

Picture Your Future: A Participatory Photography Project On the National Nature Service (Wales)

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Executive Summary

Picture Your Future was a virtual assembly held on October 26, 2021. The event brought together eight participants from Wales between the ages of 18 and 25 to consider the structure, aims, and objectives of the developing National Nature Service (Wales). It sought to engage young social and environmental activists in a deliberative process around climate action at the local and national level.

Prior to the event, participants had been asked to submit photographs responding to one of the following prompts:

1. **What's changing in the natural environment around you?** How does that change impact you? Who or what is making change happen? How do you feel about the changes you see?

2. **How do you relate to nature?** Where do you connect to nature? How do you see people around you connecting with the natural world? How does nature shape the communities you're part of? Where in your community do you see opportunities to connect with nature that are not yet there?
3. **What's the work that matters – to you, your community, and the environment around you?** How do you feel about your future work – what's the role you'd like to play? What are the skills you'd like to have? What difference would you like to make through your work?

Over the course of the assembly, participants discussed their photographs as a springboard for the development of insights for the National Nature Service (NNS) Wales. The assembly culminated in a captioning exercise, wherein participants developed written texts to accompany their photographs, offering insights for the design and priorities of the NNS.

Picture Your Future was convened by the Berggruen Institute's Future of Democracy Program and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales.

Key Insights

Using participatory photography as a springboard for offering input, participants developed a set of written insights that translated their lived experience of climate change into reflections on the program design of the NNS Wales. These insights include key ecological issues of concern that the NNS Wales could choose to focus on; broader conceptual frameworks of action; and specific initiatives that the NNS Wales may consider implementing.

General insights included the following:

Accessibility and Scope

- "The impact of the climate crisis isn't limited to one particular community or subset of the youth population, it's far-reaching."
- Given the scope of the problem and how far-reaching its impacts are, there should be focus on "ensuring a National Nature Service that's accessible for everyone."

Confronting Neglect

- Green spaces and opportunities to access nature have deteriorated due to neglect and lack of resource allocation.

- “The idea of areas not being maintained how they should be, as if the nature around us has been left to rot or fend for [itself].”
- “The neglect and underuse of urban space toward community-driven purposes, and the omission of...the natural world from urban planning concerns. We need to encourage [and] cultivate nature in images of the spaces we want to build in future.”
- There is an overall insufficiency of investment in communities and in community spaces. There’s also a systemic lack of maintenance of community spaces, particularly those where community members can engage with nature.

Community Action

- “Community initiatives need more support” and resource allocation.
- Climate action efforts are often framed as individual and can therefore be isolating, and should be reoriented toward a communal model.

Systemic Approach

- Policy and legislation need to address the entanglement of environmental concerns, pollution, and housing concerns given the post-industrial landscape of much of Wales.
- “Discussion about some of the more ‘post-industrial/industrial’ images shows we can’t disconnect the national nature service from the issue of housing or pollution - these issues are interconnected and require collective, collaborative response.”

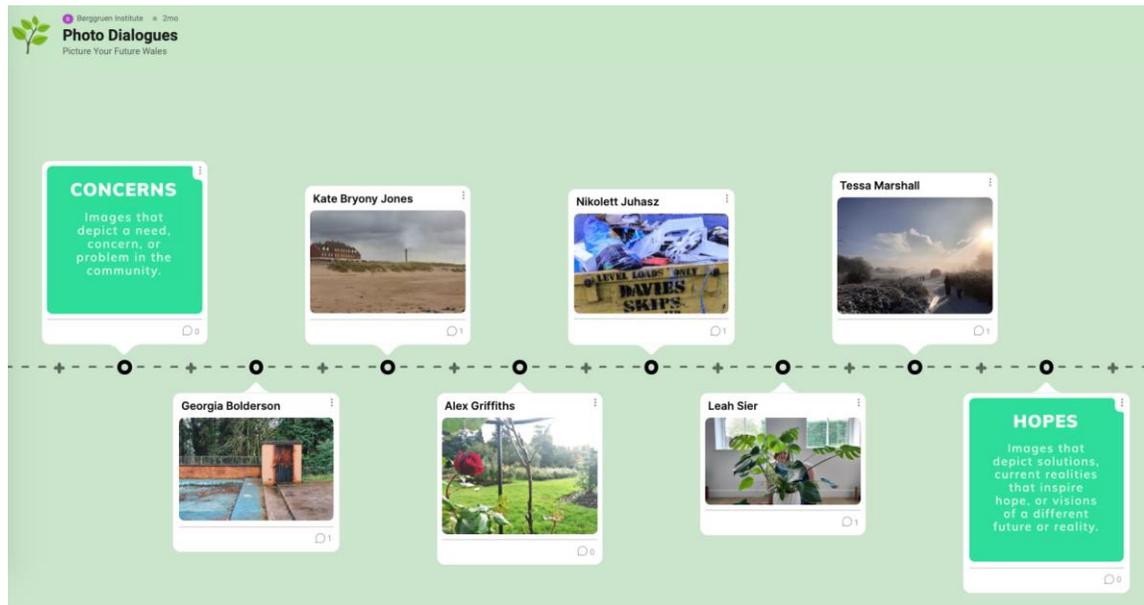
The Entanglement of Housing and Ecological Concerns

- Young people face unprecedented concerns regarding housing and the living conditions that climate change will bring — they confront the issue of unaffordable housing options that are often in close proximity to sources of pollution

Event Overview and Structure

“Picture Your Future” drew its structure from the field of participatory photography (see the section below for an overview of participatory photography). This approach involves a series of activities designed to prompt conversation about participants’ photographs, as a means to generate insights applicable to policy and decision-making. Several of the activities used were drawn from approaches developed by Photovoice, a UK-based organization that uses ethical photography to promote positive social change. As the event was held digitally, the activities were adapted to a virtual format.

These activities included:



Screenshot from "From Hopes to Concerns" Exercise
Picture Your Future" (Wales), October 26, 2021

3. Captioning

In the final activity of the convening, participants generated captions to accompany their images through a process of brainstorming and peer review.

CAPTIONING PROMPTS

- Sense Poem (I see/hear/feel/smell/taste/touch)
- Photo Diary/Story: What happened 1 minute, 1 hour, or 1 day before and after this photo was taken?
- Word Association
- 6 Question Starter: When, What, Where, Who, How, Why
- SHOWeD
- Free Writing (5 mins) and Revision (5 mins)

Prompts for Captioning Exercise
Adapted from Photovoice UK

Photographs and Captions

A sampling of photographs and their accompanying captions is below. The complete set of captioned photographs will be compiled and displayed in a future exhibition.

Credit: Lucia Ballesteros



Caption:
Transcend - 2021.

These images come across as environmentally inspired colour images featuring models covered in plastic. These photos were taken in a variety of locations in Cardiff, Wales, in order to reflect and raise awareness of how litter pollutes natural habitats. This is achieved

by juxtaposing the unnaturalistic aspect of plastic with nature. To reflect the feeling of being stuck inside our planet's abundance of plastic, each model holds a different pose which simulates being trapped by this material. The clothing on the models represents the immensity of this issue, and how we are all surrounded by this pollution. But Transcend also shows how each individual has the power to change their actions regardless of what backgrounds they come from. It aims to motivate people to take action by crossing the line between a negative action such as littering, towards more positive behaviour, which will help our planet reclaim its health.

Credit: Georgia Bolderson



Caption:

Unnatural Reality - Can We Bring the Community Back Together?

This photograph shows an abandoned pool in the middle of a park. The pool has been left empty and unused for years, slowly allowing it to be taken over by the elements.

This image speaks to us, as a community, because this used to be a popular area for children to play - but has now become a shell of the joy that it once held. This concern exists because the grounds which the pool is on was not maintained or looked after at all. It slowly became littered and overgrown, which pushed people away from visiting and admiring the area.

To improve this, we could have the community come together and input their ideas of what they want here. If they want the pool to stay, they can input their feelings towards helping out with cleaning etc. If they want the land used for something else, they should have a say.

Credit: Alex Griffiths



Caption:
Beauty - But no Beast.

The image I have chosen represents a typical urban green space - well managed, organised,

and pruned to perfection. In the image we see a rose garden, which for many symbolises beauty. However, I see regimented lines of roses, kept in order by pruning and pesticides, allowing nature to exist only on the margins of the park space. This begs the question, is this really a space with the community and nature in mind?

We need our green spaces to be centres for community engagement within nature, and also a stronghold for biodiversity and the natural world. They offer a perfect opportunity to encourage more biodiversity, while also being somewhere people can come to experience true nature and wilderness. We could have spaces which offer homes to nature, while also being used to produce food and other services for local businesses.

The National Nature Service could be used to help rewild these spaces, both simultaneously offering a home to nature and a space for community engagement and action. Although spaces like this do exist across Wales, much more can be done both in an urban setting and in the rural communities to further this grassroots effort.

As a society we may learn that we can have beauty, while also providing a home for the beast.

Credit: Kate Bryony Jones



Caption:

Aberavon Beach Front, 2021.

The steel works are visible from most areas in Port Talbot. Here, on the beach, they are even more obvious juxtaposed against the natural shore line. The housing development is spaced away from the chimney but it is still close enough to smell the sulphur and see the thick smog.

House prices are rising across Wales, especially in seaside towns like Port Talbot. These beachfront rooms are costly properties that locals just aren't able to afford. Second home ownerships and industrial pollution is making areas of Wales unlivable.

We need to see more access to natural areas that are clean and safe for locals. A NNS could help to organise a way to provide assistance to a community who has long been left behind in terms of environmentalism. Transport to the beaches should be made more accessible, cleaning efforts should be more regular. Children with Asthma in Port Talbot are 51% more likely to be hospitalised than children in other areas. They shouldn't be more at risk from playing on the beach or anywhere else outdoors.

Credit: Nikolett Juhasz



Caption:

"Can we reduce our plastic"? I believe that this photo represents the overuse of plastic wastes in every area of where we live and I think it creates a sense of hope, as well as worry. I think the national nature service could address this concern by making public how much waste is being used by promoting it on television or any social platform to raise awareness and make it hopeful, to us to use less plastic and recycle them properly. I think with that we can massively change our environment if we just looks at the hopes of what we can change

Credit: Tessa Marshall



Caption:

Snow on the Northern Meadows, 2021

For 18 months my community has united to act in the hope that we could save the biodiverse, local green space that we call the Northern Meadows. Construction was initially set to start in the summer of 2020 and our work ensured the community still had access to snowball fights, snowmen, and sledging when snow hit earlier this year.

But it's been a struggle. Our wellbeing has been hugely impacted by the stress of objecting to over 5 planning applications within 18 months during a pandemic. A National Nature Service could ease the stress on communities like mine, who are acting in isolation to protect their local green spaces. A technical arm could produce advice about objecting to planning applications on ecological grounds, giving the right technical information, bolstering arguments for why biodiversity and ecology need protecting. Further, they could regulate Local Authorities who seek to pass planning permissions which do not appropriately consider nature and biodiversity when the community cannot.

Community members at the Northern Meadows attempting to regulate the local Councils actions were arrested on the 26th of October 2021. The community asked the council to enforce its own regulations and not start clearing work before permission was granted. They were threatened by private security and the police. More support for local people must be provided if we are to end the destruction of Welsh biodiversity.

Credit: Leah Sier



Caption:

Connecting with nature in an unnatural world

In isolation, separation or a lockdown

Good for your wellbeing, or simply having a friend?

Credit: Marwa Zaman



Caption:

The Rare Beauty of True Nature

Missed Wonders of the The World

Background:

Future of Democracy Program and the Youth Environment Service

Picture Your Future builds on a year of research, publication, and convenings organized by the Berggruen Institute's Future of Democracy program. The program's work in this field was dually

focused on 1) establishing a **Youth Environment Service (YES)**; and 2) **developing participatory processes for youth engagement**.

This research originates from the Future of Democracy's reform plan published in 2019, "[Renewing Democracy in the Digital Age](#)." The YES appendix in this plan was driven by Martin Moore, Director of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power at King's College London. A cornerstone of the plan was YES: the Youth Environment Service.

In 2020, the Berggruen Institute published a policy brief advocating for the establishment of YES. The brief defined YES as a program that would:

provide opportunities for young people to work together across differences to protect the planet from climate catastrophe while furthering their democratic leadership, job skills, and capacity for common purpose.

— "Youth Environment Service (YES) Policy Brief"
Future of Democracy Program, Berggruen Institute

The YES program was designed to address three primary objectives: 1) **environmental goals** (to slow climate change and reverse mass extinctions); 2) **economic goals** (to develop job skills, particularly for youth populations disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of COVID-19, and to advance sustainable development); and 3) **social goals** (to promote the democratic integration of youth from diverse communities and build solidarity by working toward a common cause).

After President Biden's January 27th announcement of the CCC, the Future of Democracy program drew from its ongoing research and discussions on YES to publish a series of recommendations entitled "[Youth-Led Climate Action: Strategic Recommendations for the Civilian Climate Corps](#)."

The publication outlines three key recommendations for the CCC:

1. Youth should serve as core participants and co-designers of the CCC;
2. The CCC should focus on building transnational coalitions; and
3. The scale of the CCC should be calibrated to the massive scale of the problem that faces us through a jobs program.

Building on this publication, the Future of Democracy program spent 2021 developing participatory processes for youth engagement on these themes, and creating platforms for young people to provide insights regarding the Corps. Picture Your Future was one among these convenings, with additional events organized in Los Angeles and Manchester.

Background: National Nature Service for Wales

The National Nature Service for Wales is an idea which emerged in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, as one of the most compelling proposals for Green Recovery. A co-design process, led by the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, and championed by the Future Generations Commissioner, has so far involved hundreds of organizations and individuals across Wales in figuring out how young people and job seekers can get involved in working on nature recovery, whilst gaining the skills, knowledge, and experience they need to pursue nature-friendly careers in the future. It aims to inspire practical action, re-skill the workforce, and re-connect people to the natural environment – radically expanding our collective capacity to build a sustainable future.

It does not yet exist, but many youth organizations have already spotted its potential to transform their future prospects, and there is an open invitation for young people to get directly involved in shaping what it becomes. This event is an exciting opportunity to do this, using creative and participatory methods, and drawing on the skills and experience of the Berggruen Institute.

Methodology: Participatory Photography

Participatory photography is an approach drawn from the broader methodology of **participatory action research (PAR)**. PAR can be defined as:

“A collaborative approach to research that involves all stakeholders throughout the research process, from establishing the research question, to developing data collection tools, to analysis and dissemination of findings. It is a research framework that aims to address the practical concerns of people in a community and fundamentally changes the roles of researcher and who is being researched.”

— Janice C. Burns, M.A.; Deanna Y. Cooke, Ph.D.; Christine Schweidler, M.P.H., “A Short Guide to Community-Based Participatory Action Research,” Advancement Project / Healthy City, 2011.

PAR projects tend to foreground three questions:

“What are the problems people face and must explore?

Who are the actors or stakeholders affected by a situation or with the capacity to intervene, and how do they interact with each other?

What future scenarios and options for action should be assessed against existing stakeholder interests and values?”

— Jacques Chevalier and Daniel Buckles, *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2019)

Guided by this set of questions, PAR offers a rubric for stakeholder-driven research wherein those most impacted by a particular scenario play a central role in determining what the response to that scenario will look like.

Participatory photography is situated within the broader field of PAR and utilizes visual methods of communication to enable individuals to convey their lived experience, articulate their communities' concerns, and influence future decision-making around issues of collective concern.

Photovoice represents one widely-used variation on participatory photography, and was developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Anne Burris in the context of a Ford Foundation project on women's reproductive health. Wang outlines that photovoice enables participants to:

“(1) record and represent their everyday realities;

(2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and

(3) reach policymakers.”

— Caroline C. Wang, DrPH, MPH, “Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change,” *Journal of Community Practice* vol. 14, No. 1/2 (2006): 147-161.

Photovoice can be a particularly generative approach for youth-led research, and can “contribute to youth mobilization for community change” (Wang 2006).

In the context of Picture Your Future the use of participatory photography encouraged participants to document their perception of how climate change impacts their communities, and to share the expertise they have acquired through lived experience to inform future policymaking and program design.

Acknowledgments

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