

Executive Summary /

The Natural Change Project was developed by WWF Scotland as a new and innovative response to the challenge of sustainability and to the growing evidence that current environmental campaigns are not resulting in the depth of behaviour change necessary to address this challenge. The project drew together seven diverse individuals from the business, charitable, arts, public, health and education sectors in Scotland. All were selected on the basis of being excellent communicators who were influential in their sector, but not particularly environmentally aware. The purpose of the project was to encourage this group to think deeply about sustainability, to communicate through their social and professional networks and to share the changes in their thoughts and attitudes more widely through the forum of internet blogging.

The approach was based on a series of residential workshops, which were held in natural environments and used eco-psychological activities. It was designed to engage the participants at the level of experience, values and identity, rather than the knowledge and evidence-based approaches commonly used to communicate about sustainability issues. As an innovative communications and behaviour change project working with the psychology of sustainability, Natural Change was also intended to provide an insight into the process of how individuals change.

An Action Research approach was chosen as the most appropriate method of gathering data and drawing conclusions from this project. Action Research gathers data through three tiers of evidence, interlacing personal experiences, group experiences and experiences of the wider world. The participants played a central role in the research process, asking and answering questions such as “What did I experience?”, “What did we experience?” and “What conclusions can we draw from this?”. In light of this, this report draws heavily on records made of the group discussions that took place during the workshops and on the content of participants’ blogs. The conclusions are drawn from what participants report they have gained, and the actions and changes which have occurred in their lives. The process as a whole and the questions and insights it provokes are also considered.

Evidence from participants’ testimony and discussions during the workshops shows the Natural Change approach to have been extremely effective among the participants in stimulating deep thinking about sustainability and about their own lives. The importance of a community of interest, providing support for personal journeys and critical reflection on sustainability was also clearly evident. This project has been extremely successful in causing the participants to communicate with their social and professional networks and a wider audience about these issues. What is remarkable is the honesty with which participants reported their, sometimes deeply personal, experience of the project, both in discussion and importantly in their blogs, touching others in a way that a mass-marketing campaign simply could not.

What has also been clearly emphasised by this project is that human beings are complex and their behaviour is shaped by many factors including the physical and social environments, relationships and the events they experience. This project has demonstrated that there is no quick and simple method of changing behaviour. However, having been part of the Natural Change Project, all the participants have expressed a clear desire to take actions that go beyond the ‘quick and painless’ changes advocated by many environmental campaigns. It is also clear that the participants are now motivated to take practical action to realise this desire both in their personal and professional lives. It must be accepted that the pace of change is slow and the longer term impact of the Natural Change Project will take time to emerge.

This project has created a replicable approach to building commitment to sustainability and it is likely to provide valuable approaches to behaviour change and environmental communications strategies in the future. The full blogs from the participants and facilitators on the Natural Change Project can be found online at www.naturalchange.org.uk

Conclusions /

Looking back on the initial aims of the Natural Change Project, it is beyond doubt that the Project was extremely successful in causing a group of 'light green' individuals to think deeply about sustainability and to communicate their thoughts widely through their social and professional networks. It is also clear that these communications have connected with individuals beyond the participant group in a way that more traditional environmental 'campaigns' have not.

What is remarkable is the honesty with which participants reported their, sometimes deeply personal, experience of the project, both in discussion and importantly in their blogs: this method of communication should not be underestimated. In the first two weeks of the project there were 4,827 unique page visits to the Natural Change website with a total of 16,409 unique page visits recorded over the six month period of the project, amounting to 22,098 total views. The eloquent testimonies seen in this report show that the Natural Change Project has had a profound effect on the participants and has led them to think differently and more intensely about sustainability and about their lives. However, whilst the Natural Change Process is regarded by the participants as a significant event in their lives, change is a complex process and it is not possible to link concrete features of participants' lives in a simple, causal way to an activity:

"Change happens—the world changes and you change with it, the product of a whole host of complex and interwoven influences and drivers. But I'd be prepared to say that a lot of the change that has happened—in particular in relation to me really exploring my values and how I relate to the world has its roots in Natural Change." Louise

This fits with the understanding put forward throughout the project of human beings as complex, and interdependent on environments and events around them. Many of the participants state that they are still processing what they have learned and are beginning to find ways of bringing this learning into their lives—meaningful change is long term and subtle. However, participants have expressed a strong desire to continue exploring the process of change—following the Natural Change Project they seem motivated to follow through on this desire with practical action that goes beyond the 'simple and painless' steps often advocated by environmental campaigns. The follow-up research after another six months will contribute significantly to this report.

Key elements of the participants' experience are as follows:

- Undergoing the Natural Change process was a challenging and sometimes uncomfortable, but ultimately very rewarding, experience
- Time alone in nature, led by skilled facilitators had a profound impact on participants' thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards the natural world and their own lives
- The group developed strongly as a community and provided support for powerful personal journeys
- Exploration of deeper social and ecological issues opened up the space for participants to 'be themselves', and question the ways in which personae are created
- Participants developed a conceptual understanding of ecological and social systems which helped them grasp the interconnection of current global challenges
- The process was neither quick nor simple; time and effort was invested in creating the physical space, the 'diary space' and the 'mental space' for it to take place. Change takes time and it was important for participants to have time between workshops to reflect on and 'digest' their experiences
- All participants have been active, or are planning events, in their professional lives, inspired by their experiences of Natural Change
- The techniques used in the project are now part of the participants' professional tool kit

As Louise puts it, "This project is making me think big, prompting questions far beyond 'is my washing up liquid environmentally friendly?'"

It is obvious from this report that the Natural Change Project has reached deep into people's lives, and in a way that an advertising or mass marketing campaign could not. Beyond the participants' experiences, this research implies wider conclusions:

- The accounts of participants going through a values-based process are a very effective demonstration of change
- The emotional, personal and psychological dimensions of sustainability are fundamentally important, both to people involved in a change process and in reaching out to others
- The values-based approach of Natural Change affects self-identity and attitudes creating a strong desire for change: the participants want to do things differently and are now in a position to further develop how they might go about this
- Spending time in natural environments and building a strong community of interest are pivotal elements in the process of revealing the mutuality between social and ecological issues