



The Ecology of Experience:

**Six months on from the
Natural Change project**

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About the Natural Change project

The initiative for the Natural Change project came from a desire to create a unique value and identity-based behaviour change 'campaign' by inviting a group of influential 'pale green' individuals to take part in a process of deep change.

The Natural Change project, September 2008 to June 2009, was created and managed by Jules Weston, formerly of WWF Scotland. The process was designed and facilitated by Dave Key with Margaret Kerr providing psychotherapeutic support to the group. Sam Harrison, participant researcher during the project, has carried out the collaborative research six months on from the end of the project and is the author of this report.

Executive Summary

The first 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. This report documents collaborative research undertaken with the participants six months on from the end of the project, which ran from September 2008 to June 2009. Following on from the publication of the report *Natural Change: Psychology and Sustainability* (WWF Scotland 2009), the participants reflect on the subsequent changes that have been brought about.

The picture that emerges is of a profound experience which reached deep into the participants' lives, influencing their sense of identity, and the ways they sustain their well-being. The Natural Change project broadened the concept of pro-environmental behaviour to include psychological well-being, creating clear impact in these areas. This has brought with it many challenges and questions. On the surface, some of the group have realised major changes personally and professionally. They also expressed frustration at the lack of resources and influence they have been able to bring to bear to implement these changes. At a deeper level, Natural Change was effective in creating a strong feeling of interconnection with the natural world around them. The research identifies the importance of the development of a group of supportive friends and peers as key to sustaining continued change, and the critical role of nature as a catalyst.

Natural Change aimed to promote deep and lasting transformation and the research indicates that the impacts of the project on the participants will continue to emerge. The report concludes that the impacts need to be viewed as part of a complex and interrelated system of influences. Attempts to identify simple 'cause and effect' mechanisms of behaviour change are of little use as they do not reflect the reality of the participants' experiences or the complexity of modern lives.

The report recommends that future projects which engage with identity, values, and psychological issues around pro-environmental behaviour change engage fully with participants' wider context to determine measures of 'success'. Evidence suggests that future Natural Change projects should focus on groups of decision makers, ensuring the provision of post-project support to enable participants to bring about wider change.

The relationship between personal identity, well-being and pro-environmental behaviour is a new and developing area of research and understanding. The relationship between these aspects is only just beginning to be understood and further research and projects will be needed to build on the learning generated by this Natural Change project.

Introduction

Natural Change drew together seven influential professionals from the business, arts, public, health, charity and educational sectors, in a series of innovative workshops, using a values-based approach to inspire deeper pro-environmental change. The participants directly communicated about their experiences through a series of blogs on the website www.naturalchange.org.uk. Experiences in various locations from remote Knoydart to rural Stirlingshire, provided the stimulus to reflect on sustainability, identity and values, and the ways in which we are deeply embedded in the natural world around us.

The report *Natural Change: Psychology and Sustainability* was launched in June 2009 and documents the experiences and outcomes of this process. It highlights the importance of time spent in natural surroundings exploring sustainability issues from a psychological perspective.

Natural Change aimed to promote deep and lasting transformation; ascertaining some of the ways in which it was effective required follow-up research. This report was completed six months on from the official end of the project in June 2009. It brings together findings from one-on-one interviews between Natural Change participants and the participant researcher, and a group workshop discussing the changes catalysed by the participants' experiences.

Research approach

Key themes for the research were identified by WWF and the participant researcher: relationship to the planet; values and identity; professional life and sustainable lifestyle choices. The follow-up research matched the collaborative ethos of Natural Change, giving the participants many opportunities for contribution through face-to-face interviews, a workshop, and access to the report before it was submitted. The facilitators and most of the participants of Natural Change met on 25 February 2010 to discuss the themes which arose from the interviews, and share their feelings and ideas looking back on their experience.

Understanding Natural Change

So...has it worked then?

The simple 'surface' answer is yes. Yes, I tell people, it's made me more aware. Yes, it's made me think more about the whole range of interconnected themes around nature and our relationship with it as human beings. Yes, it's made me act different – from changing my shopping habits, to introducing new sustainable procurement policies at work, to feeding the birds.

*But whilst it's a true answer, it is an answer of convenience. The more complex answer is also yes, it has worked, but in ways it is so hard to articulate, because the impact has affected me inside and out, at every level, **Louise, blog Jan 2010.***

Emma reflected that there were many interpretations of the project, both within the group and externally, and this resulted in a certain amount of uncertainty about what is meant by 'outcomes' and what is meant by the question 'has it worked?'

The personal, complex and long-term nature of the experience will always necessitate investigation, and structured opportunities to do this will be important in the future (Leberman & Martin, 2004). If the answer were simple then the richness of the experience would be reduced. This report documents some of this richness.

The Environment and Sustainability

Natural Change is seen by the participants as going against the dominant grain of the wider environmental movement, using a positive approach to motivate change. Louise commented on the need for more organisations to adopt the ethos and approach of Natural Change. This critique of environmental activism extended to a feeling that the word 'sustainability' in its current use did not get to the heart of the matter. The participants had a sense that the project had almost bypassed the traditional sustainability debate for a deeper, more personal engagement with nature.

Most participants reported strong feelings of interconnection with the natural world as a result of Natural Change. The implications of this for the participants' sense of self are discussed below, but this change also affected their relationship with the natural environment. The group expressed their desire to be outside more, a desire which was often difficult to fulfil due to life constraints. For many, the natural world has become a place away from all the pressures of everyday city life.

The connection to the natural world was on a feeling and intuitive level, reflecting the core ethos of the project, with participants appearing content to be without traditional technical, biological or ecological understandings (Thomashow, 1998, p284). Ambivalence towards the facts and figures of environmental issues was expressed. This supports existing evidence that there is more to caring for the environment than understanding the science, or being able to name and understand the individual species around you. (Orr,

2004, Sterling 2001). There were also a couple of different perspectives on this from Gavin, expressing that knowing what was around him was important: *“being able to name plants and a whole world opens up,”* and Roseleen feeling that her observation skills in nature had improved.

Personal and group identity

The group identified the solo and the blogging amongst the key ingredients of Natural Change. For Emily, right from the start with the solo in Knoydart, it was the experience of *“laying bare with my own self/soul that brought about realisation of self and made me wake up to some of the things I wanted to change in my life.”* The group also stated that the relationship between public and private persona had sometimes proved challenging. These comments bring out the important theme of ‘identity’.

Some in the group saw Natural Change as a big event in their understanding of who they are, and others felt they had always loved the natural world and didn’t need to be converted. Most participants reported an expansion of their sense of self in nature – seeing themselves as embedded into a wider world. Sarah talked about a bigger sense of who you are because you are part of that world. Most participants also discussed the ways in which they see things through the wider lens of nature, or feel a deep membership to all life. *“I speak about it in a way that I am part of it,”* says Gurjit.

Importantly, alongside this ‘wider’ sense of self, all participants felt permission to be their intuitive, ‘authentic’ selves. For example, Gurjit points out how the group allowed him to feel safe enough to open up. While Louise, through the group’s regard for her without her usual accoutrements of work and power, realised that she didn’t always need to wear her ‘power suit’. Some of the participants also seem to have developed ambivalence to the usual gauges of success: status and material things. For all involved, there was the long-term challenge of maintaining this authenticity.

Building a strong community to support the participants’ journey through Natural Change was important and powerful. For some, the group was the strongest thing about the experience pointing to the potential of shared experiences in natural places in building human relationships. The mix of people provided inspiration and long-term friendship. The close bonds formed reach beyond the process itself: for Sarah the question is how to ‘scale up’ this community-building approach within her work. The presence of community as a continued theme six months on from the experience reinforces this element of the project.

Psychological well-being

The group as a whole reported strong positive psychological affects from the Natural Change process. Gurjit states it was like counselling for us all, and Roseleen expresses the widely held sentiment that the workshops provided time out to think. Emily reinforces this, saying that it was very personal for her: *“giving me the opportunity to talk about my heart”*.

What was clear six months after the project finished was that Natural Change provided a direct experience of well-being upon which each participant commented. For example, Gurjit stated, *“I felt much more in tune with my own self.”*

This had a strong impact on the participants' understanding and approach to their personal well-being after the project. Many realised the power of the outdoors to contribute to their psychological and physical health. Louise says, *“I know that if I want to feel better... that what I need to do is go out.”* This extended to professional life, where for example Emma commented on her realisation of the 'powerful resource' that nature provided in health provision, and Roseleen has been taking her school students outdoors regularly.

The Natural Change project raised important questions about the relationships between personal and environmental wellbeing. Emily sums this up, pointing out, *“the environmental issues can't be extricated from the overall [picture] and nor should they be. Taking apart different sides of our being and compartmentalising them isn't helpful and should be considered holistically.”*

There was some questioning of how personal health and well-being connected to wider sustainability issues and, for some, whether the wider issues would come to the fore for them in the future. Louise felt. *“Natural Change has to let participants go through a deeper change which is long term.”* This theme was discussed further during the workshop, where the group discussed moving beyond anger, trauma and despair towards 'self-discovery,' eventually bringing about wider societal change and environmental behaviour change (Joanna Macy et al 1998).

Pro-environmental change

Many participants reported changes in their personal behaviour. These occurred in areas such as recycling, transport, and shopping. Others reported changes in perspective and approach, but no big practical changes. Within the group there was a feeling of frustration at the difficulties and costs of making big changes. Some reported increased feelings of guilt associated with their inability to make as many changes as they wanted to.

The majority of the group reported that their personal behaviour, whether it had preceded Natural Change or not, was underpinned by a deeper understanding and motivation following their involvement. As Louise puts it, *“previously it was an intellectual exercise – recycling etc, it was what a good citizen did.”* Importantly, the Natural Change participants report a deeper commitment and feeling towards these behaviours.

Participants discussed whether one form of consumption (shopping) has been swapped for another (consuming nature)? While some participants want to drive out of the city each weekend for their 'fix', some, like Emma, report their ability to localise their outdoor experiences, changing the way they engage with the outdoors from 'munro-bagging' to local exploration in the city. However, it is interesting to note the general shift in participants' language from that which expresses a desire to 'have' to that which expresses a desire to 'be'.

It was acknowledged openly in the interviews that only a few participants have so far undergone 'strong changes' with regard to what are generally identified as 'pro-environmental behaviours'. The participants' frustration at being unable to implement bigger changes combined with their deeper understanding and commitment raises the question of whether, as a result of the Natural Change project, the participants would be more willing to accept more radical actions if they were proposed by government. It will not be possible to answer this question until such a situation occurs.

The question of whether Natural Change was the most effective approach to influence what is typically understood as pro-environmental behaviour arises. Participants reported different reactions to the various elements of the project: time alone outdoors and psychological and group communication exercises. The findings in this report reinforce the view that behaviour is complex and raises the question of whether there is, or could ever be, one 'most effective approach' to influencing environmental behaviour. The Natural Change project clearly changed the environmental behaviour of some of the participants and equally created impact on a broader range of issues for all the participants. As has been seen in the identity and well-being sections, the project fundamentally broadened the concept of pro-environmental behaviour to include psychological well-being, creating clear impact in these areas.

In their professional spheres, some of the group reported that they are yet to find, or to bring about, the changes they wanted to, but some had external actions and change to report. Roseleen has been very active bringing environmental issues into her school, from talking about Natural Change at a UN conference in Korea, to regular trips into the outdoors with students undertaking the John Muir Award. Louise has already initiated numerous projects within her organisation (for example a 'Green Team'), has introduced Natural Change collective processes and started exciting new collaborative work. However, Emma feels that her position in her organisation hinders her ability to bring about change, while others like Gurjit and Gavin have recently moved to new organisations and have not yet had the opportunity for their ideas to bear fruit. Sarah felt that her work was already overtly dealing with values and change but she was now finding ways to bring in the 'bigger picture', making links between community, culture and environment.

The participants noted the challenge and possibility of bringing the Natural Change 'way of being' into the workplace through their actions and language, and a few voiced the feeling that their own experience was still very personal.

Sarah states: *“it was very difficult to have a public persona for such personal experiences”*; a sentiment also expressed by Emily. Other participants found this less of an issue. One of the strengths of the project was how it reached deeply into personal issues, providing a space away from life pressures. Yet for some, there inevitably lies a tension within the workplace, through the challenge of blogging to colleagues and of creating change as professional leaders.

Causation and change

In one workshop, the participants created a very sophisticated model and theory of change: discussing and examining the extent to which the experience of Natural Change has become integrated into their lives. This supports the original report’s argument for an ‘ecology of change’ rather than a simplistic approach to change where one intervention causes one outcome.

The consensus clearly was that Natural Change had become part of people’s lives and, as such, was a motivating factor in many of their choices. The experience is thus interconnected with the rest of their lives and events in the wider world, as Sarah puts it: *“I am always unsure that anything comes from my particular experience.”* This embedding can render the question of ‘outcomes’ almost meaningless, as Louise said: *“there is no point in asking whether these changes would have happened without Natural Change.”*

As with any system, the interconnections are many and complex: participants discussed the difficulty of pinpointing exactly where the changes happened. Emily states: *“yes, it has made a difference... how? I still find it hard to quantify.”* Several of the participants reported feelings of guilt and a certain amount of pressure they put on themselves to change ‘because of’ Natural Change. Whilst these insights support the conclusion that deep changes have been made with some of the participants, they also imply that a focus on traditionally recognised ‘outcomes,’ or ‘hard evidence’ is problematic and perhaps in some cases counter-productive.

Conclusions

It is clear that Natural Change was a significant experience in all the participants’ lives, and understanding its full importance and consequences is a long-term process which extends far beyond this report. What can be seen through the participants’ words and discussion is the effectiveness of an experiential approach in creating a feeling of connection and re-connection to the natural world. Importantly, this is at an emotional and intuitive level, bringing psychology squarely into the largely technical and rational discourse on sustainability.

All the participants had a deeply personal experience on a psychological level providing an opportunity to improve their well-being. Natural Change was an opportunity to deeply reflect on who they were and where they were going. Whilst participants are striving to bring many of these practices into their daily lives, the relationship between personal well-being and pro-environmental behaviour remains complex and non-linear.

There have been changes in personal pro-environmental behaviour including use of transport, recycling, and consumption patterns. For some participants this was new, others have continued behaviours from before Natural Change. However, this behaviour is now underpinned for all by the sense of membership to the natural world. There is also a strongly expressed desire for greater changes but frustration at the lack of resources and influence the participants have to bring these about. Some participants have been highly active professionally, while others are still finding the most appropriate way to create change in their workplaces.

The key element in facilitating the whole process was the open and authentic group dynamic which emerged from shared experiences of the natural world. Having a supportive peer group that understood and shared the same experience created bonds which held the group together and continues to provide support, friendship, inspiration and deepening of the Natural Change experience. It is these authentic relationships with other people and the rest of the natural world that hold the potential for action and impact into the future.

- Natural Change was a significant experience in all of the participants' lives.
- Natural Change was effective in creating a feeling of connection to the natural world.
- Participants felt that Natural Change was a deeply personal experience and found it challenging to express the experiences and changes they had undergone in the public sphere.
- Participants agreed that they had changed as a result of the Natural Change but acknowledged that it was part of the sum of their life experiences and therefore impossible to separate its influence from the influence of their other experiences.
- It is not possible to measure direct 'cause and effect' changes in behaviour as a result of the Natural Change process.
- As a result of Natural Change, participants strongly expressed a desire to bring about greater changes in their personal and professional lives but also expressed frustration at the lack of resources and influence they were able to bring to bear to implement these changes.
- All participants expressed the importance of the development of the group of supportive friends and peers as key to sustaining continued change.
- The relationship between personal identity, well-being and behaviour is a new and developing area of research and understanding. The relationships between these aspects are only just beginning to be understood and further research and projects will be needed to build on the learning generated by the Natural Change project.

Recommendations

For future projects intending to use the Natural Change approach or for those involved in behaviour change policy and practice, we make the following recommendations.

- It is recommended that a full analysis of the context is required to gauge the 'success' of projects which engage with identity, values, and psychological issues around pro-environmental behaviour change. It is unrealistic to expect simple 'cause and effect' changes in behaviour and it must be accepted that change is a long-term and complex process.
- It is recommended that pro-environmental behaviour change initiatives consider the importance of spending time in natural environments and building a supportive community of interest. It is these authentic relationships with other people and the rest of the natural world that hold the potential for action and impact into the future.
- It is recommended that, in future Natural Change projects, consideration is given to selection of participants and the provision of post-project psychological and technical support, to ensure that participants have both the capacity and the resources necessary to bring about wider change.
- It is recommended that in selecting future participants, careful consideration is given to geographical and practical issues that may assist or hinder the group in continuing to meet and support each other following the project.
- It is recommended that further research and practice is needed to explore the relationship between personal identity, well-being and behaviour to further refine approaches to bringing about behaviour change.

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The mission of WWF is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- reducing pollution and wasteful consumption