

# NATURAL FUTURES

PILOT PROJECT 2022

Centre for Culture & Creativity, Teesside University

over

**80%**

of participants said  
that they felt more  
connected to nature  
at the end of our  
creative workshops



School of  
Arts &  
Creative  
Industries



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12

bespoke ecopsychology workshops across Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland

110

participants joined in the workshops

Workshops with people of ages

6-80

12

local workshop facilitators trained as part of the pilot

The pilot workshops targeted older people, people living in low-income areas, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and people living with disabilities, with many at the intersection of these

## Report written by:

**Professor Sarah Perks**, Teesside University (Centre for Culture & Creativity including MIMA and School of Arts and Creative Industries), with **Rachel Murtagh**, Tees Valley Nature Partnership, **Shahda Khan**, Borderlands (part of the national Creative People and Places programme and funded primarily by Arts Council England), and **Esther Smith**, Natural England.

## Pilot project

**commissioned by:** Natural England

## Creative producers:

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# INTRODUCTION

Natural Futures creative ecopsychology workshops invite participants to imagine they are an aspect of nature, creating a mask or headdress to become a bee or bamboo, a mountain or a mole, an octopus or an ocean! Participants begin the workshop by making a mask or headdress with art materials together before they begin the council of all beings' process. The experience then asks them to consider everything from this perspective in a playful and performative 'council' ritual where they speak as nature.

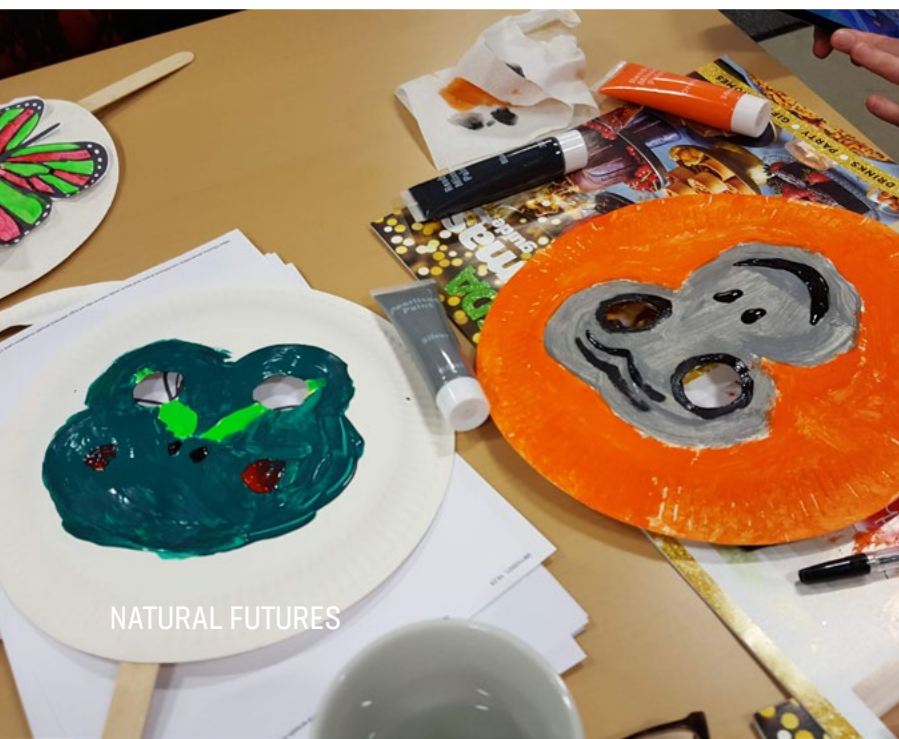
This pilot project has been commissioned by Natural England as they launch the UK-wide Nature Recovery Networks and embark on an unprecedented 20-year strategy to recover, re-wild, regrow and preserve our vital ecosystems. This creative project also challenges the assumptions of both understanding and access with groups under-represented in terms of participation and visibility in the environmental sector.

# 100%

of the groups would be happy to be contacted by the Natural Futures project again

The Natural Futures workshops have been developed by a collective of organisations and people led by Shahda Khan (Borderlands), Rachel Murtagh (Tees Valley Nature Partnership) and Prof Sarah Perks (Teesside University). Together they have been working on how to build new inclusive participation and engagement with environmental issues using arts and creativity to communicate complex and sometimes overwhelming messages about our natural world.

This pilot project directly introduces art and creativity in response to problems outlined in Natural England's *Included outside* reports (2022) starting with the call for the "importance of re-thinking what nature spaces and nature experiences are." This project adopts the *Included outside* series' social groupings of under-represented people, with the aim to expand the evidence of 'what works' to connect these groups to nature. These groups were identified as the following: older people; people living in low-income areas; people from ethnic minority backgrounds; people living with disabilities. The need to acknowledge and understand intersectionality between these groups is also highlighted.



A specific challenge identified for the pilot project team from *Included outside* was that people not engaged in nature are less likely to care about it, and therefore any health, creative, skills and social benefits of nature connection would be unclaimed. This project also responds to *Included outside's* call for widening the sensory ways of experiencing diverse nature settings, and the need to widen the language and interpretation of outdoor spaces and nature from the visual to more multi-sensory alternatives - soundscape, touch, smells - to increase the inclusionary potential of nature spaces. Natural Futures understands these alternatives to encompass all possible creative approaches from traditional artmaking to storytelling, performance and conceptual activities in any physical or digital space.



This pilot project also builds directly upon policy recommendations in two further recent reports on inclusive nature connectedness for health and creative sectors:

- The Mental Health Foundation's report *Nature: How connecting with nature benefits our mental health (2021)*, building on their policy recommendations around 'facilitating connection with nature,' and 'developing a life-long relationship with nature,' whilst also responding to the barriers for inclusivity outlined within.
- Responding to the lack of research in the creative and cultural sector. In BOP Consulting, Julie's Bicycle, NESTA's report *Creative Industries and the Climate Emergency: The Path to Net Zero (2022)*, it states that "there is at present little in the way of evidence or understanding of how the activities of the Creative Industries influence consumer decisions or attitudes and behaviours with regards to the environment."

"Making the masks made it all real. When they engaged in creativity they didn't over think [the participants] just got on with it and learnt the messages in a much more interesting way than being told directly."

– Judith, Workshop Facilitator



# WHO TOOK PART?



This pilot study took place within the council regions of Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland in Teesside in the North East of England in 2022. This area represents an existing focus of work for Borderlands and MIMA, and facilitators were largely recruited via their contacts at Tees Valley New Creatives.

The participant groups were selected to represent social groups included in Natural England's *Inside outside* series, and one or more of the following barriers were evident:

- Lack of mobility and affordable access
- Suitability of existing infrastructure
- Confidence in natural environments

“A few months later, a small child saw me in the street and shouted out, you’re the nature person, thank you!”

– **Naaila, Producer**

5

older people's groups

4

place-based groups

3

disability groups

2

youth groups

2

faith groups

Ages

6-80

# TABLE OF GROUPS INVOLVED

<b>GROUP</b>	<b>WHERE</b>	<b>NO.</b>	<b>GROUP DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>INCLUDED OUTSIDE SOCIAL GROUP</b>
Ageing Better Middlesbrough # 1	Middlesbrough	7	Over 50s social group	older people / people living in low-income areas
Ageing Better Middlesbrough # 1	Middlesbrough	7	Over 50s social group	older people / people living in low-income areas
Elective Home Education (EHE)	Middlesbrough	16	Parents and children group	people from ethnic minority backgrounds
Endeavour @ Prior Pursglove College, Guisborough	Redcar and Cleveland	15	College students	people living with disabilities
Food and Friendship at Breckon Hill Community Centre	Middlesbrough	7	Adults with learning disabilities	people living with disabilities / people living in low-income areas / older people
Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery	Middlesbrough	6	Residents group	older people / people living in low-income areas
Grangetown Generations	Redcar and Cleveland	4	Community library group	older people / people living in low-income areas
Groundworks Youth Shack, South Bank	Redcar and Cleveland	11	NEET group	people living in low-income areas
Larchfield Community	Middlesbrough	16	Adults with learning disabilities	people living with disabilities
Links Youth Project	Middlesbrough	7	Diverse young people group	people living in low-income areas
Ormesby Good Neighbours	Middlesbrough	9	Community library group	people living in low-income areas
Teesside University Islamic Society	Middlesbrough	5	University students	people from ethnic minority backgrounds

# EVALUATION

## HIGHLIGHTS

- These workshops led to nature connectedness via creativity – effectively forming ‘empathy pebbles’ to the ‘stepping stones’ within the nature and environmental sector – something to encourage action or further engagement through a change in attitude.
- Participants loved the social aspect of the workshops and enjoyed the full experience – all of the groups would consider more Natural Futures activities.
- Lots of questions about caring for and with nature came up constantly and led to active research and discussion from all participants.

## METHODOLOGY

The pilot project team devised a ‘light touch’ evaluation methodology in order to be appropriate for our groups. This method asked participants to tell us:

- How connected they felt to nature before and after workshops
- Whether they had taken part in art and creative activities before and whether they would again after
- Whether they had taken part in nature activities before and whether they would again after
- If they would they let us contact them again

In addition:

- Facilitators and producers wrote down observations from the sessions
- Facilitator feedback sessions took place a few months after

40%

had never taken part in nature activities before

25%

had never taken part in art and creative activities before

90%

of all participants would all take part in both more art and creative activities and more nature-related activities (only 3 people selected art and creative but not nature)

80%

found they had a greater connection to nature by the end of the workshop

100%

of the groups would be happy to be contacted by the Natural Futures project again

# IMPACT

The facilitator feedback for this project demonstrated multiple benefits from this pilot project on the participants and their community groups:

## ARTS & CREATIVE

- They felt that participants learnt artistic and creative skills
- Improved participants attitude to creative activities
- Greater understanding of creative methods for social and environmental reasons
- Introduced idea of group activities and co-creation

## NATURE & ENVIRONMENTAL

- Increased curiosity, care and enthusiasm for nature
- Greater awareness of nature issues in their locality
- Understanding that recovery is more than just conservation of existing nature



## HEALTH & WELL-BEING

- Social environment to explore both existing and new people
- Confidence and speaking skills noticeably enhanced by peers and facilitators for some participants

## EMPATHY & EMPOWERMENT

- Improved understanding of their own role in nature
- Understanding large issues from a more personal and connected position
- Some began to see their role as part of nature as much as 'saving' nature through themselves or pets





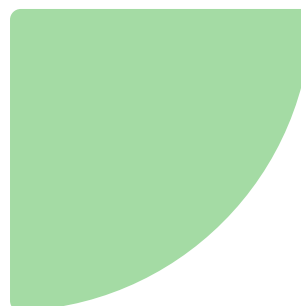
“My groups were young people not in education, employment or training, and a young people’s group with learning support needs. In the former group there was a very quiet male participant who became very activated after making a mask and became very passionate and emotional about the local oystercatchers being disturbed and displaced by the building of a Lidl nearby. He really came out of himself and surprised the rest of the group. In the latter group, they enjoyed making masks inside and then went outside for the council part. They needed encouragement to talk but later began to shout, “save the wildlife!” after each participant’s contribution.”

– **Steve, Workshop Facilitator**



“The workshops made them think about things, learn from each other and listen to peers, ultimately, we were just facilitating them to do this. People could talk and express themselves in a non-judgemental way with the masks and council process. Everyone was listened to; this was validating and had a positive impact on their mental health. Their speaking and confidence skills noticeably improved with the use of masks.”

– **Trudy, Workshop Facilitator**



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

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The evaluation and impact of this pilot project demonstrates important gains across health, creativity, skills and social cohesion. Natural Futures methodologies are a way to begin *Included outside's* call for increased habitual connection that enables access to nature and pro nature actions.

## NATIONAL

- Embed creativity in the national Nature Recovery Network, promoting inclusive methodologies and activities in Local Nature Recovery Strategies to avoid assumptions on accessibility, enthusiasm, care and empowerment
- Consider 'empathy pebbles' ahead of 'stepping stones' to change behaviour towards and understanding of nature recovery in a more inclusive way, otherwise the full range of benefits are unclaimed
- Continue to design and evaluate new type of nature experiences and spaces that increase nature connectedness for under-represented and diverse social groups – further responding to *Included outside's* call for the "importance of re-thinking what nature spaces and nature experiences are"
- Design and produce 'natural futures' sustainable packs and guides to aid facilitation
- Further research support and project funds on a larger scale, and ultimately to consolidate into a national website





## LOCAL

- Further use by facilitators and all involved in this pilot within their ongoing projects
- Track adoption into existing organisations and infrastructure including Wildlife Trust integrating into projects such as 'Next Door Nature'
- Produce materials to signpost further information and encourage next steps
- Embed in specific regional projects i.e., activities around Teesmouth National Nature Reserve

"I loved the way everyone was willing to get involved in every aspect of the session and that it did get people thinking about the natural world and the impact that humans have on it. I would love to have more sessions like this happening in Ormesby."

– Ormesby Good Neighbours Group Contact

# WHAT WE LEARNT

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## PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

- Multi-disciplinary partnership was a successful way work inclusively and effectively
- Essential to have the time and resources to effectively connect to community groups (especially with ongoing Covid and cost of living crisis implications)
- Vital to manage expectations and prepare groups ahead of workshops
- Signposting on from these workshops essential

## PRODUCER AND FACILITATOR SKILLS

- Extremely important to have effective creative production skills
- Establish organisation framework early and embed evaluation firmly from the start
- Effective training and adaptability by facilitators essential
- Need to prepare more resources (for both speed and inspiration) and consider snacks/food/environment (keeping sustainable and natural)

## REACHING UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS

- Hard to get on board and it takes a great deal of time, energy and experience to recruit and engage communities, specifically with ongoing Covid and cost of living crisis implications
- Language could be a barrier
- Adaptation essential for age and multiple needs including neurodiversity

## RESOURCES AND PREPARATION

- Allocate more space in budget and production plans
- Design and create a practical (and natural) resource kit including sustainable objects i.e., fallen leaves and sensory snacks

## EVALUATION

- Nature connectedness chart didn't work effectively – people found it difficult to understand with too many options and word 'connected' causing confusion
- In future would be valuable to do a long-term group or focus
- Further consider next stages and design of co-creation into activities

The project team would like to stress that working with community groups takes care, time, energy and experience that should not be underestimated.

# MORE NATURAL FUTURES ACTIVITIES

Further types of Natural Futures workshops by colleagues at Teesside University include the fun 'Extinction Bingo' and the powerful 'Erasing lost animals' with illustrator Amy Dover and Assembly of Actions performance by Dr Paul Stewart developing a group nature manifesto with bamboo structure and karaoke for tools.

## ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Amy Dover, a researcher in illustration, design and ecology in the Centre for Culture and Creativity took part in a pilot artist in residence scheme for Natural England on community engagement and nature connectedness. Amy developed two workshops for this; Extinction Bingo which took place at Breckon Hill Community Centre in Middlesbrough and Grangetown Library in Redcar & Cleveland, and Erasing Lost Animals



Workshop at Newcastle Contemporary Art (NCA). The bingo workshop is an introductory experience based on the popular game but using Amy's hand drawn images of animals (called out in order of extinction), designed for those with no or minimal experience of art activities and/or with attention, language, or mobility barriers to participation. In the second workshop, a large life size drawing of the extinct (from Britain) brown bear that was created over a number of months by Amy is erased by the group as a communal activity, building an emotional response to our collective responsibility. The vulnerable groups for the bingo workshops could not be shared publicly, however the bear erasure was shared widely across social media and received just under 1,000,000 views so far. In the feedback, all participants said they would take part in nature recovery after the workshop.

## ASSEMBLY OF ACTIONS

This full-day workshop held at Larchfield Community, Camphill Village Trust in Middlesbrough focused on participants developing collective approaches towards key questions around place and ownership towards nature recovery and voice. A researcher in critical practice and social engagement, Dr Paul Stewart's Assembly of Actions considered geographical, ecological and social issues through the production of a collectively written nature manifesto made up of words, ideas, wants, oppressions, emotions

brought out from the participants in response to how nature has a democratic voice. These developed into a series of responses through karaoke performance, placard making, collective poetry and discussion. A key aim was to come to a collective understanding of how to act on the question rather than a resolution of the question, how can we make sure nature has a voice. The pandemic presented an opportunity to redefine how space, navigation, touch and embrace are all considered and their renewed effects on the world we live in. The feedback demonstrated that the group had many ideas of what nature means to them but had not applied that knowledge to collective and individual actions that impact ecosystems and their own day to day routines. The overwhelming feedback from all participants was the freedom to explore climate action in such an exploratory manner allowed them to recognise their impact and role in nature recovery. The development of co-authored nature manifesto was also highlighted as a meaningful outcome. Assembly of Actions is an ongoing durational performance and research project. This iteration was in collaboration with Dr Christo Wallers and supported by two graduate assistants, Egypt Clarke and Matty Emery.



# FURTHER CONTEXT

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## THINKING IT THROUGH

Natural Futures is an ongoing collective and interdisciplinary project at the intersection of creative social action, ecopsychology and nature recovery. These pilot workshops are an adaptation of *The Council of All Beings* developed in the 1980s in Australia (see publication *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* by John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess), and continued through work of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone in particular, who publications include *Active Hope* (2012) and *Coming Back to Life* (2014), and The Work That Reconnects (WTR) online network. Group processes for connecting with nature have always been a part of human communities across time and across the whole world, and often developed from or connected to indigenous cultures. It is only in recent generations that these have been lost to our mainstream culture.

The project is also informed by contemporary critical and cultural theory that deals with environmental issues, most notably Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), a proposal for getting and making together in the Chthulucene era – Haraway's own alternate to the human-centric post-Anthropocene. The book asks us to be truly present now as a way of dealing with where we are, in urgent (purposefully chosen as opposed to emergency) times, in her words: "not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings." Other key texts that have influenced our research include Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016), Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and *Arts of Living On A Damaged Planet* (Eds Tsing, Swanson, Gan and Bubandt, 2017).

The ongoing effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis has also informed the research process and influenced this project's conception and delivery directly, on a practical level in terms of access to social groups and new considerations of safety, and also through the pandemic's specific implications for human-nature interaction (for example Soga et al, 2021).



## CONNECTING WITH CARE

There is increasing evidence that nature connectedness is critically important to fostering pro-environmental behaviours. Research by The University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group (Richardson et al, 2020) and Natural England (see *Included outside* publication series, 2022) amongst others shows visits to natural sites, knowledge and understanding are not enough nor are they necessarily inclusive. We need to build empathy and emotional connection to the natural world, and not make assumptions about access. Natural Futures with its playful and creative approach brings the opportunity to connect to a broader spectrum of people and communities.

Workshops can take place in a variety of public and community spaces, including art galleries, community centres, schools, parks, libraries and online, that all utilise the key factors of empathy, creativity, and imagination. Nothing specific is needed although the workshops can be staged and be shaped by the context, for example full costumes for a school performance. From the Council is the idea of creating masks, gifts and sharing future visions. These then belong to the participants and can be displayed or used to launch local initiatives that combine art and nature. It is vital to consider, adapt and prepare for the needs of different social groups ahead of any workshops taking place and often, how these activities are introduced make a big difference to how they are received. This could range from just a preparatory activity of noting care and considerations to specialist support for groups with more complex needs.

At the end of the experience, the facilitator takes photos and notes to capture the masks, gifts and future visions. The typical length of a workshop is ninety minutes, but this should be tailored to the social groups and the context. Ninety minutes is both a typical standard length of a theatrical performance, and also the amount of time spent walking in nature that a Stanford University research study demonstrated actually changed the brain for a lower risk of depression (Bratman et al, 2015).





## WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

- Each participant has to do a simple prior task, to research and choose an animal, plant, material or landscape and create a simple image or *mask* to hold in front of their face or on their head of the part they will play in the performance. This method of creative empathy gives nature a voice: each human becomes an element of nature and begins to see the world from their perspective. Alternatively, they can choose quickly and create a 'print out' aspect of nature.
- There is a creative invocation by the facilitator of around 10 minutes that sets the scene and tone. This should feel like an epic poem that starts at the beginning of time and reaches the present, to highlight that humans are only a tiny new part of Earth's history, and whilst they have had a disproportionate effect on the planet it is not too late or too intimidating to change the narrative. A special invocation will be created for the pilot specific to the Tees Valley area.
- Introductions – each participant reveals their part of nature in a short ceremonial style ("I am the Tawny owl and I speak for the owls of the world")
- Now, invited to speak at random, the aspects of nature express particular concerns that they have about the current state of nature. For example: "As Tawny owl, I want to tell the Council that my hunting is being affected and I struggle to feed my young. I hunt at night, as humans know from my song. 'You still up? Me too!' but now there is no escape from the lights of the towns and cities and I can't find the food I need." Everybody acknowledges with a communal, "We hear you, Tawny owl"
- Through the process each participant is given the chance to take the place of the humans, this can be done individually or in small groups. This is about the power of listening and receiving. Each part of nature directly makes a plea of their concerns to humans. "Hear us, humans. This is our world, too. And we've been here a lot longer than you. Yet now our days are numbered because of what you are doing. Be still for once, and listen." The ceremonial style of delivery continues.

- Actions – after calling the humans to account, the performance changes mode and turns away from the concerns and into a positive gift-giving space. “For all their machines and apparent power, the humans now are frightened. They feel overwhelmed by the momentum of the forces they have unleashed. It does not serve our survival for them to panic or give up, for truly our life is in their hands. If they can awaken to their place in the web of life, they will change their ways. What strengths and gifts can each of us give them to help them now?” In response, “I, Tawny owl, give humans my night vision, so they can save precious energy resources and reduce light pollution and the confusion it causes wildlife.”
- Thanks and thoughts – each member ceremonially thanks their part of nature and is invited to pledge as a human what they can do for them, “I will turn off my outdoor lights at night. I want to volunteer to plant some trees for you owls!” An additional element that can be introduced is each member offers a future vision, “I am imagining, seven generations from now, the rewilded forest that replaced the plastic factory and the night hunts that feed all of the owls”
- There is an opportunity to create or record the gifts and/or visions.
- It is also recommended that time and/or space is provided for the post-performance period, here groups might want to just continue talking, do specific art activities, go for a nature walk or even host a nature recovery themed disco!



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