

Wood you believe it? Children's and young people's perceptions of climate change

A key aspect of the strategy of Forestry Commission England (FCE) is promoting the potential of trees, woods and forests for preventing, mitigating and adapting to climate change. This research contributes towards FCE's aim of assessing current public understanding of climate change and the role of trees, woods and forests.



"They're telling us but it's not enough, we need to know more because we'll just say 'oh who cares' basically we need to think why, we need to actually do something."

Young person, rural primary school

Background

There is a general consensus that the world's climate is changing and that the actions of humankind are a primary cause of this change. High levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which trap a greater proportion of the sun's radiant energy, are causing average global temperatures to rise. Climate change will have serious and far-reaching impacts for society as well as the natural environment. One of the ways in which FCE is contributing to efforts to prevent and adapt to climate change is through using trees, woods and forests to help communicate and improve understanding of climate change issues and, potentially, to bring about positive behavioural change.

Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

- to investigate children and young people's perceptions and knowledge of climate change and the role of trees, woods and forests;
- to explore whether certain factors (urban/rural location, educational experiences, parents' perceptions and the media) had any impact on the children's and young people's perceptions.

Methods

A range of methods was employed:

- literature relating to children's and young people's perceptions and knowledge of climate change was identified and reviewed;
- children's and young people's perceptions of climate change and the role of trees, woods and forests were investigated using focus groups;
- teachers and governors were interviewed about the teaching approach and the importance of environmental issues within their schools;
- parents' knowledge and perceptions of climate change and the role of trees, woods and forests were assessed using a short questionnaire.

Pupils (n=89, aged 7-15), parents (n=67), teachers and governors (n=7) from five schools (two urban and three rural; three primary and two secondary) in the south-east of England participated in the research. The data were collected in March of 2009.

Findings

The review of existing literature highlighted that little is known about children's and young people's knowledge and perceptions of climate change and, in particular, the specific role of trees, woods and forests.

General awareness of climate change was high amongst the children and young people who participated in the focus groups, nevertheless a number of misconceptions were evident. Few of the children and young people realised the total contribution of forestry to climate change, though they did see deforestation (globally and in the UK) as an environmental problem. They were concerned about climate change and typically thought that action is needed urgently. However, their concern was tempered by their perception that the effects of climate change would be felt elsewhere, their optimism that science and technology would find

a solution, and their perception that other threats (e.g. the economic crisis) were of greater concern. The media and educational experiences appeared to have had an effect on some children and young people's perceptions.

The parents were aware of climate change and the majority attributed it to the actions of humankind. Like their children, they perceived that the economic crisis was currently of greater concern.

Although the teachers and governors thought they had a responsibility and desire to educate the children and young people about climate change, they indicated that due to the constraints of the curriculum and other competing interests relatively little time was devoted to the issue.

Recommendations

The findings of this research indicate that:

1. There is still a need to educate the public about specific aspects of climate change, in particular to target common misunderstandings and misconceptions. In addition, highlighting the ways in which climate change will affect current generations may also be valuable.
2. The Forestry Commission should continue to focus efforts on educating the public about the ways in which trees, woods and forests can contribute towards prevention, mitigation and adaptation to climate change.
3. Further research needs to be carried out to determine the most appropriate ways to reach certain audiences; for instance an internet-based initiative may not reach the types of children and young people who participated in this research but 'whole school' approaches or television-based strategies may be more successful.

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Reports and publications

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