

# Carbon Capture:

## A Participatory photography Project On the Youth Environmental Service UK

Berggruen Institute, Future of Democracy Program  
Youth Environmental Service UK

### Executive Summary

Carbon Capture was a one-day assembly held on October 6, 2021 in Manchester, United Kingdom. The event brought together seventeen local participants between the ages of 18 and 25 to consider the structure, aims, and objectives of the developing Youth Environmental Service (YES) UK, a movement for nature, creating opportunities for young people to get involved in deploying nature-based solutions to address our environmental and ecological crises. 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 aspects of the climate crisis concern you the most? Are there places in your life or in your community where you already experience the effects of the climate crisis? How does the climate crisis impact you now? Where do you think it might impact you in the future?
2. Where in your community do you see people connecting with one another? Where do you see members of your community working together toward a common goal? Alternatively, where in your community do you see an opportunity to build new community bonds that are not yet there?
3. Are there examples in your daily life, and/or in your community, of people connecting with the environment? Examples could include community gardens, rewilding efforts, co-ops, smart energy initiatives, and beyond. Are there other examples of your community members cultivating relationships of care with nature? Alternatively, where do you see opportunities to bring more nature into your community if it is not yet there?
4. What are some of the skills you'd like to develop as you prepare to enter the workforce? If you could imagine spending a year developing your qualifications for working in the green economy (or elsewhere), what would that look like? Alternatively, are there concerns you have about employment in a post-pandemic economy?

Over the course of the assembly, participants discussed their photographs as a springboard for the development of insights for the Youth Environmental Service UK. The assembly culminated in a captioning exercise, wherein participants developed written texts to accompany their photographs, offering insights for the design and priorities of YES UK.

Carbon Capture was convened by the Berggruen Institute's Future of Democracy Program and the Youth Environmental Service UK, and facilitated by British radio host and presenter Swarzy Macaly.

The Youth Environmental Service UK aims to inspire and connect passionate people to fulfilling nature-based work, expanding our skills and collective capabilities in the fight against climate change.

## 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 YES UK. These insights include key ecological issues of concern that the YES UK program could choose to focus on; broader conceptual frameworks of action; and specific initiatives that YES UK may consider implementing.

Key insights included the following:

### Accessibility

- Issues of access and equity should be prioritised in environmental action, both with respect to the projects undertaken and the composition of the teams undertaking those projects.
- Opportunities for participating in environmental action and environmental service should be made available to communities who remain underrepresented in environmental discourse.
- Opportunities should be made available to young people to contribute meaningfully to the conversation and in ways that are ongoing.
- “Every voice must be welcome at this table.”

### Systems Approach

- The climate crisis should be understood as symptomatic of broader structural concerns.
- Issues of environmental concern should be tackled not only through service-based approaches and individual or group action, but through a broader policy lens. Policymaking should be a sphere of accountability for addressing and mitigating the impacts of the climate crisis.

### Skills Building

- A primary focus of YES UK should be on helping participants develop skills that contribute to sustainable futures.
- Artisan skills that offer alternatives to the consumption of mass-produced goods should be explored (e.g., basket making).
- Woodland and outdoor skills offer useful entry points to engaging with the natural world.

### Green Spaces

- Approaching easily accessible green spaces as a basic human right.
- Initiatives to develop green spaces in neighbourhoods with a disproportionate lack of green space access.
- Developing and clearing footpaths and pathways that lead to nature and green spaces.

## Food Systems

- Reconfiguring relationships to food systems by shortening food links and reconnecting to natural food sources.
- Building community infrastructures for sourcing food from community gardens.
- Community-based food systems offer opportunities for community-building more broadly and for strengthening social bonds within a given community.
- Recognizing gardening as an opportunity for the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.

## Compensation

- Ensuring that environmental service is waged.
- Recognizing that unwaged environmental service and volunteering widens existing inequities and limits participation for many.
- A “whole person” approach should be taken in determining compensation for environmental service, including factors like the need to support dependents, housing costs, and transportation.

## Affirmative and Additive Approaches

- The discourse around climate action is weighted toward negative or subtractive approaches, i.e., toward what not to do. For example, conversation around action at the individual level often centers on what behaviors and habits an individual should cease, rather than what actions they can actively perform to add to climate efforts.
- Eco-anxiety marks much of the discourse around climate. While valid, this sensibility can also deemphasize people’s collective and individual capacity to intervene by taking active measures to combat the climate crisis.
- Affirmative narratives are necessary that foreground the actions an individual can take, the activities they can engage in, and the services they can perform to meaningfully intervene in the climate crisis.

These insights have helped set the foundations for the co-design process of a Youth Environmental Service pilot in the UK. In addition to directly suggested specific elements of the participant experience, it has also shaped a set of underpinning values that will inform design decisions, both now and in the future, with YES UK guided by the need to be:

- **Youth led:**  
Both in its design and implementation, the Youth Environmental Service needs to be fundamentally youth led. This means ensuring young people have a seat at the table in all design discussions, and YES empowers them to drive the kinds of change they want to see in the world.
- **Inclusive, diverse and accessible**  
YES should be an actively open and inclusive organisation from the beginning - it needs to welcome and reflect the diversity in the UK that makes us stronger,

embracing the benefits of different voices and different perspectives.

- **Grounded in science**

All YES projects need to be environmentally driven and scientifically informed. They should be focused on using the right tools and the right times to address both the environmental and biodiversity crises facing our country.

- **Collaborative & network-led**

As an organisation YES cannot function without leaning into the wider environmental network. Collaboration should be at the heart of how we operate and YES needs to embrace a networked model that utilises expertise from a range of public, private, and charitable organisations.

- **Empowering tomorrow's leaders**

It needs to make sure that the experience creates a new generation of confident, capable and passionate environmentalists. Participants should be empowered to go on and create positive change in their personal lives, their communities, and across wider society.

- **Inspirational**

YES should offer a powerful new positive story of collective action in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. In the same way that British resilience in the face of the Blitz bombings is talked about today, YES should offer current and future generations a clear example of the power of collective action to make an impact.

## Event Overview and Structure

Carbon Capture drew its structure from the field of participatory photography (see section 5 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 organisation that uses ethical photography to promote positive social change. Participants engaged in these activities in groups organised according to the pre-distributed prompts.

These activities included:

### 1. Commonalities and Differences

First, each participant presented two of their strongest photographs and described why they chose those images as responses to their respective prompts. After each group member presented their work, groups collectively brainstormed common themes emerging across the submissions. They subsequently chose three key themes that seemed most relevant to a discussion about YES UK, spatially arranging the photographs by theme.

### 2. From Hopes to Concerns

In the following activity, participants spatially organised their photos on a linear trajectory (from left to right) along a spectrum with "concerns" on one end and "hopes" on the other. On the left side, "concerns" denoted images that depict a need, worry, or problem in the participant's community. On the right side, "hopes" denoted images that depict solutions to a need, worry, or problem, or images that offer visions of a different future or reality.

### 3. Synthesis and Visual Mapping

Participants left breakout groups and rejoined the assembly to share out the common themes, hopes, and concerns that emerged across each of their groups. Once these concepts were aggregated, they were used to synthesise a visual map of the core concerns shared across participants.

### 4. Captioning

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

## 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:**

Tristan Allen

**Caption:**

*Worried enough to be motivated, but not to be defeated. Get involved to find the balance.*

## **Background: Future of Democracy Program and the Youth Environment Service**

Carbon Capture 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. Carbon Capture was one among these convenings, with additional events organized in Los Angeles and Wales.



In the UK, the Youth Environmental Service is gathering momentum, with a pilot programme planned for Autumn 2022. This will be nationwide, with 70 roles being created for young people from different backgrounds in environmental organisations from different regional hubs. Building on the insights identified during the Carbon Capture event, the pilot is currently being developed out of The Eden Project, with support from both local and national environmental organisations and youth advocacy groups.

## 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 Carbon Capture, 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.

## Acknowledgements

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All photographic documentation of the Carbon Capture event not attributed to specific participants is courtesy of Haris Finazzi Ahmed/Haych Digital.