

# Rewilding Research: Exploring young people's perceptions of nature, identity and home

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## Abstract

Our research seeks to shed light on the transformative effect that nature immersion and rewilding can have on young people, particularly those living in areas of socio-economic deprivation. Conducted in 2024, the research employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to investigate barriers preventing youth engagement with the natural world. Central to the project were the 'Wild Camps', five-day immersive experiences in the Yorkshire Dales, designed to foster a deeper connection to nature through camping, outdoor activities and community. Equally, the camps provided a space for reflection away from their normal urban environments and, crucially, away from technology.

This essay will focus on the two key themes that emerged from the research: Relationship to Home and Relationship to Nature. These themes, drawn from participant reflections and observations, reflect the complex interplay between young people's perceptions of their local areas, home life, technology, and their evolving connection to the natural world. Relationship to Home explores the value of reflecting on home lives and technology use, while Relationship to Nature demonstrates the benefits of connecting deeply with the natural world.

By highlighting how these immersive experiences challenge the boundaries between people and landscapes, the study offers insights into the potential of rewilding to shape young people's identities and relationships with nature. These findings hope to offer valuable insights for designing programs that leverage nature immersion to address well-being, social inclusion, and ecological awareness.

## 1. Introduction

Richard Louv's (2008) concept of 'nature deficit disorder' (NDD), and its critiques (Dickinson, 2013), has significantly influenced contemporary discourse on the importance of nature-connectedness. Louv suggests that increasing access to nature

can have profound benefits for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged areas.

Hull, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, has limited green space and the least wooded area in England (Woodland Trust, 2018). Therefore, the potential from increased connection with nature is significant. To better understand and address these challenges, our youth-led research addressed two questions: what barriers limit young people living in disadvantaged urban areas engagement with nature, and what impact does participating in immersive nature-based practice have on young people?

Our study, funded by the Ideas Fund, employed two young researchers (themselves aged between 19 and 22) to carry out youth-led participatory action research to seek answers to these questions at three Wild Camps held at Aysgarth Falls, North Yorkshire. The camps were organised by Rewilding Youth, a Community Interest Company based in Hull and the East Riding that supports young people living in disadvantaged urban communities to develop connections with nature and the world around them. These five-day immersive residential combined camping, outdoor activities, and learning to foster young people's relationships with nature, themselves, and their peers (Rewilding Youth, 2025).

Participants were aged between 13 and 22 and were recruited as those who were typically not already involved in any nature-based or environmental activities. They were predominantly young people involved in anti-social/criminal activity; struggling to attend education; socially isolated or who struggled with their mental health and general wellbeing. Rewilding Youth facilitators felt these were individuals most likely to benefit from this opportunity.

By situating our questions within the context of Wild Camps, this article contributes to wider debates. Namely, young people's access to nature in urban environments, the role of immersive experiences in fostering nature connection and the impact these experiences have on young people's connection to their localities.

## **2. Methodology**

Our research was guided by the principles of participatory action research (PAR) (Baum et al., 2006) and utilised the Nature Connectedness Index (NCI) (Richardson and Butler, 2022) as a framework for our research questions.

We adapted the concepts and language of the NCI for young people, ensuring relevance to our project. The adaptation included daily scale questions (1–7), such as "My happiness depends on nature" and "I feel freer in nature." Participants also

answered open-ended questions like "What does 'nature' mean to you?" and "Is there a difference between being outside and being in nature?"

In the Wild Camp study, utilising PAR principles ensured that participants played an active role throughout the research process. We monitored their experience through semi-structured interviews, encouraged ongoing feedback and suggestions, and gathered reflections throughout on their overall experience.

Initially, both participant and unobtrusive observation methods were planned, but we found that this disrupted engagement. A blended observation model was therefore adopted, balancing involvement with minimal intrusion.

Our daily interviews and observations captured the participants' reflections on their experiences. Using thematic analysis, we coded and categorised data into six themes, offering a comprehensive understanding of young people's connection to nature and the camp's impact. Throughout the article, we incorporate anonymised quotes from participants to illustrate key themes.

### **3. Consent and ethics**

Participants and guardians signed consent forms after we explained the research and shared our accessible video clarifying data use and the process of involvement. Our ethical approach was organised internally at Rewilding Youth guided by Dr Charlotte Dean to ensure that we met UKRI ethical research requirements.

### **4. Findings and discussion**

Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse our research data, we identified six themes ranging from community/relationships to participation to personal barriers to geography. This paper is an analysis of the two most emblematic themes identified. The first, Relationship to Home, examines how young people reflected on home life while being disconnected from urban environments, technology, and routines. The second, Relationship to Nature, charts participants' journeys in building deeper connections to the natural world to the green spaces within their own community. These expose the profound benefits of empowering young people to connect with nature, as well as an acknowledgement of the challenges in encouraging this connection.

#### **Relationship to home**

Relationship to home emerged as a central theme in the data, reflecting a complex and multi-layered connection between the young participants and their lives at

home. This theme captures three interconnected subthemes that revolve around the young person and their relationship to home: homesickness, technology, and reflections on home life.

Homesickness typically emerged within the first two days of camp. Here, homesickness refers to struggling to adjust to a new environment. Moving from the familiarity of Hull to the relatively wild environment of Aysgarth Falls, the young people often expressed discomfort and reservation. For some, this initial shift led to reluctance in participating in activities. One young person, when asked to attend a sunrise walk, responded, “Do you think I’m getting up to see a shitty sunset?” revealing an early resistance which potentially stemmed from feeling uneasy in a new environment. This resistance generally faded as participants grew more comfortable, and many became enthusiastic about activities they had initially rejected. For instance, a participant who initially refused an animal tracking activity, “I’m not going anywhere,” gradually became engaged as they adjusted to the Wild Camp environment. By the end, they were engrossed, investigating footprints, discovering skulls, and admitting, “I really like these walks.” This shift shows early resistance came from discomfort. Homesickness also surfaced in early interpersonal tensions, reflecting difficulty adjusting to new social dynamics. One participant, feeling out of place, remarked, “Don’t have nowt in common with them,” highlighting their unease being away from friends and family. Nonetheless, most participants gradually assimilated to the group setting, forming connections with their peers over time. This aligns with previous research indicating that wild camps encourage the development of “self-confidence, self-esteem, and social relationships” (Henderson et al, 2007), demonstrating how these experiences provide participants with valuable opportunities to grow and connect with others.

Technology emerged as a significant subtheme, as the enforced absence of phones and vapes marked a significant shift for participants. While some humorously wanted to find a “phone” or “vape” during foraging, the lack of technology proceeded to encourage deeper engagement. One participant noted, “No one would have gone in the water if phones were there,” highlighting how the absence of mobile devices reduced distractions. Others reflected on being without a phone impacted daily habits, with one saying, “I don’t normally eat at home because I’m on my phone, but I’ve eaten here.” Another noted how social media’s pressure to “get the perfect photos” faded in the presence of nature. In the UK, at least 95% of young people aged 14 to 17 have a social media account (Dixon, 2022), underscoring the prevalence of technology in their lives. With fewer distractions, participants became more present, engaging with nature and peers. By the camp’s end, many felt liberated from technology, appreciating simplicity and connection. This shift reflects broader research on the benefits of nature immersion, which suggests that “the biosphere may provide a reprieve from the cybersphere for highly connected youth”

(Minor et al., 2023), highlighting how technological disconnection fosters deeper connections with nature and each other.

However, it is important to note that technology can also play a role in connecting young people to nature. Crawford (2016) suggests that 'mobile application was just as effective at connecting children to nature as more traditional ways of non-formal environmental education.' Nevertheless, our research and experience with Wild Camps demonstrates that removing technology can be effective in helping participants to form deep emotional connections with nature, a connection that can spark a long-lasting bond.

Reflections on homelife, another subtheme, captures participants' contemplations on their everyday lives in Hull. Removed from their usual settings, many young people began to reflect on the challenges they face at home, including safety concerns. One participant expressed, "If we go for a walk at home you're bound to see a dead homeless person," highlighting the unsettling scenes they may encounter. Another participant shared, "Can't explore around our area thanks to drug dealers; feel safer around trees than being around kids with machetes." These statements portray the contrast between the sense of security they found at camp and the dangers at home, perhaps a reflection of Hull's crime rate being 65% higher than the U.K. national crime rate (National Crime Rate, 2025). The camp's safe space enabled participants to address their struggles more openly. For instance, one participant stated, "If I was at home, I'd just stay in bed all day, I'd be really unmotivated. Here, there is actually something to do." Another added, "If I was at home, I would just be in bed; I don't want to kill myself here." Young people reported that the temporary escape of the Wild Camps provided relief and the chance for self-reflection away from stresses of homelife. Therefore, suggesting that an engaging environment with opportunities for nature immersion can provide critical respite with potential wellbeing benefits.

### **Relationship to nature**

Another central theme was the young participants' existing relationship with nature and how their immersion in the Wild Camps influenced them. Many had limited prior exposure to nature, making this experience of deep immersion novel and for many participants particularly profound. We also gathered their perspectives on being in nature and its impact on their lives.

A recurring theme was the sense of peace and calm that emerged as the participants adjusted to their natural surroundings. Observations revealed a marked shift in behaviour: at the start, the young people were visibly stressed and restless, but as the days passed, they became calmer and more regulated. As participants adjusted

to being in nature, the camp grew tranquil. Many described feeling “calm” and “peaceful.” One said, “I felt at peace, like I’m part of the wild,” while another shared, “I wasn’t stressing, just felt free.” Nature seemed to provide an escape from home’s noise and stress. One reflected, “At home, it’s too loud to focus. Here, hearing your own breath is completely different.” Others found solace in the woods, using quiet moments to reflect. One said, “I laid there listening to nature” to avoid thinking about home challenges”, while another noted, “I walked up a hill, it was peaceful, no cars, just nature.” This calm was not just a break but a chance to reconnect with themselves and their surroundings.

The Wild Camps introduced many participants to entirely new experiences, immersing them in a far wilder environment than they were accustomed to. Many came from housing estates in and around Hull, where green spaces are limited, and wild nature is scarce. The camp provided unique encounters with nature that left lasting impressions. One participant stated, “That’s the first hedgehog I’ve ever seen. I knew what they looked like, but I’ve never seen one. It was pretty beautiful, actually.” Another group excitedly shared their experience of spotting a deer during an animal tracking activity, demonstrating the emotional impact of these close encounters with wildlife. A similar sense of awe emerged during a clear night, one young person remarked, “It’s calming when you see the stars,” perhaps reflecting the joy of being away from the city and light pollution. These encounters fostered a sense of wonder and a deeper emotional connection to the natural world, which many had never experienced before.

Throughout the camps, participants reflected on their respect for nature. When asked, many expressed an appreciation for the intelligence of living organisms. Some shared positive perspectives: “I try to leave nature how I came to it, that’s someone’s home,” said one participant. However, their actions sometimes conflicted with their words. While they recognised behaviours like littering or killing insects as problematic, these habits persisted during the camp. Several participants killed insects and even encouraged others to do the same. Yet, by the end of the camp, there were signs of shifting attitudes. On the final night, one participant reflected, “I feel bad I threw that spider into the fire now,” sparking a group discussion about insects’ roles in ecosystems. As the camp progressed, some participants began to police their peers’ actions, encouraging mindfulness. For instance, during a foraging activity, one young person advised others not to “take them all” when gathering ‘crampballs’, a type of fungus useful for lighting fires. Responsibility deepened over the camp, with one participant noting, “If we destroy nature, we destroy where we live,” reflecting growing self-awareness and appreciation for nature’s interconnectedness. This aligns with the goals of outdoor education, as outlined by Higgins and Nicol (2002), who emphasise that fostering responsibility for sustainability is not solely the role of facilitators but also something that should

emerge within peer interactions. The participants' evolving perspectives highlight how immersive outdoor experiences foster environmental stewardship by encouraging both reflection and action.

## **6. Conclusion**

The journey of the young people during the Wild Camps highlights the transformative power of nature-connection and community. Many arrived feeling disengaged, dysregulated, and hesitant to participate, with the camps initially mirroring the fast pace of urban life and reliance on technology. As the camps progressed, the frenetic energy shifted to a calmer rhythm, shaped by the absence of devices and constant immersion in nature. This fostered deeper engagement, a growing sense of belonging, and stronger community bonds. Participants also found solace in nearby beauty spots, with meaningful experiences often emerging in spaces around the camp they felt drawn to. This transformation prompted reflection on their lives in Hull.

Our findings underscore the significance of immersive outdoor experiences in building resilience, confidence, and respect for the environment. The contrast between the insecurity of home environments and the safety found in camp highlights stark social inequalities in access to nature. The deepened respect for nature also points towards the importance of fostering environmental stewardship through peer interaction as well as facilitation.

Furthermore, the entanglement of technology and nature connection reflects wider concerns about how digital life mediates young people's engagement with the natural world (Minor et al., 2023). At the same time, the sense of refuge found in nature underlines the role that access to green space plays in tackling social and health inequalities (Dickenson, 2013).

Following the findings of the research Rewilding Youth have set up a Rewilding Youth Collective, which focuses on empowering youth voice in local climate action. The research also resulted in the creation of a short film in collaboration with Hinterland Creative. It explores the findings of the research, directly explored by the young people.

Ultimately, the research supports the mission of Rewilding Youth and similar organisations in their efforts to connect young people with nature. By fostering freedom, reflection, and connection, these programs have the potential to create transformative experiences that inspire participants to carry forward the principles of nature-connection, community, and resilience into their everyday lives. In turn, fostering young peoples' connection with nature may benefit recent attempts to

develop more participatory and inclusive approaches to rewilding and nature recovery (Hafferty et al., 2023), with positive social as well as ecological effects.

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