

Youth Engagement with Nature and the Outdoors

A Summary of Survey Findings



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SOLUTIONS ARE IN OUR NATURE

In the spring of 2012, the David Suzuki Foundation asked Canadian youth between the ages of 13 and 20 to tell us about their experiences outdoors.

During a six-week period, 664 young Canadians from every province and territory in Canada (except Nunavut) shared their views on:

- Why they get involved in environmental programming, and why they don't.
- The types of outdoor programming that might interest them.
- The types of programming they think are most effective in fostering a longer-term connection with the outdoors.
- The types of environmental issues they are interested in.

The profile of a typical respondent to the survey was a female between the ages of 18 and 20 years of age who lives in a city or suburb and who does not identify as a minority. She spends about an hour a day outside and has participated in some kind of outdoor programming, likely before she was 16 years-old.

KEY FINDINGS

Nearly half of Canadian youth surveyed feel they don't have enough time to join programs that get them out into nature. They say school, work, and other chores make it difficult for them to take part in outdoor programs. This speaks to the fact that society may not prioritize spending time outdoors. If parents and the school system are putting a greater emphasis on indoor tasks and activities, this will translate into how young people spend their time and where.

Seventy per cent of the youth surveyed spend only about an hour or less per day outdoors. When they are outside, youth spend much of their time in and around their neighbourhoods, with their friends and travelling by foot or on wheels. This highlights the importance of creating and maintaining natural areas in our urban environments. Schools also play a pivotal role in getting kids outside, with over two thirds having accessed outdoor or nature programming through their school or a field trip.

The survey also shows the importance of getting kids to spend time outdoors at a young age. Young people currently or previously involved in some form of outdoor programming were 20 per cent more likely to spend unstructured time outside. They were also more likely to spend time exploring nature.

The survey also points to the important role parents and families play in getting younger teens to spend time outside. The younger they were, the more likely they were to spend time with their families in nature and to spend time outside in structured outdoor programs.

Youth aged 16 and over were more likely to spend time outdoors on their own, perhaps because parents relax restrictions on their children's movement as they get older. Only 35 per cent of youth aged 13-15 said they usually spent time outdoors by themselves, compared with over 60 per cent of older youth.

Most encouragingly, over half (58 per cent) of youth reported that they usually do at least some type of unstructured outdoor activity that gives them the freedom to observe and inquire about their surroundings e.g., observing wildlife, hiking, arts-based activities, catching bugs, etc. This indicates that this kind of activity has great appeal to young people, and that families and communities need to encourage young people to spend more time exploring their natural curiosity about the world around them.

OTHER FINDINGS

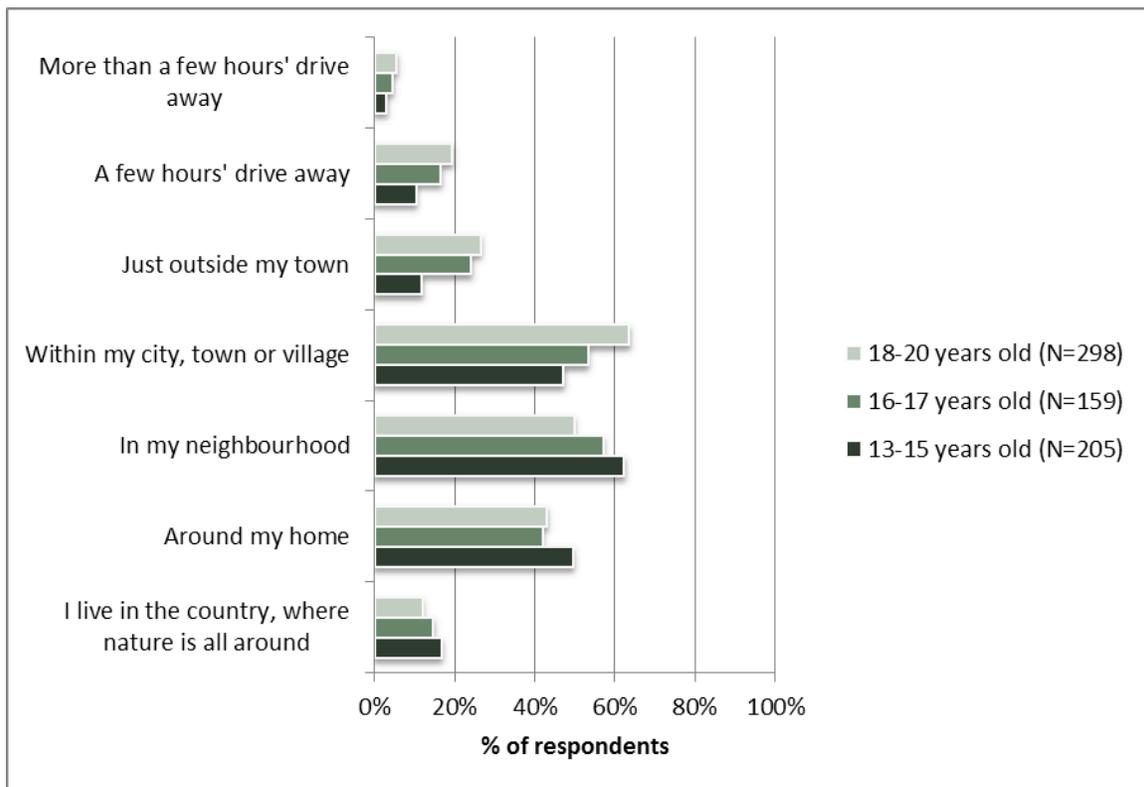
- Youth who had been involved in programs that “got them outside and into nature” spent more time outdoors than those who had never been involved.
- A lack of time (due to school, work, chores, etc.) is a barrier to many youth participating in outdoor programming. The cost of the program is another barrier for many youth.
- Youth under the age of 16 were more likely to think that outdoor activities with their family helped them to connect with nature best.
- Older youth were more likely to feel connected by exploring nature on their own, and facing challenges in natural surroundings.
- Youth who had never participated in outdoor programs more often thought they connected best with nature when they spent time in nature with friends.
- Most youth are looking for fun, adventure, and excitement when they spend time outdoors.
- Youth are most likely to join programs offered through school courses and field trips, followed by summer programs/camps.

Of the youth who had been in outdoor or nature programs:

- 75 per cent had joined school courses or field trips
- 59 per cent had taken part in summer programs and camps
- 39 per cent had been in after school or weekend programs

- Youth in the 18-20 age range thought they were less likely than the younger respondents to join school-based or summer programs, and more likely to join programs with a community group.
- Youth are most likely to be with their friends or on their own when they spend time outside.
- Most youth spend their outdoor time close to home, in recreational areas like backyards, parks and school yards; and on streets, sidewalks or urban trails.
- Just over half (57 per cent) of the youth indicated they usually spend time in at least one type of setting where plants and wildlife predominate (a garden, farm, nature/hiking/ski trail or other natural area).
- Youth aged 16 and over were more likely than younger teens to spend time in natural areas, on streets and sidewalks, or on nature trails. Younger teens were more likely to spend time in recreational areas.
- Older youth were also likely to roam further afield to be outside and in nature, as shown in *Figure 1*.

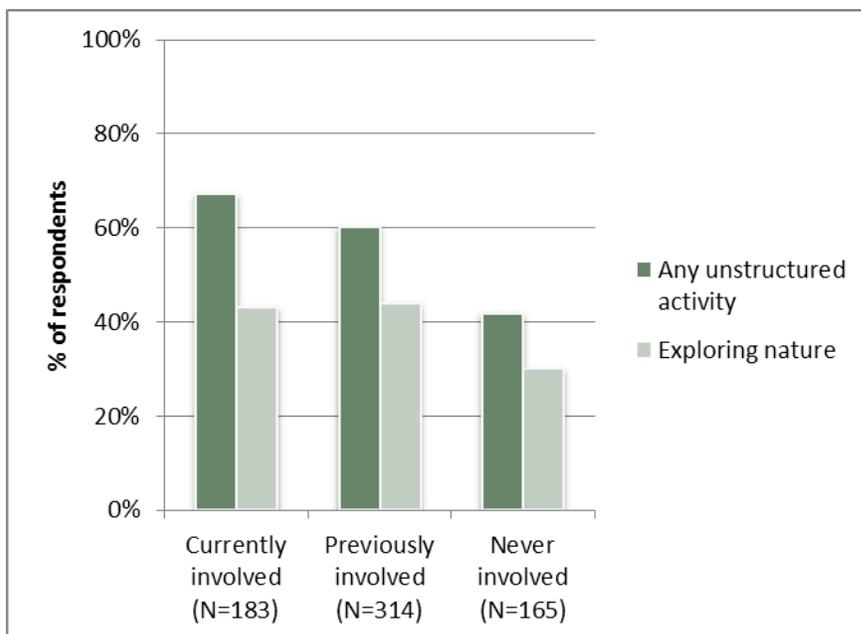
Figure 1: How far youth usually go to be outside and in nature, by age



- While outside, youth were most likely to be walking, biking, running or skateboarding, either for pleasure or to get somewhere.

- **Many, but not all, youth engage in at least some unstructured activities outdoors.** Over half (58 per cent) of the youth reported that they usually did at least some type of unstructured outdoor activity that would give them the freedom to observe and inquire about their surroundings e.g., observing wildlife, hiking, arts-based activities, catching bugs, etc. This indicates that this kind of activity has great appeal to young people.
- Youth who had been in outdoor programs were more likely to engage in unstructured activities than those who weren't.
- **The older they were, the more likely they were to spend time doing unstructured activities.** Only 43 per cent of the younger teens reported doing unstructured activities, compared with over 60 per cent of the older teens. Younger teens were also less likely to say they “usually” explore nature when they are outdoors (26 per cent vs. 46 per cent).

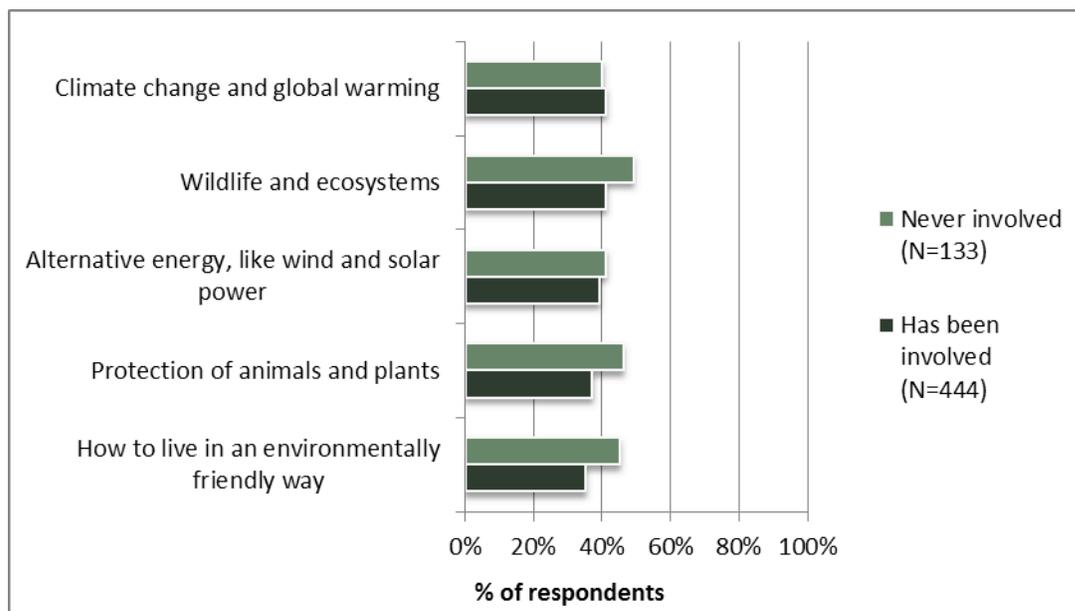
Figure 2: Per cent of youth “usually” engaging in unstructured activities and exploring nature, by involvement in outdoor programs



- Of the youth surveyed who have never been in programs that take them outside and into nature, half of them (53 per cent) indicated they would be willing to sign up for an outdoor program, Females and youth living in cities are among the most interested. Most respondents who identified as a minority also indicated they would sign up.
- Many youth (33 per cent) who have not previously been involved in outdoor programs said they hadn't thought about joining a program that would get them out into nature.

- Youth are most likely to join peer programs in which they can get outside and into nature with people their own age.
- Youth are most interested in learning about climate change, wildlife and ecosystems, alternative energy, the protection of animal and plants, and how to live in an environmentally friendly way.
- Youth who have never been involved in programs are more interested than those previously involved in learning about wildlife, protection of animals, and the “how-to’s” of living in a more environmentally friendly way.

Figure 3: Most popular environmental topics, by previous program involvement



Differences among subgroups – some highlights

Age differences:

- Younger youth are more interested in joining school programs, after-school programs, and summer camps than older youth.
- Older youth are more interested in programs offered by community organizations, as well as mentorship programs.
- 13-15 year olds are more interested in getting involved to have fun, adventure and excitement, and to learn new skills.
- Older youth are more interested in learning leadership skills and how to take action for the environment.
- Older youth are more interested in spending more time outside and to be physically active.

- 16-17 year olds are more interested in getting more involved in the environmental movement.

Gender differences:

- Males are interested in learning new skills like hunting, fishing, or swimming.
- Females are interested in becoming involved in the environmental movement.
- Males are more interested in learning about alternative energy.
- Females are more interested in learning about the protection of plants and animals.

Location differences:

- City and urban youth are interested in getting involved to spend more time outside and to be physical active. They are less interested in learning about wildlife and ecosystems.
- Rural, farm and small town youth are interested in learning more about the environment as well as new skills and to improve existing skills.

Differences by amount of time spent outside:

- Youth who spend more than six hours outside per week connect more often with nature through mentorship.
- The more time youth spend outside, the more likely they are to get involved in programs in order to learn more about the environment and ecosystems.

The survey and research findings were conducted by Cathexis Consulting on behalf of the David Suzuki Foundation and have been summarized by the Foundation.