

"What made you green?":  
Some older Kiwis' reflections

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# How and why do some New Zealanders become 'green'?





THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Project Green at the University of Waikato investigates how today's teenagers construe their in-school and out-of-school environmental experiences to date (refer Eames, Barker & Scarff at this conference).

The present study serves as a base-line for, and a precursor to, Project Green. It asks:

- What were the formative environmental experiences of older New Zealanders in the absence of school programmes in EE/EfS?
- In comparing these responses with those of some current New Zealander students, what advices and caveats does this study have for Project Green?



# 'Becoming Green': The Research Literature ...

There are at least six major discourses ...

1. Significant life experiences, e.g. Chawla (1999)
2. Transformative learning, e.g. Sterling (2001)
3. Values, e.g. Callenbach (2005)
4. Environmental identity, e.g. Wenger (1998)
5. Ecological literacy, e.g. Orr (1992)
6. Action competence, e.g. Jensen & Schnack (1997)

# Data collecting

... An opportunistic sample from a conservation-based organization at a four-day camp in a national forest park





## The sample:

22 adults, age range 45 - 82 years (only the 45-year-old had experienced an EE/EfS programme at school) and, for comparison, 3 students, 12 - 15 years, all exposed to EE/EfS programmes at school.  
Total = 25



# The interviews ...

Individual interviews, 5 - 10 minutes' duration

Discussion around two questions:

1. "Can you identify any significant turning points, events or situations in your life that heightened your 'becoming green', in terms of your 'green' awareness and/or your 'green' action-taking?"
2. What part did your schooling have in these processes of 'becoming green'? Was it major, medium, minor or nil?



# Coding the 25 interviewees for subsequent reporting ...

A three-part code was used:

- A letter of the alphabet (A through Y) from oldest to youngest,
- M or F for gender,
- age in years at interviewee.

For example, KM66 was a 66-year-old male.

# Findings and Conclusions

Firstly ...

In response to the research question:  
"What were the formative environmental experiences of older New Zealanders in the absence of school programmes in EE/EfS?"

# 1. Negotiating 'green' language: 'awareness', 'action-taking', 'turning points/events/situations'

- All 25 interviewees found these terms self-explanatory.
- Half described awareness and action-taking as usually occurring simultaneously in their lives; for the remainder 'awareness' usually preceded 'action-taking'.
- Identifying personal turning points was unproblematic, although two interviewees (BF75, LF66) saw their action-taking emerging continuously and without identifiable turning points.

## 2. The process of clarifying, and committing to, one's own stories

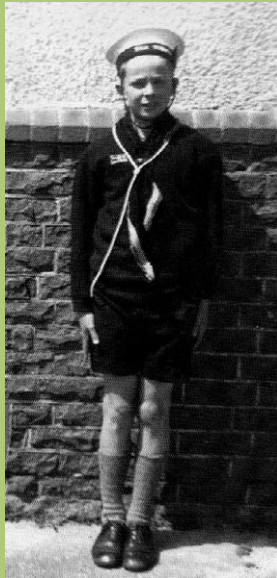
- The older Kiwis (AM82-VF45) were eager to participate; readily described themselves as 'green'; and their stories were unambivalent and apparently well rehearsed. By contrast ...
- The students (WM15-YM12) were happy to talk; did not describe themselves currently as 'green'; and their responses were far more noncommittal and much less elaborate.

### 3. Awareness and action-taking - the significant influences

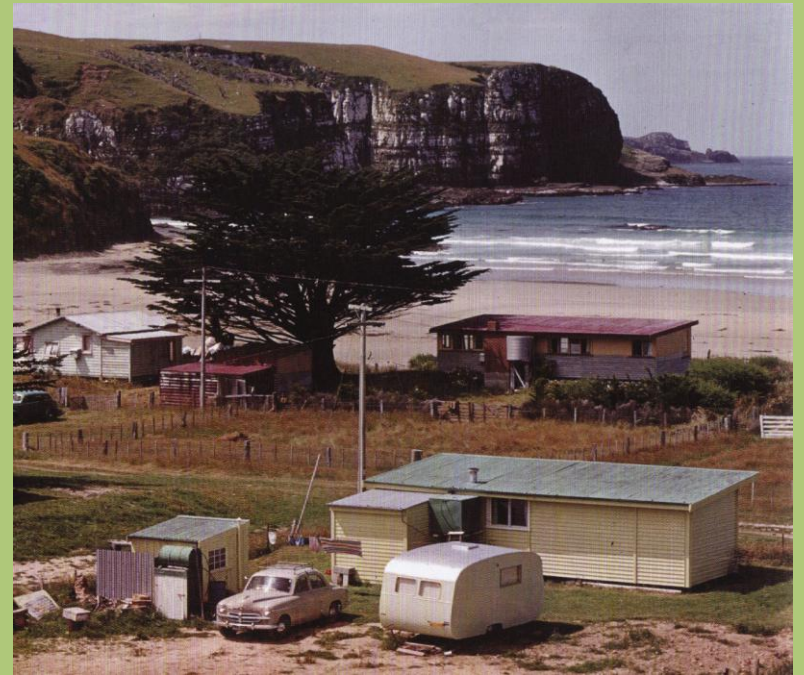
All 22 older Kiwis identified turning points which had promoted AWARENESS. These were:

- Participation in organizations (8 interviewees), namely

Boy Scouts, Junior Naturalists, Play Centre, an Outdoor Centre, a tramping club, a self-organized group of senior school students



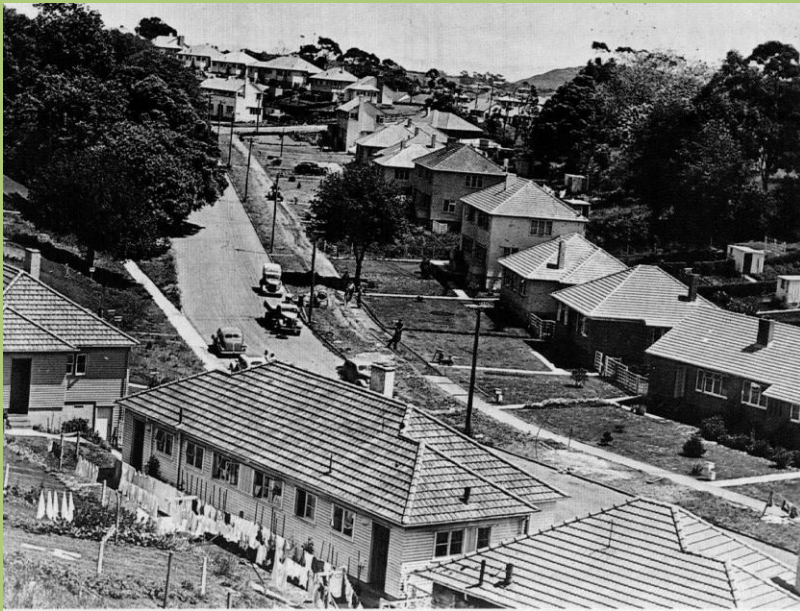
- Parental modelling of frugality (5)
- Gardening (5)
- Family trips and holidays (3)
- Schooling (3): Biology Club, EE/EfS (VF45)
- Urban gully restoration (3)
- Concern about rubbish (2)
- Anxiety about her children's world (1)
- An environmental workplace issue (1)





# All 22 older Kiwis identified instances of initial ACTION-TAKING:

- Political/environmental action within an organization  
Maruia, Forest and Bird, Junats, Ornithological Society (8)
- Began domestic recycling (4)
- Began urban gully restoration (3)
- Initiated personal political action (3)
- Gardening and landscaping (2)
- Began environmental education work (2)
- Had a vasectomy (1)



## 4. Awareness and action-taking - the particular influence of schooling

The older Kiwis ...

Major: 1 - Vigorous exploration of environmental issues in a rural school, 1970-1978 (VF45)

Medium: 2 - Biology Club (AM82), Nature Studies (CM73)

Minor: 7 - Growing seeds (RF59), quadrats and transects (NM64)

Nil: 12

The students ...

Medium: 1 - "Some school project work" (WM15)

Minor: 2 - "I'm more into computers" (YM12)



## 5. Environmental awareness and action-taking as products of their times

LF66 recalled that in her first five years her awareness was aroused by her mother's patching of clothes, her insisting that lights be turned off, and that little food be wasted.

These years, in the late 1940s were ones of post-war austerity, and memories of the Great Depression were still strong.





KM66's awareness resonated with the more sunny years of growing prosperity in the **1950s**: carefree days of sunshine, wood-smoke, flying foxes and billy cans at Scout Camps on upland sheep farms adjacent to native bush.



HF70's first job in the early 1960s was analysing plant material from grasslands to which superphosphate-coated DDT prills had been applied. However, her reading at that time of Rachel Carson's dire warnings about environmental poisoning caused her to take political action and soon to change her employment.



TM58's story, the way he told it, was pure **1970s** ...

Awareness: "The Age of Aquarius, Woodstock, loving the Earth, all that stuff ..."

Action-taking: "... Stephen Brand's 'Whole World Handbook', getting involved with the 1972 UN environmental conference in Stockholm ..."





## 6. Theorising early experiences in hindsight

Three of the older Kiwis provided interesting reflections on their thinking about the 'turning points' they had described ...

PF60: "I remember one afternoon - I may have been about three - when I was visiting a friend of mum's and I wandered into her vege garden. There I was dwarfed by corn plants and surrounded by greenery and pumpkins and everything, and I just stood there ... for a long time. There was LIFE all around me. How did it happen and who was looking after it? Later, I often worked with dad in our own garden. He had a strong feeling for providing for people. He was tied up with the Springbok tour thing. It was all kind of connected, I suppose - life and caring about humanity ... But I'm reading a lot into this later, I'm sure. That afternoon I just stood there, silent and kind of awed.

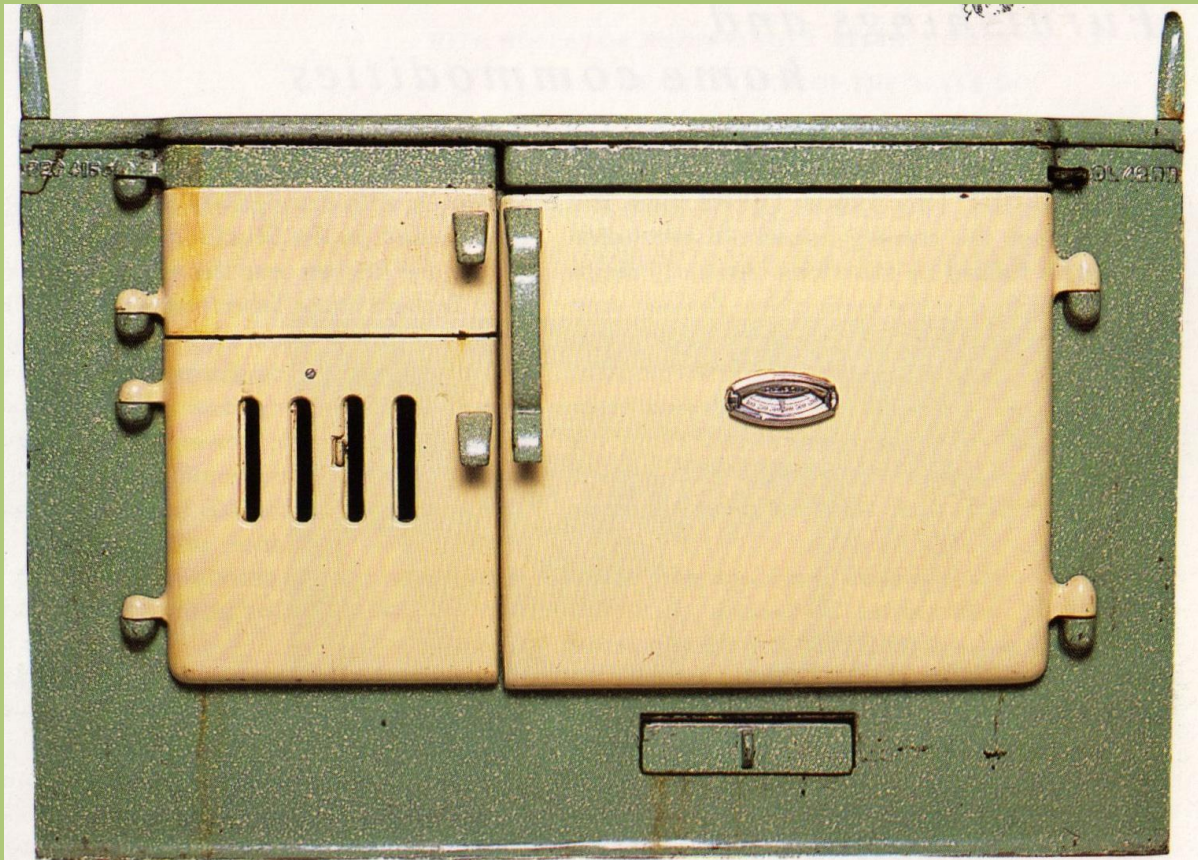


CM73 recounted his story about his vigilante gang's action-taking in protecting bird's eggs from youthful intruders in an Essex woodland. He commented: "I suppose it was actually all about biodiversity, although of course I didn't realize that at the time."





The five older Kiwis who cited parental modelling of of domestic frugality had all assumed, correctly, that in those days the motive was to save money. Now, in addition, they value these behaviours as examples of "recycling" (LF66, SF58) or "sustainability" (FM70).



# Findings and Conclusions

Secondly ...

In response to the research question:  
"In comparing these responses with those of some current New Zealand students, what advices and caveats does this study have for Project Green?"

## a) Young people's notions of 'being/becoming green'

- These may be diverse.
- The students may not have had sufficient time yet to disentangle personal awareness from personal action-taking.
- They may not yet be able to identify and nominate clear 'turning points' in their lives.



## b) Notions of their own 'green-ness'

Students' responses may be fluid, guarded, little rehearsed and apparently not theorised. This style of response may contrast with how the researchers would respond to their own questions.

### c) Green-ness - the most persuasive factors

Apart from schooling, it may be that gardening, home practices, family travel and voluntary participation in groups may be important in current students' lives .

## d) School programmes in EE/EfS

These cannot be assumed to be a dominating and enduringly persuasive factor in students' lives.

**e) Their views will reflect the social characteristics of the current decade**

Because of their immediacy, perceiving those characteristics will be an issue in this research.

f) Students may have changed their motives and rationales by hindsight.

Some of these older Kiwis freely volunteered that they had, or they might have, tidied up their stories!