YOUNG PEOPLE
LEADING NATURE RECOVERY

IMPACT REPORT 2025

ACT!ON FOR CONSERVATION

Contents

3. A message from our CEO
4. What we do
5. Recapping the year
7. Ten moments that highlight our impact
9. Connecting young people to nature
13. Strengthening wellbeing, confidence, and social connection
17. Case Study: David's Journey
19. Creating access to meaningful leadership opportunities
23. Demonstrating best practice in inclusive decision-making
27. Influencing sector thinking and practice
31. Acknowledgments

ACT!ON FOR CONSERVATION

A message from our CEO

Young people never fail to amaze and astound me with their vision, ingenuity and commitment in the face of the uncertain and unstable times we are all living through, and the climate and ecological crisis unfolding in waves at our bow and in our wake. In 2025, our eleventh year of operation as a charity, this has been as evident and impressive as ever. The achievements, impacts and stories of hope and change that flow through this report, intertwining, and feeding each other, speak to us. They say just how important young people are for humanity and for the wider living world that nourishes, sustains, and enlivens us. They also make crystal clear how vital nature is to young people, to their health and happiness, to how they form relationships and forge a sense of community and to their development into compassionate human beings and good ancestors. As the waters settle on a busy and productive year at AFC, it is a joy to be able to share with you all – our supporters, cheerleaders, collaborators and co-creators – with deep gratitude, the positive change that young people are bringing about with our and your support. We look forward with excitement to building on these successes in the year to come.

Hendrikus van Hensbergen

Hendrikus van Hensbergen
FOUNDER & CEO

What we do

WildED

WildED is our environmental education and action programme for secondary schools and youth groups, including our bespoke land-based education programme at the Penpont Project. We empower young people through hands-on workshops and action days to take meaningful, lasting action for nature through legacy projects in their communities.

Residential Summer Camps

On our annual Residential Summer Camps, young people aged 12-16 from across the UK spend five days in the UK's beautiful National Parks, discovering wildlife, learning new skills, getting stuck into hands-on conservation projects and making friends for life.

Ambassadors

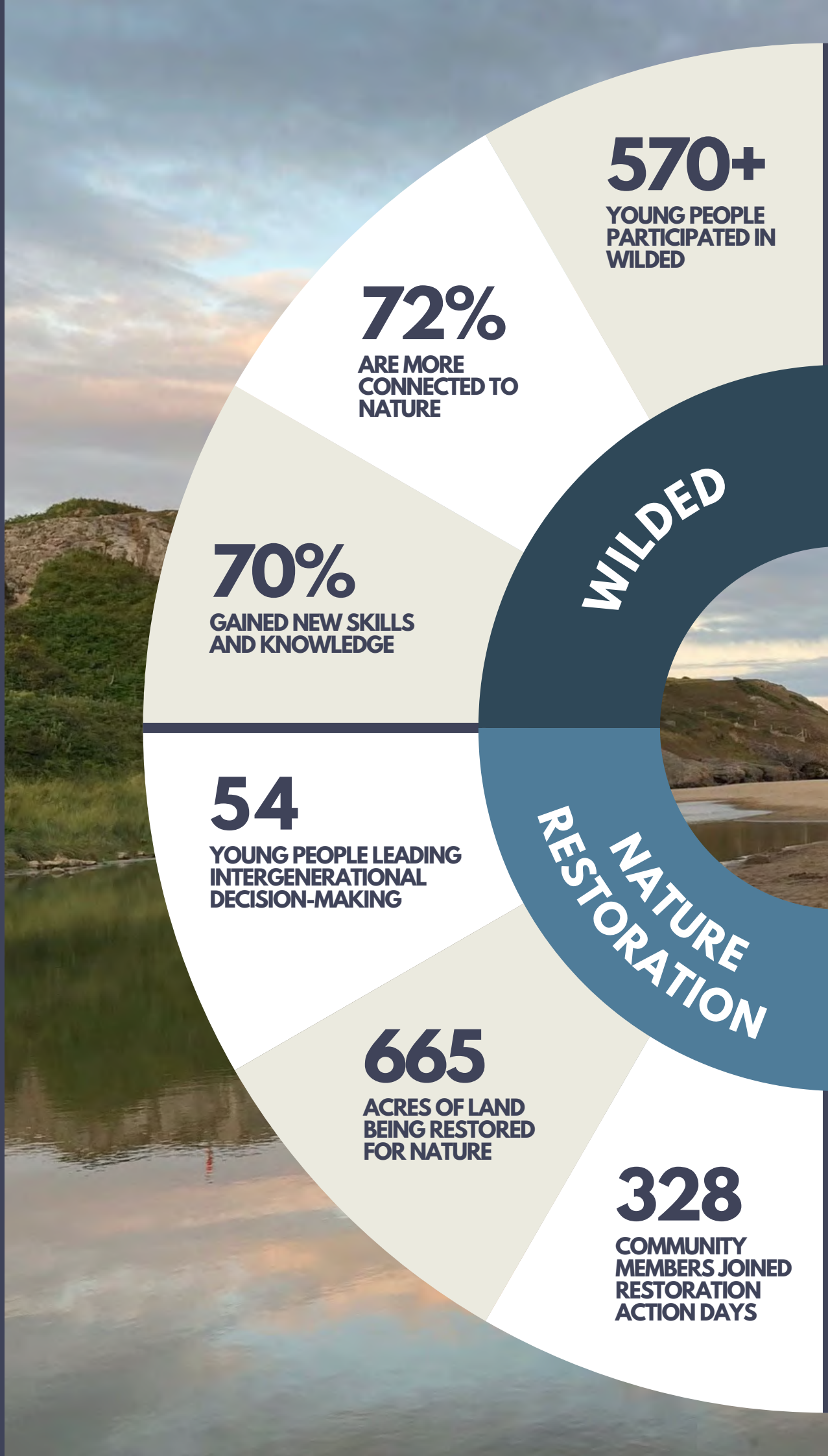
After Camp, young people join our Ambassador Programme for dedicated mentoring and support. As Ambassadors, young people lead environmental projects and campaigns in their communities and access meaningful leadership opportunities across the sector.

Intergenerational Nature Restoration Projects

Young people co-lead our Intergenerational Nature Restoration Projects, working alongside partner organisations, farmers, experts and local people to create and enact community-led action plans for nature restoration at scale. Young leaders develop hands-on conservation skills, while expanding their leadership experience and ability to forge and maintain community.

ACT!ON FOR CONSERVATION

Recapping the year



ACT!ON
FOR CONSERVATION

CAMPS

69
YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDED FIVE CAMPS

68%
WERE FROM UNDERREPRESENTED BACKGROUNDS

82%
SAID CAMP HELPED THEM FEEL HAPPIER AND CALMER

AMBASSADORS

59
YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN THE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

88%
FEEL MORE MOTIVATED TO TAKE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

81%
ARE MORE INTERESTED IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE NATURE SECTOR

Ten moments that highlight our impact

1

Young people from the Penpont Project's Youth Leadership Group were awarded the National Park Protector – Young Changemaker of the Year award, at a ceremony at the House of Lords.

2

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Blue Spaces Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund's Nature Networks Grant supported the expansion of our intergenerational nature restoration initiatives at the Penpont Project and to two tributaries of the Usk River, with an incredible combined total of £500,000 in funding.

3

We completed the construction of Camp Aelwyd, our new immersive outdoor woodland education space at the Penpont Project that will benefit young people for decades to come.

4

North West Ambassadors designed and co-led the fifth annual Manchester Festival of Nature at Heaton Park, welcoming thousands of community members to celebrate nature, arts, craft and music in the city.

5

Our Residential Summer Camps were shortlisted for Outdoor Adventure of the Year at the London Youth Awards, which celebrates outstanding achievements within London's youth sector.

6

41,719 National Trust members elected AFC as an Appointing Body to the National Trust Council. Our South East Programme Manager, Omar Abu-Seer, now represents us on the Council and will advocate for the greater inclusion of young people and underrepresented groups in the Trust's work.

ACT!ON FOR CONSERVATION

7

Young people participating in our WildED Programme, from across Greenwich, Walthamstow and Putney, planted new orchards and microforests in their communities with support from the Mayor of London's "Trees for London" initiative.

A record number of beneficiaries were supported to progress into leadership roles at AFC. For example, Katie (who joined AFC aged 15, now 23) is now working as an ecologist to design a citizen science river monitoring programme at the Penpont Project. Reece (15) is now a Young Volunteer for WildED and helped create a new growing space at his school in Manchester.

8

9

AFC Ambassadors gained hands-on environmental leadership experience thanks to partnerships formed with, among others, the Knepp Estate, Wildwood Trust, Avon Wildlife Trust, Groundwork, Westonbirt Arboretum, British Trust for Ornithology and the Railway Land Wildlife Trust.

10

The Penpont Project's Usk Living Memory map, created with Peak Cymru and communities along the River Usk, toured Abergavenny Pride, the Brecon Show and Hay Festival. At Hay Festival it served as a backdrop to a panel discussion featuring René Olivieri, Chair of the National Trust, acclaimed author and AFC Trustee, Robert Macfarlane, ornithologist and campaigner, Mya-Rose Craig, and Simone Lowthe Thomas of the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority.

CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ALL BACKGROUNDS TO NATURE

and inspiring and supporting young people to take action that contributes to its restoration

I feel different about nature now than I did before. I feel more connected, because we spent so much time outside, and I appreciate nature a lot more from being outside all the time and getting hands-on with volunteering work.

Alice (16)

Connecting young people to nature:

We believe that young people will protect what they care about, and will care about what they experience, enjoy and understand. That's why fostering connection, wonder, curiosity and joy in nature underpins all our work with young people.

This year, we delivered **130 nature-based workshops**, **17 action days** and **16 immersive residential experiences** for young people. Our programmes expanded to Sussex, supporting young people from coastal communities to connect to blue spaces on their doorstep. We also completed the construction of Camp Aelwyd, our new woodland education space at the Penpont Project, where young people can live, cook and learn outdoors.

74% of young people across our programmes reported experiencing a deeper connection to nature and many are sustaining this in their own time by walking more, spending more time outdoors, practising species identification with their friends and building nature-based craft and mindfulness into their daily routines.

"The one thing I'd like to revisit after this camp is doing sit spots because I felt really at peace and connected to nature around me. I'll do that when I get home more frequently because it felt really good for my headspace" – Zak (15)

This year, young people translated this new connection into practical action locally through over 175 youth-led projects, campaigns and actions, including new wildlife ponds, leaky dams and food growing spaces. In London, 80 young people planted a new orchard and a broadleaf micro-forest in their communities as part of the Greater London Authority's "Trees for London" programme, gaining vital knowledge and skills while taking stewardship of these new green spaces.

"The group has clearly increased their knowledge, awareness and connection to nature. Students are now more engaged in conversations about environmental sustainability and their motivation to support nature has definitely strengthened." – Richie F,
Head of Geography at Thomas Tallis School

1,700 HOURS

of experiential outdoor activities delivered across all our programmes

STRENGTHENING WELLBEING, CONFIDENCE, AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

and fostering a sense of belonging and laying the groundwork for collective change

Being involved in an education system outside of school and having adults who are very understanding and empathetic really helped me build that personal resilience. [It helped me] overcome adversity and hardship.

Emily (22)

Strengthening wellbeing, confidence, and social connection:

Nature connection and environmental stewardship are closely linked to young people's wellbeing, confidence and sense of community. These foundations are critical to building a thriving youth-led movement. This year, we started systematically measuring wellbeing and relational outcomes to better understand how our programmes support young people's emotional wellbeing, build confidence and foster a sense of belonging within the wider nature movement.

This year, we supported **685 young people** to experience the benefits of spending time in nature. **78% reported a positive effect on their overall wellbeing**, rising to 86% for our residential programmes, where young people spend extended periods outdoors with like-minded peers.

"Spending time in nature has that soothing effect, which can't be explained, and helped me realise that I can do things and not have to worry or be nervous or be anxious." – Nadia (19)

"AFC improves mental health in a way you don't realise until you look back. AFC helps you get out, talk and socialise in ways you think you can't." – Katie (16)

Many young people we worked with this year now use nature to support their mental health in their daily lives.

"Camp made me realise that when I'm overwhelmed, I can always go on a walk. You can take in details of the small things in nature that take your mind off other things." – Zak (15)

This year, we led 280 hours of skill-sharing, leadership and resilience-building activities that help young people feel more capable as changemakers, including campaign training, writing and public speaking workshops, and all-weather camping. As a result, **81% of young people reported feeling more confident in themselves**.

"I've become more confident in talking to new people and doing new things. I've also been more aware of the world around me instead of staying inside all the time." – Charlotte (17)

89% of young people from our programmes reported stronger relationships and **87% have a deeper sense of community**, leading to individuals feeling more hopeful and motivated to act for nature.

> ***I've got more hope for the future. Meeting so many people who care just as much as I do from so many different backgrounds and ages has given me so much more motivation knowing that I'm not alone.***
> *Freyja (16)*

David's Journey

David, aged 17, has been part of the AFC network since 2023, when he applied for our South West Summer Camp. At the time, David had recently moved to the UK and was excited to learn more about nature and meet new people.

During Camp, David visited the UK coastline for the first time and was struck by its beauty. He also discovered his love for woodlands, where he enjoyed peaceful meditation sessions.
He described the Summer Camp as a "life-changing" experience that he would recommend to anyone. As an AFC Ambassador, David continued to develop his confidence, knowledge, and hands-on conservation skills, taking part in activities like tree planting, seed collection, and river restoration, and presenting at the Penpont Project Education Summit in 2024.

David has now joined our Youth Leadership Group at Green Shoots at Grow Wilder in Bristol, our newest Intergenerational Nature Restoration Project, and he also joins Ambassador events with this year's cohort as a Young Volunteer. One of his highlights has been a residential visit to Heal Somerset, where he particularly enjoyed the nature-spotting night walk and the chance to hold a slow worm. David wrote a wonderful blog post about his experience, here or visit: www.actionforconservation.org/blog

He told us, *"In just 48 hours, I felt more connected to nature, to others, and to myself than I had in a long time. The weekend reminded me how powerful slowing down, being outdoors, and working together can be. It was inspiring, grounding, and exactly what I didn't know I needed. I even made a new best friend."*

David also told us about his motivation for the future, saying, *"My goal is to know more, know more about nature, to see more problems that are going on right now, and then find more solutions."*

David is currently studying construction at college, building on the practical skills developed through hands-on conservation experience with AFC. We look forward to David bringing his knowledge and skills to help design and build a new Youth Hub at Green Shoots, creating a lasting legacy for nature and his local community.

Case Study

> ***One of the most eye-opening moments [of the visit] was watching footage from the camera traps – a reminder of how much life goes on unseen when we're not looking. I also learned that there's a lizard that looks like a snake called slow worm, I even carried one, I felt so good.***

CREATING ACCESS TO MEANINGFUL LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

and enabling further progression into education, employment, or leadership roles, influencing positive change in the environmental sector and wider society

The Penpont Project has changed my life insanely. It's made me decide to pick environmental science at university. I'm doing that now and I'm enjoying it. Every time we have visitors come to speak to us, it's like a glimpse into what my future could look like. On top of that, it is really good fun.

Rhys (22)

Creating access to meaningful leadership opportunities:

Our programmes serve as a springboard for young people to enter leadership positions where they can drive positive change in the environmental sector and wider society. We expose young people to a wide range of leadership pathways while creating opportunities for them to progress into leadership within our organisation and the wider sector. As a result, **84% of young people we worked with this year were more motivated to pursue leadership pathways**, and nearly one-third of all young people we have worked since 2017 have moved into paid work, post-secondary education or leadership roles in the sector.

This year, we supported **54 young leaders at our Intergenerational Nature Restoration Projects**, where they are co-developing shared future visions for nature through eco-cultural mapping and delivering nature and cultural restoration. We also recruited and trained five young people as Residential Camp Leaders, where they gained facilitation, safeguarding and leadership experience as role models for future cohorts of young people.

We delivered the second year of our Youth Ranger Traineeship at the Penpont Project, giving two young people **300+ hours of paid land-based experience and qualifications** like animal handling and chainsaw use. Both Rangers joined with limited work experience but shared a desire to develop a practical conservation skillset. By the end of the Traineeship, one Ranger progressed to a paid role with the RSPB while the other enrolled in a Level 3 Land and Wildlife course, with plans to pursue an ecology degree.

"Learning about nature made me realise how much more I want to learn. The Rangership is just the start of my journey." – Layla (20)

This year, **42 young people from our programmes moved into influential positions in their communities or into education pathways** that provide a route into environmental leadership. For example, Anali (15) became Southend's Council Youth Mayor, Grace (18) started working with Trees for Cities, and Fortune (15) was elected to the Hackney Youth Parliament.

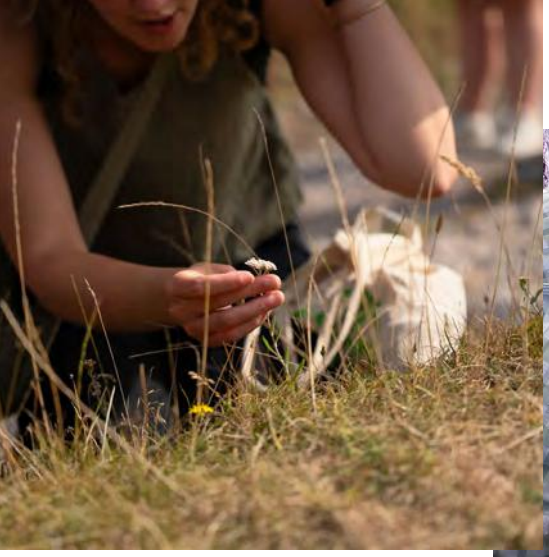
1 IN 3 AMBASSADORS

progressed to a leadership role in the nature sector this year

DEMONSTRATING BEST PRACTICE IN INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION

and supporting the restoration of nature, culture, and community

> *[For] all young people, no matter where they are, climate change is an issue that affects them and probably worries them as well. AFC teaches you how to advocate for yourself [and] how to advocate about issues you care about. It uses the environment to empower young people.*
>
> Emily (22)



Demonstrating best practice in inclusive decision-making and implementation:

Our Intergenerational Nature Restoration Projects demonstrate the power of bringing generations together to strengthen community bonds and build a mandate for ambitious nature restoration. We use unique eco-cultural mapping methods to support communities to explore the land's past, present and future potential and create ambitious long-term visions for collective change. Eco-cultural mapping is particularly effective in giving young people and other historically marginalised voices a genuine say and hand in shaping the future of our landscapes.

This year, through our Intergenerational Action for Climate and Nature Project, we expanded our eco-cultural mapping methods across three sites through partnerships with Avon Wildlife Trust and Heartwood Social Farm, covering 665 acres of land in the UK. We worked closely with **75 community leaders** – including **54 young people from diverse backgrounds** – and over **325 members of the wider community** to co-create and bring these maps to life.

"The maps represent our approach to intergenerationality and how we aim to share knowledge and preserve culture." – Callum (16)

At the Penpont Project young people delivered nature restoration at scale, alongside their community. We **planted over 5,000 trees**, established a community tree nursery, **installed 12 leaky woody dams** and **introduced conservation grazing regimes across 10 acres**. We are seeing early signs of an ecological response, with new sightings of slow worms, roving beetles, otters and dung beetles.

At Heartwood Social Farm in Derbyshire and Green Shoots at Grow Wilder in Bristol, we completed key eco-cultural mapping milestones and created new critical community infrastructure to improve accessibility, designed new flood management systems and **planted 300 trees**.

"There are literal green shoots on the tree strips planted through the project – we can imagine the future orchard!" – Karina, Project Partner

Our methods are gaining recognition across the sector. **The Penpont Project has been described as "the gold standard of co-design"** by others in the sector and young leaders from the Penpont Project received the Campaign for National Parks 2024 Young Changemaker of the Year Award for their leadership.

At the start, I felt that taking time to research was taking too long and I wanted to get stuck in quickly. I realised the reasons I want to get ahead and get stuck in quickly to 'show progress' is something ingrained by society. I learned that it's okay to build connection to community using small steps to make it meaningful and connected.

Jemima (18), Green Shots at Grow Wilder

INFLUENCING SECTOR THINKING AND PRACTICE

by sharing evidence and insights and encouraging the uptake of approaches and methods by others

To me, AFC is so much more than just an environmental organisation. It's a social mobility organisation, it's a youth empowerment organisation.

Emily (22)

Influencing sector thinking and practice:

We aim to inspire a youth environmental movement that shifts culture, shapes environmental policy and transforms conservation practice nationally. Our influence extends beyond our own programmatic work as we actively advocate for and support others in adopting similar youth-led practices.

This year, we hosted **31 organisations at the Penpont Project**, including Natural Resources Wales, Rewilding Britain, the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority and Wye and Usk Foundation to share our best practice in intergenerational leadership and land-based decision-making.

These relationships set the foundations for a new project to expand our eco-cultural mapping methodologies to the Upper Usk Catchment over the next three years, with the **support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Blue Spaces fund**. This work will see us scale our approaches to two new subcatchments of the River Usk in partnership with the Usk Catchment Partnership, Peak Cymru and Landed Futures.

"We are reaching wider and new audiences through community days, learning exchanges, exhibitions, mapping activities and outreach. We receive multiple emails every week from people wanting to learn more about what we do here." – Forrest Hogg, Penpont Project Manager

Beyond our Intergenerational Nature Restoration Projects, we have provided guidance and support on broader youth governance and inclusion. As a result, the Campaign for National Parks is now leading their 'New Perspectives' programme to engage more young people in the National Parks movement, and Slow Ways created a paid position for a young person on their Advisory Board, which was taken up by an AFC Ambassador.

Following many years of collaboration with the National Trust, **we were elected, by over 40,000 of their members, as an Appointing Body to their Council**, where we will help shape the Trust's work to be more inclusive of young people.

31

ORGANISATIONS

engaged in knowledge sharing sessions led by our land-based projects team

Thank you!

We'd like to say a huge thank you to the young people we work with, our supporters, donors, funders, partners and volunteers. A special thank you to Avon Wildlife Trust, Andy Pilsbury, Catriona Wright, Sam Walton and Ziggy Lyons for their beautiful photographs that are featured in this report.

Follow our work

www.actionforconservation.org

Instagram, Bluesky & X (Twitter):
@action4conserv
TikTok & Facebook:
@actionforconservation

© Action for Conservation, 2026

ACT!ON
FOR CONSERVATION

Registered Charity ("CIO") in England and Wales (No. 1157297)
www.actionforconservation.org