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FROM EDUCATION TO TRANSFORMATION: ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING AS A PATHWAY TO YOUTH AWARENESS AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: This article examines how environmental volunteering can support young people’s ecological learning, psychological well-being and participation in local communities. A narrative review of academic studies, international policy documents and initiatives in Kazakhstan is organised around four themes: environmental education, well-being, corporate partnerships and environmental camps. The synthesis identifies conditions conducive to sustained participation, including meaningful tasks, social support, access to resources and opportunities for follow-up. On this basis, the article proposes the Five Steps of Sustained Participation framework and a 90-day university pilot project, together with indicators for evaluating educational, social and environmental outcomes.

Keywords: environmental volunteering, environmental education, youth, psychological well-being, corporate social responsibility, environmental camps, sustainable development, social participation.

Introduction

Environmental volunteering offers young people a way to apply ecological knowledge to problems in their own communities. A local conservation project, for instance, can connect an understanding of pollution with decisions about waste prevention and public participation. By taking responsibility for a specific task, participants have an opportunity to examine the relationship between their everyday choices and environmental conditions. This connection between learning and action is central to the present article.

The international agenda for education for sustainable development recognises young people as active agents of social change. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap identifies youth action, the transformation of learning environments and local-level initiatives among its priorities [1]. The United Nations Volunteers report emphasises the capacity of volunteers to establish cooperation among residents, organisations and public institutions, helping them respond to the actual needs of communities [2]. These approaches highlight the importance of projects that combine education with practical participation.

A central concern is how an isolated environmental event can develop into a sustained community initiative. The relevant outcomes extend beyond attendance at an event: they include everyday environmental practices, the condition of the site and the continuity of collaboration. This

article asks which educational and organisational conditions may help young people maintain their involvement over time.

Materials and methods

The study is a narrative literature review and conceptual analysis of ten selected sources: international policy and evidence reports, peer-reviewed research and published descriptions of youth programmes in Kazakhstan. The material is examined across four themes: environmental education, psychological well-being, corporate partnerships and environmental camps. Findings and programme descriptions are compared to identify practical conditions for continued engagement. The resulting conceptual framework and pilot project are proposals for future evaluation; no original participant data were collected for this article.

Results and discussion

Environmental volunteering as a tool for environmental education

Environmental education introduces learners to the causes of biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution and other pressures on ecosystems. Volunteering provides an opportunity to examine these issues in a local context. When a team investigates litter on a riverbank, for example, it can connect the sources of pollution with individual and collective decisions. This practical link may help participants develop a more informed approach to everyday environmental behaviour.

The educational value of volunteering is particularly evident in the cycle of preparation, action, discussion and improvement. A riverbank clean-up, for example, can become a comprehensive educational and community project. Before the event, young people examine the sources of pollution. During the activity, they record the types of waste collected, and afterwards they work with partners to develop proposals for preventing further accumulation of litter. This format simultaneously develops environmental knowledge, observation skills, communication, responsibility for shared spaces and the ability to present well-reasoned solutions.

Giving volunteers a choice of roles and opportunities to propose solutions can develop civic agency. Future teachers may also draw on such experience when introducing environmental responsibility in schools.

Two examples from Kazakhstan illustrate distinct approaches to youth engagement. JASYL EL is a paid youth employment programme that includes the maintenance and improvement of public green spaces [3]. UNICEF Kazakhstan, by contrast, offers unpaid youth volunteering, including environmental education and community activities [4]. Although their organisational arrangements differ, both demonstrate ways of involving young people in practical environmental work.

Environmental volunteering and psychological well-being

Environmental volunteering also has a social dimension. Participants may gain a sense of purpose through shared tasks, such as maintaining a green space or organising an environmental education session. Working alongside others provides opportunities to establish relationships and receive feedback on individual contributions. These features are relevant to the design of supportive youth programmes.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe reports an overall positive relationship between exposure to green and blue spaces and mental health, while noting variation in the evidence [5]. A systematic scoping review by Baker, Chioran and Marks examined 37 studies of collective pro-environmental activities and identified social interaction as a prominent potential mechanism of well-being [6]. These findings provide a rationale for combining contact with nature, collaborative tasks and social support in youth volunteering programmes.

Thompson et al. (2026) examined collective environmental action and well-being in a longitudinal mixed-methods study. At baseline, young people who identified as environmental activists or volunteers reported higher well-being as well as higher climate-related distress and impairment [7]. These findings suggest that opportunities for collective action should be accompanied by appropriate support and realistic expectations, rather than placing responsibility for environmental change on young people alone.

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Voluntary participation, manageable workloads and respectful communication are important organisational conditions. A brief discussion after each activity can help participants reflect on what they learned and identify further opportunities for action.

Corporate partnerships and environmental volunteering

Long-term conservation work requires a combination of educational, human and material resources. Universities provide a research and educational foundation, civil society organisations have experience working with local communities, and businesses can offer equipment, logistics, expertise and funding. Corporate environmental volunteering brings these resources together around a common social objective. Its principal value lies in tangible environmental improvements and in partnerships capable of sustaining activities beyond a single event.

In a study of Romanian companies, Puiu and Udriştioiu found positive associations between management support and employee involvement in environmental volunteering, and between such involvement and employee well-being and productivity [8]. For youth programmes, this evidence offers a rationale for partnerships in which employers contribute resources and expertise while respecting voluntary participation and manageable workloads. Community priorities and follow-up responsibilities should be agreed in advance.

Consider a collaborative project involving a university, a local business and a civil society organisation to care for urban green spaces. Students conduct preliminary observations and maintain a record of changes. Specialists recommend suitable plant species and maintenance procedures, the company provides equipment and transport, and residents participate in discussions about local needs. The project's effectiveness can be assessed by examining plant condition and survival after several months, the number of trained participants and whether a team continues to care for the site. This approach combines measurable environmental benefits with the development of lasting cooperation.

Partners should agree in advance on objectives, responsibilities, maintenance and evaluation. In greening projects, this includes suitable plant selection, irrigation and follow-up observations. Public reporting can help residents assess the contribution of each partner.

The TURAQTY JOL initiative provides a relevant example from Kazakhstan. According to UNESCO, 18 teams reached the final of Youth Eco Camp TURAQTY JOL 7.0 in 2026, following a week of instruction, mentoring and project development. Bank CenterCredit and Chevron were among the organisations supporting the initiative [9]. The programme illustrates how educational and business partners can provide young people with opportunities to develop and present environmental projects.

Environmental camps as a setting for experiential learning

Environmental camps concentrate learning and project development within a shared setting. Participants investigate local conditions, consult specialists, allocate roles and present proposals. This format provides opportunities to practise independent decision-making and teamwork.

O’Malley, Roberts and Burnett (2026) examined an environmental education component of a four-day residential summer camp in Louisiana, United States. Participants reported favourable environmental orientations and positive aspects of social and personal development [10]. As the study evaluated outcomes following participation, its findings support the potential of structured camp-based learning rather than establishing long-term behavioural change. Mentoring and opportunities for follow-up are therefore relevant considerations for programme design.

An effective programme integrates four components. The first is field investigation, involving observations of water, vegetation or waste using accessible methods. The second is practical action through conservation activities coordinated with specialists. The third is social experience, including collective decision-making, resolving disagreements and responsibility for shared outcomes. The fourth is post-camp continuity, including mentoring, small initiatives at participants' educational institutions and a follow-up meeting after one or two months.

For schoolchildren and university students, a successful programme provides age-appropriate tasks, trained adult and specialist supervision, accessible participation and compliance with safety requirements. Appropriate consent from legal guardians is necessary for minors. Careful

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organisation allows participants to focus on exploring nature, solving problems creatively and cooperating with others. The transformative potential of environmental camps lies in trust within the team, the experience of useful action and the transfer of new environmental habits into everyday life.

An integrated model of sustained youth participation

The four themes suggest complementary functions for youth programmes. Initial activities offer an entry point for participation; supportive group settings may help maintain engagement; partnerships can provide resources and specialist knowledge; and camps offer concentrated opportunities for project-based learning. Table 1 presents the proposed synthesis of these functions and the conditions intended to support continuity.

Table 1 – Comparative overview of four environmental volunteering formats (compiled by the author)

Participation format	Main mechanism	Condition for lasting effects
Environmental activities	Initial experience of useful action	Understanding causes and undertaking follow-up initiatives
Nature care activities	Belonging and a sense of efficacy	Voluntary participation, support and manageable workloads
Corporate partnerships	Resources, expertise and infrastructure	Transparent indicators and responsibility for continuity
Environmental camps	Intensive team-based learning	Mentoring and a follow-up project

The main conceptual contribution of this article is the Five Steps of Sustained Participation framework. It links problem identification, collective action, reflection, evaluation and continuity. The framework is intended for educational institutions, youth associations and community partners and may be adapted to local needs and available resources. Its effectiveness remains a question for future empirical evaluation.

Step 1. Observe and understand. A youth team works with residents and specialists to identify a local environmental challenge, explore its causes and document the initial condition of the site. Discussing the actual needs of the community helps formulate an objective, select an appropriate format and define the expected outcome.

Step 2. Act together. Participants allocate roles according to age, experience and abilities. The educational institution provides the necessary learning preparation, while partners offer professional and organisational support. The work should be manageable and safe.

Step 3. Reflect on the experience. After the activity, the team discusses the work completed, new knowledge, emotional experiences, approaches to cooperation and opportunities for improvement. Collective reflection helps each participant recognise their contribution and formulate ideas for the next stage.

Step 4. Evaluate the outcome. The team collects simple data agreed upon in advance, such as the condition of the site, the proportion of plants receiving care, the number of returning participants and survey-based changes in environmental habits. The evaluation distinguishes between work completed and actual impact.

Step 5. Ensure continuity. A follow-up plan, responsible team or permanent partner is established. Materials, observation results and practical recommendations are shared with the next group of participants. Through continuity, a single event becomes part of a sustained local environmental practice.

Proposed pilot project: EcoRoute, 90 Days

The proposed university pilot, EcoRoute, 90 Days, translates the framework into a three-month programme. During days 1–14, students, supported by a lecturer and a local organisation, select a suitable site, such as a park, riverbank, schoolyard or environmental education venue. The team documents baseline conditions, consults residents and coordinates the action plan with relevant services.

During days 15–42, participants undertake educational sessions and agreed practical activities. Teams may examine waste-related problems, support specialists in caring for green

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spaces or organise environmental education sessions for schoolchildren. Partners may contribute materials, facilities, transport or mentoring. A short field school or environmental camp can be included where resources and supervision permit.

During days 43–90, the teams continue agreed maintenance or educational tasks, revisit the site and discuss findings with residents. At the end of the pilot, they present the results, review the quality of collaboration and agree on responsibilities for the next cycle. The proposed timetable allows initial observations and follow-up findings to be compared within a single organisational period.

Evaluating environmental and social outcomes

Evaluation should distinguish participation indicators from environmental and educational outcomes. Attendance and volunteering hours describe the scale of involvement. Site observations, plant survival and maintenance records provide information about environmental conditions. Short knowledge tasks and voluntary questionnaires can assess understanding and self-reported practices. Returning participants, resident involvement and active partnerships can indicate continuity.

Brief, voluntary and anonymous questionnaires may capture satisfaction with the programme, perceived contribution and sense of belonging. These measures describe participant experience rather than diagnose mental health conditions. Future evaluations could include baseline and follow-up assessments and, where feasible, a comparison group to examine changes associated with participation.

The framework proposes two complementary evaluation questions: what changed at the site, and what did participants learn? For example, a follow-up survey of a cleaned area can identify recurring litter problems, while a team discussion can reveal whether volunteers are willing to continue. These observations can guide the next stage of the project.

Conditions for responsible and sustained participation

The sustainability of volunteering initiatives begins with responsible organisation. Before an environmental activity, the team clarifies the rules governing the selected site, coordinates activities with relevant services, plans safe tasks and establishes procedures for handling collected materials. Specialists provide the necessary supervision, while young participants gain accessible and meaningful experience of socially useful work. Clear allocation of responsibilities combines volunteers' enthusiasm with the competencies of organisations and local authorities.

Accessible participation increases the social value of environmental initiatives. Convenient venues, flexible schedules, varied team roles, remote educational tasks and reimbursement of necessary expenses where resources permit help engage young people from different circumstances. Continuity is supported by designated partners, a shared archive of materials and a clear plan for handing responsibilities over to new participants. These conditions make a project open, inclusive and resilient to changes in team membership.

Organisers should obtain consent before publishing participant photographs, particularly those of minors. Reporting should explain how indicators were calculated and identify future tasks. Transparent communication helps residents and partners assess progress.

Conclusion

Environmental volunteering connects ecological knowledge with local participation. The literature reviewed here suggests that meaningful tasks, social support, cooperation with partner organisations and opportunities for experiential learning are relevant to the design of youth programmes. Their combination offers a practical basis for initiatives that seek both environmental and educational outcomes.

The Five Steps of Sustained Participation framework and the proposed EcoRoute pilot translate these considerations into an organisational sequence. Their contribution is conceptual: they identify actions and indicators that can be tested in university and community projects. Future research should examine changes in site conditions, ecological knowledge and repeat participation to assess the framework’s applicability in Kazakhstan.

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