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Canadian Commission

Toolkit for Youth Engagement

in UNESCO Designated Sites



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Foreword

In environmental organizations around the world, consistently engaging youth can help advance sustainable development and modernize work related to the protection of natural and cultural heritage. Developing youth capacities, skills and awareness contributes to the growth of our future change-makers, responsible for the community, environment and the world. Furthermore, youth bring fresh and innovative ideas, and present contemporary and holistic perspectives.

UNESCO designated sites (Biosphere Regions, Global Geoparks and World Heritage Sites) are mandated to engage all sectors of society, and engaging youth is essential for these sites to meet their full potential. Managers at these sites must ensure that youth have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and are supported in capacity-building initiatives. Youth deserve to be active participants in the decision-making processes that concern the environment and their future.

Too often, tools developed for youth engagement are designed by older generations who do not necessarily understand the challenges that young people face today. For this toolkit, youth who have worked in UNESCO designated sites in Canada were included in every aspect

of its creation. We wanted this toolkit to reflect the diversity of perspectives, ideas, dynamism, enthusiasm and energy of youth from different backgrounds who are directly implicated in the Canadian networks of UNESCO Biosphere Regions and Global Geoparks. From consultations, informal exchanges, interviews and a survey, we fostered safe spaces for the youth participants to express their opinions freely in informal virtual settings. The information here was compiled to identify areas of improvement and strategies to enhance youth engagement and to foster meaningful inter- and multi-generational dialogue in UNESCO designated sites.

While this toolkit was developed in a Canadian context, it can be used to promote meaningful youth engagement by UNESCO designated sites around the world. It will refer primarily to Global Geoparks and Biosphere Regions, but it can be applied to World Heritage Sites as well. Our objective is that the Youth Engagement Toolkit becomes a standard for all UNESCO designated sites in Canada and beyond.

Zoe Compton,
Programme Officer, Natural Sciences
Canadian Commission for UNESCO



Introduction

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide guidance to the organizations and people managing UNESCO designated sites on how to mobilize and meaningfully engage youth as essential partners in their work to advance sustainable development. The goal is also to empower youth networks to contribute to sustainable development through their local UNESCO designation.

Recognizing their creativity, innovation and capacity to make change happen in the world, we firmly believe that young people are crucial actors, leaders, and partners. UNESCO is committed to accompany them in fighting inequality, contributing to sustainable development and building peace.

 **From UNESCO with, by and for youth**

In 2020, CCUNESCO and the Slovenian National Commission for UNESCO released a **Toolkit on Youth Engagement in National Commissions**. The toolkit demonstrated how sustainably engaged youth and youth organizations help National Commissions, “...modernize their work, advance inclusion, mobilize local communities, and realize their mandates”. It also highlighted the importance of developing youth capacities, skills and awareness, as well as giving youth agency and responsibility for the community, environment, and world. Following the launch of this toolkit and after consultations with youth from the Biosphere Regions and Global Geoparks networks in Canada, CCUNESCO identified the need

UNESCO Global Geoparks

Geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with the focus on protection, education and sustainable development. Geoparks are set up with the intent to involve local communities to combine conservation and sustainable development.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (In Canada, Biosphere Regions)

Known as “learning places for sustainable development”, biosphere regions are used to test, understand and manage changes and interactions between social and ecological systems of biodiversity. These areas include terrestrial, marine and coastal ecosystems that promote solutions to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with their sustainable use and development.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

Cultural or natural heritage sites inscribed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO for having cultural, historical, scientific or other forms of significance that fall under the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) criteria.

for a similar toolkit for UNESCO designated site managers on how to meaningfully engage youth in all aspects of their work. The aim is to ensure that youth have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and are supported in capacity-building initiatives.

This toolkit is meant for site managers to engage and support youth in professional settings, including interns, graduate and summer students, permanent and temporary staff, heritage professionals and volunteers. It can also be applied to young business owners in the community and individuals who collaborate with these sites.

UNESCO identifies youth as a Priority Group in its Medium-Term Strategy (2022-2029), which states its intention to support youth, “...in all areas of its mandate and at all levels of action that will not only address young people as beneficiaries but will also engage with them as change-makers, knowledge-holders, and partners.”

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) engages youth through its networks, partnerships and its Youth Advisory Group. In aligning its 2021-2026 Strategic Plan with UNESCO’s Medium-Term Strategy, CCUNESCO identified mainstreaming youth leadership as one of its cross-cutting priorities: “As a society, we need to move beyond simply inviting youth to participate in discussions.

Youth have a vested interest in our shared future, and we need multi-generational shared leadership and shared decision-making. We will continue to advocate for youth participation in key forums and committees and use our position to advance youth priorities. Among other actions, we will:

- model how to mainstream youth leadership through our Youth Advisory Group,
- support youth leadership to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and
- include the perspectives of youth from various socio-economic backgrounds and with different levels of education in our work.”

Defining Youth

Since the **International Youth Year** (1985), the United Nations defines ‘youth’ as people between 15 and 24 years. While UNESCO uses the UN definition of youth, many National Commissions and regional organizations opt for a broader and more inclusive definition of youth to include individuals up to 35 years, which recognizes the diverse and complex life trajectories of young people today. In considering youth as a stage of life rather than an age, this toolkit considers youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 years, which according to **Institut de la statistique du Québec**, represents approximately 26% of all Canadians. We equally recognize that youth are not a homogenous group and therefore, our definition, borrowed from the toolkit on **Youth Engagement in UNESCO National Commissions**, is inclusive and mindful of “...marginalized individuals and communities, including Indigenous peoples, differently-abled persons, forcibly-displaced persons, immigrants, and gender and sexually diverse persons.”

“...I’ve learnt that no one is too small to make a difference.”

✦ Greta Thunberg, No One is Too Small to Make a Difference (2019)

Why Engage Youth?

Youth have a key role to play in progress towards sustainable development. They are vectors of change and provide hope for a better future. Today, a lot of young people are entrepreneurial, proactive, efficient, adaptive and dynamic, as well as passionate and resilient. Their potential to build sustainable solutions for tomorrow and address complex global challenges makes their engagement in decision-making processes vital.

Youth can bring fresh ideas and holistic perspectives to discussions. Their adaptability and powerful willingness to learn make them intrinsically strong leaders when they are offered the right opportunities and guidance. They are digital natives, and their awareness of the online space makes them indispensable for solving many of today’s complex global issues.

To engage youth in meaningful ways, organizations must redistribute power, share planning and decision-making responsibilities, entrust youth with agency and accountability of programs, and directly involve youth in planning, policymaking, and program management.



Youth and UNESCO Designated Sites



UNESCO designated sites (Biosphere Regions, Global Geoparks and World Heritage Sites) mobilize communities to take local action to achieve global goals related to the protection of natural and cultural heritage and advance sustainable development. They operate as multi-rightsholder partnerships and are mandated to engage all sectors of society in their activities, and report on their initiatives on a periodic basis. Engaging with youth – one-quarter of the population of Canada – is essential to help sites fulfil their mandates.

In a rapidly changing world, the organizations and individuals managing UNESCO designated sites must take action to ensure that youth are engaged on a regular basis to meet their evolving needs. In their review of UNESCO designated sites, the youth members consulted for this toolkit identified the need for additional support for youth engagement at UNESCO designated sites in Canada.

The following section will outline some challenges faced with regards to youth engagement at UNESCO designated sites and present opportunities or suggestions for improvement.

The iconic UNESCO designated World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and Global Geoparks provide useful platforms to apply and test climate monitoring, mitigation and adaptation, and to raise awareness on climate change impacts on human societies, cultural diversity, biodiversity, ecosystem services, and the world's natural and cultural heritage. Spread across different regions, climates and ecosystems around the world, climate change is already being felt in many UNESCO designated sites. Communities there are working on innovative ways to address climate change.

 [UNESCO Designated Sites: A Climate Change Observatory](#)



Youth Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities

We have outlined why youth play a vital role in the advancement of sustainable development in UNESCO designated sites. To provide a fruitful environment for youth to thrive, site managers must understand the potential challenges when engaging with young professionals.

It is vital that site managers recognize that youth partners are in the process of developing their knowledge and abilities, and therefore may require additional time and resources to accomplish tasks and meet their potential. Managers must be patient and give youth opportunities and responsibilities that will

enable them to develop their skills and passion, and ultimately allow them space to thrive. In addition, UNESCO designated sites should make use of online resources to promote youth engagement across Canada and beyond, and to encourage youth to join national and international networks where they can exchange strategies, ideas and experiences. Having significant initiatives that support youth will make an organization much more attractive to those debating applying for a job at a UNESCO designated site.





DISCOVERY UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK · PHOTO CREDIT: DRU KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHY

Remuneration and Responsibilities

Youth employment must be recognized as an investment that will benefit communities and organizations increasingly over time. UNESCO designated sites must have professional positions for youth to begin their careers and develop their expertise. These positions must offer a fair and decent wage for youth to feel respected, to take their job seriously, and to feel that they are taken seriously.

Challenges

A majority of UNESCO designated sites in Canada operate as not-for-profit or charitable organizations, therefore are constantly searching for funding. They are almost fully dependent on grants, sponsors, and governmental and private funding, which creates financial insecurity. As a result, it may be hard to offer stable long-term positions and fair remuneration. Short-term positions require resources

to train young professionals but do not allow enough time for them to maximize their potential. Site managers must therefore establish a sustainable funding plan prior to hiring young professionals. If it is impossible for a site to offer long-term positions, it is important to label them as temporary.

Opportunities

Site managers must actively work to understand the needs and expectations of youth, as these may differ from those of older generations. They must create a respectful environment to discuss the role requirements and responsibilities, financial elements, and youth interests and aspirations. Navigating expectations on both sides of the relationship must be realistic for young professionals and must be discussed during the onboarding process and reevaluated throughout the contract. Managers must be transparent about the terms of employment to ensure that there is a coherent understanding on both sides.

Site managers must ensure that wages for youth employees are suitable for today's cost of living, and that they adjust the salary as the position – and the employee's experience – evolves. When employment benefits are not provided, this must be considered when determining an appropriate remuneration. In addition, youth employees must be given job titles and responsibilities that can help advance their careers.

The following suggestions can help managers avoid unstable employment situations for youth:

→ Create attractive, long-term, and permanent employment positions;

- Offer career-building opportunities (internships, summer jobs, short-term contracts);
- If the position is not permanent, know the timeline for a project before hiring. If the position is permanent, make sure that it is secure by creating a funding plan before hiring to ensure a sustainable source of finances (partners, sponsors, grants); and
- Create clear and viable projects to fund. Many funding opportunities are project-based, which means funders will not cover the salary of an employee. Therefore, site managers may consider building projects before hiring a youth employee.



DISCOVERY UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK • PHOTO CREDIT: DRU KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHY

ANISHINAABEK YOUTH POSE WITH OSHKINIGIG THE WIIGWAAS JIIMAAN (BIRCHBARK CANOE) THAT THEY BUILT WITH HUNDREDS OF YOUTH IN 2019 AT THE GEORGIAN BAY MNIDOO GAMII BIOSPHERE.

PHOTO CREDIT: DELINA RICE



Remote and Rural Areas and Isolation

UNESCO designated sites are often in rural and remote areas that cover large amounts of land, which can result in youth feeling isolated on the site. For instance, in some UNESCO designated sites, offices are far away from each other, and youth may have fewer opportunities for mentoring and to be implicated in projects.

Challenges

Distributed and remote teams can make it difficult to create an effective onboarding experience. It is important to ensure consistent communication to avoid isolation and provide all the necessary resources to make sure youth are involved and mentored. It can also be challenging for UNESCO designated sites to attract young post-secondary professionals since they tend to favour big cities where there is more professional opportunity. In addition, while there are options for engagement at the international level, an active youth network among UNESCO designated sites within Canada does not currently exist.

Opportunities

UNESCO designated sites are part of national and international networks, such as the [UNESCO Global Geopark Youth Forum](#), the [UNESCO MAB Youth group](#) and the [CCUNESCO's Youth Advisory Group](#). These associations can offer youth opportunities to connect and take part in national and international conversations on relevant topics and foster collective action on a larger scale. This is also a means for collaboration across UNESCO designated sites.

The following suggestions can help managers combat youth isolation and promote networking opportunities:

- Ensure that youth who are working in remote offices receive additional support and sufficient mentoring;
- Promote available resources and encourage youth to participate in national and international youth networks;
- Collect data on youth networking and collaboration in UNESCO designated sites in Canada to highlight the need for more initiatives;
- Create a Canadian youth network for UNESCO designated sites; and
- Allocate funding to pay for travel accommodations, expenses and resources that will facilitate youth networking.





PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGIAN BAY MNIDOO GAMII BIOSPHERE



Mentoring and Training

The organizations that manage UNESCO designated sites are often small teams, limiting the time and opportunities for mentoring and training. Older staff members may be too busy to mentor and engage youth in meaningful ways. Potential mentors must see past the burden of time and resources to recognize the crucial long-term benefits for the organization, community and for youth in their career development. A youth who is meaningfully engaged will be more motivated to progress within their current organization than to seek external opportunities.

UNESCO is a complex organization with many layers that take time to understand. Often, mentors do not allocate sufficient time and resources to help youth build their knowledge of UNESCO and its mandate. It is important to offer guidance to newcomers and introduce its multidimensional context in a way that is not overwhelming.

Challenges

Without sufficient mentoring or training, there might arise dissatisfaction regarding the tasks that youth are assigned and/or their progress in the organization. In this regard, it is important that mentors conduct check-ins on a regular basis to review their learning experience and progress. Mentors should pay particular attention to whether it is a positive experience for them and areas that they would like to focus on.



Opportunities

Good mentorship can make a significant impact in career advancement and capacity building. Youth can learn from older generations through their experiences, knowledge, and guidance on how to integrate and be productive members in an organization. Mentors can give youth opportunities to take ownership of projects and give them agency to develop their passion and their investment in the organization. Empowering youth staff to make decisions on their own is tremendous for their professional progress and self-confidence. In addition, it can be incredibly rewarding for mentors to know that they have played a pivotal role in the career development of youth employees. The youth may feel forever grateful for their guidance and trust, and it could even result in life-long connections.

Beyond offering full time, long-term positions and fair remuneration, there are other ways to provide valuable career-building opportunities for youth:

- Sharing knowledge, good mentorship and meaningful training. Ensure that knowledge is shared in approachable and supportive ways, recognizing the complexity of the organization and its mandate;
- Provide opportunities for networking and connections within UNESCO circles at the local, national and international levels;
- Provide strong reference letters and promote their contributions; and
- When unable to offer full-time positions, offer flexible contracts that allow individuals to work elsewhere concurrently.

“ UNESCO sites have a real opportunity to set an example and establish a model for youth engagement. As site managers, the most incredible and creative tools at our disposal are the young minds that live in our local communities. Meaningful involvement of this group ensures the sustainable and holistic development of UNESCO sites for generations to come.

 Caleb Grant, Geoscientist at the Cliffs of Fundy UNESCO Global Geopark





ÁTL'KA7TSEM/HOWE SOUND BIOSPHERE REGION • PHOTO CREDIT: CAPILANO UNIVERSITY

Constructive and Effective Communication

Intergenerational dialogue and constructive, respectful communication are important aspects in creating strong communities in and around UNESCO designated sites. It is also an essential part of mapping expectations and building relationships between colleagues and superiors. Communication between youth and older generations must be approached carefully, while consciously avoiding stereotypes and unconscious bias.

When consulted, some youth members of UNESCO designated sites mentioned the lack of language sensitivity among senior staff, sometimes referring to the communication as diminutive.

Challenges

One of the most common and detrimental stereotypes about young people is that they are lazy. However, what is often perceived as laziness can be their ability to render tasks more efficient. Young people are innovative and move at a faster pace in certain tasks, and it is important that site managers recognize that their recent education and technology-savvy generation might have given them tools to optimize certain tasks. In this regard, time efficiency should be perceived as proactivity, and not laziness. If it is in fact an issue of laziness, managers should consider that it may be an outcome of their being under-stimulated.



Opportunities

Motivate and inspire youth by implicating them in the cause of the organization and recognize value in their work that comes from a recent education and an upbringing in a fast-paced contemporary world. Site managers must consider the generational gap and adjust communication mechanisms accordingly. There must be a clear understanding of expectations and needs in intergenerational relationships and it is important that older generations avoid language that could be interpreted as condescending for instance, calling someone lazy.

To foster constructive and effective communication, site managers must:

- Create time and space for intergenerational relationships to develop and make the effort to understand different perspectives and experiences through respectful interactions;
- Actively overlook stereotypes and unconscious bias and learn to recognize and appreciate youth efficiency and technological skills;
- Ensure that youth are stimulated in their responsibilities and tasks; and
- Implicate youth in the cause of the organization.

PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGIAN BAY MNIDOO GAMII BIOSPHERE





SURFRIDER BEACH CLEANUP AT CLAYOQUOT SOUND BIOSPHERE
PHOTO CREDIT: CLAYOQUOT SOUND BIOSPHERE

Youth Engagement Through Governance

There are many young people who want a seat at the decision-making table. Their contemporary expertise can offer unique contributions to many of the world's current issues such as climate change, social injustice and biodiversity loss, which are key issues to be addressed in the mandate of UNESCO designated sites. Including youth in governance can help reach broader audiences across Canada and beyond. It can give voice to contemporary perspectives and render sites more inclusive to all.

Challenges

Older generations may feel that youth are not experienced enough to have a seat at the governance table. While youth may have less experience, they are creative and adaptive. They bring the valuable perspectives of a contemporary generation entering the workforce, which is often overlooked when there is a generational gap in the governance structure of an organization. Recycled ideas rarely have the largest impacts when it comes to progress and sustainable development, as they do not reflect contemporary issues.

Opportunities

Young people can offer an unbiased view of an organization and can push its progressive boundaries. They can also offer creative and interdisciplinary solutions that have not been explored by the organization before. Youth have digital literacy skills and awareness of online spaces. They come with a collaborative and dynamic energy, motivation to learn, and an ability to raise new questions – all of which offer tremendous room for progress in sustainable development. However, this can only happen in an environment that welcomes scrutiny and new ideas. Not least of all, promoting youth will make the organization more attractive to rightsholders and funders that prioritize youth engagement. It is in the organization's best interest to allow room for change and new perspectives in its governance.

To be truly inclusive of youth in UNESCO designated sites, management must:

- Establish a youth seat on their board and develop policies that prioritize youth outreach;
- Amplify the contributions of young generations to make UNESCO designated sites more accessible and relatable to youth networks;
- Consult and implicate youth in decision-making processes on UNESCO designated sites; and
- Be open to scrutiny and testing new ideas presented by youth.

“They have a lot of experience, but we have ideas, we have energy, and we have solutions for the now problems [...] So we need to collaborate. We don’t want to intimidate them too much... we can ride on [their] power, foster our agenda, but then partner. We’re not just going to tell you what we want to happen, we want to be involved from the start to the end.

✦ Natasha Mwansa, 2020 Davos World Economic Forum Annual Meeting

SEA TO SKY OUTDOOR SCHOOL AT ÁTL'KA7TSEM/HOWE SOUND BIOSPHERE REGION
PHOTO CREDIT: TIM TURNER



Conclusion

UNESCO designated sites mobilize communities to take local action to achieve global goals related to the protection of natural and cultural heritage and advance sustainable development. Biosphere Regions and Global Geoparks operate as multi-rightsholder partnerships and are mandated to engage all sectors of society in their activities, and report on their initiatives on a periodic basis. Engaging with youth, who have a vested interest in a sustainable future, is essential to help sites fulfil their mandates.

Youth bring fresh and innovative ideas, in addition to contemporary and holistic perspectives. Their adaptability, energy, dynamism and passion make them intrinsically strong leaders, but they must be given the appropriate agency, resources and support to thrive. To engage youth in meaningful ways, UNESCO designated sites must redistribute power, share planning and decision-making responsibilities, entrust youth with accountability and management of programmes, and give them a voice in policymaking.

This toolkit should be used as a tool for UNESCO designated site managers to build meaningful youth engagement in their organization and community, and to foster space for the young leaders of tomorrow to emerge. We want to encourage everyone in the decision-making process to follow the same principle that was used to develop this toolkit, which is, “for youth, by youth”!

Resources

[UNESCO Man And Biosphere \(MAB\) Youth](#)

[UNESCO Global Geopark Youth Forum](#)

[CCUNESCO's Youth Advisory Group](#)

[Youth Engagement in UNESCO National Commissions](#)

Written by Bushra Ebadi for the Canadian

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Manda Maggs, Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark

Max Deck-Léger, Percé UNESCO Global Geopark

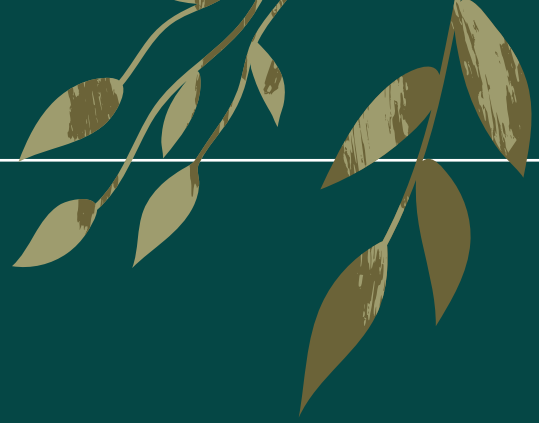
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Raven Nixon, Fundy Biosphere Region

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