



by Geoff Cooper

# EUROPEAN YOUTH AND ENVIRONMENT

## TOWARDS EUROPEAN UNDERSTANDING

*"It was a fantastic experience for me, from the start there was a good atmosphere, all the people of the centre were like a family. I discovered so many cultures through the presentations, the cooking and when we all talked together. I found out what is done all around Europe for Nature and it gave me a new jump in my passion to take more action myself."*

Maude, France.

### Introduction

In the summer of 2003 Low Bank Ground, Metropolitan Wigan's outdoor education centre in the English Lake District, hosted its tenth European Youth Event. Since 1994 groups of young people aged between 17 and 25 years from some 16 European countries have been coming together for these unusual two-week gatherings. The events have been supported by grants from Connect Youth International through the "Youth for Europe" Action 1 programme. For most participants they represent special experiences and for some they have changed the direction of their

lives. Each event has an environmental theme and there is a well-tried recipe for creating a strong learning environment based on friendship, trust and sharing responsibility. The team of facilitators has developed a way of working which encourages co-operation, creativity and intercultural learning. Their success is shown by the many friendships, projects and continued links the young participants have established across Europe. It is hoped that the experiences and ideas from these events may contribute to the development of good practice on other multilateral youth exchanges.

### How did the youth events start?

*"If I recall the preparation of the first two TOUCH conferences in 1989 and 1990 I must still believe that what occurred was some kind of miracle. Who would have expected the TOUCH meetings would lead to so many follow-ups, programme exchanges, scholarships, translations of materials and joint projects. We did not know, we could not have known, in October 1989 that the political barriers to co-operation would be broken so dramatically."*

Jiri Kulich, Czech republic.

In October 1989, Geoff Cooper, head of Low Bank Ground, was invited to an environmental education conference in Czechoslovakia. It was an informal gathering of environmental educators from East and West European countries who met to share experiences and discuss the role of environmental education in a rapidly changing Europe. The approach was different from other conferences; there were no learned papers delivered from a rostrum, the emphasis was on education through experience and in creating an atmosphere for interactive and co-operative learning. It became known as the TOUCH conference as participants were involved in practical, hands-on learning and were encouraged to have direct experience with the environment- to touch it.

At the time it was not realised that the barriers between East and West Europe would be removed so rapidly in the months that followed. The process was taken a step further in 1990 with an environmental education conference at Low Bank Ground, organised by Metropolitan Wigan, the Centre for Global Education, and WWF (UK). Since then TOUCH conferences have been held in Greece (1992), Latvia (1995), Spain (1996) and the Czech Republic (1997). During this period there have been many links established through the TOUCH network; programme exchanges, regional meetings and joint international projects. The youth events at Low Bank Ground, known as Young TOUCH, have become part of this process.

## ► The aims.

“*I have never been in sympathy with so many people and never met as many people with the same opinions and concerns while being so different. It has given me a taste to meet and talk with others without being frightened by their opinions.*”

Nino, Georgia.

The main aims of the Youth Event are to encourage environmental awareness and intercultural understanding. These are achieved by:

- 1 Establishing an open-minded, supportive, learning community.
- 2 Giving young people responsibility for the event and their own learning.
- 3 Encouraging creativity and critical thinking.
- 4 Showing how to establish a personal link with the environment.
- 5 Encouraging groups to use English for communication.

The success of these events depends on the interaction of the four essential components, the four Ps:

## ► People, Place, Programme and Process.

### The people.

“*An excellent mixture of the right kind of people. I have loved every moment and person at this event*”

Lars, Norway.

Delegates from the TOUCH conferences have played a key role in helping to set up the European Youth Events. In the early 1990's this existing network of people and organisations had already begun to disseminate good practice and involve young people in environmental projects. It was a natural progression to recruit groups for the youth events at Low Bank Ground. Veta Tsaliki and Maria Katsakiori from Greece and Alberto Martinez Villar from Spain have been a great support in co-ordinating groups since the first event in 1994. The co-ordinators and participants come from a wide range of environmental and youth organisations including NGOs, environmental education centres, wildlife and conservation groups and student associations.

The young people themselves are from a wide age range, 17-25 years, but all have an interest in the environment and basic ability in speaking English. Over the years the participants have included students, teachers, engineers, builders, travel guides and social workers. Common characteristics have been their open-mindedness, good humour and willingness to learn from each other.

The facilitators are also an unusual mix. John Gittins was involved in the original TOUCH conference at Low Bank Ground. He is director of the Cheshire Landscape Trust and brings a wealth of environmental knowledge and practical skills to the events. Andy Wallbank, from Wigan, started as a trainee instructor at the centre and quickly became a natural role model and motivator for young people. Geoff Cooper is head of the centre and has spent many years working with young people in the outdoors and facilitating environmental training in different European countries. Jenny Deane, the youngest member, is studying environmental management and international politics and was a participant of the 1998 event. As a result of contacts she made at this event she spent six months working in Indonesia at the age of 17 years. In summer 2003 two previous participants, Jitka Kretov from the Czech republic and Giovanni Amarena from Italy returned to help as facilitators.

### The Place.

“*These hills, these valleys, these lakes, are now in our hearts. Here time stops forever.*”

Alberto, Spain.

**“Soft, green moss, grey slate, gentle rain, walls, quarries, stone upon stone, white farms, spreading trees, green grass, sheep, mountains, crags, gills, dales, becks, lakes busy with boats, carparks, walkers, picnics, clouds racing, blue patches, windy days”**

These are just a few words and phrases used by participants to depict the scenery around Coniston. These landscapes have long inspired writers and artists. John Ruskin, the Victorian artist, environmentalist and social reformer lived at nearby Brantwood and owned the land on which Low Bank Ground stands.

Each year participants comment on how the environment affects them. Low Bank Ground, is a special place, a collection of old farm buildings tucked together on the hillside below Grizedale forest and above the shores of Coniston water. It lies near the centre of the Lake District, England's largest National Park.

The views across the lake to the Coniston fells are outstanding. It would be hard not to be inspired by this setting.

The size, shape and informal layout of the buildings and surrounding spaces also help create a feeling of belonging and friendship. There is a stone pond with maple and magnolia, a walled garden, hedgerows, kissing gates and stonewalls. New groups quickly succumb to this comfortable environment. This setting is itself an icebreaker for the young people who have journeyed from the corners of Europe, tired from their travels and apprehensive about what lies in store for them at the Youth Event.



## ► The Programme.

***"It combines adventure with knowledge by offering a lot of experiences. Presentations help show participants how other countries manage their environment. The event includes water sports like kayaking, canoeing and raft building. It also has a mountain expedition and visits to protected areas of the Lake District. It offers games and art activities which help to exchange experiences and feelings. To join this event is like making a deal with yourself to understand nature, to find out about skills you hadn't known about yourself, to communicate with people from all over Europe; and after all these experiences to feel closer to what is called environment."*** ☺☺

Chrisovaladia and Maria, Greece.

The two-week events have an environmental theme which is agreed by the participants for the following year. The themes are deliberately broad so that they are relevant to young people in any part of Europe. Examples have included: "Youth, Environment and Tourism"; "Biodiversity- Nature and Culture"; "Community, Arts and Environment" and "Young People, Education and Sustainability". Although there are planned parts of the programme, the participants take increasing responsibility for the running of the events. Each person makes a presentation related to the theme. This may be a short illustrated talk but it can also be an activity, a workshop, a display, a song, a discussion or a dance. There have been excellent presentations over the years, for example: talks on the problems of animal excrement in the Netherlands, teaching gypsy children in Hungary, a bee-eater's view of biodiversity in the Aegean, solar energy self-help groups in Austria; performances

of minimalist, folk and bongo music; games to encourage trust, co-operation and environmental awareness; demonstrations of country dancing and a moving personal dance of one participant's response to the deliberate burning of a forest near her home in Thessalonica in Greece.

One year the participants interviewed a selection of local residents of Coniston to discover their views on village life, what they liked and disliked, which parts of the environment were special for them. As a result of this survey a small exhibition was put up in the parish church and this led to interest in improving aspects of the local environment. Other groups have worked on practical conservation projects restoring traditional drystone walls and taking action for the environment.

*All the young people have the chance to take part in a mountain expedition. As part of their journey they bivvy or camp in the Coniston Fells. For some this is a very special experience. One participant describes his feelings:*

***"Walking in the landscape gave me a feeling of being surrounded by magic. The clouds were rolling down the hills into the valleys. The sun was shining....I was comforted by the spirit and sound of a small beck seeking its way to the lake below."*** ☺☺

And another participant writes:

***"The feeling of being so close to nature and its hidden mysteries, so close to the harmony composed by the bird-songs was unforgettable....So tired but so pleased to have the opportunity to touch, to feel, to smell, to walk for 5 or 6 hours up steep paths that led to a real paradise....So cold during the night but so warm with the others around, watching the shooting stars and making wishes for the future....So insecure of falling down the rocks but so secure that nature won't leave us helpless....So many things to observe but so little time."*** ☺☺

During the event everyone is involved in cooking a typical meal from their own country and over the years this has developed in some cases into an evening of food and traditional singing and dancing. There have been Greek and Spanish nights and evenings of Hungarian and Austrian folk dancing. Drama and art workshops are also used to encourage environmental awareness and to explore environmental issues. One year the group expressed their wishes for the future in the form of a large communal piece

of artwork, another group worked on individual pieces of land art, celebrating the natural environment.

In the evenings groups often provide their own entertainment but there have also been performances at the centre by rock and blues bands and folk singers, jazz evenings, a village music festival and late night discos in Windermere and Barrow.

## ► The Process.

***"My eyes have been opened, it has changed my whole outlook on life. I am aware now, focused, ready to think and act."*** ☺☺

Andy, England.

Although a great deal of thought goes into the programme, the facilitators believe that the process- the how – is more important than the actual programme - the what. We can consider, for example, one of the main aims of the event, intercultural understanding. This is developed through an interaction of the young people, the facilitators, the place, the activities on the programme and also the ethos of the event and the methods and manner of working.

These events are based on a simple philosophy of quickly breaking barriers and establishing trust and confidence. The facilitators create a supportive atmosphere where everyone can contribute their ideas and experiences freely. Techniques such as "brainstorming", discussion groups, role-play and games are used to encourage interaction. Gradually the participants take

more responsibility for the event and its organisation. In the early events this was not always a smooth transition and some groups had to be encouraged to take ownership. It was sometimes difficult to stand back when there was uncertainty and lack of action. The facilitators are now more adept at approaching the natural organisers in the group who then act as catalysts inspiring and involving others.

At the end the participants evaluate individually and in groups and make suggestions for future events. They also produce their own report of each year's event. The early reports were in the form of booklets. In 2003 a CD was produced including photos and brief descriptions of the participants, menus and aspects of the programme.

**There is certainly more than one recipe for success but Young TOUCH uses the following well tested ingredients:**

- ① Icebreakers to rapidly establish trust, empathy and understanding.
- ② Lots of fun and active learning.
- ③ Co-operative rather than competitive games to help in teambuilding.
- ④ Small group discussions to encourage involvement.
- ⑤ Adventurous activities to motivate and develop self-esteem.
- ⑥ Self support groups to help with English. Nationality groups help each other with translations and share presentations when some of their members have limited English.
- ⑦ Different ways of evaluating and reviewing.
- ⑧ Use of art and sensory activities to encourage environmental awareness.
- ⑨ International cooking and group journeys to encourage taking responsibility.
- ⑩ A practical conservation project to demonstrate taking action for the environment.
- ⑪ Group discussions on environmental issues to encourage critical thinking.
- ⑫ Participants involvement in recording the event and in planning for the future.

**Towards a common European understanding.**

When an international group comes together it is tempting to look for differences. We sometimes find other peoples' customs amusing and this is often the source of light-hearted conversation. It can, however, lead to bias and harmful stereotyping which becomes a barrier to international understanding. The International Youth Events held at Low Bank Ground over the last nine years have helped to break down such barriers by emphasising our common heritage but at the same time celebrating the richness of local customs, landscapes and traditions.

Travelling throughout Europe you are struck not by the differences that occur from region to region but by our common European heritage and future. For example, Saint George, the patron saint of England, is celebrated in Christian and Muslim communities across Europe. Most countries were profoundly influenced by the Greek and Roman civilisations and by Christianity. Our cultures have been shaped by countless European philosophers, artists, writers and scientists. The work of Socrates, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Mozart and Picasso cannot be claimed by any one nation, it is an essential part of our common heritage. We have common folk tales, for example, most countries have a version of "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". There are similarities in folk dancing between the Celtic west and the Slavonic east. The great architecture of the Classical, Gothic and Art Nouveau periods is found in many European capitals.

The twentieth century has brought pop culture and the spread of the multinational. City life is much the same whether it is in London, Athens or Prague. We share the benefits and pitfalls of the "Big Mac", the "Irish Pub" and the internet. Our future is inextricably bound.

It is clear from the Young TOUCH events how interdependent we are in Europe and across the globe. Environmental issues do not respect national boundaries. Many problems, such as traffic congestion, acid rain and loss of habitats are common and there is much to learn from each other's experiences and by sharing good practice. It is also vital in the new, enlarged Europe that we encourage intercultural learning and understanding. These events will undoubtedly strengthen the belief that young people have a key part to play in this process. ■

**Contact:**

[lowbank@aol.com](mailto:lowbank@aol.com)



• Training methodologies