

WELLBEING & THE  
ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENT

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**SUPPORTING  
SUSTAINABILITY  
FROM THE INSIDE  
OUT.**

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**SEPTEMBER 2022**

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***BY JO MUSKER-SHERWOOD***



SUSTAINABLE WELLBEING  
ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

# 01

## Who is this report for?

*This report shares the learnings of a six-month consultation to establish the scope of the UK's environment movement's resilience and wellbeing needs.*

*It is intended for anyone interested in supporting the sustainability and impact of the environment movement's work over the crucial years ahead.*

*The Sustainable Wellbeing Environment Network (SWEN) was consequently envisaged as a means of beginning to provide this much needed support.*

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### SUPPORTED BY...



# 02

## A mandate for wellbeing.

Coming to environment work young, I was not well prepared for the realities of climate leadership. The organisation I co-founded grew rapidly in response to the escalating climate and nature crises, but the infrastructure needed to support that growth was always at least a year behind.

Passion throughout the sector was abundant, but so was over-emotional investment and all the burnout and interpersonal challenges that brought.

The sheer speed of the machine that is the environment movement often left me breathless and disorientated, as if I were constantly drowning but couldn't allow myself to ever actually 'go under'.

**"IT WAS AS IF I WERE CONSTANTLY DROWNING BUT COULDN'T ALLOW MYSELF TO EVER ACTUALLY 'GO UNDER'."**

As part of my research for the SWEN, I interviewed one of the key climate leaders from President Biden's administration about their experiences of work and wellbeing:

"Sometimes I wish I would just get cancer or something like that. Not to die, but serious enough that I could justify a break. It would have to be more serious than a TIA<sup>1</sup> though, because I've seen a colleague back into work on the same day after her TIA. It's crazy, I know it's crazy, but the window of opportunity is too small for us to let up."

I still carry a degree of shame and self-doubt that I couldn't find a way to push through my own burnout experience for longer. I still seek out the flaws in myself or my personal life as to why I suddenly found that I just simply could not haul myself to work for one single more day, where others have managed to keep ploughing on.

But this is a kind of nonsense because if environment work can accommodate only the most well-resourced and conventionally resilient, then no wonder it has so often struggled to bring everyone along with it.

1. A transient ischaemic attack (TIA) or "mini stroke" is caused by a temporary disruption in the blood supply to part of the brain.

The work of the SWEN has grown out of both personal experiences and empirical research demonstrating that mission-driven work, generally, and that environment work, specifically, can be experienced as deeply troubling and even traumatic for those involved, and that this has tangible and far reaching negative impacts on the movement's effectiveness.

This project's mission has been to reduce the suffering of those within the movement, yes, but underpinned by the understanding that, because of the urgency of the task at hand, the world needs an environment movement at the absolute top of its game right now.

**"IF ENVIRONMENT WORK CAN ONLY ACCOMODATE THE MOST WELL-RESOURCED, NO WONDER IT HAS SO OFTEN FAILED TO BRING EVERYONE ALONG WITH IT."**

This project's answer as to where the power to shift this dynamic might lie has been to look to those who resource much of the environment sector: funders. Grantmakers are the ones who in many ways set the parameters for how environment work is carried out, such as its targets, rates of remuneration, and timeframes.

And so this project's question has been; 'what can funders do to better support the wellbeing – and therefore performance – of the UK's environment movement?'

This has been one of the most surprising and genuinely nourishing projects of my career so far, but has required a real reworking, even revolution, of the kinds of working patterns that dominate much of the UK's mainstream environment work. The results of that revolution, however, have been profound.

This report charts that revolution. Through these words, I invite you to join us for the conversations and processes as they unfolded, and to contribute to them yourself if you wish.<sup>2</sup>

My hope is that this report might also act as a guide or signpost for those seeking to embody more sustainable ways of approaching their own work on sustainability.

Jo  
SWEN Convener



2. Get in touch, contribute ideas, express interest in involvement or for further information email me at [jo@climateemergence.co.uk](mailto:jo@climateemergence.co.uk).

# 04

## The SWEN's mission.

When setting out on this piece of work, I had first envisaged an Institute rather than a Network.

This was representative of the mindset with which I approached this piece of climate work, which was similar to how I had approached much other climate work. I was of the opinion that great effort and authority must be mustered in order to create something substantial, influential, and powerful.

The Institute's transition to a Network is demonstrative of this project's journey at large, and the discovery that it is our togetherness, in resilient networks, that underpins both wellbeing and excellent performance.

**The SWEN currently works with the following mission statement:**

**“TO INCREASE THE IMPACT OF THE UK’S ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENT BY SUPPORTING BOTH THE COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL WELLBEING OF THOSE GIVING THEMSELVES TO THIS URGENT AND EXTENSIVE WORK.”**

# 05

## Wellbeing 'revolution' principles.

### Centring Wellbeing

To speak of a wellbeing 'revolution' is to ground this work in the underlying values of climate activism that seeks to subvert significant aspects of dominant Western culture.

It is to assert that the wellbeing of people and planet should come before profit. That nothing alive, whether human or otherwise, should be exploited. That the health of the individual depends on the health of the communal, and vice versa.

But this revolution is not so much another rally cry for action as it is an invitation to explore the interconnectedness of personal and planetary wellbeing, and the benefits that this exploration might have for both. In this revolution all perspectives are welcome, including those that see the value in how things are currently done.

**"THIS REVOLUTION IS NOT SO MUCH A RALLY CRY AS AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF PERSONAL AND PLANETARY WELLBEING."**

This is part of the gentleness that can characterise work that has wellbeing at the heart of it.

To centre wellbeing is to centre relationship and emotion, alongside reason. These can be easy to dismiss, both in ourselves and others, but we now know that the devaluing of more intuitive ways of working has not served the environment movement well.

For decades many of us had hoped that by simply explaining the science of ecological breakdown we would move the world to action, only to be left scratching our heads and wringing our hands.

More recent developments in climate communications research, however, point us instead toward the importance of telling a compelling story,<sup>3</sup> of speaking to values rather than facts alone,<sup>4</sup> and of the knowledge that much of what we 'reason' is decided first by our intuition.<sup>5</sup>

**"MUCH OF WHAT WE 'REASON' IS FIRST DECIDED BY OUR INTUITION."**

## Wellbeing and Privilege

Here too may lie a clue as to one of the many reasons why the environment profession is the second least ethnically diverse of all UK professions.<sup>6</sup> Under the reign of white supremacy, reason and individuality has been often associated with whiteness and masculinity, and has dominated more intuitive, community-focussed ways of knowing, often associated with people of colour and the feminine.<sup>7</sup>

This is some of the ways Western environmentalism has inadvertently perpetuated the very systems of oppression that it had hoped to dismantle, and has ended up infinitely less effective as a result.

Our group inquiries into how wellbeing might be embodied in the sector were therefore facilitated by Sonia Mayor, a therapist, somatic practitioner, and black woman, who encouraged us to learn from wellbeing practices rooted in BIPOC communities, such as mindfulness and embodied practices.

A significant part of my own journey with this piece of work, and in my burnout recovery more generally, has also been to better understand how my own whiteness has perpetuated harm, alongside other aspects of my own privilege or in some ways, lack thereof.

It has been to understand, for example, that the extractive way that I treated myself during my burnout experience, mirrored extractive practices that damage the earth. Or that the impulse to rush certain processes may be just as much linked to my need as a white person to maintain the status quo, as it is to my eco-anxiety.

**"THE EXTRACTIVE WAYS I TREAT MYSELF MIRROR EXTRACTIVE PRACTICES THAT DAMANGE THE EARTH."**

3. 'The Myth Gap', Alex Evans, (2017).

4. 'The Common Cause Handbook', (2011).

<https://publicinterest.org.uk/download/values/Common%20Cause%20Handbook.pdf>

5. 'The Righteous Mind', Jonathan Haidt, (2012).

6. Research from *Policy Exchange* in (2018).

[https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/research\\_on\\_lack\\_of\\_ethnic\\_diversity\\_on\\_sustain](https://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/research_on_lack_of_ethnic_diversity_on_sustain)

7. 'Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone', Minna Salami, (2020).

## Inclusion and Wellbeing

To discuss 'wellbeing' within the context of ecological destruction is in itself to enter into a political discussion as to whose wellbeing matters; BIPOC communities, for example, have been on the frontlines of ecological breakdown for decades, and the world's delayed action serves only to highlight the ways in which colonial attitudes still abound today.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding that we cannot work effectively towards wellbeing without a central emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, therefore, we considered the diversity of the Advisory Board to guide the consultation, as integral to our process.

The board included individuals from the Global South who had experienced ecological destruction firsthand, for example, as well as those currently leading the UK's environment policy sector. Some members were just a few months out of University where others were several decades into their climate careers. We had therapists and scientists, CEOs and interns, grantmakers and grantees. Our group especially shone in its diversity of race, age, location, and neurodiversity.

The scope for disagreement, especially with regards to working on such a nebulous topic as 'wellbeing' was also therefore potentially enormous.

Yet what those of us involved in developing the SWEN experienced instead was that when strong, resilient, and attuned relationships are in place, they create a container that can much more easily hold conflict and difference, and in doing so generate genuinely creative and innovative thinking.

**"WHEN STRONG, RESILIENT RELATIONSHIPS ARE IN PLACE, THEY CREATE A CONTAINER THAT CAN MUCH MORE EASILY HOLD CONFLIT AND DIFFERENCE."**

## Relationship Before Task

Of all the wellbeing principles by which the SWEN has been developed, this was one that underpinned everything: relationship before task.

The choice to invest in our working relationships with each other above the task of creating the SWEN, however, did not at first come naturally to me.

8. 'The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality', Farhana Sultana, March 28th 2022, *Political Geography*, [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096262982200052X?](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096262982200052X?via%3Dihub)



With just four meetings in which to take a raw concept and make it funder-ready, everything in me had wanted to rush straight to the task at hand. This sense of pressure mirrored the unrelenting urgency that so many of us live with whilst working within the rapidly closing window of opportunity to halt climate catastrophe.

As our facilitator, Sonia's guidance was that if we wanted to move fast, we would need to first take the time to invest in our relationships with each other.

Through my previous work lobbying elected representatives, I already knew of the power of building strong relationships with those we hope to influence, but what of the relationships with those with whom we agree? We take so much for granted when entering collective working spaces with others – assumptions that we will share a sense of priorities, for example, or that there are no undercurrents of competition – and then wonder why we so easily run into conflict.

**"IF WE WANT TO MOVE FAST, WE FIRST NEED TO INVEST IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS."**

## **A Mandate for Better Wellbeing**

Recent research by Dr Rebecca Nestor, another member of the SWEN's Working Group, has evidenced the almost unbearable impact that climate distress has on how individuals relate to themselves and each other within environment organisations.<sup>9</sup>

Here is one of the ways in which the movement's wellbeing and performance intersect most obviously; resilient relationships enable individuals to more easily tend to their distress, drastically increasing the capacity of those individuals to work effectively, cohesively and creatively, both individually and collectively.

In the words of Dr Gabor Maté, 'safety is not the absence of threat, it is the presence of connection.'

**"SAFETY IS NOT THE ABSENSE OF THREAT, IT IS THE PRESENCE OF CONNECTION."**

**- DR GABOR MATÉ**

9. 'The ticking clock thing': a systems-psychodynamic exploration of leadership in UK organisations that engage the public on climate change, Rebecca Nestor, (2022). <http://repository.essex.ac.uk/33066/>.

What was also clear through this consultation process, however, was that this sense of connection would require more than relationships alone. It would also need the resourcing and backing of those with the power to bring about the cultural change needed to truly support the environment movement with the ambitious and extensive work at hand.

The work of the SWEN has been to explore what this might look like in practice and what potential, if any, this might have to revolutionise the impact of the UK's environment movement.<sup>10</sup>

10. Other research sources of note include; *Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change*, Caroline Hickman, Elizabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, Susan Clayton, Eric Lewandowski, Elouise E Mayall, et al, (2021) [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext); *Climate change, fragmentation and collective trauma*, Steffi Bednarak (2021); *Engaging with Climate Change: Comparing the Cultures of Science and Activism*, P. Hodgett, R. Randall, (2018) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325111927\\_Engaging\\_with\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Comparing\\_the\\_Cultures\\_of\\_Science\\_and\\_Activism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325111927_Engaging_with_Climate_Change_Comparing_the_Cultures_of_Science_and_Activism)

# 10

## Who is involved?

### SWEN Working Group

The Working Group met each month over the SWEN's six month consultation period to take key decisions about the SWEN's development. The Working Group Members were:

#### JO MUSKER-SHERWOOD, SWEN CONVENER

*Jo burned out as the Founder-Director of one of the UK's fastest growing climate charities. Now, through her workshops and programmes, she supports activists to fuel themselves, their work, and their life with joy.*



#### SONIA MAYOR, FACILITATOR

*Sonia provides facilitation, leadership, and supervisory support with an approach that embraces systemic psychotherapy, restorative practice, and compassionate inquiry.*



#### FLORENCE MILLER

*Florence is the Director of the Environmental Funders Network, the largest network of UK based foundations, family offices and individual donors supporting environmental causes. Florence has worked within the environment sector both in the UK and US for over two decades.*



## REBECCA NESTOR

*Rebecca is an organisational coach, consultant, and facilitator. She is a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance board, a climate café facilitator and trainer of facilitators, and recently completed a professional doctorate in climate leadership.*



## SARAH ROUSSEAU

*Sarah provided administrative support for the Working Group. She is a grassroots climate campaigner with extensive experience organising and working for community groups and organisations.*



## SWEN Advisory Board

The Advisory Board, representing a diverse range of the environment movement's leaders, met over four sessions to advise the Working Group. The Advisory Board Members were:

### BIDISHA BANERJEE

#### SOCIAL ECOLOGIST & EMBODIED LEADERSHIP COACH

*Bidisha is the author of Superhuman River: Stories of the Ganga. She is based between Kolkata, India, and Oakland, CA, and was recognised by Harvard Divinity School as one of 80 'spiritually innovative community builders' for her work as a founding program and curriculum director for the Dalai Lama Fellows.*



### RICHARD BENWELL

#### WILDLIFE & COUNTRYSIDE LINK CEO

*Link is a coalition of 65 charities, focused on nature, climate, animal welfare, and health and wellbeing. Richard has been leading Link for 2 years, following roles at DEFRA, WWT, RSPB, and the House of Commons Commission.*



## **DIANA CLARKE**

### **THIRTY PERCY FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE**

*Thirty Percy is an independent foundation contributing to the future security and wellbeing of our world. Diana supports the Foundation's trustees and manages a variety of grants.*



## **NOORA FIRAQ**

### **CLIMATE OUTREACH INTERIM EXECUTIVE & OPERATIONS DIRECTOR**

*Originally from the Maldives, Noora has worked for the past two years as a senior leader within Climate Outreach whose mission is to create a social mandate for climate action using social science.*



## **SARAH JORDAN**

### **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE DIRECTOR**

*With her background in environment psychology, Sarah heads up Hope for the Future which trains and supports communities to have effective conversations with decision makers on climate change.*



## **CHLOE REVILL**

### **CHANGE IN NATURE FOUNDING DIRECTOR**

*Change in Nature facilitates immersive group experiences in nature. Chloe is also an international climate change policy consultant and currently advises a small number of African youth activists on their political strategy and advocacy.*



## **MARVIN TAHOULAN**

### **GREEN SCHOOLS PROJECT SUPPORT OFFICER**

*Marvin joined Green Schools Project on a 6 month placement. This was following his Masters' in Climate Change Science and Policy, and an internship with the Royal Geographical Society co-writing a research paper on racial injustice in the sustainability sector with 7 other black UK university students.*



# 13

## The SWEN's development

*The following record of the four SWEN Advisory Board meetings over a six month period attempts to demonstrate how the embodiment of wellbeing throughout this process worked in practice. These meetings were supported by further one-to-one conversations, as well as additional discussions with a range of other stakeholders from across the environment movement, drawing also from existing wellbeing research.*

### **Establishing Connection**

In our first meeting, we spent close to the entire time simply getting to know each other as we experienced Sonia's invitation to prioritise 'relationship before task'. The meeting began by listening to birdsong whilst everyone arrived, followed by some gentle shoulder rolling. We met each other in a variety of smaller groups, facilitated by zoom breakout rooms, and practiced deep listening through an exercise inspired by spiritual leader and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh.

The intention of these practices was to facilitate the regulation of our nervous systems with a view to enabling us to more easily attune to each other. An activated or stressed nervous system will want to more quickly differentiate between allies or enemies, and right or wrong.

**"THE INTENTION OF THESE PRACTICES WAS TO FACILITATE THE REGULATION OF OUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS WITH A VIEW TO ENABLING US TO MORE EASILY ATTUNE TO EACH OTHER. "**

By holding space for self-care as integral to the meeting itself, however, we hoped to encourage curiosity, openness, and a greater capacity to tolerate difference.

With only three meetings remaining, however, I left that first meeting with a real sense of vulnerability that we might not reach a functional plan for meeting the movement's wellbeing needs by the end of the process.

Having had one-to-one conversations with each of the board members prior to our first joint meeting, I was holding my perception of the different expectations of those involved. I was anxious that no one should feel that their time was being wasted, and wondered how the diversity of hopes for this piece of work might come together as a cohesive whole.

Yet there was already an indication that the focus on relationships and wellbeing would bear fruit; in the final fifteen minutes of our meeting a working mission statement was presented, reworked, and agreed with minimal effort.

I experienced surprise at the ease of this process, apparently facilitated by how attuned the group already was despite our diverse perspectives.

**"WE HOPED TO ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY, OPENNESS, AND A GREATER CAPACITY TO TOLERATE DIFFERENCE."**

## **Testing Connection**

In our second meeting, we focussed on the exploration of diversity, equity, and inclusion and their relationship to wellbeing. Our aim was to continue building a common sense of what it meant for us to work together on wellbeing, rather than jumping into the work itself at this stage.

Here our still new relationships with each other would experience their first real test.

Would the 'container' we had built together through relationship building fall away with the introduction of a potentially highly charged issue? Might we find ourselves unable to really delve into the heart of these matters for fear of fracturing the newly built container? Or had we instead established enough connection to provide the necessary safety for such discussions?

Over this discussion, however, a strong collective sense of the centrality of diversity, equity, and inclusivity to any work on wellbeing, began to emerge.

As a whole, the board understood 'inclusivity' to mean the welcoming of our whole selves, and the recognition that everybody's wellbeing needs are different. The board did also challenge the idea of 'inclusivity', because of the problematic implication that the 'other' join 'us', rather than a genuine reworking and redistribution of power.

The board acknowledged the role of funders in stepping into their power to take greater risks, and understood that convoluted funding processes often act as a barrier to those holding less privilege. Working with a lower salary, less job security, or reduced flexibility for caregiving responsibilities outside of work, for example, automatically favour those who are in a place of enough privilege to be able to do so.

Knowing that these biases are still prevalent in the environment movement, we asked ourselves how much our work should challenge the culture of the sector, and how much it should be part of the sector itself. This discussion also highlighted the complexities of navigating who gets to define what 'wellbeing' means, what types of wellbeing support are deemed appropriate, and how this relates to experiences of power and privilege.

The tone of these discussions was one of joint inquiry, leaving each individual more informed and perhaps challenged or with questions outstanding, but not alienated.

**"THE TONE OF THESE DISCUSSIONS WAS ONE OF JOINT INQUIRY, LEAVING EACH INDIVIDUAL MORE INFORMED AND PERHAPS CHALLENGED OR WITH QUESTIONS OUTSTANDING, BUT NOT ALIENATED."**

## **A Network Emerges**

By our third meeting, I was itching to gain the Advisory Board's perspective on some sort of tangible proposal. We were already half way through the process and I was struggling with the feeling that, aside from our draft mission statement, we appeared nowhere closer to getting a tangible idea off the ground.

I wondered if it might finally be time for the task bit, after so much relationship building.

Here, through Sonia's facilitation, we were encouraged to move away from binaries and to adopt 'both/and' thinking as a way of further exploring what it means to include everyone. Need it be a question of relationship or task? Might we instead find a way to open space for both?



We therefore invited the Advisory Board to organise themselves into two groups. The Responding Group would hear the proposal for the SWEN and feedback, whilst the Creating Group would have a blank canvas to design their own proposal.

I presented to the Responding Group the idea of an Institute to safeguard the movement's wellbeing. The creative energy of those working with a blank canvas was so infectious, however, that this proposal was quickly forgotten in favour of developing the idea of a Network.

Our nourishing personal experiences of exploring wellbeing together in relationship had left us wanting to facilitate such a space where this kind of meaningful connection could be fostered across the entire movement. By experiencing wellbeing ourselves in this way, we found that as a collective, an 'answer' as to what wellbeing support might look like for others came naturally and with ease.

Our lived experience of wellbeing within the context of working on this project together had, it seemed, given the group an intuitive knowledge as to what we felt were the right next steps to take.

**"THE CREATIVE ENERGY OF THOSE WORKING WITH A BLANK CANVAS WAS SO INFECTIOUS, HOWEVER, THAT THE ORIGINAL PROPOSAL WAS QUICKLY FORGOTTEN IN FAVOUR OF DEVELOPING A NETWORK."**

The question from our previous session as to how the SWEN would navigate the variety of 'wellbeing' needs was also beginning to come a little clearer. 'Wellbeing' as the board understood it, could fall into two separate but not unrelated categories; firstly, wellbeing in terms of healthy culture across the movement's organisations and networks, and secondly wellbeing in terms of support for individual ecological distress, and its impact on organisations and networks.

It was clear that the SWEN would need to have the capacity to attend to these different aspects of wellbeing with quite different skills and workstreams, but that they would also need to interact with each other.

### **Rowing Toward Our Destination**

By our fourth and final meeting, I had the sense that an exciting piece of work might be unfolding, but there were many details still to be worked out.

My anxieties of not 'getting there' on time were still prevalent and were all too familiar in their mirroring of other existential anxieties of not 'getting there' in terms of averting climate catastrophe. I was also anxious to better understand what the SWEN would need to be in order to inspire continued involvement despite the high workloads and busy schedules that characterise mission-driven work.

Knowing that our final session would be pivotal and having already experienced the benefits of time invested in self-regulation, we spent the first fifteen minutes of that final meeting doing an embodied visualisation led by board member Bidisha. Each in our own rooms across the UK and beyond, we physically acted out 'rowing toward' our collective goal to support the wellbeing of the UK's environment movement.

We then put forward the following question: what would the SWEN need to be that is so exciting that people couldn't help but make time for it?

**"WE THEN PUT FORWARD THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:  
WHAT WOULD THE SWEN NEED TO BE THAT IS SO  
EXCITING THAT PEOPLE COULDN'T HELP BUT MAKE TIME  
FOR IT?"**

Each board member spoke first from their own perspective. From there we pooled our suggestions to build up a four main SWEN activities for the pilot year: building a network, facilitating funder conversations, cultivating healthy culture, and tending to ecological distress.

## **What would LOVE say?**

Throughout the SWEN consultation process, I received supervision and therapy from Sonia who supported me in tending to the various anxieties that convening this consultation period inevitably generated.

We explored the way that these anxieties affected my quality of presence, both in these meetings and in the other wellbeing related conversations and pieces of work I curated alongside them.

Over our time working together I noticed myself better and better able to listen without needing to respond, to hold complexity without myself feeling confused, and to naturally allow others to show leadership without feeling the need to control

processes as they unfolded. It was my great pleasure to experience this support myself and to see how the development of the SWEN benefited as a result.

Sonia would often ask both myself and the Working Group, 'I hear fear speaking, but what would LOVE say?'

Sonia's **LOVE** acronym - **L**isten, **O**bserve, **V**alue and **E**xperimental attitude - was transformational in facilitating the SWEN's ambitious work, and I hold a great deal of excitement about the potential that this, alongside other more intuitive ways of working, might have for the environment movement at large as we face into these crucial and deeply concerning years ahead.<sup>11</sup>

**"SONIA WOULD OFTEN ASK BOTH MYSELF AND THE WORKING GROUP, 'I HEAR FEAR SPEAKING, BUT WHAT WOULD LOVE SAY?'"**

11. 'Love in Action', Sonia Mayor, June 8th (2022).  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/6V2ZMUFEWCYKU5CWDCGY/full?target=10.1080/14767333.2022.2082819>

## Experiences of the SWEN's development

This report attempts to embody the value of lived human experience by describing the journey of the SWEN's development as experienced by myself as the project convener.

The following excerpts of others' experiences elaborate on the ways in which wellbeing was explored through the consultation process, and how it might be furthered throughout the environment movement by the work of the SWEN.

### SONIA (FACILITOR)

*"Sometimes you meet someone and just instantly know you want to work with them! When Jo approached me, I didn't feel I had much capacity but was happy to have a chat.*

*I found myself saying yes when my head was saying no as Jo invited me to facilitate the SWEN consultation process. Having little knowledge or experience in the sector, I did feel slightly daunted when I saw people's CVs!*

*Whenever fear arises, however, I always ask myself 'What would love do'? The response was to get to know what matters to each of the members and help them to get to know each other.*

*As a facilitator, I pay attention to relationship, task, and process. For this group, it felt important to create a listening and spacious environment where people could be present with one another to explore what was required. It was interesting that in the slowing down, how much more was achieved!"*

**"AS A FACILITATOR, I PAY ATTENTION TO RELATIONSHIP, TASK, AND PROCESS. FOR THIS GROUP, IT FELT IMPORTANT TO CREATE A LISTENING AND SPACIOUS ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE COULD BE PRESENT WITH ONE ANOTHER TO EXPLORE WHAT WAS REQUIRED. "**

**- SONIA MAYOR**

## FLORENCE (WORKING GROUP MEMBER)

*"I had some reservations about being involved with the consultation due to feeling very tightly squeezed timewise with my current work. I also began the process a little daunted about what it might look like to envisage and create an organisation. What I experienced was a real gratitude for such a nourishing, calming, even healing space. It was such a contrast to how frazzled I often feel by other work pressures.*

*I looked forward to the meetings and I noticed how different I felt during and after them. This was in large part down to the community that was built and the experience of really listening to each other which doesn't always happen in the practice of environmental work.*

***The process seemed to naturally present a solution to the rift felt across the environment movement; the divide between professional organisations driven by processes, and the more organic approach of grassroots movements. It blended the best of both with goals, objectives and processes that were held with fluidity, equity and a sense of real emergence."***

## REBECCA (WORKING GROUP MEMBER)

*"I finished my Ph.D. feeling a real sense of wanting to do something with my research evidencing the distress felt by those in climate leadership. I was therefore excited to be involved in the consultation process, although once we got started I too felt a level of anxiety about the ambition and complexity of what was involved.*

***I found the nourishment of the processes of this work, as facilitated by the wellbeing principles we worked to, meant that more challenging emotions such as competition or disconnect were able to be held. They could then do what they needed to do and dissipate rather than become problematic.***

*This enabled complex work to take place, including the welcoming of different kinds of wisdom, without overcomplicating relationships. I also noticed how this enabled us to stay connected to the distress of the climate emergency without it overly dominating or becoming something that as a group we had to ignore.*

*This is a somewhat different experience to conventional ways of working with climate distress in the environment movement, and felt to me a significant step toward some kind of a solution."*

## BIDISHA (ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER)

*"I feel so much that this is what we need so much more of in the world and in this sector. This process has really inspired me to look at myself and my world in a new light. I really appreciate the commitment to inclusivity and bringing people to share philosophies, practices, and ways of being, as well as the heavy, strategic lift of what the SWEN hopes to achieve."*

## MARVIN (ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER)

*"Coming to the SWEN meetings was a very interesting experience for me. I'd worked recently with a group of 7 other black geography students to co-write a paper so I had experience of what can be achieved by people with similar backgrounds and experiences working together. The diversity of the advisory board contrasted with this, and I initially wondered whether the wide range of perspectives could negatively impact our working. The combination of Sonia's excellent facilitation and the willingness of everyone to contribute, to listen, and to be flexible turned these different perspectives into a strength of the group."*

***The experience has been invaluable for me, and I believe that the way we collaborated so successfully revealed the importance of connectedness and networking to wellbeing."***

## NOORA (ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER)

*"We know the health of organisations drives how well they can achieve their mission. Taking care of the people who work within the environmental movement is crucial to the movement's success. **This initiative has helped to understand the financial, structural and systemic challenges within the movement regarding team wellbeing.** I hope this initiative can continue to address those challenges in an inclusive manner as it has done so far".*

## RICHARD (ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER)

*"This is a hugely important initiative. Lots of people in our sector are stretched to their limits. **We're all united by the joy of the mission to save nature, but in some cases the enormity of the mission is limiting the enjoyment of life.** I hope we've witnessed the birth of something that can reduce that tension and even add to the already-enormous positivity of the environment sector."*

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## Where to now?

*As part of enquiring into the wellbeing needs of the environment movement, each organisation that was not a funder and which was represented on the Advisory Board was given the opportunity of a £1,000 wellbeing grant. A total of five grants were given during the consultation period, with the request that board members make a short record of their experiences using the grant.*

*I found the diversity and creativity of the grant's intended uses especially inspiring; one grant facilitated the establishment of a 'wellbeing sub-committee' which attracted further match funding and resulted in a range of wellbeing initiatives across the organisation. Another was to be used to take the entire team out of the office for a day of bird watching, whilst another was to create a garden for environment activists living in urban environments.*

*But what was also obvious was that financial resources alone would not be enough in meeting the sector's wellbeing needs. By the end of the consultation period, a couple of the grants had not yet been used due to time restraints. Such is the pressure that many environmental organisations work under.*

**"WHAT WAS ALSO OBVIOUS WAS THAT FINANCIAL RESOURCES ALONE WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH IN MEETING THE SECTOR'S WELLBEING NEEDS."**

The role of the SWEN will be to support grantmakers to fund in a way that places wellbeing as an integral part of funding practice, rather than as an add on that can easily be lost.

We will work to achieve this by facilitating a series of roundtables and conversations between funders and grantees in order to foster a better understanding of what the movement really needs from those that resource it.

These funder conversations will be integral to the SWEN pilot which will work with four main workstreams in mind;

## **BUILDING A NETWORK**

*The SWEN will be a resourced network that promotes genuine collaboration across the environment movement. All too often environment work is siloed, due in part to funding competition. This network will bring the sector together as an act of both self and communal care, to share resources and learning, and to promote greater cohesion. It will explore, develop and model ways of working that have been demonstrated to be of value by the consultation process.*

## **FACILITATING FUNDER CONVERSATIONS**

*The SWEN will act as a resource on best grantmaking practices to ensure the wellbeing of both grantees and grantmakers, and the optimal use of funds. Quite rightly, funders are not often privy to the intricacies of how poor wellbeing may affect an organisation, such as its rates of staff turnover or sick leave. The SWEN will protect the privacy of grantees and advocate for their wellbeing whilst also providing assurance to funders that grants are used as effectively as possible.*

## **CULTIVATING HEALTHY CULTURE**

*Wellbeing must be structurally supported, and therefore to speak of wellbeing is to speak of more than supporting the personal resilience of individuals within the movement. It is to speak also of remuneration and holiday allowance, of job security and progression opportunities, and of diversity, equity, and inclusion, for example. The SWEN will work to envisage a movement that others would look to as an example of best working and organising practices.*

## **TENDING TO ECOLOGICAL DISTRESS**

*The impacts of working with the catastrophic, all-encompassing nature of ecological breakdown cannot be underestimated. The SWEN will provide opportunities for those working on the climate and nature crises, in any capacity, to tend to this distress and in so doing best safeguard against the negative impacts this can have on working, personal, and organisational life.*

Of these four work streams, we shall prioritise building a network and facilitating funder conversations as we begin piloting the SWEN's activities across the movement. This is with the understanding that the cultivating of healthy culture and tending to ecological distress workstreams will be in part addressed by the activities undertaken by the first two.



As a Network the SWEN will curate spaces for these conversations, resources and learnings to ripple out across the entire movement. The consultation as to what the wellbeing needs of the environment movement are will continue, with those throughout the movement and beyond invited to participate in conversations, programmes, and events that further the exploration of personal and planetary wellbeing.

As the SWEN enters its pilot year, we seek funding to support the development of this project. We would be delighted to work with any grantmakers or donors who also recognise the importance of supporting sustainability from the inside out.

For further information, questions, comments or simply to get in touch, please make contact at [jo@climateemergence.co.uk](mailto:jo@climateemergence.co.uk)

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## Existing wellbeing support

*The following wellbeing resources for the environment movement have had particular influence on the approach taken by the SWEN. Most contain free or grant-subsidised support/ resources for those experiencing ecological distress or whose wellbeing is negatively impacted as a result of environmental awareness and work.*

- *[The Climate Psychology Alliance](#) promotes psychology for understanding and facing climate change and difficult truths. CPA offers free therapy to anyone affected by the ecological, biodiversity and climate crises which you can find out [more about here](#).*
- *A [Climate Café](#) is a simple, hospital, empathetic space where fears and uncertainties about our climate and ecological crises can be safely expressed. Climate cafés are community led and are now spreading across the world.*
- *[The Resilience Project](#) empowers a generation of resilience change-makers through 8 week youth-led resilience circles, drawing on the latest insights from psychology and neuroscience, and combining action, rest and joy.*
- *[Good Grief Network](#) offers a unique 10 step programme that helps individuals and communities metabolise collective grief, fear, rage and other painful feelings about the state of the world.*
- *[Change in Nature](#) resources people and organisations to take purposeful action in a pivotal time by facilitating immersive experiences in nature.*
- *[The Rest of Activism](#) is a grant-subsidised burnout prevention and recovery programme to help climate concerned folks fuel their activism with joy.*
- *[A Larger Us is](#) a community of people who share the aim of bridging divides rather than deepening them, who want to transform relationships rather than defeat enemies and who recognise that achieving these things is about psychology as much as politics. Founder, Alex Evans' latest report makes an excellent case for many of the wellbeing principles explored through the SWEN's work. You can [read it here](#).*