

## Kids of the world take on the world

**Children's Express reports from the International Children's Conference on the Environment, where young people from 85 countries had their say on the future of the planet.**

When world leaders gathered in Brazil two years ago to discuss the best ways to preserve the Earth's remaining resources for future generations, only 10 minutes were allotted so that the future - young people - could share how they felt.

So, the governments, hopefully, will pay more attention to children and realise they do have valid opinions and good ideas that should be listened to. International Children's Conference on the Environment was held last month in England. More than 800 children from 85 countries gathered to exchange ideas on pollution, endangered species and recycling. The delegates also issued challenges to our world leaders. These challenges were presented to the United Nations in New York by the two British children who organised the event.

The London bureau of Children's Express found out what worries young people and what suggestions they offer for the future.

"If all the people in the world looked after the environmental problems in their area," said Australian Derek Calderway, 12, "all the environmental problems in the world would be attended to. There wouldn't be such a problem as there is today. "All this work has gone into the conference. but we think that it should go just a little bit further... keep it going."

Emma Barry, 10, from Surrey, England, launched Air World Sky Watch at the conference. Children write letters to airlines to ask what they've done for the environment. She told the conference attendees about the pollution caused by airplane travel. "There are a lot of things grown-ups could do, but they can't be bothered," she said. "So now I think they should listen to children. The government doesn't do a lot. When this conference started, I don't think they took it seriously. Now, it's happened. I think they are starting to regret it badly."

John Gummer, Britain's Secretary of State for the Environment, seemed to miss the point entirely. In his closing speech, he went out of his way to tell off the children for looking at issues that involved more than picking up garbage off the street.

"It's easy to tell other people to take care of things, but where should we start?" he asked. "With ourselves. It's very easy to tell other people about nuclear tests, or the rainforest. You have to start here, if you live in England. How many people here are good at turning the lights off when they don't need them? Not quite so many of you as are interested in nuclear tests. I can see that."

Shortly afterward, Gummer was shouted off the stage by delegates who yelled, "You sound too much like an adult!" This meant he was preaching to the children without listening to them. Laura Mentis, a 12-year-old from South Africa, has worked on a project to preserve a flower threatened with extinction. She talked about the need for adults to listen.

"I will write long, offensive letters to the newspapers if they don't," she said. "More children should get involved. There is nothing going to get done in the world if they don't."

Meghan Letters, a 10-year-old from California, came to the conference as part of a team of 12. She talked about what they try to do at home. "We wrote to different senators, the president and vice president about the environment," she said. "We've heard from Vice President Al Gore. We have over 150 projects in our country. We'll be able to give the information we get from home to other countries. I wrote three pages of notes about the presentations here, and I'll go home and try them and see if they work in my school."

"There are many things that are destroying our environment in our country," said Yab Yewab, 14, from Ghana. "The conference was a real education for us. There were many things that we heard about and we never knew about them before."

Debbie Simmons, 13, lives in Eastbourne, England, and helped to create the conference three years ago. It was co-sponsored by British Airways. She was one of the young people who presented the children's challenges to Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the executive director of the United Nations Environmental Programme.

"The governments, hopefully, will pay more attention to children and realise they do have valid opinions and good ideas that should be listened to," said Debbie.

"If one person says something to the UN, they don't have to listen, but with 800 children saying, 'We think you should do this, this, and this because you're ruining our world,' the government and the UN haven't got much choice but to listen, really."

Dermot Briars, a 12-year-old from London, was Debbie's vice chair on the Junior Board of Directors of the conference. He went with Debbie to New York. "We hope that the governments will listen to us. Some will obviously be sceptical and they won't want to listen, but most of them will because it is so big," he said of the response of the young delegates.

The conference was special because it was run by the children. The biggest problem was that it simply wasn't enough. There are so many problems and each need to be thought about over time. Some children travelled thousands of miles to speak for only two minutes; and they were rushed about by disorganised adults in a hurry.

A conference like this should take place on a regular basis. The Children's Express bureau in London challenges the United Nations to establish a permanent department that would allow all children to directly address the UN. This is to ensure that the voices of children are expressed to world leaders on all subjects - whether it be the environment or war.

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### About the team

This article was reported by Natasha Asare, 13 and Shahi Ahmed, 13, and edited by Erica Rutherford, 14 and Gemma Wilcox, 17. It was published in a variety of regional papers in North America including The Montgomery County/Prince George's Sentinel, the Chatham Courier and The Royal Gazette.

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