



Kids Do the Write Stuff

By Karl Hansen

Sustainability has been core to the cultural DNA of the Living Rainforest and its parent charity, the Trust for Sustainable Living (TSL), ever since we were established as an educational charity back in 2000. We run a popular “Sustainable Futures” school tour, and we have a number of kid-friendly exhibits, including a simulated rainforest in a greenhouse to show the impact of climate change and a new *Sustainable Futures* exhibition. So it was a logical move for us to establish a trailblazing global essay and debating competition to inspire children to imagine a more sustainable future.

HOW THE COMPETITION BEGAN

Eight years ago, the Living Rainforest hosted a national online children’s essay competition and debate on the theme “How on Earth can we save the rainforests?” The idea was to create an opportunity for children’s voices to be heard on important global issues, starting with the plight of the world’s threatened tropical rainforests.

We received a few hundred essays from children

ages 7 to 17 and invited all the participating schools to two days of debates at the Living Rainforest’s Human Impact Building. But before the submissions deadline closed, we received a phone call from a teacher at an English-speaking school in Dubai, asking if her students could enter the competition despite being located outside the U.K. We didn’t hesitate to say yes, and a few months later found ourselves welcoming a rather sizeable delegation of

The stunning blossom of the *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*. This is one of the oldest plants in the Living Rainforest, and originally comes from China but is now grown throughout the tropics. Image courtesy Living Rainforest





Debate delegates explore Masdar City, near Abu Dhabi, April 2016. Photo courtesy Trust for Sustainable Living

students from the United Arab Emirates to our first fledgling “national” debates.

The following year, we decided to formally rebrand as an international competition and open it up to all nations. With all eyes on the “Rio+20” Earth Summit, and expectations riding high on world leaders to rise to the occasion and show real leadership, we invited children around the world to write open letters to the then-UN-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon telling him what they expected from their leaders. The Grand Prize would be an all-expenses-paid trip for one lucky student, one teacher, and one parent to attend the international summit in Brazil. Participation skyrocketed from two countries to 59.

Although the Rio+20 Summit turned out to be a huge disappointment, with most national leaders failing to “bring it” and many even failing to turn up, including Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and David Cameron, one silver lining was a commitment to develop a set of “post-2015” goals for the planet. Following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were due to end in 2015, the new goals would be called the Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), and the timeframe for achieving them would be the year 2030.

After the SDGs were announced in 2016, we found that they provided a handy frame of reference for linking to the sorts of global sustainability challenges that we could feature in our essay competition and debates.

THE COMPETITION AND THE SDGs

We chose Sustainable Cities (SDG #11) as the competition theme for 2016. The debates took place in Dubai, which has ambitious plans to become a global showcase for sustainable construction and technology in the lead-up to Dubai Expo 2020. The debate program included visits to Masdar eco-city outside Abu Dhabi and Dubai Sustainable City, where children, parents, and teachers got a firsthand look at eco-buildings and technologies suitable for the extreme desert environment. At Masdar City, the children got to interact with leading designers and engineers, explore the shaded walkways between the buildings, and ride in driverless cars. In Dubai Sustainable City, young delegates got to see

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vegetables growing in communal greenhouses in the city center, as well as cycling tracks and exercise paths crisscrossing the development.

In 2017, we challenged our contestants with Climate Action (SDG #13) and held the debates at Rhodes House, Oxford, near the Living Rainforest. Two hundred delegates from thirty countries participated in five days of lively debates, panel discussions, and field trips. Climate experts met with children at

the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, where the kids delivered their plans for action and were encouraged by messages of support from luminaries including Achim Steiner, the former head of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and now administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Katharine Wilkinson, senior writer at Project Drawdown (www.drawdown.org). Field trips included visits to a solar farm and wind turbine, the BMW Mini factory, and the Johnson Matthey Technology Centre, where children, parents, and teachers were inspired by scientists working on new eco-friendly technologies such as carbon capture, electric cars, and solar cells.

This year, the competition theme is Oceans (SDG #14), and the debates are being hosted by the Seychelles government on Mahe Island in July 2018. The delegates will be welcomed by the Seychelles' ministers of education, environment, and tourism, and the opening ceremony will be followed by a book launch with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Voices of Future Generations initiative and Bloomsbury Books. The exciting, five-day program includes a Children's Ocean Conference, where kids from around the world will work with local Seychellois youth organizations and marine conservationists to protect the seas of the Small Island Developing States, and teachers will attend a special workshop on improving educational resources on oceans, seas, and marine resources. The field trip program includes a choice of visits to a marine park, a fishery, a maritime academy, and a marine discovery station. The program will close with an entertaining Cultural Evening.

Looking ahead to next year, the theme for 2019 will be Life on Land (SDG #15), and the debates will take place in Victoria and Vancouver, Canada, hosted by the government of British Columbia.



TSL developed the interactive “Drawdown Challenge” in partnership with the creators of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*. The term “drawdown” is defined as the point in time when the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere begins to decline on a year-to-year basis. Drawdown identifies 100 climate change solutions and ranks them based on their potential to reduce greenhouse gas levels. The game uses the content of the book to help Living Rainforest visitors explore solutions to climate change. Players are challenged to identify which solutions have the most impact. All the solutions should be implemented, as no single solution will be enough. To play, visit <https://trustforsustainableliving.org/play-drawdown>.

Registration for the essay competition will open in September, and the deadline for submissions is December 2018. Further details will be announced on the new Trust for Sustainable Living website, <https://trustforsustainableliving.org>.

HOW CAN MUSEUMS GET INVOLVED?

The TSL competition is free to enter and provides an opportunity for museums and schools to educate and engage children and teachers in the SDGs. Rather than focusing solely on global environmental problems, the competition challenges children to think about positive and constructive solutions. It empowers kids from all walks of life by giving them a voice on a world stage. All entrants are eligible to win the grand prize of a free, all-expenses-paid trip

to the TSL debates and awards program for themselves, plus one parent and one teacher, and an extra £500 (USD 662) in spending money.

To get involved, museums and science centers can post a link to the competition web page, with a short write-up introducing the competition. For more information, see <https://trustforsustainableliving.org/take-part/>.

Museums can also register directly and submit up to 60 essays online on behalf of their young visitors (30 essays from 7- to 11-year-olds, and 30 essays from 11- to 17-year-olds).

More ambitious or well-resourced museums and science centers might wish to help host a future debate or side event or help drive up national-level participation of schools in the competition. ■

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Delegates to the 2017 Debates on Climate Action at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, July 2017. Photo courtesy Trust for Sustainable Living