



FOUNDING PARTNERS



FOR YOUTH, BY YOUTH

# MARKING 5 YEARS OF IMPACT

October 2024



**"A UNIQUE PROJECT"**  
GULF NEWS 



**"THE PROGRAMME AIMS TO INCREASE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AMONG THE LOCAL YOUTH COMMUNITY"**  
وكالة أنباء الإمارات- وام  
EMIRATES NEWS AGENCY-WAM 

**"THE TIME HAS COME TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE"**  
Nuha Mohideen,  
Ambassador for Nature 

**"I HAVE GAINED A DEEP APPRECIATION FOR NATURE AND ITS CONSERVATION. THIS PROGRAM HAS EMPOWERED ME TO BECOME AN ADVOCATE FOR OUR PLANET, INSPIRING OTHERS TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE OUR PRECIOUS ECOSYSTEMS."**  
Aesha Alshehyari,  
Ambassador for Nature 



**"20 YOUNG UAE NATURE AMBASSADORS TO FLOAT GREEN IDEAS"**  
Khaleej Times

**"WE CANNOT NEGOTIATE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE"**  
Denice Henson, Ambassador for Nature 



**"UAE'S FIRST CONSERVATION-THEMED VIRTUAL ESCAPE ROOM"**  


**"TIME TO PRESS RESET"**  
Youth whitepaper

**"SURVEY SHOWS THAT NEARLY 2/3RD OF 18-29 YEAR OLDS IN THE UAE WANT TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT"**  
ArabianBusiness







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For more information please visit:  
[www.connectwithnature.ae](http://www.connectwithnature.ae)  
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# NURTURING A YOUTH MOVEMENT FOR NATURE



**H.E. Dr Shaikha Salem Al Dhaheer**  
*Secretary General,  
Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD)*



Connect with Nature was founded in 2019 with the vision of inspiring young people in the UAE to experience, celebrate and safeguard the UAE's natural heritage.

Over the past five years, the movement has grown beyond our expectations, **reaching more than 2.5 million youth and mobilizing 14,000 youth to take action for nature.** This remarkable milestone is a testament not only to our commitment to our future leaders, but also UAE youth's passion for nature and their determination to be part of the solution for a sustainable future.

When the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration was launched in 2021, our thriving community was prepared to

take action. Attracting the attention of young adults is not always easy, but thankfully Connect with Nature witnessed strong participation from the beginning, with youth signing up in droves for **exciting excursions into UAE's natural landscapes – our wadis, deserts, wetlands and coastal lagoons.** These trips provide youth a safe way to explore the nation, with the guidance of environmental experts. They are designed to be fun and social, to invite youth to experience something new, and to **build their comfort and confidence in nature.** Buoyed by the popularity of these activities, Connect with Nature has grown to organize **250 events** across the country as well as online.

Many of these events have taken place amidst the rich natural ecosystems and reserves in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, with popular events like **Kayak 4 Mangroves** and **Turtle Patrol on Saadiyat Island** becoming regular fixtures in Connect with Nature's annual calendar of events. Abu Dhabi youth have flocked to these and other events in large numbers, with their energetic spirits and can-do attitudes.

The community impressed us with their eagerness to take this journey further – and our “for youth, by youth” approach empowered them to learn from their peers - upskilling their knowledge of nature, biodiversity and climate, while also developing leadership skills through masterclasses, training sessions and a more intense hands-on bootcamp series. Across these sessions and workshops, youth developed their own nature and climate solutions – one of which has even been selected as a **finalist in the global Earth Prize** youth competition.

More than **60 promising youth change makers** have evolved into environmental leaders and Ambassadors for Nature, organizing their own community participation events and advocating for nature on the regional and global stage.

It is with great pride that we celebrate the **transformative impact** our youth movement is spearheading, in the footsteps of the UAE's late founding father and our conservationist Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Their curiosity, creativity and vocation to build a sustainable future is a source of inspiration as we chart the next five years of the Connect with Nature movement.



# TODAY'S YOUTH, TOMORROW'S LEADERS



**Laila Mostafa Abdullatif**  
Director General,  
Emirates Nature-WWF



We envision a future in which people and nature thrive side by side. A future in which businesses are powered by clean and innovative technologies; where products are eco-friendly, people consume mindfully, and litter is disposed of responsibly. A future that can sustain humanity for generations to come.

To achieve this, **we need inventors, entrepreneurs, change makers and leaders who will prioritize nature and sustainability in decision-making.**

This vision gave rise to Connect with Nature – a movement that brings younger generations closer to nature

and equips them with the knowledge, capacity and opportunity to spearhead the transformation towards a sustainable future.

The natural historian Sir David Attenborough famously said: *“No one will protect what they don’t care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”* This profound insight stuck with us as we designed Connect with Nature and created opportunities for youth to not only experience nature, but also environmental science, ideation and the power of advocacy.

Across these activities, youth demonstrated a keen grasp of complex issues, a passion for innovation, and the resolve to advance solutions. Their dedication and connection to nature persevered through the COVID-19 pandemic, as activities moved online and we explored creative ways to keep the community engaged. For instance, during the **virtual Reimagine Youth Circle series of video calls, youth confidently presented their views and solutions to high-level decision-makers**, including UAE Ministers of State, business leaders and industry specialists. Since then, they have eloquently **represented the youth voice at prominent local and global events** including the Food for Future Summit, Stockholm+50, COP15, COP27 and COP28.

At COP28, our **Youth Insiders** – young professionals who are already championing sustainability in their workplaces – impressed us with their advice on overcoming hurdles and transforming large corporations from within. Within our neighbourhoods, youth **Ambassadors for Nature** are leading grassroots initiatives to raise awareness about environmental issues and mobilize communities to act.

**Connect with Nature has granted us front-row seats to witness the evolution of UAE’s youth into inspiring, ambitious leaders.** It is with great pride that I follow their progress, and with great hope that I welcome the newest members to our movement.



# WHAT IS CONNECT WITH NATURE?

Connect with Nature takes UAE youth through a transformational journey that shapes how they value and prioritise nature. The programme is designed to captivate youth's minds, touch their hearts and inspire meaningful actions.

It encourages youth to **Re-wild**, **Re-think** and **Become the Change**, offering carefully planned activities across four strategic pillars of engagement:



## REACH:

In this initial stage, youth begin to see important messages about conservation and what it means to embrace a sustainable lifestyle. They recognize Connect with Nature is a way to engage more deeply with these issues and sign up to join the movement.



## EXPLORE:

Youth commence their journey by 're-wilding' – getting outside, experiencing nature and developing a sense of adventure. Connect with Nature offers hundreds of exciting activities such as **Desert Survival trips** and **Moonlight Kayaking** to encourage teenagers and young adults to explore the UAE's unique natural heritage.



## IMPACT:

Gradually, youth move from learning about environmental issues to doing their part. They begin volunteering as **citizen scientists**, as Connect with Nature integrates Public Participation in Scientific Research (PPSR) into field activities. Sustainability considerations are now driving their behaviour and decision-making.



## LEAD:

A core group of youth change makers are developing skills through masterclasses and training bootcamps. Through action and dialogue, they are beginning to lead their communities by organizing their own events. They are now confident to challenge the status quo and shape a sustainable future.



# 5 YEARS OF IMPACT

## WE ARE CONNECTING YOUTH WITH NATURE

Connect with Nature has grown to become one of the UAE's largest movements for change makers, who love nature and want to protect it.



**2.5 MILLION**  
**YOUTH REACHED**



**14,000+**  
**PARTICIPANTS**



**250+**  
**EVENTS**



**22,000+**  
**HOURS FOR**  
**NATURE**



## WE ARE TRANSFORMING HEARTS AND MINDS

The movement is dramatically increasing UAE youth's commitment to the environment. When surveyed, an incredible 94% of respondents said they would recommend Connect with Nature to a friend.



**1.** Dramatically decreased my commitment  
**5.** Dramatically increased my commitment

We asked participants how Connect with Nature has changed their commitment to the environment.



## WE ARE EDUCATING YOUTH ABOUT NATURE AND CLIMATE

Youth are unravelling the complex relationships between nature, climate and human well-being, and re-thinking how nature aligns with their values.



**6,000+**  
PARTICIPANTS ACROSS  
OUR NATURE-THEMED  
ESCAPE ROOMS



**2,000+ YOUTH  
AND 20+ MINISTERS AND  
DECISION-MAKERS JOINED 10  
RE-IMAGINE YOUTH CIRCLES**



**500+**  
YOUTH PARTICIPATED  
IN THE **Ghaf Youth  
Majlis Series**

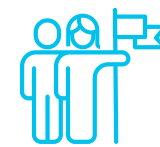


**50%  
INCREASE IN  
PARTICIPATION  
IN 2024!**

**2,000+**  
YOUTH JOINED OUR VIRTUAL  
SUMMER TRAINING SESSIONS  
- THE **CLIMATE SERIES** AND  
**NATURE'S RESILIENCE SERIES**

## WE ARE NURTURING A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS

We are doing our part: upskilling, mentoring and shining the spotlight on promising youth to help them succeed as future leaders and change makers.



**60+**  
YOUTH  
LEADERS



**30**  
AMBASSADORS  
FOR NATURE



**13**  
'GRADUATES'  
OF OUR YOUTH  
LEADERSHIP  
BOOTCAMP



**15**  
YOUTH RECENTLY  
TRAINED AS **MURSHED  
YOUTH RANGERS**



## WE ARE USHERING IN AN ERA OF CITIZEN SCIENCE

Youth and the wider community are signing up to become citizen scientists, volunteering to collect and assess valuable data about biodiversity and nature to enhance scientific research in the UAE.



**13,505**  
DATA POINTS  
COLLECTED



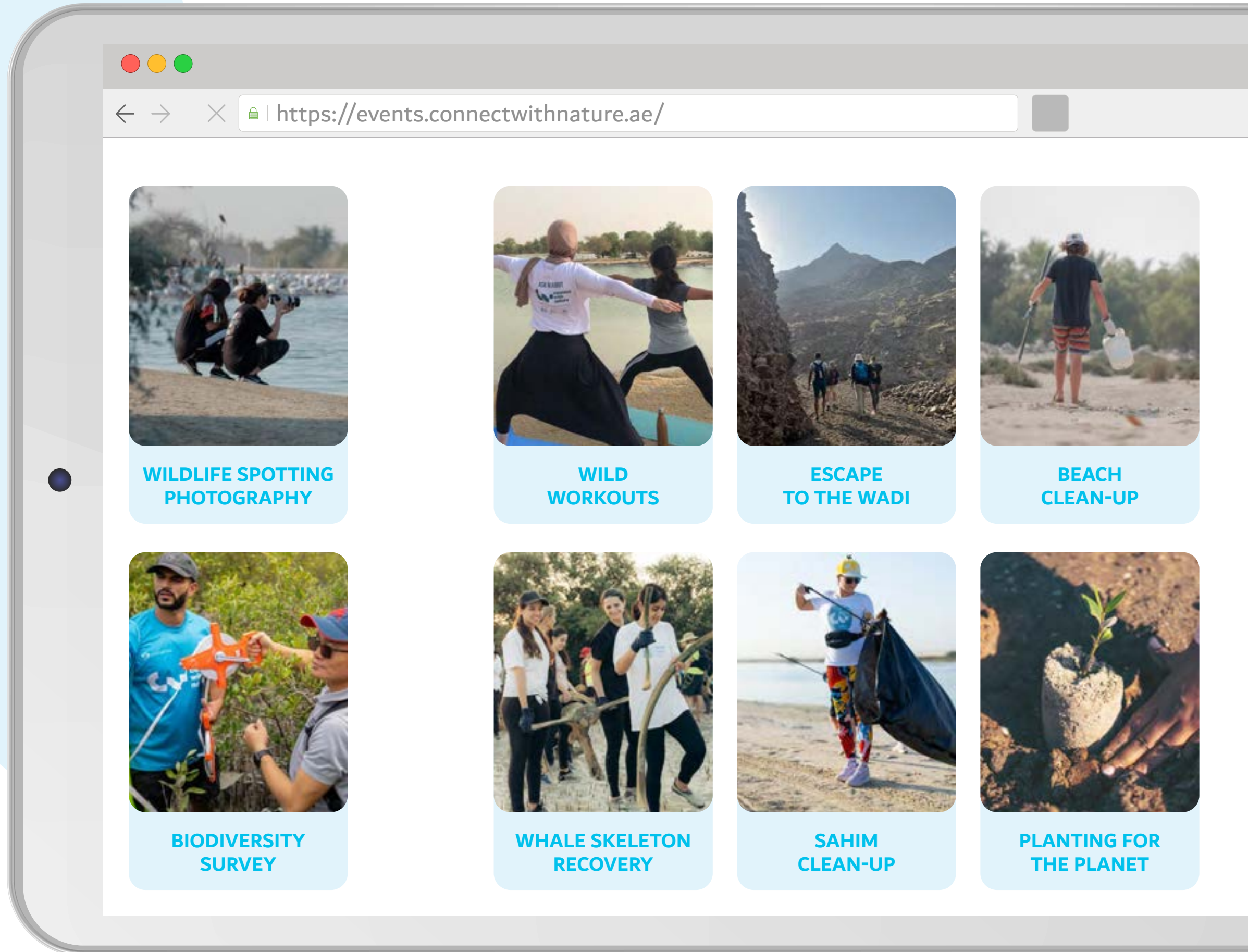
**12,047 PIECES**  
OF LITTER  
CATEGORIZED



**2,572.2 KGS**  
OF LITTER  
COLLECTED



**9**  
CITIZEN SCIENCE  
CONCEPTS DEVELOPED  
WITH EAD RESEARCHERS







# NUMBERS DON'T DO THE MOVEMENT JUSTICE.

We'll leave you with 5 stories...

# 1.

## OUR FIRST TRIP IN NATURE

Many of us have visited the mangroves. But how many have paddled deep into the mangrove forests at night, under the calm cover of moonlight.

Our first Moonlight Kayaking adventure was magical and unforgettable, as we wove through mangrove trees and inky black water alive with nocturnal marine life. Truly immersed in nature, we heard about the harmonious relationship that binds the mangroves to the creatures they shelter - birds, crustaceans, and fish that make up our vibrant coastal wonderlands.

It's no surprise that Moonlight Kayaking has become one of our signature Connect with Nature activities, even now five years on.

*"I'm having such a great experience with Connect with Nature! I am enjoying every little bit of it and I'm involving my friends and family as well! We enjoy going to the landmarks of the UAE and discovering new locations full of nature."*

**Diana, member of  
Connect with Nature**





2.



## THE COVID CONUNDRUM

Imagine trying to run a programme called ‘Connect with Nature’ during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we had to remain indoors to stay safe. Thankfully our creative team didn’t miss a beat - they quickly found ways to keep our community motivated and focused on making a positive impact.

Even though we were physically apart, our community felt more connected than ever. We logged on to group Zoom calls with decision-makers and national leaders, directly speaking to them and sharing ideas to “Reimagine” a better, more sustainable future for all.

It was exhilarating to genuinely be heard and actually have a say in how our country moves forward. For most of us, it was our first time participating in such a serious, high-stakes conversation. It was eye-opening to realize that our voices could influence real-world policies and actions. Having gained this experience, we can confidently say - this is just the beginning!

*“Having the opportunity to present the White Paper to UAE ministers deepened my interest in working with government leaders to advance climate policies.”*

**Hannah Melville-Rea**, our Ambassador for Nature has since authored a peer-reviewed article on regional sea level science. Hannah is now pursuing a PhD and researching how governments can prepare for climate disasters.



3.



## UAE YOUTH ARE CAPABLE

By this point, the programme was set to give deserving youth a launchpad to become sustainability leaders in their communities and across the country. But how could we reach young people from all seven emirates, to let them know about this incredible opportunity?

We kicked off a nationwide search for youth ‘**Ambassadors for Nature**,’ calling on passionate change makers to apply for this prestigious title and receive hands-on training and mentorship from environmental leaders.

UAE youth answered the call, demonstrating their interest in nature and eagerness to advocate for sustainability. Over the years, two cohorts were selected, with 30 homegrown heroes earning the title of Ambassador for Nature. They’ve since organized and led events for their communities and inspired others to explore, study and protect nature. Our ambassadors have also spoken up for nature at high-profile events such as the Food for Future Summit, Stockholm+50, COP15, COP27 and COP28 - standing tall as role models for the entire youth community.

In 2023, Ambassadors for Nature **Fayaz and Tamara**, successfully transitioned into full-time roles at Emirates Nature WWF, contributing to our mission and impact. In fact, Fayaz is leading the next cycle of the Ambassador programme.



Fayaz



Tamara





4.

## MAKING SCIENCE AND NATURE ACCESSIBLE

Science is at the heart of tackling the nature-climate crisis, and there are already so many solutions just waiting to be put into action. To get people excited about these solutions—and make the science behind conservation a bit more fun—we came up with something creative and out of the box. Enter our nature-themed escape rooms, designed to reward teamwork and ignite action - especially with a 10-minute countdown timer flashing red in the corner.

First up was the Desert Survival escape room, where youth had to navigate a sandstorm in the Arabian Desert while protecting nature along the way. An amazing 2,800 participants took the challenge - through the physical escape room caravan and the online simulation we launched to keep the excitement going during the hot summer months.

Since then, the escape room has evolved, and in 2023—the Year of Sustainability and COP28—we launched the Mangrove Edition escape room. Operated by Connect with Nature volunteers, it is now touring the nation, demystifying Nature-based Solutions and inspiring thousands to take action for the planet.

*“The escape room was a ton of fun. We got out with two minutes to spare. It really gave a good overview of the importance of our role in protecting these ecosystems, Nature-based Solutions as well as how the science plays into it.”*

**Student participants during COP28**



5.

## SMALL IMPACTS ADD UP

Experts and scientists can only be in so many places at once. But with hundreds of citizen scientists on the ground, we can help scout the country!

Citizen scientists get involved in many ways, gathering valuable data about local species and habitats to support scientific research. Every contribution and data point adds up, contributing to environmental decision-making and driving a huge impact over time. As our community grows, so does our influence.

Together, we’ve taken part in numerous citizen science projects, from categorizing litter in our natural spaces to recording wildlife and biodiversity in some of the nation’s most beautiful natural hotspots to better understand species trends and health.

The best part? Citizen science is easy to scale up, with several Ambassadors for Nature already leading the charge and expanding our efforts!

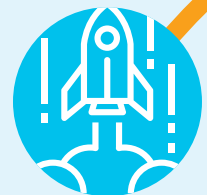
*“I reduced plastic consumption and started a community group called Meet N Heal Nature organizing local clean-ups.”*

**Judy Mahfouz, our Ambassador for Nature also advocates for environmental awareness as an ambassador for Asics.**





# OUR JOURNEY



## 2019 LAUNCH

Connect with Nature launches at the World Future Energy Summit

UAE's first conservation-themed Escape Room pops up across the nation

Youth clear litter in Beach and Mangrove clean-ups

72 nature-driven activities take place in 2019



## 2020 REIMAGINE YOUTH CIRCLES

Youth join the global #SwitchOff for Earth Hour 2020

Youth join the Reimagine Youth Circle Series and publish key takeaways in Reimagine whitepaper

20 Ambassadors for Nature embark on a journey of learning and leadership

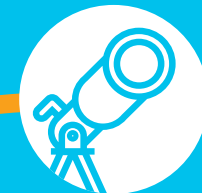


## 2021 AMBASSADORS FOR NATURE

Virtual activities see tremendous participation during the COVID-19 pandemic

Ambassadors for Nature represent UAE at high-profile events

Connect with Nature pivots to include more Public Participation in Scientific Research



## 2022 CITIZEN SCIENCE

Field activities resume, with 50 events held in 2022

Ambassadors continue to champion nature and excel. Two Ambassadors were selected as finalists in the global Earth Prize contest.

Youth Leadership Bootcamp kicks off during the summer

Youth begin to gather valuable data around biodiversity as citizen scientists



## 2023 COP28

Sahim launches, ushering in a new era of citizen science

Mangrove themed Escape Room tours the nation, inspiring thousands to join climate & nature conservations

800+ youth explore challenges and solutions through experiential Climate Series

10 new Ambassadors for Nature kickstart their journey at COP28



## 2024 A NEW CHAPTER

World Environmental Education Congress attendees join field activities across Abu Dhabi

Strategic planning is underway to chart the next 5 Years of the movement

Nature's Resilience series launches over the summer with 50% increase in participation



# THE ROAD AHEAD



**Arabella Willing**  
Head of Conservation Outreach  
and Citizen Science,  
Emirates Nature-WWF

I'm incredibly proud of the impact Connect with Nature has achieved in only five years. We have seen a noticeable cultural shift in young people in the UAE. It's now considered cool to spend weekends hiking, camping or visiting the mangroves, when not long ago there was a common misconception that you had to travel overseas to visit nature.



**We've seen youth really step up and lead the movement amongst their peers. They've shown incredible leadership in creating an optimistic future for our planet.** Many have been inspired by Connect with Nature to dive into education and science, prioritizing nature in their careers. Some have ventured into public policy, while others have found their place closer to nature, organizing community hikes and clean-up drives.

What started as an effort to introduce the community to local wildlife and wild spaces at our doorstep, has evolved into a movement of taking action. The places and creatures they've come to love are at risk, and **it's time to strengthen and scale up the programme for greater conservation impact, and for more individuals of all ages.**

This means reaching younger audiences, school children, and adults keen to spend more time in nature and make a meaningful difference.

We are excited about this next chapter of the programme, which harnesses our community's enthusiasm through citizen science and targets conservation impact, in line with the evolving needs of our environment and our community.

Moving forward, **Connect with Nature will continue to serve as a crucial stepping stone for passionate game changers,** helping develop their skills, knowledge and hands-on experience. Working alongside scientists and conservation professionals, we'll keep inspiring the UAE to create a greener future.



## ABOUT CONNECT WITH NATURE

Connect with Nature was developed through a founding partnership between Emirates Nature-WWF and the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD). The programme aims to reconnect youth with nature through experiences and activities, equip them with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions, and to become leaders of the community in creating a sustainable future.

For more information, visit [www.connectwithnature.ae](http://www.connectwithnature.ae)

## ABOUT ENVIRONMENT AGENCY – ABU DHABI (EAD)

The Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) was established in 1996 to preserve Abu Dhabi's natural heritage, protect our future, and raise awareness about environmental issues. EAD is Abu Dhabi's environmental regulator and advises the government on environmental policy. It works to create sustainable communities and protect and conserve wildlife and natural resources. EAD also works to ensure integrated and sustainable water resources management, to ensure clean air and minimise climate change and its impacts.

## ABOUT EMIRATES NATURE-WWF

Emirates Nature-WWF is an environmental NGO charity established to conserve the United Arab Emirates' natural heritage and build a future where people and nature thrive. The organization was founded in 2001 by our Honorary Founder and President, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Ruler's Representative in the Al Dhafra Region and Chairman of the Governing Board of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, as a legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed's vision for the United Arab Emirates.

For two decades, Emirates Nature-WWF has been a prominent and active partner in environmental conservation in the MENA region. We work in association with WWF, one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations.

