

NOVEMBER 8, 2023

School Students' Statement on the Right to a Healthy Environment



We, high school students gathered on Awabakal and Worimi lands in Newcastle, Australia in November 2023 make this Statement about the human right to a healthy environment. We acknowledge the ongoing custodianship, connection and care of lands, air and waters by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and believe that these knowledges and practices are central to environmental health and protection.

We direct this Statement to the Australian nation and to politicians, government, and other public institutions with responsibility to care for the environment. We also share this Statement with the United Nations and people around the world. We hope other young people will connect with our voices.

The right to a healthy environment includes several aspects – a safe climate, clean air, healthy systems and biodiversity, safe and sufficient water, healthy and sustainable food, and a non-toxic environment.





To best protect and promote full realisation of the right to a healthy environment for young people, we need:

- Equitable access to true and reliable information about the challenges facing the environment, to build a shared understanding of those challenges across society;
- Quality education about a healthy environment, to prepare young people as advocates;
- Public investments in youth, including environmentalists and activists;
- Equitable access to places and spaces where young people can connect to the natural world;
- Acknowledgment from governments and parliaments that the right to a healthy environment must be protected;
- Young people call on political leaders to realise how deeply significant the right to a healthy environment is for young people living today and for future generations;
- Young people will hold political leaders accountable for climate goals;
- To challenge the mindset that Australia is a country that runs on fossil fuels;
- To embrace and foster youth climate action, not to stifle it;
- Peaceful, inclusive activism, including disruptive action when required; and
- Cooperative approaches across all parts of society, with the shared goal of promoting a healthy environment.



Practical measures are necessary to foster the right to a healthy environment, including:

- Provision of healthy public facilities, noting the importance of clean water and sanitation;
- Urban re-wilding – bringing the natural world into our urban spaces to improve mental and physical health and connection to the natural world;
- Public transport that is sustainable and provides equitable opportunities for people to connect with Nature;
- Transition away from fossil fuels and to clean energy production;
- Economic aid and retraining opportunities for communities and industries that rely on fossil fuels;
- Sustainable agricultural practices; and
- Enforceable protection for Nature against over-exploitation.



The introduction of General Comment No. 26 by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child holds governments and climate polluters around the world accountable for compromising young persons' rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. It calls on member states to act on the climate emergency to ensure that the right to a healthy environment is protected. General Comment No. 26 is a product of protest and advocacy from children around the world and highlights the right to participation and the need to include young people in discussions around the climate crisis.

Despite the importance of the right to a healthy environment, many obstacles are preventing young people from fully realising that right. Compromises made in government policy and corporate strategy in the face of the climate crisis are compromising young people's future. Climate change is not just another social issue. We cannot tolerate climate denialism now that the evidence is so clear.

Young people remain marginalised from public life and decision-making, including in relation to environmental issues of fundamental importance. We have too few opportunities to be included in parliamentary processes or have direct voices to power. Young people are not adequately consulted at local, regional, national or global levels.

Young people today do not accept that we should be seen and not heard. Yet we perceive a prevalent view that young people are politically and socially ignorant compared to older people. Too often we see experience being equated to knowledge. Given all that has happened to our climate in our short lifetimes, we reject the view that we are too young to understand the nature of the crisis facing humanity. We do not want to be held back by a characterisation of young people as the 'leaders of tomorrow' – we are watching in real time as established systems fail to meet environmental challenges, and we should be seen as 'leaders for today'. To maintain hope in the face of catastrophic risks to our environment, we need to know that we can raise our voices and be taken seriously. Young people have so much at stake.



We call on influential people and institutions to drive change and address obstacles that limit our enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment. These obstacles include:

- Failure of governments to meet minimum targets essential to prevent climate catastrophe;
- Short-term decision-making rather than cohesive and comprehensive strategic decision-making;
- Biased and false media coverage of environmental issues;
- The influence of vested interests on information flows, public debate and decision-making;
- Incompatibility between profit-motivated corporate decision-making and the needs of the environment;
- Continued preferencing of economic motives over the needs of a healthy environment;
- Stifling responses to environmental activism, including harsh penalties for disruptive protests that draw attention to the climate crisis; and
- Planning and development that fails to prioritise the right to a healthy environment.



In order to overcome the obstacles we have identified, we call on governments to prioritise consultation and engagement with young people in relation to the right to a healthy environment. This will require:

- Strategies to build diverse youth representation to parliaments and other public institutions, creating direct pathways for young people to make their voices heard and have real influence on decision-making;
- Lowering the voting age to provide increased opportunity for young people to exercise their right to political participation in the interests of the environment; and
- Commitment by governments to genuinely engage with, and act on, the advice of young people.

Governments should also incentivise change rather than protecting the status quo. By this we mean:

- Communities should be financially supported to shift to clean energy, public transport and collaborative solutions to environmental challenges;
- All tools at the disposal of government – including subsidies, tariffs and taxes – should be applied to facilitate the shift away from fossil fuel-dependent industries and promote sustainable agricultural and development practices;
- Governments should decline political donations and arrangements with private interests that undermine our right to a healthy environment; and
- Governments should hold industries and corporations accountable for causing environmental harm, for example the destruction of Aboriginal sacred sites.



Governments must also be accountable to their commitments and obligations as dictated by science and international law. As young people, we argue that governments must:

- Establish transparent, step-by-step plans outlining their planned responses to the climate crisis;
- Make ineligible for re-election or re-appointment public officials who fail in their duties to deliver promised commitments;
- Enable community members to act on behalf of the environment through effective complaints mechanisms in response to environmental harms; and
- Invest adequately in services essential to preventing and addressing disasters.





Public institutions, particularly educational institutions, have important roles to play in protecting and promoting our right to a healthy environment.

Schools need to implement an updated curriculum that gives people the knowledge they need to protect the environment. Young people need to understand what a healthy environment is, and how they can promote it. The curriculum should build confidence among young people about speaking out in defence of the environment, as some students have been made to feel outcast for voicing their environmental concerns.

An updated curriculum should incorporate Indigenous knowledge including cultural, agricultural, and ceremonial practices as a key source of learning in relation to the environment. Young people should learn more about how Indigenous peoples have cared for Country over time and today, and how these practices promote connection and care for Country. This should include immersive opportunities for students to connect to the natural world through 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness' – a concept expressed by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr of the Ngangiwumirr language group by the word *dadirri*. These efforts can be practically supported by facilitating more learning in outdoor classrooms and green spaces. This would stimulate and support better mental health outcomes and enable students to connect with how they want Nature to influence education.

The implementation of an updated curriculum should also build student skills in creative thinking processes alongside their development of critical thinking skills. This would support a shift from problem identification to problem solving.



**Everyone in our community has capacity to promote a healthy environment.
We should all collaborate to:**

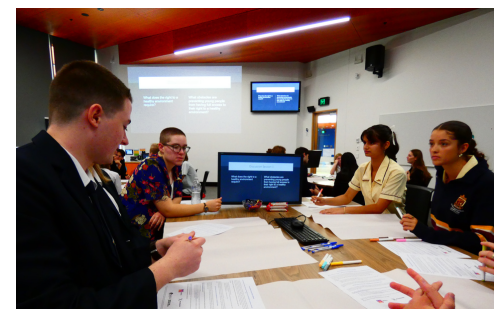
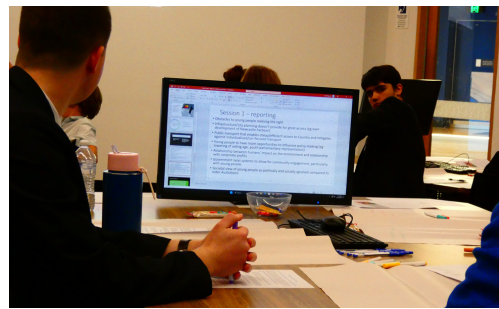
- Ensure a shared understanding of the real impacts and risks of climate change for our planet and all its inhabitants;
- Use our votes and other means of political participation to make informed choices that benefit the environment;
- Aim for a standard of idealism about the natural world and how we should honour, respect and care for it;
- Support existing and future community-led initiatives that care for the environment, like Clean Up Australia Day;
- Encourage all efforts to connect to Nature, from street gardens and community farms to sustainable agriculture; and
- Challenge unsustainable consumption and shift away from being a 'throwaway' society.



We invite young people to join our call to protect the right to a healthy environment by sharing this Statement.

This Statement was drafted and adopted at a gathering of 55 students from 12 diverse high schools in the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales, on 8 November 2023. It reflects the views expressed by the students in their Youth Forum on the Right to a Healthy Environment. The Forum was hosted by the Centre for Law and Social Justice at the University of Newcastle, Australia, in association with the Human Rights for New South Wales Alliance and Australian Lawyers for Human Rights.







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