

**Environmental  
Leadership  
Australia**

# **Young People & the Environment**

**Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation**  
Strategic Review 2021- 2024

# Executive Summary

From regenerating soils and protecting biodiversity to powering their schools with renewable energy, young people are leading the way on environmental solutions in NSW. Faced with an unprecedented ecological crisis, they are bringing their ideas, passion and energy to the challenges - collaborating with their peers and making connections across the state.

There are a range of high-impact organisations that exist to support young people tackle environmental challenges. They provide opportunities for young people to take action, rather than sinking into despair about their future, to build connections in their communities and learn important skills.

But the funding landscape for the environment, and particularly for young people and the environment is limited. Only 0.5% of philanthropic funding and 2.5% of PAF funding is directed to the environment in Australia. Similarly, few government grant programs exist for environmental projects, let alone those led by young people.

VFFF has an opportunity for a real and lasting impact on young people's lives through supporting them to participate in, and lead, environmental projects. There are many funding options, from school sustainability programs to supporting young farmers practice sustainable agriculture. VFFF's funding impact will be particularly strong if focused on organisations that:

- 1.** Support young people to create and implement their OWN solutions, relevant to their local communities and/or educational institutions.
- 2.** Prioritise young people by ensuring that their experience doing environmental volunteering makes a genuine impact, builds their network and helps them learn and develop new skills.

# Context and methodology

The process for this report involved three stages:

## 1. Literature review

Researcher Sophie Kerrigan conducted a literature review of all available academic and social research on young people's attitudes to climate in the last three years, with direction and support from Dr Rebecca Huntley. The full list of articles is listed in the Appendix.

## 2. Interviews with young environmental leaders

Rebecca Huntley, Sophie Kerrigan and Stefany Goldring conducted ten in-depth interviews in February and March 2021. Interviewees were young leaders aged between 19 and 33 who had engaged in environmental projects for between 4 months and 20 years. Eight participants (80%) were from rural and regional areas. Two participants were from Metropolitan Sydney and currently living there. All participants were currently studying at university or had graduated from university. Two participants identified as from culturally diverse backgrounds. Two participants identified as Aboriginal.

## 3. Sector consultation

Through February and March, Anna Rose spoke with 12 environmental organisations led by or working with young people to learn their views on the biggest gaps that philanthropy could fill, with a focus on young people in NSW. Anna also consulted with the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network, Australia's network of donors giving to the environment.

# Current state of play for young people, the environment & environmental giving

**“Right now, we’re facing a manmade disaster of global scale – our greatest threat in thousands of years. If we don’t take action, the collapse of our civilizations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon. But the longer we leave it, the more difficult it’ll be to do something about it” – Sir David Attenborough, A Life on Our Planet**

**The scientific evidence is now clear. Reports from the Australian Academy of Science, CSIRO, and Australia’s top scientists agree: the environment that young Australian lives depend on is under serious threat. We must act now to protect our soils, water, climate and biodiversity.**

- Australia has warmed 1.4C since pre-industrial times – already worsening extreme weather. The Australian Academy of Science warns that in a world warmed by three degrees, extreme bushfires and flooding would happen more commonly, and there would be serious disruptions to food security, economic growth, lives and livelihoods.
- By 2040, heatwaves in Sydney and Melbourne could reach highs of 50°C
- More flash flooding: through a 10% increase in the intensity of short duration (hourly) extreme rainfall events.
- Lower rainfall: April – October rainfall reduced by 10-20 percent in Southern Australian over a few decades.
- The worst recorded bushfires last summer: burning 5.4 million ha (6.82% of NSW).
- We are losing so many species that scientists say we are in the ‘sixth mass extinction’. Australia has the highest rate of mammal loss for any region in the world and right now over 1000 species of plants and animals in NSW face extinction.
- Plastic polluting waterways is ingested by fish and contaminates our food chain.

Author Paul Hawken said in a speech to a young audience:

*“You are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating. Kind of a mind-boggling situation... but not one peer-reviewed paper published in the last thirty years can refute that statement. Basically, civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.”*

## Young people are embracing this enormous responsibility with determination, enthusiasm and creativity.

Our interviews demonstrate the breadth and depth of young leaders’ environmental action – from community gardens to regenerative agriculture to tackling plastic waste, switching schools to solar energy, spreading awareness amongst their peers, leading the transition to a clean energy economy through unusual alliances, and building resilience in their communities to increasing extreme weather events such as more frequent flooding, bushfires and drought.

Young leaders’ work is supported by a range of environmental charities. Research from the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network shows that donations to environmental charities represented just 0.05% of all charity revenue in the last ACNC reporting period, and 2.5% of charitable giving from

Private Ancillary Funds. Most of the funding received by environmental charities came from two sources: government grants (34.3% of all revenue) and donations and bequests (29.8% revenue). Environmental charities are much more reliant on donations and bequests for revenue than most charities due to having lower revenue from government grants and fee-for-service arrangements. There are fewer than 1000 environmental charities in Australia – 959 in 2018, the ACNC’s last reporting period. Resources are not distributed equally across environmental charities; the largest 28 environmental charities receive more revenue than the remaining 931 combined. The largest environmental charities are very small by the standard of other large charities operating in areas including the Arts and medical research. Most environmental charities are very small and are entirely run by volunteers. A total of 840,811 Australians volunteered with environmental charities in 2018, although there is no age breakdown in the data to indicate what percentage are aged 12-25.

Most donations are given to a few organisations. There are around 600 environmental organisations on the Register of Environmental Organisations (REO) and together they received around \$182 million in donations in 2018/19. In 2018, 24 organisations on the REO received over \$2 million in donations each. Together they accounted for 76 per cent of all donations. In comparison, 481 organisations (86 per cent) received less than \$200,000 in donations in the same year. The same pattern of concentration is mirrored in the ACNC data referred to above, where three organisations, (WWF Australia, Bush Heritage Australia and Greenpeace Australia Pacific) receive 25 per cent of all donations revenue. Only one organisation in the list of the 20 biggest environmental charities by revenue 2014- 2018 has a focus on young people and that is the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (Appendix One).

The policy context for young people’s participation and leadership in environmental projects is mixed. At a local level, some councils are supportive and provide small grants, although their resources are limited. At a state level in NSW, there is bipartisan support for stronger action on many environmental issues including transitioning to renewable energy and reducing plastic waste. The current Environment and Energy Minister is personally passionate about the portfolio, spearheading new policies and funding commitments. However, NSW Government funding for young people to participate in environmental work remains limited, with only a small grants scheme administered by the NSW Environmental Trust and no specific focus on young people. Federally, the young leaders interviewed pointed to a lack of leadership on environmental issues, and the perception that the federal Government was unwilling to prioritise the environment and its implications for young people’s futures.

# Young peoples’ views

## 1. Literature review

The literature published from 2017 - 2021 on youth attitudes to climate and environment reveals four core themes for young people across studies:

- 1. Awareness.** They are aware of the threats of climate change and environmental systems collapse from a very young age and are able to identify environmental concerns. From primary school on, children have a complex and well developed understanding of environmental issues, their causes and effects.
- 2. Concern.** All studies showed overwhelming evidence that young people are concerned and anxious about climate change and environmental systems collapse including extreme weather, pollution and species extinction. By the time young people are finished school they associate

environmental issues with fear for the future. Many of these publications linked the high levels of concern with mental health issues e.g. anxiety and depression. This is linked to research published in health literature such as The Lancet.

3. **Education.** Their environmental concerns and motivations to act often stem from feeling connected to the physical environment and landscape as opposed to the technical, science-based environmental education they receive at school. This is even more common for rural and regional young people who possess a stronger connection to nature and the land.
4. **Action.** They do not believe that there is enough being done to combat environmental systems collapse, primarily by government but also by business and the broader community. They believe they can be part of the solutions to these issues but are often discouraged from acting because they do not feel they have power to make change compared to older generations. If given the tools, resources and encouragement, young people see themselves as able to affect action.

## 2. Interviews with young environmental change makers

We interviewed ten young change-makers in the environmental field (see bios in the appendix) about their experiences, challenges, and needs. Common themes included:

### **A need for greater support and opportunities to engage in environmental work in high school.**

Half of the participants got involved in the environmental movement in high school. Their engagement was generally linked to teachers encouraging them and finding them further opportunities to pursue this passion.

**A call for support for First Nations Justice.** There was a strong emphasis on the link between environmental and social justice in achieving environmental solutions. Most participants explicitly mentioned the important role of First Nations people and believed that environmental solutions should involve a strong role for First Nations peoples. One non-Indigenous participant said: *“You can’t just fight for climate without acknowledging that First Nations peoples have... a lifestyle that is intertwined with keeping the earth healthy.”*

**A need for more support for Community-Based and Collective Action.** All of the participants had engaged in environmentalism through community organisations that promoted a collective, rather than individual action, model. They strongly felt that by doing things together with other young people (especially in their local area) they would have a greater impact, learn more skills, and be more motivated to act. They also spoke about the importance of strengthening local community networks in the face of increasing extreme weather events. One participant from Lismore, who worked on the flood recovery efforts said: *“I think localisation is the solution we need to the problems we’re facing now and creating really enriched resourced place-based networks, community-driven activities, building resilience wherever you are”.*

**A need for more training and mentorship programs for young people, especially in rural and regional communities.** For these young people, the skills they were building through environmental projects such as putting solar on schools, helping their communities recover from extreme weather events, or revegetating landscapes and adopting sustainable agricultural methods were just as much about leadership as they were about the technical skills.

Almost all participants mentioned that, during their early engagement, their organisations invested staff time in building their confidence and giving them structured training and mentoring opportunities. Participants wanted to see these opportunities offered to more people. One participant said: *“There are leadership programs out there but there needs to be more that are rural-focused.”* Another said: *“They made me take up any opportunity that came my way - they’ve offered me internships to develop my leadership skills, opportunities to speak about my experiences and feel like I’m being heard.”*

**Frustration around chronic underfunding of the environmental sector.** A common frustration among all interviewees was the lack of core funding for the organisations where they worked or volunteered. This prevented these organisations from financially supporting the young people who committed countless volunteer hours and barred them from pursuing or expanding their passion projects. All mentioned the difficulty of supporting themselves financially while wanting to pursue their environmental work. One participant said: *“I had so many ideas but the financial pressure of moving out and trying to live completely toppled that”.*

Young environmental leaders believe philanthropic foundations are disconnected from the reality of the scientific warnings around collapse of environmental systems, the climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction. Many we interviewed were aware of the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network

research showing only 0.5% of charitable giving and 2.5% of PAF giving goes to environmental causes. They knew from firsthand experience that only a tiny percentage of this number goes to youth-run projects or organisations working on environmental challenges. Government funding is similarly scarce, other than a few small council grants.

While young people view the environmental climate crisis with urgency, government and the philanthropic sector have been slow to respond. This disconnect creates a strong view of intergenerational injustice: that older generations fail to take responsibility for the environmental damage they created and have the power to stop. They believe that by not factoring in environmental issues and their consequences for the economy and society, philanthropy is ignoring the trajectories that young people will experience in their lives.

## Role of philanthropy

Many large international foundations with no history of funding in climate or environment have started to direct funds into this area, recognising that the other areas that they fund in are inherently tied to, and depend on, environmental wellbeing.

Larry Kramer, President of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation says: *“What should grantmakers do when the social and political and environmental circumstances that have made our work and progress possible begin falling apart? Because, make no mistake, that is what’s happening now as a result of climate change...Any grantmaker who just chugs along on the same issues without addressing climate is, truly, fiddling while the world burns – particularly given the certainty that whatever short-term progress is made through these efforts will be lost if climate change continues unchecked.”*<sup>1</sup>

Many other international youth-focused funders agree with this. The UK’s Blagrave Trust Director Jo Wells writes: *“As a funder that is exclusively concerned with the next generation, we feel this is not an issue we can ignore. It is particularly notable that children and young people are showing some of the boldest and most visible leadership for change.”*

The overwhelming interview feedback was that the most progress on environmental issues comes from grassroots community efforts – either by taking matters into their own hands to protect the environment or by banding together to advocate for pro-environmental outcomes and that this was where VFFF should focus.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Kramer, *Philanthropy must Stop Fiddling while the World Burns*, Jan 15, 2020 *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, [link here](#).



Young people are passionate about environmental issues, but need strategic, well-resourced organisations to give them opportunities to translate their concern into action, and build their capacity to create change.

Core funding for organisations with a proven track record, especially those that are youth-led or have young people represented in a significant way in their decision-making, builds the capacity of young people to make a difference on environmental challenges. We suggest two important criteria for VFFF to look at when evaluating which organisations to support in NSW:

1. Organisations that support young people to create and implement their OWN solutions, relevant to their local communities and/or educational institutions.
2. Organisations that prioritise young people by ensuring that their experience doing environmental volunteering (a) makes a genuine impact (b) builds their network and (c) helps them learn and develop new skills.

We recommend funding programs designed specifically for young people, not involving young people in broader programs designed for adults. Young people have unique needs, strengths and ways of working that are not easily absorbed into broader environmental programs. General environment groups are not attractive for young people. Groups need to be set up specifically for young people.

**We have identified four priority areas that would fit with VFFF's approach:**

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## 1. Priority Area: School sustainability programs

***"I think getting more professionals; people actually coming to schools and helping students because it's great when teachers help students in classes, and they do a great job like Miss Lopez did, but when you get professionals or people outside the school coming and helping out it just feels like there's more of a - it makes it more special."*** - James, age 24, Sydney

The literature review and interviews reveal that most young people's first experience with learning about environmental challenges comes in high school. Providing avenues to take action on environmental issues soon or immediately after learning about environmental degradation and climate change is critical. Failure to do so can often lead to feelings of anxiety and helplessness. A synthesis of research published in The Lancet last month concludes that climate and ecological breakdown poses a significant threat to young peoples' mental health, saying:

*"International surveys suggest that young people are more concerned than adults about climate change... Particularly potent is a feeling of existential dread linked with an overwhelming sense of responsibility to deal with something so huge it becomes paralysing. Studies also suggest that uncontrollability, unpredictability, and uncertainty are important factors. Focusing on immediate demands, like those of school, can seem impossible or insignificant to young people whose future feels so threatened."*<sup>2</sup>

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2 The Lancet, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(21\)00001-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(21)00001-8/fulltext)

Many school students are combating this anxiety by exercising leadership on a range of environmental issues, supported by curriculum-aligned programs. VFFF support could help organisations doing excellent work with high school students to scale up.

## 2. Priority Area: Sustainable agriculture / land management

***“Australian agriculture and food security are exposed to increasing risk from droughts, extreme high temperatures, coastal inundation, floods, invasive species and fires. We recommend that Australia prepares for potential interruptions to its food import and export systems driven by global environmental, social and economic changes.”*** – Australian Academy of Science, April 2021

Environmental crises and worsening extreme weather affect farmers’ ability to manage their land. At the same time, land management must be a key contributor to environmental solutions as farmers manage 50% of Australia’s land. Given VFFF’s focus on rural and regional young people, and the family’s existing strong links to agriculture, this could be a strong priority for the foundation.

There is a clear need to work with young farmers to help them manage their land with better environmental outcomes. Research from Professor David Lindenmayer and his team at ANU (partially funded by VFFF) shows this also improves long-term profitability and mental health outcomes.

University of Melbourne research shows the value to farmers of adopting farming techniques that preserve soil carbon. Australian soils are typically poorly structured, low fertility, and low in carbon and organic matter. Land clearing and ill-suited management practices compound natural salinity, acidity, sodicity, and compaction and so undermine productivity and sustainability. Regenerating soil carbon and organic matter builds resilience, lessens compaction, boosts beneficial microbes, releases some mineral nutrients, reduces the risk of accumulated toxins, improves water-holding capacity, reduces the risk of waterlogging, and lifts productivity. Further research shows that the money saved in productivity benefits alone make some regenerative agricultural practices financially worthwhile: small improvements in soil carbon can yield substantial savings through more resilient production.

Our interviews and conversations in the sector show that there is a strong demand from young people in agriculture for more education and support in learning about and implementing more sustainable practices on-farm. This is particularly important from an environmental perspective because of the ageing population of Australia’s farmers – with an average age of 56, that’s 17 years older than the average Australian worker.

The recent Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network strategy paper identifies sustainable and regenerative agriculture as an under-funded gap in environmental philanthropy.

## 3. Priority Area: Aboriginal young people in NSW

***“The land’s in trouble... so we need to start listening to the First Nations voices again.”*** – Maddy, age 24, Lismore

Many of the young environmental leaders interviewed reflected on the importance of First Nations people being at the front and centre of solving environmental challenges.

## 4. Priority Area: Young People in the Hunter Valley

***“There’s a lot of people rusted on - like ‘coal mining’s the best!’ But there’s a lot of people starting to realise, especially after the bushfires last summer - that was a turning point. There’s a lot of people like me, uncertain about the future... they’re uncertain what they’ll do for work, they’ve never worked in anything else... As young people move into work and that work starts to move away from traditional industries you need to educate them to pick up the gap and move into new jobs.”***

- Nathan, age 25, Singleton.

As Australia’s energy system moves from coal and gas to renewable energy, coal mining communities risk being left behind in the transition. In NSW, the Hunter Valley is a critical area to focus on for “just transitions” programs. These programs must ensure communities are prepared for the coming job market changes and that governments give communities the support they need for retraining and to stimulate economic diversification.

# Conclusion

Young people in NSW are urgently calling on adults to do everything in their power to prevent ecosystem collapse and protect the environment. They are anxious not just about the future of the planet, but about adults' inability to respond to the urgency of the situation.

Young people have compared the Government's decisive response to the COVID crisis to the lack of Government action to address the slower-moving but even more serious ecological crisis that will define their future. Young people feel that despite previous generations of adults making sacrifices to protect their children, today's older generation are not listening to their calls to urgently act to protect the environment.

VFFF has an opportunity to take a bold step into environmental funding. Whilst it is a new area for the foundation, now is the time to act. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report in 2018 concluding we have only a decade left before Earth's systems hit irreversible tipping points. This means that the opportunity for VFFF to fund young people to take action to prevent environmental collapse will not be around forever. Scientists stress that in line with the precautionary principle, the actions we take this year (including dollars we spend) matter much more than the actions taken the year after, and the year after that.

Including an environmental funding stream in your grantmaking reassures young people that they are taking their concerns, and their future, seriously. It will show leadership that will have a ripple effect throughout the whole philanthropic sector. And most importantly, it will encourage and support the amazing young people throughout rural and regional NSW who are already taking matters into their own hands and building a safer, more sustainable future, to scale their impact, implement their own solutions and inspire tens of thousands of their peers to get involved.

# Appendix one

The AEGN calculated the largest 20 charities based on total donations and bequests **from 2014 – 2018**, the most recent reporting period from the ACNC). Only one of them (Australian Youth Climate Coalition) has a focus on youth.

**Table 4: Top 20 environmental organisations by donations and bequests received**

Charity name	Amount received 2014-2018
World Wide Fund For Nature Australia	\$129,114,102
Greenpeace Australia Pacific Limited	\$94,585,589
Bush Heritage Australia	\$88,621,000
Australian Wildlife Conservancy	\$66,778,273
The Wilderness Society	\$58,864,210
Australian Conservation Foundation Incorporated	\$58,618,597
The Sunrise Project Australia Limited	\$32,599,011
The Trustee For The Nature Conservancy Australia Trust	\$20,741,848
BirdLife Australia	\$14,202,104
Australian Marine Conservation Society Inc	\$13,721,125
Climate Council of Australia Limited	\$13,363,551
Humane Society International Inc	\$12,334,451
Tasmanian Land Conservancy Inc.	\$11,372,172
The Trustee For The Marine Stewardship Council Trust	\$10,449,879
Great Barrier Reef Foundation	\$8,701,525
Australian Youth Climate Coalition Limited	\$8,206,275
Environment Victoria Inc	\$8,194,072
Wetlands & Wildlife <sup>11</sup>	\$6,357,031
Warddeken Land Management Limited	\$6,211,758
Sea Shepherd Australia Limited	\$5,973,942

# Young people interviewed

## Briana, 24, Jervis Bay.

Environmental Volunteer at University of Wollongong student organisation, now works with One Million Women.

## Harine, 18, Blacktown, Western Sydney.

Young leader in Tamil community, volunteer with Voices for Power, Sydney Alliance.

## James, 19, Sydney.

Instigated solar panels on his public high school in Sydney's East with support of Solar My School. Now at Uni.

## Maddy, 25, Lismore.

Volunteer with Intrepid Landcare, expert in community resilience building after Lismore floods.

**Ruby, 23, Moonee Beach.** Ruby is from rural NSW, got involved in OzGreen in Year 7 and is now a board Director and facilitator.

## Sophie, 24, Lower Belford, Hunter Valley.

Young First Nations leader and regenerative farmer, volunteer with Young Farmers Connect.

## Will, 19, Hawkesbury region.

As a proud Gundungurra man, Will got active on climate in high school, now at Uni and works with Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network.

## Anika, 33, Broken Hill.

Young farmer and sustainable agriculture expert.

## Jo, 24, Maitland & Rutherford, Hunter Valley.

Coordinator of the Hunter Community Environment Centre.

## Nathan, 25, Singleton, Hunter Valley.

Works in coal industry, volunteers with Hunter Renewal.