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### Life Events which Motivate Youth to become Climate Activists in Sydney and Canberra

Phoebe Dolan  
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# **Life Events which Motivate Youth to become Climate Activists in Sydney and Canberra**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Australia: Sustainability and Environmental Action, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2019

## *Abstract*

Climate activism is the tool of young people to rise and fight for their future and the future of the planet. Today it is necessary that young people engage as climate activists. My research asks what life events motivate youth to become climate activists. I looked into the initial life events which spark the motivation of young people to understand their initial motives for joining the climate movement. I looked into where the motivation came from, a concern for nature, a concern for social justice or the interconnectedness of the two. I also looked into the life events of individuals to see what sparked the initial motivation. My research creates an understanding of the motivations of youth climate activists so the movement will grow and strengthen through understanding the commonalities found between activists and activist groups.

I interviewed twelve university students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five years old in Sydney and Canberra coming from four universities. I asked each participant to share the events in their lives which motivated them to become climate activists. From these interviews, the trend for concern for the environment as an initial motivator to join the climate movement appeared from the data. The trend went from concern for the environment to concern for social justice as the participants grew.

Four themes emerged as youth climate activists answered the question on life events which motivate action. The four themes, nature connection through outdoor experiences, family influence and mentorship, seeing injustice in the community and world, and peer-to-peer learning, became clear categories of the life events that sparked motivation for the young people. The final theme of initial motivation, peer-to-peer learning appear most frequently. Young activists coming together to create change for a better future empowered the participants to feel useful and join the climate movement. This study of the life events works to understand the ways youth climate activists are similar, to engage future generations to join in the movement through discovering the initial motivations and inspiration of youth climate activists.

Keywords: Youth, Australian Climate Movement, Climate Justice, Motivation, Youth Activists

Title Page.....	i
Ethics Review Statement.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
1. Introduction	
1.1 Study Question.....	1
1.2 Sustainability of Research.....	2
1.3 Overview of Relevant Background Resources.....	3
1.3.1 Climate Change and degradation.....	3
1.3.2 The Corporate Drivers of Anthropogenic Climate Change.....	3
1.3.3 Youth Activism and Protest.....	4
1.3.4 Motivation.....	6
2. Methods	
2.1 Interviews.....	8
2.1.1 Finding participants.....	8
2.1.2 Participant demographics.....	9
2.1.3 Conducting interviews.....	11
2.1.4 Analyzing interviews.....	11
2.2 Preliminary Survey.....	12
2.2.1 School Strike for Climate Action survey.....	12
2.3 Challenges and Short Comings.....	13
3. Results and Discussion	
3.1 Introduction to Results and Discussion.....	15
3.2 Avenues of concern.....	15
3.3 Themes of motivation.....	17
3.3.1 Nature concern through sense of place.....	18
3.3.2 Family influence and mentorship.....	19
3.3.3 Seeing injustice.....	21
3.3.4 Peer to peer motivation.....	22
4. Conclusion	
4.1 Youth climate activist and collective power.....	23
4.2 Future of Research.....	24
5. Reference list.....	26
6. Appendices	
6.1 Appendix i- The Resource List.....	29
6.2 Appendix ii- Interview Schedule.....	30
6.3 Appendix iii- Survey data.....	31
6.4 Appendix iv- Survey Template from 15 <sup>th</sup> March.....	32
<u>Charts and Tables</u>	
Table 1- <i>Participants in my Research interview</i> .....	10
Chart 1- <i>Initial motivations of From Avenues of Concern</i> .....	16
Chart 2- <i>Themes of Initial Motivation from Life Events</i> .....	18

## *Acknowledgements*

- Thank you Nick from ANU for connecting me with many climate activists and being persistent on your Facebook group to make sure I was heard. I would not have had as many fantastic interviews if it wasn't for you.
- Thank you Toby Thompson for connecting me with ASEN and University of Sydney climate activists and answering my requests for help and helping me spread the word about my project.
- Thank you Alev for helping me get the word out about my project to the people of University of Sydney, I appreciate your help and I am glad that we met and I got to see the wonderful Fossil Free USyd people and talk with you all.
- Thank you UNSW Fossil Free for having me at one of your meetings and sharing space for me to talk about my project, I really appreciate that.
- Thank you to MC, Toby, Bella, Austin, Alison, Tallulah, Alex, Jelena, Dana, Bella, Andy, and Hannah for taking time to be interviewed! You are all the reason that I have any ISP data to work from and I appreciate the effort you all gave your responses that made them rich and interesting to analyze. I wish you all the best of luck down the line.
- Thank you to Haiden Lancaster and Lindsay St. Pierre for reading my draft and correcting my grammar, I appreciate you both taking your time to help me out.
- Thank you to all of the 14 people who answered by survey at the March 15<sup>th</sup> School Strike for Climate Action, I appreciate the perspective you gave me and the opportunity to hear a lot about Sydney activism before I even arrived for ISP.
- Thank you Briony for working to put me in contact with organizers at the school strike.
- Thank you to all of the people who I spoke with trying to create time for interviews who were unable to be interviewed in the end. I appreciate that you all were open and interested.
- And Last, and most importantly, thank you Ruth for listening to my ideas, giving me contacts, sending me interesting background sources, talking me through my own thoughts ideas and concerns and for being just an email away this whole ISP period. I appreciate all of the guidance you gave me in shaping my ideas into a research project!

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Study Question

The focus of my research looks into what life events shape youth climate activists. What mechanisms and motives propel young people to join the climate justice movement? When was the first spark of interest and call to action for youth activists, who or what facilitated it and where did it occur? I looked into motivators which spark a young person to become a climate activist through looking at life events to understand the early exposures and engagement in specific events, people or pastimes that led up to them becoming an activist. What are the commonalities between participants, what are the differences? Are these experiences, natural, family-created or peer made? Through recording life events, I looked for patterns to understand how other's experiences can encourage and cultivate climate justice motivation in more young peoples' lives.

In Scott Fisher's research paper *Life trajectories of youth committing to climate activism*, Fisher builds a model for looking at the motivations of youth climate activists (Fisher 2016). He states that young climate activists undergo transformative moments where they conscientiously commit to activism (Fisher 2016, pg.325). These moments are had through two avenues and/or a combination of both. Youth climate activists in Fisher's research cite either concern for the natural environment or concern for social justice and occasionally they were motivated by a concern for both, seeing the interdependence of the two (Fisher 2016, pg.234). These motivations became clear as the participants spoke about their pasts and what events had motivated them.

In her work, Louise Chawla discusses the concept of the Significant Life Event (SLE) (Chawla 1998, pg.13). Significant Life Events are the transformative moments, they are the memories and experiences which motivate an individual to behave a certain way. The SLE model was used to find data on motivations in many studies in the past and therefore I see it as an excellent model to build my analysis from.

In part, I modeled my research after Fisher's questions, looking for the types of concern which motivate young climate activists. Chawla's ideas of the importance of Significant Life Events informed my research and gave me a framework to build from. I am inquiring to find the experiential knowledge of youth climate activists. Helena Norberg-Hodge shared this idea in her lecture in Byron Bay, "Motivation is not about intelligence, motivation is about experiential knowledge (Norberg-Hodge, 2019)." This quote demonstrates the goal of my project.

## *1.2 Sustainability of Research*

Climate activism promotes sustainability through pushing for a more just, fair, and healthy planet and society. University of Alberta released a definition of sustainability in the early 2010's. It states that "Sustainability is not just environmentalism... in most definitions of sustainability we also find concerns for social equity" (University of Alberta Office of Sustainability, 2012, p. 1). Sustainability is more than ecological sustainability but societal sustainability as well, looking towards community engagement and resilience to increase environmental sustainability for all people and in all types of communities. The term climate justice, which is used consistently in the climate movement, is the intersection of social justice and action for ending climate change. This intersection is important to the definition of sustainability here because it incorporates community resilience alongside environmental sustainability.

For my research purposes, sustainability is defined as the conservation, regeneration and the resiliency of humans and the environment, for the present and future generations. By recognizing what is finite, both material and energy, my project will interact with the human finite resources, such as energy, capacity for change, and the power of the collective.

I looked into the motivations of individuals who work in building a regenerative culture for young people. Regenerative meaning the goal of climate activism is not to push out a result but cultivate abilities which serve communities well in the rest of the individuals lives. Environmental sustainability being the other side of the resilient coin, builds the type of sustainability climate activists fight for - planet and social sustainability.

My Independent research project is important because it is focusing on which tangible events motivate young people to take action in the climate movement. This is an invaluable perspective on how to bring more people into the climate movement through the various avenues which can spark engagement and motivation. My goal is to shed light on the initial sparks of inspiration and motivation of climate activists, through experiences (Norberg-Hodge, 2019) and by doing so, build a better understanding of how motivation can be fostered through all young people to join in the climate movement.

### *1.3 Overview of relevant background resources*

#### *1.3.1 Climate Change and Degradation*

According to NASA, climate change is the process of the temperature and weather on earth becoming warmer due to the Greenhouse Effect. When the atmosphere around the planet grows thicker due to emissions such as CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, and water vapor, the heat coming from the sun becomes trapped in the earth's atmosphere and cannot get out. This blanket effect makes the planet warmer and warmer and creates extreme, human-induced climate change (The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2019).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations committee, issued their most recent report on the climate crisis on 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2018 ([www.IPCC.ch](http://www.IPCC.ch)). This report stated the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the ways that the members of the UN are planning to keep the climate below 1.5 degrees Celsius increase since the industrial revolution. This number, 1.5 degrees Celsius comes from climate scientists and is the maximum temperature where the world will be safe to live for everyone. The goal is to keep the global temperature average well below this number (Connors and Pidcock, 2018, p. 5).

The report states that, following the current trajectory, the planet will reach a 1.5 degree Celsius increase in temperature by 2040. There are 11 years from today in which to end warming and reverse the adverse effects of warming and reduce the temperature increase before 2040 (Connors and Pidcock, 2018, p. 7). The earth is changing rapidly; young people today will have to reckon what is left of the planet in the next decades.

#### *1.3.2 The Corporate Drivers of Anthropogenic Climate Change:*

Humanmade climate change stems from many actions society takes, but mostly it coming from energy production and usage. Benjamin Franta, a scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School, unpacked the moment, throughout his article, when companies such as Exxon Mobil and Shell chose to pursue global climate change as an oil prospecting tactic and inform no one about it (Franta, 2018). In the 1980's, oil companies hid findings which indicated the arrival of climate change due to emissions from fossil fuels. These companies saw this as an opportunity to drill under what was then ice in the next 40 years (Franta, 2018). In 1982, Shell created a chart which predicted the potential increase of 2 degrees Celsius of the planet's climate by 2060. In 2015, that chart, which depicts the increase in global temperature, was discovered and published (Franta 2018, para. 4).



This deception of the truth led by the successful fossil fuel lobby worldwide gave these companies a competitive edge and forced the world to continue purchasing petroleum products and operating gasoline powered vehicles. Fraud, greed, and profit motive being the basis of climate change, demonstrate the fact that this world problem has been sustained by consumerism to increase the profits of the fossil fuel industry.

### *1.3.3. Youth Activism and Protest*

With all of the arising social and environmental issues that come with climate change, action on a community scale as well as a youth influence has begun to grow. Corning and Myers define an activist' orientation;

“[It] is defined as an individual's developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors spanning a range from low- risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors.” (Corning and Myers, 2002, p. 704).

Ben Kirshner writes about young people and activism in his article, *Youth Activism as a Context for Learning and Development* (Kirshner, 2007, p. 368). The rebellious nature of young adults, fosters the natural tendency for them to be driven to protest. Kirshner speaks about how learning through group activism leads to collective thought and how this collective perspective builds a “we can do it” attitude (Kirshner, 2007, p. 369).

Activism is a powerful tool for young people and Kirshner states how it channels the natural tendency for young people to want to fight back. Here, the ability to create political change and fight against the system comes from and builds on prior learning, through school systems and peers (Kirshner, 2007, p. 368).

Australian youth activism is not a new creation. In *Breaking the Boundaries*, a collection of activists' stories from Australia, two young people, Phoebe and Savannah Brice, pushed to have the Aboriginal flag hung in their public school (Allen and Noble, 2016, p. 22). This took persistence and pushing against the superintendent advocating for their rights as young aboriginal people to be recognized at their school.

In the past few decades in Australia, young people have been moved to take a stand against consumerist culture and capitalism. In 2007, Ferne Edwards and David Mercer published an article out of the University of Melbourne. Edwards and Mercer spoke about the way movements such as the Freegan and “Food not Bombs” became an outlet for young activists and anarchists alike in Australia (Edward & Mercer, 2007, p. 279). The Freegan

movement was a type of voluntary simplicity where groups of people would source their food from dumpsters and other types of food waste receptacles. Their goal being to stop the food waste cycle, not contribute to capitalism, save money, and live more sustainable lives (Edwards and Mercer, 2007, p. 281). Edwards and Mercer found that youth activists were drawn to this movement because it was an outlet for them to practice counterculture and “punk” behavior, as well as socialize and meet other people like them (Edwards & Mercer, 2007, p. 283). From there, the movement focused young people around the potential for them to create their own systems and push back against capitalism and build the type of society they wish to see (Fisher, 2018, p. 241).

Punks and rebels are an easy way to see youth who appear to be rebelling in 2019, but Melbourne native and author Clare Press demonstrates a different type of youth power that flies under the radar. In her 2018 book, *Rise and Resist*, Press speaks about the challenge of communication between generations of activists and change makers (Press, 2018, p. 120). The social media generation, the one that creates a social movement overnight through a Facebook event and moves millions in the United States to March for our Lives, is not confined to the limits of power that the government gives them. The older generation, the one that has harbored the current problems, as Press sees it, is inaccessible to the youth of today. In the aftermath of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018, a high school student and movement figurehead, Emma Golzález said, “We don’t want these people in charge of us anymore,” (Golzález in Press, 2018, p. 120).

The young generation today is misunderstood by the older generation currently in power because they lack social media and cultural knowledge. Press speaks about the stereotyping that occurs about Gen Z and Millennial generations. The stereotype that the younger generations are lazy and nursing a “constant praise and affirmation problem” are ridiculous (Press, 2018, p. 122). Press says, “It is not the bruised egos that disappoint this generation; it’s the fact that the last lot failed to clean up after themselves and the planet’s conking out (Press, 2018, p. 122).” Young people in Australia and around the world are looking for a way forward in a world which is led by people they cannot relate to. Press demonstrates a reason why young people are driven to activism as a way to make the change they are not seeing (Press, 2018, p. 120).

Power is changing with the shifting modes of communication and the virtual world. In 2018, economist Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms wrote *New Power*, a book outlining the two systems of power and how they are changing:

“**Old power** works like a currency, It is held by a few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, and the powerful have a substantial store of it to spend. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It downloads , and it captures.

**New Power** operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven, It uploads, and it distributes, Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.” (Heimans & Timms, 2018, p. 2).

New power is a manifestation of the misunderstanding between the older generation and the youth. The current that Heimans & Timms describe is that collective power that is channeled and not bought and sold. Youth movements have the power to do that and create that surge without buying and selling power “currency” (Heimans & Timms, 2018, p. 2). News travels fast and the young generation can harness the new power and engage with the peer driven nature of it to rise and become change makers in ways the old power could never let them.

#### *1.3.4 Motivation*

From this new power flows the motivation of the younger generation. All of this anger and passion for the ways which life on earth has been treated by corporations becomes motivation for action. Motivation is defined as “A reason or reasons for acting or behaving in a particular way” (Motivation, 2019). Using that definition, activists’ motivation comes from the need for action against injustice. Motivation requires both maintenance and retention, according to Elizabeth Cherry in *I was a vegan teenager*. She describes motivation being sustained by surrounding one’s self with the people and culture associated with that task or goal (Cherry, 2015, p. 56). Using her community of fellow vegans and more radical thinkers built a motivation structure so that she was able to stay vegan and be supported at the same time. With the rising challenges of today and the community motivation to combat them, it is no wonder that young people are rising up.

Young people rise and become activists from different types of motivation, but a theme of motivation can come from the older generation. On 11<sup>th</sup> April 2019, Lismore Regional Gallery published a podcast, as part of their Thursday Night Live! series, titled “Striking for Change: can youth activism shape the future?” (Rogers, 2019). The podcast consisted of a panel of young women who were activists involved with the School Strike for Climate Action Campaign, as well as other campaigns. Most of the panelists cited their parents and family culture as a motivating factor in their climate activism. Parents who were cultivating action in their children as well as supporting what their children thinks, is

important. This type of parental support created the space for the young panelists to realize their futures as climate activists (Rogers, 2019).

Aiden Ricketts, activist and author of *The Activist's Handbook*, speaks briefly about the Not in My Backyard or NIMBY effect. He states: "I sincerely believe that when people wake one day to find an issue on their doorstep that they cannot just ignore, there is an enormous potential for transformation," (Ricketts, 2012, p. 1). When an issue arrives in a person's life, there is serious potential they will take it up and work to find a solution. Aiden Ricketts is directly in line with Helena Norberg-Hodge in this quote because he is restating that experiential knowledge, understanding the problem first hand is directly connected to motivation (Norberg-Hodge, 2019,).

The following pages will answer the question of what are the life events which motivate youth to become climate activists?

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Interview*

#### *2.1.1 Finding participants*

I chose to find youth climate activists between the ages of 18 and 25 to interview about the events and trends in their lives that led them to become climate activists. I chose this age group because young people between the ages of 18-25 can attend university and be involved in university-related climate justice movements. I chose to interview university students because they were a group of people I could find through student organizations such as fossil free groups and environmental collectives and they were relatable to me. The relatability piece is important because it contributes to how I will be able to use this data and my research to benefit the sustainability of youth climate activism. By interviewing university students, I saw the types of stories that were similar and created a narrative that anyone at a university level, if properly motivated, can become a youth climate activist. Telling the story of becoming a climate activist, being my goal, interviews were the best option. Interviewing gave my participants the ability to share about their significant events and moments as well as elaborate on any of the questions as they chose.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, I began reaching out to climate activism groups over Facebook. I had created a list with Ruth, my advisor, of particularly good organizations to reach out to and I began by contacting them over their Facebook pages. I contacted groups like Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) and Australian Students Environmental Network (ASEN). Both of these organizations are national and have many members between the ages of 18-25. I wrote to many university student-run groups, such as Fossil Free chapters and environmental collectives, and asked about interviewing members of these groups. I also messaged a few individuals who seemed like they were involved with the climate movement either because of the university group their profile description said they were part of, or because they were following and liking certain Facebook pages.

This direct messaging method yielded one response, the high school ASEN page wrote back to me within minutes. The first direct message I received was from a student at Australian National University (ANU) and proved to be an incredible help in gathering participants for my research. The student put me in contact with many other ANU students and I began to hear back from many individuals there. The ASEN student, an 18 year-old, organizer named Toby Thompson, began by listening to my goal and then helped me reach out to a group of students at University of Sydney. After receiving these first responses to my interview requests, I chose to go to Sydney because University of Sydney and University of

New South Wales are both there. Sydney offered this project a base location and large group of potential interviewees.

Before I began to make plans or schedule interviews with any participants, I received ethics board approval for my research through SIT NRB. I received a signed statement of approval and began to create dates and times to meet with participants as well as networking out to more people.

I moved to Redfern, Sydney, just a fifteen-minute walk from University of Sydney so I was near a group of participants. In Redfern, I had access to a large transit station and many public libraries full of useful resources that also offered me a space to work in during the week. I began to build a group of participants through the networking I had begun back in March.

I drew on the relationships I had created over Facebook and got permission to post a blurb about my research on different university climate activist groups' walls. From this, potential participants could see my inquiry and also like the post. When someone liked the post, I would follow up and message them. When someone would direct message me, I would write them back and so on.

I attended an event at University of Sydney which was run by their environmental collective and their Fossil Free group. Here, I officially began my recruitment of participants. I went and helped with painting a banner and selling t-shirts and the members of the Fossil Free group talked with me. I took note of everyone's name and I found them on Facebook afterward and sent them all follow up messages asking about being interviewed for my research. I repeated this same tactic a second time at University of Sydney and one week later at University of New South Wales.

### *2.1.2 Participant demographics*

After gathering contacts through this process, I messaged them and set concrete times and dates to interview (Appendix ii). I emailed or delivered in person an informed consent form to each participant for them to review and sign. The form outlined the goal of my research and the use of their data. Once I had received a signed and dated copy, I began the interview. I conducted ten of the twelve interviews over the phone. I completed all twelve interviews within the first three weeks of April. When interviewing over the phone, I recorded the phone calls after receiving consent to record the phone call. I stored them on a locked device to keep them confidential. I purchased a call recording application for my

phone, and it worked very well. When interviewing in person, I received consent to use my phone as a recorder.

After I gathered all twelve interviews, I sorted the demographic data on to a spreadsheet. I collected the name, age, gender, hometown, university, and resource recommendation of each participant (Table 1). All of this data was written down exactly as the participant stated it. Table 1 is sorted by age. Sharing demographic data was made optional for the participants, no one was forced to report any piece of data. Providing names were optional and participants received the option to have a pseudonym or just their first name or initials. In my research, there are times that I used pseudonyms or simply first names by request of the participant. I collected this information at the end of the interview because I did not want to change the answers if the participant felt like they were being categorized before they had given their answers.

I conducted twelve interviews, averaging around twelve minutes each. The participants came from four different universities and they ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Gender of the participants I gathered through self-reporting, this was an open question and participants had the opportunity to report which ever gender they identified with. As for location, participants were asked where they lived currently or where they grew up. Everyone had the chance to report whichever location they preferred.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>University or Affiliation</i>	<i>Hometown or Location</i>
<i>Toby Thompson</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>University of Wollongong</i>	<i>Wollongong</i>
<i>Jelena Rudd</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>UNSW</i>	<i>Sydney</i>
<i>Isabella</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>UNSW</i>	<i>Canberra</i>
<i>Hannah</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>ANU</i>	<i>Canberra</i>
<i>Dana</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>UNSW</i>	<i>Newcastle</i>
<i>Isabella</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>ANU</i>	<i>Canberra</i>
<i>Alison</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>USyd</i>	<i>Sydney</i>
<i>Austin Bird</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>ANU</i>	<i>Canberra</i>
<i>Alex</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>UNSW</i>	<i>Sydney</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>ANU</i>	<i>Canberra</i>
<i>Tallulah Dods</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>USyd</i>	<i>Byron Bay</i>
<i>Andy</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Non binary</i>	<i>USyd/ ASEN</i>	<i>Sydney</i>

*Table 1 – Participants*

### *2.1.3 Conducting Interviews*

The interview process took around twelve minutes on average. After getting the participant comfortable and not concerned about the research process, I asked them about the one main research question. This question was: “In your life, which tangible life events, experiences or trends have motivated you to become a climate activist today?” Then I followed up with a deeper explanation if the participant asked for clarification. Since the question was open-ended, participants tended to answer with a timeline of events that covered many aspects of their motivations. After they were finished answering the first question, I followed up with questions based on the response I received. These questions referred back to certain aspects of their time line in order to receive more details.

Once they concluded their responses to the main question, I asked them about their avenue of motivation, a question which I built from the Fisher’s research question: “Would you say your motivation to join the climate movement came from a concern for the environment, a concern for social justice or a concern or understanding of the interconnectedness of the two?” (Fisher, 2018, p. 237). This question acted as a follow up question usually, but in some cases, the participants had not touched on it yet.

Then I finished the interview by asking for a recommendation of a book, film, talk, article or another resource to inspire a new, young climate activist. I designed this final research question to build a resource list but also to continue conversation further and to solidify what was important to each interview participant.

During each interview, I took notes when I heard a topic of interest emerge from the participant. Taking a few notes gave me the chance to reference what was said earlier in the interview. This made it easier for me to target specific points of interest without having to rely on my memory. Directly after each interview was finished, I went over the notes I wrote down and entered the demographic data into a spreadsheet. Then within the next few days, I went back and listened to the recording of the interview. It was important to take days off in between interviews and the transcription because it gave me time to synthesize the themes from the recording more clearly.

### *2.1.4 Analyzing Interviews*

The transcriptions of the recordings were not the entire interview recording; they captured the important pieces and highlighted the themes I was looking for. I wrote down direct quotes as well, paraphrasing themes or specific points when it made sense to. I transcribed all twelve interviews on the same document my notes from my interviews were



on. This made it easier for me to know where the important sections of my interviews were inside of my recordings.

I created a chart for each interview to help guide me during and after the interview. These guides then served as a template to analyze specifics of the data as I had heard them. Each interview transcription was highlighted four different colors pulling out the major themes and categorized on to a new document. The themes came from every aspect of the interview and shifted during the field portion of the Independent Study Period. It was not until I had completed all twelve interviews that I saw the types of trends that I used in my research.

I grouped the themes together and found sources which informed each theme. The academic sources came from the work I had completed in preparing the literature review as well as extra research as the themes emerged. From these themes, I found quotes and ideas which were shared from individual interviews and chose specific quotes from participants to represent the ideas and data that came from the interviews. I sorted the data into charts and graphs where necessary, so it became easier to see the quantities of what I had collected. The charts took the data trends and themes and sorted them quantitatively. Quotes in the following research are edited for clarity. From here, I wrote the results and discussion section of this research paper and concluded my research when the analysis was complete.

## *2.2 Preliminary Survey*

### *2.2.1 School Strike for Climate Action Survey*

On 15<sup>th</sup> March, I conducted a preliminary survey at the School Strike for Climate Action at the Sydney Town Hall. This rally was an international call for action, which, in Australia, had three major demands: 1. Stop the Adani Coal mine, 2. No new coal or gas projects, and 3. 100% renewables by 2030 (School Strike for Climate Action, 2019,).

I received National Review Board's ethics approval before 15th March. The goal of the survey was to ask people what the motivation was for the attending the rally. The survey consisted of three questions, age, what your role is at the strike and what your motivations are for coming to the rally. The third question was an open question to write their complete motivation for attending the school strike action (Appendix iv). I surveyed 14 individuals, three of which did not fit the criteria because they were older than 25 years. It was challenging to survey people after the speeches had started because people wanted to listen and were tightly packed together.

The data here was were inconclusive, but it gave me a direction in for my research and my interview questions in the future (Appendix iii). The goal of my survey was to run a pilot survey so that I understood the Sydney activist climate before I went to Sydney and spoke with many more activists. This preliminary survey worked to help make me confident in talking with people and helped to make the interview process easier because I had background in the youth climate movement to work from.

### *2.3 Challenges and Shortcomings*

The challenges of my research came from the sample of individuals I researched. I found that by only interviewing university students who had the means to attend university, I gathered data from a fairly homogenized group of young people. I understand that my research mostly did not reach young people from minority groups or varying socioeconomic backgrounds. I understood this fact going into my research and I acknowledge the effects this choice had on my research. Ten out of twelve of my participants had Facebook accounts, therefore having social media presence. This made it easy for me to reach out to people I had met. However, I did not contact people who did not have social media and that removed a whole group of potential interview participants.

Reconnecting and connecting with people over social media comes with the biases potential of who I felt most comfortable reaching out to. Because my research sample was so dependent on who showed interest and responded to my messaging, who I reached out to had a major impact on who was researched. I was more likely to reach out to people who seemed approachable than those who did not. This an issue I recognize and may be a factor as to why there are more female than male participants. I did my best to reach out to everyone fairly, but this is a subconscious challenge that may have affected my participant gathering process.

The process of interviewing as my method of data collection worked well. I found I was able to gather many interesting stories and hear from different people about their lives and motivations. I did, however, see that it was challenging to be consistent in giving the questions and receiving clear answers. In giving questions, I changed the way I stated the questions to better fit the recipient. Having to reword my questions for each recipient is due to the consistency of my responses and making sure that each person had the opportunity to answer as best they could. This challenge may not be that important, but it is of note and does hold the potential to change the outcome of the research.

My final challenge was determining who was an activist leader and finding what a leader meant in the Australian youth climate movement. I defined an activist leader in my ISP

proposal as someone who was deeply involved in activism as a leadership member of a group, as an organizer, or as someone who seemed to have a deep understanding of the youth climate movement and had a strong involvement. Out of my twelve participants, five of them were current or former state coordinators for the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) or the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN). The other seven were a mixture of coordinators and members of fossil free collectives and other types of climate organizations through university.

I found leaders in a few different ways, particularly through Facebook and the Facebook groups I joined. Members of climate activism collectives, such as a university fossil free or environmental collective, posted and monitored the group pages on Facebook. Participants who were clearly involved with AYCC or ASEN as state coordinators for New South Wales or Australian Capital Territory. I counted as youth activist leaders. Not all of my participants fell into these categories, but the ones who did not self-identified as leaders and I counted them because of the lateral structure of leadership in the climate movement as a whole. I chose to define leaders as people who have a deep understanding of what they are doing and work to bring people together to build climate justice.

In the end of my research, I chose to not simply call everyone a leader, but to refer to the participants of my study as youth climate activists. I decided to do this because I felt that the lateral structure of the climate movement makes more sense to call people activists and not leaders. I interviewed deeply involved members to make sure that I received rich answers to my questions, though many were in leadership roles, leader was not the correct term to use in my research.

With keeping all of the shortcomings of my methods in mind, my project flowed smoothly, and I built a strong set of data from interesting participants along with way. By acknowledging the limits to my collection method and sample pool and size, I narrowed my research and my analysis to fit the data I gathered and not to elaborate on data I did not have.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

Motivation is a challenge to analyze as it is different for everyone and even after hearing a conversation or a series of thoughts about a certain motivator, it is hard to compare one person's experience to another's. Isabella from Australian National University (ANU) shared some insight with me about motivation during our conversation. She is referred to in the paper as Isabella ANU for clarity.

“You have just got to give people something that makes them angry and makes them empathize, and the combination of those two things is what sets off the spark usually, rather than something, that you know, makes people feel guilty or whatever; a lot of empathy and a lot of anger,” (Isabella ANU, 2019, pers. comm.).

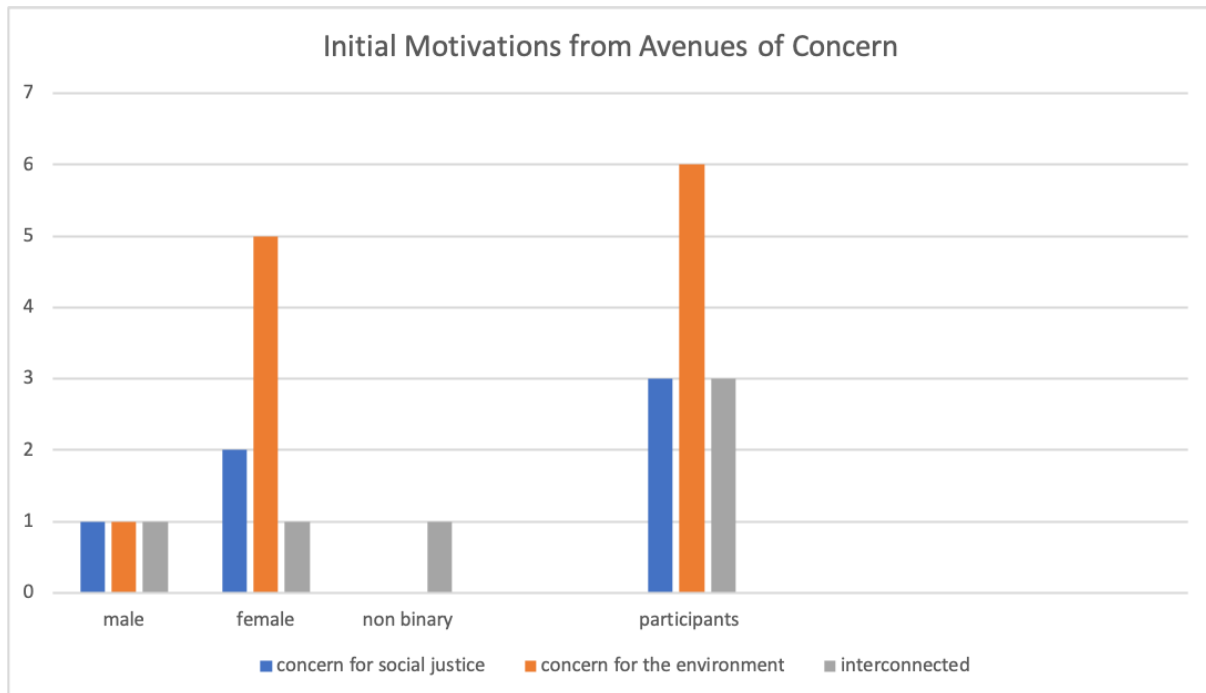
Isabella ANU is an experienced organizer and climate justice activist leader. She is speaking in the quote above about how to motivate others from her experiences: “To give people something that makes them angry and makes them empathize,” (Isabella ANU, 2019, pers. comm.). These two motivators of anger and empathy are seen over and over in the responses I gathered in my interview process. I understand anger is the passion that is the core of the motivation and empathy is the understanding of something other than the individual and ability to learn and support that entity. Through the discussion of the data I gathered, themes of anger and empathy are intertwined with the sparks of motivation from the participants.

#### *3.2 Avenues of Concern*

By using Fisher's ideas on motivation out of a concern for the environment versus motivation from a concern from social justice versus the interconnectedness of the two, I found interesting trends in the answers I received. Though, unlike Fisher, who asks about current and past motivations (Fisher 2014, 237), I asked about where motivation came from, out of a concern for nature or a concern for social justice. When I asked this question during the interviews, I found that there was a clear trend as to the spark of motivation in my pool of youth climate activists.

Fisher found that his participants either cited one reason or another and he prompted them to do so (Fisher, 2014, p. 237). I did not prompt my participants to answer one way or another and I found that when I asked the question the trend was mostly the same and that the responses flowed, almost all beginning with a concern for nature. This concern for nature came from different places and in different ways but it was the first reason that people feel the spark to be climate activists (Chart 1). Not all the responses demonstrated a concern for

nature as the primary motivator: three cited a concern for social justice and three cited an interconnectedness. The answers to the question about avenues of concern shifted, mostly depending on the amount of time the participant reported spending outside as a child. For the people who did not report spending time outside in their interview, most often they shared a concern for social justice as an initial motivator.



*Chart 1*

I divided my data by all three categories: concern for the environment, concern for social justice, and the interconnectedness of the two. I sorted the responses from my participants into the three categories. Because many people responded with a progression of their concerns, I built the chart of what was the first motivator was for each participant and then I sorted that data by gender and as one whole group as well.

Hannah’s, a participant from ANU in Canberra, answer to the question of concern as a motivator sums up what most people said in all the interviews. “My motivation initially came from protecting and conserving the natural environment,” she states, but then her concern progresses;

“But I guess through AYCC, it’s definitely become more yeah about social justice issues as well as environmental issues. I have definitely learned how those issues interact and are related and how you can’t focus on one without focusing on the other and how you can’t find solutions for one without finding solutions for the other ” (Hannah, 2019, pers. comm).

Hannah’s progression of motivation demonstrates the particular way most participants answered the question. Starting with an environmental concern and moving to a social justice concern and then the realization that the two are interconnected and part of the same systemic

problem. Hannah, like other participants came about her concern for the natural world through her childhood experiences, these types of events and experiences I continue to examine later in the paper.

Not every participant showed this type of concern motivation. Three out of the twelve participants said that their motivation for being a climate activist came out of their concern for social justice. This concern for social justice was simply the first things they reported before they went into the nuances of their concerns.

Alex states that his motivation was fueled by a concern for social justice. He says, “I am a lot more motivated by the social side of things than the purely environmental... the recognition that disadvantaged groups are the ones who are being hurt the worst...that motivates me a lot more strongly than land degradation and so on” (Alex, 2019, pers. comm.).

Most of the participants have arrived at this point in their activism careers as motivated by the intersection of the two. These motivators come from different places and events and created by life experiences and trends. Isabella ANU spoke about the initial motivation from concern for social justice that she experienced in her life. She says that she saw social justice and environmental concern as two entirely different categories and how they both contributed to the her spark for climate activism separately. Finally, one participant, more recent to climate activism states, “It’s not even out of love for humanity or the environment, it is out of a love for my own sanity that I’m doing this.” (Alison, 2019 pers. comm.). This final type of motivation veers from Fisher’s framework, some people are motivated for themselves, their own safety and sanity.

### *3.3 Themes of motivation*

From the twelve interviews, I found four major themes which were most common between all the participants. These themes outline what types of life events occurred which motivated all of the participants to become climate activists.

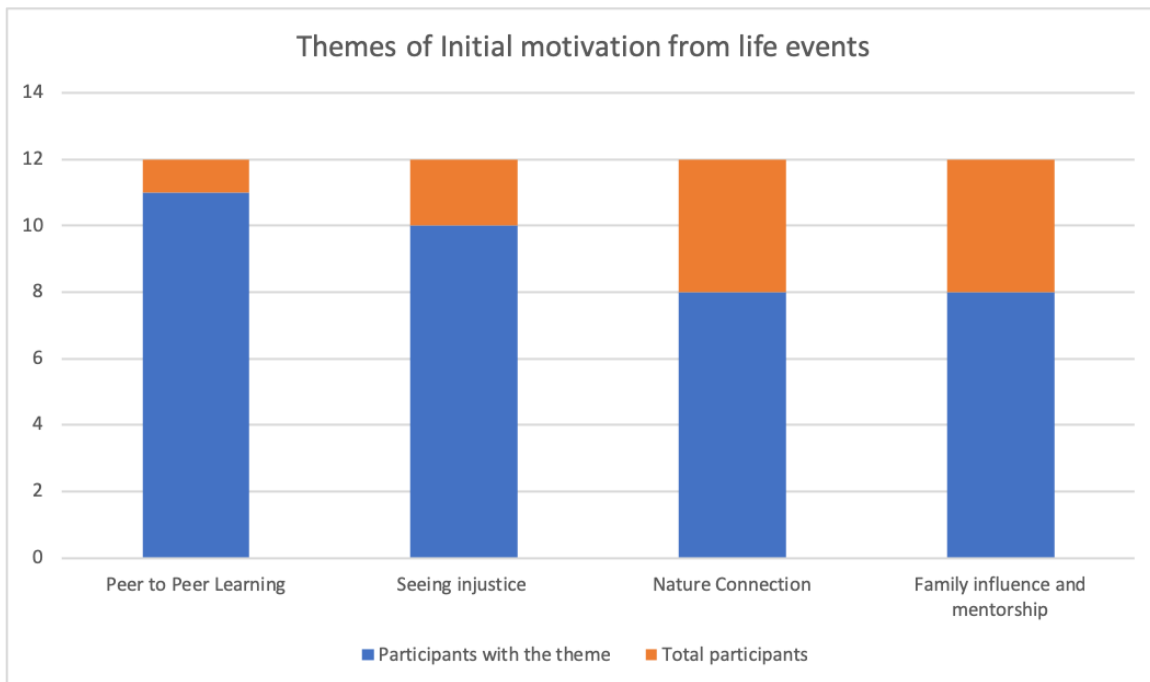


Chart 2

### 3.3.1 Nature Connection and sense of place

Spending time outside as a child appeared as a common theme for many of the participants. Bushwalking and playing as a family or with friends outside was an influence for eight out of the twelve participants in my research. Starting out the interview, many people would begin such as Austin Bird did. “From like a young age I spent a lot of time outside and stuff, especially going to the nature reserves near my house” (Austin Bird, 2019, pers. comm.). When asked about what life events had motivated him to become a climate activist, Austin immediately started by speaking about his love of nature and the time he spent outside.

“This connection with the natural areas near his home is common among the participants in my interviews. The eight people who answered as having the outdoors as a primary motivator began their interviews by speaking about playing outside as a child. “It first started off with a sort of love for nature...when I grew up always lived near the bush and the beach, and had lots of opportunity to interact with it. I guess it [concern from the environment] was a very local thing for me because I was very connected to it growing up on the central coast.” (Alex, 2019, pers. comm.)

Austin and Alex demonstrate that climate activism can be sparked through a caring for a place of personal significance that comes from building nature connectedness. This connection is a manifestation of sense of place. Sense of place being the idea that we are in a “cult of homelessness” where we are detached from our location and community (Orr,

2013, p. 188). When an individual learns a place and creates an emotional attachment with that place., this attachment creates a relationship which sparks a motivation to save or protect the location of that sense of place. The motivation here is connected to the natural world through personal connection and interaction.

For another perspective on nature connection and the outdoors inspiring climate action, Isabella UNSW stated: “I know [global climate change] affects disproportionately different humans but also I think we need to stop framing it in such an anthropogenic sense,” (Isabella UNSW, 2019, pers. comm.).

She continued on and said,

“[Frame it] like ‘No, it is actually going to affect [the world and] we need to protect the world not just because it is going to affect humans but also because it will have all these ongoing consequences for literally millennia and all these other species and the future of the earth,’” (Isabella UNSW, 2019, pers. comm.).

Isabella UNSW’s perspective is an outlier in this pool of interviews, but her perspective is important because she brings the conversation away from the social ecologist to the deep ecologist (Bragg, 2019). Deep ecology, those who perceive themselves to have a deep connection with nature, where nature is as important, if not more important, than humanity. Deep ecologists place the natural world above the importance of the human world because they see themselves as deeply connected to nature as a member and not as a user. This perspective is one that I did not find much of in my research, but Isabella UNSW took that angle when she spoke about changing the perspective from anthropogenic to eco-centric. Because of the climate justice persuasion of the sample, it is interesting to see a person with a deep ecology leaning. The social ecologist perspective made up most of my participants, through their concern for Aboriginal rights, social justice and in importance of standing with oppressed communities near them (Bragg, 2019). The two perspectives made the findings far more interesting and demonstrated the types of outliers in my sample.

### *3.3.2 Family influence and mentorship*

The motivation to become a climate activist for the participants also came from looking up to role models and mentors. Role models and mentors rose out of the family and teachers of the youth climate activists I spoke with. From parents involved in activism when the participants were young, to classes at school which brought the facts of climate change and social justice to light, to siblings who came before, motivation to get up and make a change grew out of observing and learning from mentors and role models. Participants spoke about family members who protested the Franklin Gordon Dam in Tasmania, spent two



weeks at the Bentley blockade, and stood up at Terania creek blockade as well as contributing to the current direction action movements.

Tallulah Dods, of Byron Bay, currently studying at University of Sydney, states in her interview:

“When I was a kid, we would go to every protest whether it was human rights or environmental rights protests. So that was the foundation and then also my dad lives next to a natural park so I was very close to nature growing up,” (Dods, 2019, pers. comm.).

Tallulah Dods cites a few different points of initial motivation: parents as activist role models and outdoor space and connection with parents. She continues on to speak about the types of protests and rallies she attended because of her parents’ involvement: “One of the biggest ones was the no Iraq War protest when I was under seven or eight and that was a really nice one!”(Tallulah Dods, 2019, pers. comm.)

Family influence here is clearly a reason behind the spark. Events attended with family and family conversations created the understanding of global and local problems which spike the interest of young people. Significant events happening to other members of the family motivate and model activism and the power it holds. Toby Thompson, a student at the University of Wollongong and organizer with ASEN, talks about his sibling as a role model:

“What really inspired me was when my sibling climbed the Sydney opera house for a pro refugee action in 2015. A very peaceful action, which ended up getting my older sibling fined... I have really looked up to my older sibling,” (Thompson, 2019, pers. comm.).

Toby Thompson saw from a young age the power of direct action and the reason it was needed. He spoke for most of the interview about his sibling and the actions they had participated in. Inspiration from family is a powerful tool in motivation. Finally, families created motivation for climate activism through family culture, not only as activists themselves, but also through religion. Two participants cited Christianity and Catholicism as foundational factors which influenced them to become active in the climate movement. They gained the knowledge and skills to be successful activists through working with the church on stewardship projects. The idea of stewardship was brought to the attention of these participants by their parents’ actions of caring for the natural world around them.

As the panelist of the “Striking for Change” Panel in Lismore noted, youth climate activists are empowered by their families and inspired by them to make change (Rogers 2019). Families as mentors bring young people along to experience different aspects of life

and the challenges the world faces. From this inclusion, comes the spark of motivation for young climate activists to begin their own activist journeys.

### *3.3.3 Seeing Injustice*

Seeing injustice motivated ten out of twelve participants. These injustices came from firsthand experiences to general concern for the state of a group of people or the greater community. Aiden Ricketts presents the about the idea of Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) (Ricketts, 2012, p. 1), NIMBY in a social justice and environmental context demonstrates the need people have to save their own homes and communities from injustice.

The experiences these ten participants had ranged from land degradation near their homes or towns, learned about in environmental science courses which took students out to look at the areas near them, or through refugee rights and social justice by seeing the poor treatment of refugees arriving in Australia or Aboriginal people in the area.

Jelena Rudd, a student at UNSW spoke simply about her initial drive to work for environmental rights as a young person. She speaks about her connection to the outdoors through the bush near where she grew up:

“When I grew older and started to realize that there were people who were destroying [bush areas near home], I was like, ‘that is something that I need to do something about’, that is just like the very basic urge, I love this thing and people are destroying it,” (Rudd, 2019, pers. comm.).

Two types of data stories emerged from the ten participants, stories such as Jelena’s of land degradation near home, in community or in country, and stories that came from witnessing injustice through government inaction and social inequality. The idea of NIMBY demonstrates the ownership and sense of responsibility which people feel over their government and how it treats the population it serves.

Many participants expressed anger at the way the government treated minorities or at-risk groups in the community. Andy spoke about the land injustices in the context of Sydney cities in their interview. They spoke about the concerns around who gets to live near trees and parks and who has reduced access. This, along with many other pieces of Aboriginal rights, were motivators for them. Andy spoke about these as rights which the government needs to work to uphold.

NIMBY works as a major motivator for action of all sorts. The backyard can extend to a nation, if there is a membership or citizenship then people have power and responsibility that they leverage to help others and the environment.

### 3.3.4 Peer to Peer learning and belonging

The most common theme was peer-to-peer learning. Peer to peer learning is the passing of knowledge through social interactions, convergences, and student groups. The peers in the case are friends and classmates of the participants. Eleven out of twelve participants (Chart 2) noted a form of peer-to-peer learning as a large initial motivator in why they are climate activists.

The theme manifested as participants spoke about the beginnings of their involvement with climate groups on their campuses. Most people said that they had a friend or group of friends who wanted to be involved or who were already involved with climate activism and therefore, they went along to a meeting or two. This story was told over and over again in interviews and it is a powerful tool in motivation because of the importance of inclusion. Fisher speaks about inclusion as a tool for recruitment and motivation. He suggests that the inclusive nature of the climate movement is the very mechanism in which it grows in membership (Fisher, 2016, p. 241).

Dana, a student from UNSW spoke about her motivation to join the climate movement as an activist:

“Coming to Uni, I wanted to get involved with activist groups, more for having new friends of similar goals, and I always saw the importance of collective action before I just never considered myself to be part of it,” (Dana, 2019, pers. comm.).

Dana looked to get involved with activism because she wanted more friends with similar interests, as Hannah put it, “Just surround yourself with people who care about what you care about,” (Hannah, 2019, 16:25). Hannah and Dana showed that their motivating factors for joining the climate movement was finding like-minded people.

People with similar goals in the climate movement are powerful, as Foran, Grey and Grosse in *‘Not the End of the World:’ Political cultures of opposition and creation in the Global youth climate justice movement* state that the young generation of climate activists build their groups and collectives as well as movements to be microcosms of how they wish to rebuild society and the world (Foran, Grey, & Grosse, 2016, p. 357). Structures such as lateral leadership and non-violence are practices in youth climate activist circles which draw young people in to create their own understanding of how the future will look (Foran, Grey, & Grosse, 2016, p. 358). Andy noted that what breaks this momentum is hopelessness, “People our age get [climate change], the problem is people have no hope about it,” (Andy 2019, 10:35).

When young people come together in this model of non-violence and inclusion, the power begins to build and everyone gains motivation through the power shift, thus building hope. Collective power and the idea of New power creating the current in which young climate activists can thrive and build hope and motivation through peer-to-peer learning and connection (Heimans & Timms, 2018, p. 2). This new power is the open forum nature of young climate activist communities to join together and rise despite the system. Many people cited convergences of climate activists as the life event which pushed them to become a climate activist and continue the fight. This is how peer-to-peer learning is successful for initial motivation to join the climate movement.

The importance of youth climate activist leaders is that they are role models and create new role models for people like themselves, as well as the greater community, country, and world.

#### *4. Conclusion*

##### *4.1 Youth Climate Activists and Collective Power*

In conclusion to the question about which life events shape youth climate activist leaders, I found trends exist between the participants in my research.

In reference to the avenues of concern, the trend demonstrated that most began with a concern for nature as their initial motivation and that grew into a concern for social justice and then to an understanding of interconnectedness. This progression suggests that exposure to either the outdoors or injustice push young people to feel protective or connected to either nature or people. I believe that the demographic of people I interviewed displayed the pattern of nature to social justice to interconnectedness because the trend was that they had grown up with access and positive experiences outdoors. The sample I interviewed had certain life events which made nature a safe and wonderful entity to protect; another sample might have had different experiences and a different trend.

From the themes which appeared in from the interviews, connection to nature at a young age, through time spent outdoors near the home of the climate activist grew the young person into a concerned and motivated caretaker of the land. Family activists grew the love for nature and the outdoors into a community connection. Family influenced the types of conversations and activities young people are exposed and care about, this type of influence builds care and concern for the planet and for the communities on it. Seeing injustice at a young age built initial motivation for many climate activists. Politicians lacking the policy and concern to create the future they promised angered the young people I spoke with.

Young people's motivations came from the dissatisfaction with the governing systems and seeing the land and nature they loved being destroyed. These types of injustices motivated many of the climate activists to make moves and sparked them to become involved. Keeping the first three motives in mind, the final event which motivated youth to become climate activists was peer to peer learning and connection. The climate movement, as a whole, provided a place for friendship and collective power which motivated and inspired most of the climate activists I interviewed. They joined the climate movement because they found people who shared in the life events previously discussed and they felt connected and empowered by the shared experiential knowledge of peer group.

Peer-to-peer learning, being the most common theme, represents the power of the future of the climate movement. My research demonstrates that young people who are university student climate activists are connected with each other by the moments that sparked them to join the movement. This research displays the connection climate activists have through the life events they share. Young climate activists are all part of the New power current (Heimans & Timms, 2018, p. 2) and that power grows through the sharing and building of peer relationships. These relationships grow into collective action through the commonalities and motivation of the activists involved. Therefore, this research suggests that within the university students I worked with, collective power of young people coming together with shared life events, concerns and values are the key to the success of the climate movement.

#### *4.1 Future Research and Use*

For the future, it is possible to conduct this study with a different set of participants. The potential for different results would create a new lens to see youth climate activists through. Using a sample of non-university climate activists between the ages of 18 and 25 years would allow for the potential for other outcomes. Other possibilities could be changing the location of the sample or the age range, such as conducting interviews looking at the avenues of concern for people in the inner city and for young activists in rural Tasmania. There are many variation possibilities and there is the potential to use these future findings to support the data I have analyzed here and to carry it further.

It is possible to implement the types of initial motivations I gathered into the lives of young people. Bringing children positive experiences in nature and empowering them in groups of socially and environmentally motivated peers may build youth into climate activists and caring concerned citizens. Continuing this research will build upon the data I have

gathered and find more and more trends for different groups of youth and create a collection of initial motivators to bring more inspiring experiences to young people.

Looking to the future of the youth climate movement, I see the potential for this research on initial motivations of youth climate activists to continue to bring together young people and strengthen the climate movement as a whole. This is not a temporary mindset of young people; the climate movement will continue to grow and empower youth to build the type of future where they wish to live.

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## 6. Appendices

### 6.1 Appendix i

*The Resource List* – A collection of recommended motivation materials for new youth climate activists suggested by the participants of my research.

#### *Books*

- Dark Emu.....Bruce Pascoe
- Green Bans Red Union.....Meredith Burgmann, Verity Burgmann
- Heat: How to stop the planet burning.....George Monbiot
- This Changes Everything..... Naomi Klein
- The Weather Makers.....Tim Flannery

#### *Films*

- Cowspiracy (2014)
- Rocking the Foundations (1985)
- Water is Life- A film put out by Seed Mob to promote the understanding pollution in the Northern Territory
- This Changes Everything (2015)
- All of Sir David Attenborough- The recommendation is to watch all/as much as possible.

#### *Articles*

- Shimmer- When all you love is being trashed..... Deborah Bird Rose
- Seasons of Smoke by Naomi Klein <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/09/in-a-summer-of-wildfires-and-hurricanes-my-son-asks-why-is-everything-going-wrong/>

#### *Other*

- Accomplices not allies: Solidarity with the First Nation People, an independent zine
- Greta Thunberg, celebrity youth climate striker and speaker, listen to her talk.
- Get up and get active! Reach out to local movements over Facebook, connect and network, join a group and engage with community!- Hannah's recommendation.

6.2 Appendix ii  
Interview Schedule

Contacts for Interviews and their Status- Completed all interviews April 26th

Name	Time/Location	Contact info	Informed consent
Alison (USyd Fossil Free)	11:00, Wednesday the 17th @USyd. send informed consent	<i>This column has been cleared to protect personal information</i>	4/17 completed.
Toby Thompson Uni of Wollongong	Friday @ 10am, needs consent form		4/10 Sent, signed and interviewed
MC ANU	Friday		4/10 Sent, signed and interviewed
Austin Bird ANU	Tuesday 5:10pm.		4/16 signed and interviewed
Tallulah in person USyd	Wednesday at 3:00pm, @Cadigal green		Received and signed in person
Bella ANU	Monday @5:00pm		4/15 signed and interviewed
Andy	Wednesday @ 5:30pm		4/24 received and signed
Alexander	Thursday @ 5:15pm		4/18 received and signed
Dana	Wednesday 11:30am		4/23 received and signed
Hannah	Confirmed 1:30pm Friday- 28th		4/25 received and signed
Jelena Rudd	3:00pm Saturday		4/20 signed and interviewed
Bella	Thursday @ 9:30 am		4/24 signed and interviewed

### 6.3 Appendix iii- Survey Data from 15<sup>th</sup> March

Age	Role	What are your motivations for being here today? (@the School Strike)	Themes
18	student	Heard there was a rally and wanted to hang out	Social
19	student (uni)	The environment is screwed and I want it better!	Enviro concern
19	uni student	supporting school kids and pushing the government for action	Support youth
20	student	There is no action for climate change by the Australian government.	government inaction
20	student	sustainability	Sustainability
21	student	Coming together to support democracy, climate and Australians	government inaction
21	UNSW (uni) Organizer	So inspired by the youth, we are in a crisis and we can't continue to sit by & let corporations & governments destroy our futures for profit & power.	support youth; government inaction
22	marshal leader	we have 12 years to reverse everything. There's too much at risk to not show up for our planet	Enviro concern
22	USyd Organizer	We are facing a climate emergency. No political party has made a commitment to policies that have the power to prevent and end climate change. We need 100% renewable energy by 2030, a just transition to green jobs for workers in fossil fuel industry and no more coal & gas projects. I am here because I understand that the only way to create change is to mobilize and take strike action.	government inaction
24	student	I want to support school kids in their strike and I also feel like climate change is the most burning subject right now	support youth
25	student	We need to take action! The world is destroyed :(	environ concern
*26	Activist? Uni Student	Climate change is happening so quickly and affects everyone. Everyone needs their voice heard, especially the ones not heard in our political system.	
*26	University Student	Because the science is in and you would have to be incredibly ignorant to deny the devastation effects of climate change that are coming and <u>already</u> amongst use. Without a dramatic reduction in emission and no new coal extraction we as a global community are going to be faced [with] mass migration and potentially war. This is the most pressing issue of <u>our times!</u>	
*29	Photographer/artist and interested person	Proud of the students. Wanting to support their choices and lend a hand.	

\*Data was not considered because the participant did not fit the expressed age range

6.4 Appendix iv  
*Survey Template from 15<sup>th</sup> March*

Thank You! For taking the time to take this brief survey today!  
I am an American uni student, abroad here in Sydney and I am doing research on the motivations of youth climate activists, from ages 18-25.  
I appreciate your participation today!

Please answer below as much as you like, be as specific as you want and share whatever you like.

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What role/position are you in here today (e.g. student, organiser, caretaker)?
  
3. Why are your motivations for being here today?- Please share as much or as little as you like, and use the back if you want!