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A Movement of Many: Stories of community action for our climate

Spotlighting the wisdom and hope diverse Victorians
are bringing to our biggest environmental challenges



Environment Victoria is located on Wurundjeri land and works across many Aboriginal nations.

We pay our respects to Aboriginal elders past and present, recognise their continuing contribution to caring for country, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Thanks to all the interviewees.

Throughout the report, we have tried to include the First Nations Country that each story takes place on. However, this is not possible for every story due to the complexities of land and border disputes – just one of the many damaging legacies of colonisation.

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Contents

Introduction	2
Yu Tao	3
Electra Greene	4
Sudha Narayan	5
Harka Bista.....	7
Ruchira Talukdar	8
Minwen Wu	10
Shannon Mielak	11
Adeena Khan	12
Helen Chen	13
Ryan’s Lagoon	14
Sunil Abbott.....	15
Farrah Moyden.....	16
Angela Ashley-Chiew.....	17

Introduction

Victoria has long been a melting pot of cultures where diverse people and stories have found a home. We are one of the most culturally diverse communities in the world.

Out of bloodshed, brutality and hardship have come stories of reinvention, renewal and resistance. First Nations warriors holding back the tide of land theft, preserving culture and passing it down through the generations to today's treaty negotiators. Labourers downing tools in the intolerable Melbourne summer sun to demand the eight hour day. Refugees from every corner of the world making a new life here, overcoming local fear and hostility to claim a treasured place in Victorian society.

We know that people all over Victoria, across different cultures and identities share a common concern for our environment and climate. Here we have captured 13 individual stories that together celebrate the strength, wisdom, joy and creativity everyday Victorians bring to our big environmental challenges.

Stories are what we use to make sense of the world. They connect us with our past, while showing us what is possible in the future. Yet not all stories have been given equal airtime in an environment movement dominated by Western culture. Our hope is that by telling these stories we can begin to build a more united, representative and effective climate and environment movement.

The voices represented here raise as many questions as they answer - vital, sometimes uncomfortable questions to which we should turn our attention if we are serious about building a bigger movement for environmental justice that brings everyone along.

What are the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities left vulnerable in a world of worsening climate upheavals?

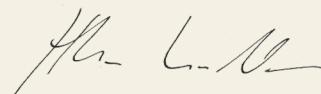
How do we pay heed to the voices of those from the global south who have a different language around climate change based on lived experience? Or how can we provide a safe inclusive space that empowers people migrating from non-democratic nations to unlearn parts of their upbringing and boldly speak up here?

The stories also highlight commonality in what draws people to care for, and want to protect nature. Pivotal moments in childhood, witnessing the destruction of beautiful places as the climate crisis worsens or responding to a primal pull to grow plants, connect with others and speak up for the planet.

And they embody the spirit we need to build our resilience and address the forces destroying people and planet. We need to unpick old mindsets that view the earth as something to exploit rather than something to respect and cherish together.

We urgently need to listen to and share the wisdom highlighted here and tap into the leadership and solutions coming from these Victorians.

As so beautifully articulated by Indian/Australian writer and activist Ruchira Talukdar - "The hope is that story by story we can piece things together and hold the ground to move ahead."



Jono LaNauze
CEO

Yu Tao

Wurundjeri Country, Carlton

Yu Tao, a 24-year-old studying arts management at the University of Melbourne, has one memory from when she was a child growing up in Yunnan Province in Southwest China that has stuck with her and deepened her connection to the natural world.

She and her friends were taking a trip in two separate cars to a nature park 24 hours away by car from her home when the driver of the first car saw a snake crossing the road in front of them. In China there is a local belief that if you see a snake crossing the road it's an omen that you must turn back, or your trip may be imperilled.

Both Yu and the other children in the car didn't want to go back but the mother insisted so they turned around and went to another place closer to their homes. "We thought – no it's the 21st century no-one believes these things anymore. But we lost the argument."

““ These table talks have been the first time in Australia that I have been invited to someone else's home.

But then the next day their father told them that a landslide had happened in the place they were heading that had damaged several cars. "Everyone was stunned. I know it's just a coincidence, but it felt like the snake knew what was coming, because animals always know the land. I think the snake crossed the road to warn us."



Yu has only been in Australia for six months, but she immediately gravitated towards getting involved in the environment movement since she first noticed a stall of a small charity called 'One Square meter sunshine' in Melbourne's CBD from whom she donated \$2 and bought a packet of seeds for a tree she is still growing in a coffee cup in her apartment.

"I felt like both the seeds and I were thriving in a new land. This inspired me to join the environment movement."

But for Yu Tao, her name itself has a story attached to it that is also linked to the natural world. "The Chinese word 'Yu' means rain. I was born on a rainy night in Spring. So, my family thinks of me as like Spring rain – I can bring hope to my family."

Her second name Tao also has a nature-based story connected to it. When she was a little girl, she frequently fell ill with colds and fever until one day her grandmother took her to see an old monk in a temple. He looked at her and said her water element was too strong since she was born on a rainy night and named Yu. She needed more wood elements for balance, so he gave her the second name Tao, which is the name of a flowering Osmanthus plant.

"This monk also told my grandmother this girl should live in an environment with a lot of trees around. So this influenced my decision to come to live in Australia."

Now living in Melbourne since February 2024, Yu has become involved in Environment Victoria's table talks outreach project. She also recently discovered an unexpected connection between her studies in Art Exhibition management and climate change.

"I've studied how climate change affects artworks. In a course called Issues in Art Conservation I've learned a lot about how changes in humidity and temperature impact artworks. When the climate changes and causes rising temperatures, it can lead to artworks expanding or getting damaged," she says.

In her new community, in Lygon Street in Carlton, she says it has taken some time to get used to living beside a graveyard. "It's a little bit scary having so many tombs right there when I walk home to my new apartment."

But she says her work with Environment Victoria has opened up her first real local social network in Australia. "This community through Environment Victoria has been everything for me. These table talks have been the first time in Australia that I have been invited to someone else's home."

This work has also made her more aware of local environmental issues – especially extreme weather and the threats to the Murray Darling River system. "At first I was too shy to speak to people in Australia because I thought I'd make too many mistakes. But Environment Victoria has helped me a lot to start to talk to foreign people – I really appreciate that."

"Thinking about the future and the threats we face; I think we just have to take it step by step. When I get together with people from different cultures to do practical activities, it really gives me hope," she says.

Electra Greene

Gunai Kurnai Country, Sale

Electra Greene recalls growing up in Tyers in the Latrobe Valley. Her father bought her a Shetland Pony when she was four years old. "I think he worked out it would be cheaper than childcare," she jokes.

"He showed me the boundaries of the bush and told me that's where I should play. So that was my childhood – my horse, my dog, me and the bush. The blackberries, the creek, jumping under fences into private property. I'd even ride into the river on my horse. That time had a huge impact on connecting me to Country."

She spent jubilant days as a child just looking at 'crawlies' on the ground – colonies of ants, snakes, lizards – how they worked and organised themselves. "I felt a bit like one of those Disney characters that could talk to the critters – I was a bit of a dreamer."

Electra, who now has three children of her own, recalls taking her children to that same river to swim some years later but discovering all the water had dried up and the trees were cut down. "I just started crying because I felt that my upbringing was lost with me, and my children didn't have that same opportunity."

More recently Electra has worked as an Aboriginal cultural adviser with a nonprofit organisation Bug Blitz (founded by Dr John Cadlow) whose vision is bringing environmental

programs to schools. "I learnt a lot from John and a wider appreciation for the environment," she says.

"I think sometimes you don't connect the dots until later in life. You know you jump from one lily pad to another and then they eventually connect. It was a journey between a lot of different lily pads for me before I fully understood the connections."

As a Kurnai Gunai woman, Electra says she does get angry when she thinks about the rapid pace of environmental decline since colonisation even though her people lived in Australia for 60 thousand years prior. "Pardon my French but I do get angry and frustrated when I think it only took them 200 years to wreck everything."

"Ours was a very consistent and smart culture – and one of the most humble cultures in the world. But being Aboriginal really drives me – it's my backbone. I can really feel the earth, but sometimes I have to turn my brain off because it would otherwise drive me mad. My drive is my grandchildren, and my passion is to plant a tree because the earth needs to be cooled down."

Electra is also passionate about education and often visits schools to share her knowledge of Aboriginal culture with schoolchildren. "I want Australians to be proud of our beautiful culture," she says.

Electra running a Bug Blitz workshop.





Electra taking part in the Ride for a Fast and Fair Transition from Loy Yang to Traralgon in 2022.

“ You have to hold on to hope at all times – because you just have to, you can’t not.

“There are so many things to be proud of – like the humble boomerang that I often show in schools. The children get so much out of it. I want people to understand that Aboriginal people weren’t only nomads, we were a society. You can’t have a society that lasted for over 40 thousand years without having structure and lores. Humans need structure – we did have that, and the proof is in the pudding,” she says.

“One way I explain this to schoolchildren is to ask – do your grandparents have a vegetable garden in their backyard? Some say yes they do. Well now imagine for Aboriginal people our vegetable garden was this country.”

Electra says that the most pressing environmental issue in her local area is water. “Water is the blood of the land and the veins of the earth. The three power stations we have here dug holes so deep that they have impacted the waterways. I’m deeply

worried because the main waterway is so close, and it affects our wetlands. Salt water is coming up through the lakes – all the fishes and birds and other animals are declining.”

“Now we have this nuclear proposal but the foundations here aren’t strong enough – the government doesn’t do their homework. We’ve had earthquakes in Gippsland – and where do they put that waste that lasts for 100 thousand years. I can’t trust it will have a good outcome at all.”

Electra says when she thinks about all the environmental and human rights challenges we are facing, the thing that gives her hope is the people in her own extended community.

“I’m a mother, I’m a grandmother, I’m a friend. I’m also a niece and a daughter. You have to hold on to hope at all times – because you just have to, you can’t not. I have to walk in a room and smile, I have to make my grandchildren smile. I have to make sure my daughter is safe. I have to make sure my aunty is happy today and my uncles are proud of me,” she says,

“So I have to hold onto hope, because with hindsight, with all those beautiful elements, it’s the people around me that matter most.”

‘I BELIEVE’, BY ELECTRA GREENE

I believe in the land
 I believe in the sea
 I believe in the stars
 And the moon,
 who pulls me
 I believe in nature
 I believe in the trees
 I believe in the butterfly

Who flutters around me
 I believe in rivers
 I believe in their flow
 I believe in peace
 I believe in hearts
 that glow
 I believe in love
 Within these urban streets

I believe in flowers
 I believe in their joy
 I believe in happiness
 For every girl and boy
 I believe in fate
 I believe in my mate
 I believe in a higher force
 That holds no hate xo

A portrait of Sudha Narayan, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a patterned jacket, standing in front of a garden with colorful flowers.

Sudha Narayan

Bunurong Country,
Point Cook

Sudha Narayan says her nature strip and backyard garden in Point Cook in Melbourne's western suburbs is the most colourful and well-kept in her street. She grows winter and summer plants that currently include mint, lemongrass, a lemon tree among marigold and orchid flowers that are appreciated by many local bees and insects.

"People taking afternoon strolls do spend time commenting and I encourage them by giving seeds or cuttings if they want them," she says.

It is one small way Sudha, who is of Indian descent, gives back to her local community. She was the last of her siblings to move to Melbourne from Fiji in 2010 on a skilled migrant visa and since then has worked as a child protection worker with Victoria's Department of Health and Human Services and a case manager in the NGO sector.

Now in semi-retirement, Sudha volunteers with The Silent Witness Network (TSWN), Wyndham Volunteers Association and other local community organisations, and until recently worked as project coordinator with Multicultural Women Victoria in Wyndham and established the Global Kitchen West where women from diverse backgrounds shared traditional recipes and built community.

She says growing up in Fiji made her acutely aware of environmental issues, where the impacts of climate change are already being felt in low-lying coastal areas, as well as witnessing unregulated logging that's left parts of Fiji stripped bare of its forests.

"My main concern has been people cutting trees without thinking about the impacts in terms of erosion – there are places in Fiji that once were beautiful but are now like a bare wasteland. In many cases those small villages have to move because of that. Climate change is creating so much destruction."

She recalls growing up visiting her grandparents who owned a large farm in Fiji where she and her sisters used to frolic as children. "During the holidays as kids we used to run wild through that farm – picking guavas and other wild fruits. So I have always loved nature and flowers – but also been aware of its fragility."

“ I live in a very diverse multicultural community, so I like to be connected with people by actively participating and making myself useful to others.

The Werribee Rose Garden is close to Sudha's home – a place she describes as her private sanctuary. "Even now in Australia sometimes when I'm quietly sitting in my pergola I can hear the birds and the bees buzzing away. For me that is very healing – it connects me to that mysterious creator being."

It is this reverence for nature that Sudha says now motivates her to work in her local community to protect it. "We can make tiny differences around our own homes. I am passionate about doing my tiny bit to promote better informed understanding about environmental issues because this is too often left beyond our multiethnic communities' understanding. Anything promoting humanitarianism and environment I am all for it!" she says

"I live in a very diverse multicultural community, so I like to be connected with people by actively participating and making myself useful to others. I just am happy doing things rather than being idle and just want equality, better governance, humanitarian actions and caring for our environment within our own local communities."

Despite the challenges, Sudha says she feels hopeful when she sees the work of small local organisations and Environment Victoria making a difference, and young people becoming active. "Seeing young people getting more aware – and those community groups, also in Fiji who really do voice their concerns and are taking responsibility. This gives me hope – but so much more can be done."



Harka Bista

Wodonga

Harka Bista has a contagious enthusiasm. As he weaves through the small family plots at the Bhutanese Community Farm, he strikes up conversations with the different people we pass, seamlessly translating between languages. He points out the hundreds of different fruit, vegetables and herbs that are growing – sugar cane, banana palms, choko, beans, mustard leaves, chilli, radish, onion, garlic, coriander and more. He speaks about his passion for the community space he now helps to run.

“We don’t have a profit for this farm, but we have a profit if people are happy and connected. We want to create a space that’s inclusive and increases connections in community.”

The Bhutanese Community Farm is located alongside the banks of the Murray River in Wodonga. The farm was started in 2013 as a small project by the Bhutanese Community of Albury Wodonga to build a sense of belonging for the newly arrived migrant and refugee population. With the support of the Wodonga City Council it was formally established in 2015. It has also received considerable support from the National Environment Centre, Riverina TAFE, Parklands Albury Wodonga, E-Works Employment service, and local businesses and organisations.

Since 2015, the farm has expanded to more than 200 individual plots and welcomed many other multicultural communities from the area, including Congolese, Filipino, Indian, Nepali, Iran, Bhutanese and Baha’i. The farm has become a central place for these communities to meet, socialize and share skills, seeds, meals, culture and language. As Harka explains, “they grow, they eat, they share, they donate.”

The Murray River runs alongside the farm and plays a big role in how people garden and connect with the space. For \$20 a year per plot, families can take water from the river to water their plots through irrigation infrastructure. All farming is organic, to prevent any pesticides running into the river. Giant old river red gums are dotted around the farm, providing shade and habitat for the many birds that keep farmers company with their birdsong. The river is a constant, calming presence.

Harka says it has made a positive difference for people by improving their self-esteem, healing mental health and helping

them feel part of a community. “People say to me ‘I don’t have to take medicine anymore because I feel good coming here’”.

However, its proximity to the river also means the farm is vulnerable to flooding. In 2022, major flooding destroyed all the plots and infrastructure on the farm. It was this moment that made Harka decide to join the management team and he has been Secretary since November 2023.

Harka has lived in Albury with his family since 2010. After leaving Bhutan when he was 18, he spent nearly two decades living in a refugee camp in Nepal before finally settling in country NSW. Volunteering at the Bhutanese Community Farm is Harka’s way of giving back. “I always tell my generation – give something back to the country and community.”

““ People say to me ‘I don’t have to take medicine anymore because I feel good coming here’.

It’s this sense of community that binds the Bhutanese Community Farm together. People come to grow food but leave with so much more.

Together with the Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), the farm has run 5-day workshops for farm members including composting, bread making and curry making. They have organised events for the wider Albury-Wodonga community by cooking meals with vegetables grown on the farm and donated more than 3000 meals to local charities. Harka is also particularly proud of how the Bhutanese Community of Albury Wodonga and farm members donated food and raised \$8,000 for the local fire brigade and community after the 2019/20 bushfires.

Harka would like to acknowledge the landowner Wodonga City Council for providing such a great space to the community of Albury Wodonga. “This project has been a success with their help, and we are sincerely grateful for it.”

Ruchira Talukdar

Kolkata, India and Wurundjeri Country, Fairfield

Dr Ruchira Talukdar grew up in an industrial township outside of Kolkata in India's West Bengal state. "Most of the forests had been cleared to make way for the zoning of the township, but nature was still very close at hand," she says.

She spent a lot of her time as a child playing in the garden. "I loved all the bugs and frogs and beetles – everything. The monsoon was my favourite season because I would make myself invisible in the grass. Or I would make myself a secret house by putting umbrellas together and just play under them."

The garden was replete with plants and bordered by old trees that her grandmother tended to every day. "She was quite obsessive about caring for every tree – and I was her little helper."

As a young adult, Ruchira had the opportunity to explore further afield in India, including trekking in the Himalayas while at college. After a brief stint working in IT in Hyderabad she studied communications in New Delhi and then started working as a communications consultant. As she was completing her undergraduate degree in English Literature, tensions were rising between India and Pakistan as both were testing nuclear underground. An anti-nuclear movement formed that Ruchira gravitated towards, also inspired by Booker Prize winning author Arundhati Roy's commentary on the issue.

"At the age of 25 I applied for an entry level communications job with Greenpeace India but they offered me the communications manager role. Suddenly I was running the communications team of Greenpeace India."

It was a formative time for Greenpeace India and Ruchira was in the thick of it – helping to launch their national-level climate campaign. "I had a team of young journalists and writers who would travel around India collecting stories from the ground of how people were articulating climate change. With very basic tools we collected stories of boat people in Banares, itinerant Sadhus in the Himalayas, coffee growers in the southwest."

"That's hard for people in Australia to understand – on the ground in the global South people do not speak the scientific language of climate change, but they experience it every day. There are innumerable ways people express that experience – and those are things we need to pay heed to," she says.

"In the end we published a report called *Hiding Behind the Poor* arguing that the Indian government wasn't doing enough for these people at the front lines. That report made a significant impact in Indian civil society – the report launch was a rare moment when we had a room of 50 journalists across newspapers, radio and TV paying attention."

Ruchira moved to Australia in 2008 when she was 28 years old to work for Greenpeace Australia before taking up a role in Melbourne to work with the Australian Conservation Foundation as a Murray Darling campaigner. "I hadn't had campaigning experience before so it was a huge learning experience. I found myself as a person of colour travelling to remote farming towns across Australia having some very honest and candid conversations."

Ruchira says although she was amazed by the natural wild places in Australia, she was increasingly drawn to learning about the country's history and relationship with Indigenous communities.

"Of course I have done a lot of hiking and experienced wild places in Australia, but grasping the effect of colonisation on Indigenous people has really been at the heart of my work. I think for a lot of people of colour in Australia it is the justice part of that work where they lead because it comes from a place of lived experience."

These experiences culminated in Ruchira writing her PHD that is soon to be published as a book focussing on the connections between global activism in the North and South. She also co-founded the project Sapna, meaning a dream, in Australia – which focuses on South Asian Climate Solidarity.

“...on the ground in the global South people do not speak the scientific language of climate change, but they experience it every day.”

"There is a well established program of solidarity to the Pacific but there is a gap when it comes to South Asia solidarity, from Australia. South Asians are now the largest immigrant group in Australia, in fact Victoria currently has the largest South Asian population, and many of these people have lived experiences of climate change."

Ruchira now considers Melbourne to be a second home. "I really like that Melbourne has this history of environmental and political activism – so I do find a community of people there who are taking tangible actions for justice. India still remains my intellectual and emotional base while Australia has added many critical layers to it."

For someone whose life and work has focused on climate justice and who bridges two distinct worlds, it's no surprise that her key inspiration is story-telling.

"There's a humongous amount of story-telling that has to happen for the various justices that are struggling to get space. There are so many stories from India and elsewhere of environmental movements that need to be retold for the newer generation."

"So I think what has always inspired me is the power of story-telling. That is at the heart of Sapna and the climate justice movement. The hope is that story by story we can piece things together and hold the ground to move ahead."



“ There’s a humongous amount of story-telling that has to happen for the various justices that are struggling to get space.

Minwen Wu

Wurundjeri Country, Box Hill

Minwen Wu was born in 1967 and grew up in a small town called Hengdian in China's once picturesque Jiangnan region, south of the Yangtze River, before it even had a sealed road connecting it to the rest of China. His family's traditional Chinese house was the last house before the foot of Bamianshan Mountain, which he says is a little like the Hengdian equivalent of Mount Fuji in Japan.

"Outside school, I spent much of my time with other kids on the nearby Bamianshan Mountain, gathering grass feed for the pig, grazing the cow or ox, fishing or playing in the little creek or simply playing around in the countryside. The food we ate was all fresh from the field – sweetcorn, sweet potatoes, bok choy, fruits – everything was from nature. There were fish in the water around the rice field. As kids we could drink directly from the underground stream."

Nowadays Hengdian is connected by a 2-hour train ride from Shanghai and his former town has become unrecognisable. "Since the late 70's China has become so industrialised. Those rural towns like mine became cities – timber houses replaced with concrete towers – migrants go back and they can't even recognise where they were born. Of course now everything natural there has disappeared and many of the creeks have dried up."

Since moving to Melbourne in late 2002, Minwen says like many other Chinese migrants, he simply wanted to live in a place with clean water, safe food and blue skies free from pollution. He says that coming from a country like China which has a history of authoritarian rule, it's harder for Chinese immigrants to become politically active in their new country.

“**...we need to simplify, minimise and care for the planet. Migrants can play a big role in that.**”

"You know, for people who have lived under an authoritarian system like me, we have this huge problem that we don't have lived experience in a civil democratic society. That means we can be very inward looking. I observe from my two daughters who are now 18 and 16, they are very natural from birth in having that sense of community. They feel they are part of a community – nature, space and society. But that's not the case for people who have grown up under the communist party in China. That needs to be re-learned – because we are told from birth not to speak out and only look out for your own interests or you will be in trouble."

Those challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in Australia integrating into a democratic system and contributing to the community here are what motivates Minwen. He has established a number of groups here including English Corners, au (EC) and Chinese Australian Network Inc. (CAN), and in



mid-2023 initiated a regular Chinese Community Roundtable meeting, aiming to tackle Chinese migrants' unique challenges.

The English Corners movement has got a major boost with Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) Community Chisholm coming onboard since early 2023. On every third Saturday of the month, ACF came to help out the English Corner / Community Conversation / Language Exchange at Box Hill Mall, plus numerous fun Walk n Talk activities in parks and reserves. Wu said, "I can't thank ACF Chisholm enough. Great Australians! I just wish the governments to support and facilitate these activities. It's for the environment, it's for social cohesion, it's for anti-racism, and it's the best way for migrants practising the English language and to be connected with the wider Australian community...all in a most convenient and impactful way with minimal cost".

Another wonderful environment group Lighter Footprints has been instrumental in establishing the fifth weekly EC in Balwyn since early 2024. The Tuesday indoor EC conversations at Box Hill central have been joined by Environment Victoria community organisers, VEC democracy ambassadors, and most recently, a waste education officer from the Whitehorse City Council.

"I can see the lack of community culture and language and zero lived experience in a democracy is a big motivation for me. The national memory and inertia is still part of the collective Chinese mentality."

Minwen says in his work with Chinese migrants in Australia, his biggest concern has been around waste disposal and recycling. "I went along to a waste education tour organised by Dandenong City Council where we saw exactly how rubbish and waste was disposed of. It made me realise that many residents don't sort out their rubbish properly. I often remind fellow Chinese migrants about doing this properly, including at big events and festivals, to sort out boxes and bottles etc from food waste"

Living in Melbourne's Eastern suburbs around Box Hill, Wu says his local community is the Chinese migrant community. "We are all recent migrants, so we have shared language, social and political challenges. But we know Melbourne has been one of the most liveable cities – so as a Melbournian we all have a shared responsibility to keep Melbourne as liveable as possible – and the environment is a huge part of that.

Looking to the future, Minwen is acutely aware of the monumental challenges faced both within his local community and globally. "Human beings are truly in crisis. Peace is at stake; real action of climate and the environmental threats have been delayed for too long – but the only hope is within ourselves. We must be the masters of our own destiny. Human beings have been too materialistic and consumerist – we need to simplify, minimise and care for the planet. Migrants can play a big role in that."

Shannon Meilak

Wurundjeri Country, Keilor Lodge

Shannon Meilak first became worried about the fate of the planet when she learned about chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) creating a hole in the ozone layer and felt outraged about the impact of French nuclear testing in the Pacific islands.

Although she says nature is her spiritual place – she faces challenges getting out into nature and public parks as a person living with disabilities. “A good example is Yaluk Barring Park – a newly reopened park that has had millions of dollars thrown into it but there is no accessible car parking for disabled people. Beautiful location but it is just not accessible to those with mobility limitations.”

Although her favourite spot is Brimbank Park which she says she can access because it has disability parking on site and a great accessible cafe – this is an exception rather than the norm. “Our nature parks are often designed with playgrounds prioritised over nature or disability access. This really limits people’s ability to be out in nature close to home, particularly if they do have a disability.”

“**Something needs to be done as the climate emergency worsens – we need a system in place co-designed with the disability community.**”

Shannon runs her local sustainability and climate action group but says she has only recently become active on climate issues, based partly on her own experiences. “Something that I’ve noticed is that climate change and disability are intersectional, as climate change disproportionately impacts people with disabilities. For example, what happens if you do get an evacuation notice and you can’t evacuate?”

Shannon experienced this first hand when a fire broke out in Keilor close to where she lives. She got a Prepare to Act warning and then an Evacuation warning as the fire approached. “I happened to be home alone at the time. My dad is my quasi-carer but he wasn’t home and I had to try to get myself and our three animals out of the house. So I needed to get my dad to come back home, because there was no formal assistance available for me to get out.”

Shannon says a registry is needed where people can nominate themselves for assistance in an emergency across the SES, Fire, Police and emergency services. “Then they can be checked up on in a coordinated way to ensure they are OK or if they need assistance. Something needs to be done as the climate emergency worsens – we need a system in place co-designed with the disability community.”

The Climate Council has identified issues including heat stress as putting people with disabilities at higher risks when we



experience extreme weather events. “People with disabilities are less likely to have the financial capacity to address these issues. Climate change is really disastrous for the disability community and yet we are usually left out of the conversation.”

Another issue Shannon is passionate about is animal rights and veganism. She recently wrote a piece for her local newspaper The Westsider encouraging Brimbank City Council, as well as other Councils in Melbourne’s West, to join other councils that have signed on to support a Plant Based Treaty.

Living in Brimbank in Melbourne’s western suburbs, Shannon says the main thing she loves is the area’s diversity. “Brimbank is one of the most diverse communities in Victoria – ethnic groups, people with disabilities, the LGBTQIA+ community – we tend to celebrate our differences a bit better here.”

However, Shannon says people with disabilities are often very disconnected, face massive barriers or simply don’t have ways to participate in their local community. “My community is my neighbourhood really, it’s my street,” she says. “During the pandemic we created a Facebook group to stay connected and support one another. I made myself available for people having a hard time and made sure I checked in on them weekly. We are a very strong neighbourhood and are here for each other – they are my people.”

Despite her challenges, Shannon says undoubtedly the thing that brings her hope is seeing young people becoming increasingly active and politically aware, especially on social media. “Seeing social media used for good – instead of spreading misinformation and coming together to fight for a common cause – that gives me hope. I think the younger generations are really good at identifying the issues and coming up with creative solutions,” she says.

“They have grown up in a world of climate change, unlike previous generations. They also know it’s a man-made problem and doesn’t have to be this way. And so they seem more motivated to want to change it – and that gives me a lot of faith that as we move forward we have people wanting to hold our governments to account.”

Adeena Khan

Gunai Kurnai Country, Trafalgar

As a child growing up in Gippsland, Adeena Khan loved nothing more than horse riding in the Strzelecki Ranges spotting Wallabies and Lyrebirds. Now 13-years old and living with her Pakistani family in Trafalgar, Adeena says it was here she first became wowed by nature.

"Growing up we had close friends who lived in Allambee," she says, "They lived on the mountain so you could see nature all around it. Even then I thought to myself – I hope this place stays the same way."

Seeing that area cleared for plantation timber motivated her to fight for nature and the places she loves. However, Adeena says she greatly appreciates the nature and space in Australia, compared to what she has witnessed in her mothers home country of Pakistan, where she frequently visits her grandmother.

"Even in small country areas it's mainly used for crops and nobody is paying much attention to the environment," she says. "I see people often just tossing their rubbish into the valley, there isn't the infrastructure there to deal with pollution."

Adeena says she had another grandmother she used to visit elsewhere in Pakistan who lived in a much greener home with chickens and quail in the garden. "There isn't as much nature in Pakistan as there is in Australia. It's one of the reasons I love living in Gippsland."

Adeena has become active as a youth Local Organiser for Environment Victoria, and earlier in the year participated in organising a climate lounge for people to discuss environmental

issues at the Eid Festival in Moe. "Everyone was having a positive discussion – mostly agreeing that we need more environmental awareness," she says.

"There was a lot of discussion around energy transitions and what are the best transitions. There was a really interesting discussion about Hazelwood mine rehabilitation and how they are going to take too much water from the environment to fill the mine pits."

The Eid Festival is an important one for Adeena and her family – because it is a key annual moment of Islamic celebration. She explains that there are two main days of celebration – the first after fasting and then a later Eid where an animal is sacrificed (usually a lamb or a goat) in the name of God. "The animal is separated into three parts – one for the needy, one for family and one for anyone else," says Adeena.

Adeena says that her family mostly enjoys a positive, warm reception from the local community in Gippsland. "Of course there are lots of different types of people everywhere, but I love how quiet and peaceful it is here in Trafalgar. We have lovely friendly neighbours – and I am committed to spreading more environmental awareness here."

Adeena says the thing that motivates her is getting people on board to take care of the environment as a community. "I have many discussions with my friends and they are now more engaged in climate change and they do want to help out," she says.

Adeena also feels positive and hopeful when she sees the federal government getting on board with the energy transition required in Gippsland. "I feel like there is more effort at the federal as well as local government level – and more young people are becoming engaged. They recognise that their future is at stake – more so than previous generations."

"I feel like I will start off making a slow, silent difference – and then I will make it LOUD!"

“ I feel like I will start off making a slow, silent difference – and then I will make it LOUD!



Helen Chen

Wurundjeri Country, Melbourne

Helen Chen grew up in densely populated urban Hong Kong in a 30-storey high-rise building without a garden and far removed from nature. “Hong Kong is a big Asian city – we don’t often get out into nature,” she says, except for occasional summer trips to Hong Kong’s beaches.

However, because her grandparents lived in Indonesia, Chen remembers visiting them as a child for the entire summer vacation. “I first visited Bali when I was five or six years old. At first I didn’t like it because I thought it was too rural, but eventually after going there every summer I grew to love that it was so different to Hong Kong,” she says.

It was in Bali that Helen had her first real nature introduction. “In Bali I could ride on a horse, I could visit the mountains... things I could never do in Hong Kong. Gradually I started to enjoy it a lot.”

Chen says it was at school that she had her first introduction to even thinking about protecting the environment when her teachers began encouraging the students to recycle their litter. “Even back then – twenty or thirty years ago – they started talking about recycling and tree planting – those were the things that engaged me and got me thinking about environmental issues.”

Chen moved to Australia six months ago as an international student doing her Masters in Education, although she had visited Tasmania, Perth and Sydney on earlier trips. “I really enjoy the wildlife here in Australia. It’s amazing to me that I can just go to a park nearby to my home and see a lot of different animals like koalas or a variety of birdlife. This is not the case in Hong Kong and this is the thing that I love in Australia.”

Even before coming to Australia, Helen had been drawn to employment in Hong Kong that would satisfy her love of both nature and education. She worked as a Development Manager at Hong Kong Ocean Park collaborating with teachers and schools, as well as for Hong Kong Telecom as a Marketing Team Leader in the education division..

“These experiences allowed me to contribute to meaningful projects supporting learning and conservation efforts, for which I’m truly grateful,” she says.

Her role at the nature park involved helping students and teachers encounter animals like the giant panda and learn about conservation. “My experience at Ocean Park in Hong Kong allowed me to work with great educators and ecologists.”

Helen says climate change impacted her work at the nature park because of the amount of rain they experienced and general warming of temperatures. “The whole of December and January is supposed to be winter but it has been around 22 degrees, it disrupts the expected winter conditions. In summer, extreme weather forced us to close the Park, which is very sad for our students.”

Helen now lives in Melbourne’s CBD – but says she loves the fact that she can just travel for less than an hour on public transport and visit nature parks. “This is the thing that I enjoy so



“ For me education is the thing. Everyone can learn what they can do better and to learn what they can contribute.

much – I go to the West Park, or Geelong or Dandenong – and this is my weekend. We have a group of people who we all visit nature together – many of us are from Hong Kong.”

Chen joined Environment Victoria’s table talk events where she says she has met many different nationalities of volunteers and event participants – including Chinese and Indian communities. “They want to contribute and do more for the environment. I was one of the co-facilitators but I learnt a lot from them. Some of them have been living here for 30 years so they have a lot of ideas on how to improve the environment – for example on public transport or making the shift from gas to electricity. I have gleaned a lot of insights and friends from this community.”

But for Chen, despite having moved from Hong Kong to Melbourne, education remains the key to meeting our environmental challenges. “For me education is the thing. Everyone can learn what they can do better and to learn what they can contribute. For children since they are at a very young age – are they getting well educated on how to lessen their environmental impact?”

“I see some of my young relatives – they are choosing sustainability courses over business – this makes me feel hopeful,” she says.

From left: Tyler Rotche, Uncle Allan Murray, Uncle Phil Murray, Laura Melville and Greg Foyster



Restoring Country at Ryan's Lagoon

Duduroa Dhargal Country, Albury-Wodonga

Standing in the dappled shade of an ancient river red gum, Uncle Allan Murray points to the entrance of this property, about 15 kilometres east of Wodonga. A gentle slope leads to a crescent-shaped lagoon, with reeds and grasses ringing the shoreline. "When the water levels were up," he says, "there were about 100 pelicans near that gate."

At the time of our visit, the Albury/Wodonga region has gone months without decent rain, and the floodplains and surrounding hills look brown and dry.

“ Water is life... If we had full control of this place, things would be a lot better.

We're at Ryans Lagoon Nature Conservation Reserve, a 165-hectare network of interconnected wetlands, on a tour with Traditional Custodians. The lagoon looks shallow at the moment, but it holds huge potential as a biodiversity hotspot for fish, frogs and birds once more water is allowed to flow naturally into the wetlands. Three wedge-tailed eagles soar overhead, which Uncle Allan calls bunjil, a revered ancestral figure.

Previously managed by Parklands Albury Wodonga, Ryans Lagoon is now under the care of the Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation, with a three-year project to restore the landscape by thinning dense regrowth to allow more room for trees to grow, clearing weeds and controlling invasive species. They're also promoting cultural practices, and Uncle Allan and Uncle Phil Murray have planted tea trees and wattles to mark out areas for dancing, rock art, axe-grinding and stone-knapping.

About a month ago they conducted a cultural burn to clear out invasive weeds along the banks of one lagoon, but there's still a big task ahead. Driving through the property, Uncle Allan points out waist-high Bathurst burr and thistles on either side of the track. "If you haven't got people to manage it," he says, "this is what it ends up like."

Once the weeds are cleared, the elders hope to plant an indigenous crop like Kangaroo Grass, so the grains can be harvested and ground into flour. Native grasses attract wombats, kangaroos and wallabies, as well as providing shelter for lizards, skinks and bandicoots.

Further along is a huge river red gum with its upper branches fused together to form distinctive rings. Hundreds of years ago, Uncle Allan's ancestors trained the tree into this shape by binding branches with twine made from Cumbungi reeds, and it stands here as a reminder of their care for Country. The Duduroa Dhargal elders plan to make their own ring trees, continuing this cultural practice.

It's a compelling example of how water secured for the environment under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan can be used to restore wetlands under the care of Traditional Custodians. But this project only lasts three years, which doesn't provide certainty to employ young Indigenous people in a secure career, making it difficult for the elders to pass their knowledge to the next generation.

At Ryans Lagoon, Uncle Allan and Uncle Phil are showing how impactful it can be when Traditional Custodians have the power to manage their Traditional land – to restore biodiversity, heal Country and promote cultural practices at the same time. "Water is life," says Uncle Phil Murray. "If we had full control of this place, things would be a lot better."

Sunil Abbott

Bunurong Country, Werribee

Sunil Abbott grew up in Chandigarh in the northern Indian states of Punjab and Haryana from the age of eight, a city he describes as the most beautiful in India, designed by the Swiss-French modernist architect, Le Corbusier. It was here he first developed his deep-seated care for the environment.

“Chandigarh has a large lake and is on the foothills of the picturesque Shivalik Hills. Since I was living in this city the environment was very clean – not much pollution or traffic or heavy industry. The local government ran the city very well and kept it clean and tidy.”

One distinctive feature Sunil recalls from his childhood in his hometown is the now famous Chandigarh rock garden made from recycled materials that was founded by a local civil engineer named Nek Chand Saini in 1957. The rock garden gave Sunil inspiration as to what was possible from making use of recycled materials.

“Nek Chand started working on it in secret – picking up waste materials from all over the city like broken ceramics, old tyres, all sorts of things. He took an area near the forest and created beautiful sculptures out of it. That was one of the things that inspired me when I was young – the understanding that these materials can be used to create beauty rather than just discarded.”

After having a successful career in different parts of India working in various multinational roles, Sunil made the decision to move to Australia in 2011 to be closer to his children who had migrated as qualified chefs now running local Indian restaurants. But he also brought his environmental consciousness with him and found ways to direct it into community work in the western suburbs of Melbourne, mostly with older Indian community members.

“I found that a lot of people who had migrated from India and other south Asian countries were settling down in the western part of Melbourne, often for economic reasons. I saw that these seniors often face social isolation and are not so aware of environmental issues in this beautiful city.”

Sunil got together with a few other Indian friends and started a group called Club 60 in 2014 that has now grown into the largest social club in Wyndham City, with a focus on park clean-ups and tree planting sessions. He was recently awarded a Wyndham City Council Waste Watchers certificate for his contributions. “A lot of people used to leave rubbish in parks and we told them that was not fine. Then we enrolled in a few activities like clean-up Australia and tree planting operations.”

The club now has 770 registered members and runs other sessions designed to break down social isolation among its members including knitting sessions, Bollywood singing and dancing, as well as English and computer literacy sessions.

Indians now make up the largest immigrant population in Australia, and the largest Indian community concentration is in the western suburbs of Melbourne around Tarneit and Werribee. “What I have observed is people choose Australia



“ The challenge is massive, we are in our 70's and we have been lucky to live in a relatively peaceful time.

because it is a safe country and people feel respected here. Obviously the climate has similarities to India – especially northern India which like Melbourne also has very different cold and warmer seasons.”

Sunil says he has noticed especially over the past five or six years, people who have come from India are very aware of climate change from their own lived experiences. “It's definitely there – a marked change. We are seeing more flooding, and very high temperatures also – we'd never seen 50 degree temperatures throughout our lives, but in the last few years it's hitting those temperatures even in the capital city Delhi and other places.”

As Sunil is largely working with an older demographic of Indian immigrants, he is acutely aware of the particular challenges they face from extreme weather. “We talk to them about how to cope with extreme heat, the pollen in the air, all these things – recommending them not to move around too much in the height of summer. Some of our people have had major health and skin problems – from spending too long in the sun or doing yoga in the parks during the daytime.”

Sunil says he would like to see the Australian government showing more leadership in shifting to a safer, less carbon-intensive and cleaner future. “The challenge is massive, we are in our 70's and we have been lucky to live in a relatively peaceful time. But the challenges of global warming are huge – the government needs to step up – I think they are lagging behind.”

They need to step up to ensure the new generations have the opportunities we had.”

Farrah Moyden

Gunai Kurnai, Ngarigo Monero and Bidwell Country, Orbost

Farrah Moyden is a mother of five living in Orbost in East Gippsland, but she grew up in the south island of New Zealand near the crater of a volcano in Lyttelton Harbour close to Christchurch.

"It was just amazing scenery where we grew up – I haven't seen anything that matches it even here in Australia. The freedom of just frolicking through the grass without having to fear snakes or spiders. Even though we were poor, nature made us feel incredibly rich."

Her father was an avid trekker who would frequently take her out exploring the nearby mountains, volcanoes, tunnels, ice caves and gorges. "I was the one child who had boundless energy and wanted to get out there with him in nature no matter what."

Her family moved to Queensland when she was a teenager mostly chasing work, as she recalls, because New Zealand had just introduced the GST and it was a tough time economically. "It was a bit of a culture shock when we moved to Queensland after New Zealand," she says.

After living with a foster family who were 'naturalists who lived off the land', she had a stint in West End in Brisbane living a more bohemian life in her early twenties in a tiny timber hut under a Leopard tree. As an adult Farrah made her way south with her children – first to Bermagui in NSW and then finally to her current home in Orbost in East Gippsland.

"I moved southwards mostly because of the temperature – it was just far too hot for me in Queensland. Eventually we moved to Gippsland because of the house prices here – we got priced out of Bermagui."

While she was living in NSW from 2007 she recalls many years of drought including strict water restrictions. "It was just so dry – nothing would grow, all the greenery around just turned to dirt." Ten years later Farrah saw those dried out landscapes turn to fire, smoke and ash.

"That many years of drought and then one day we woke up and all we could hear were sirens. Then I got a call from my ex-partner who was on farmland 5-minutes drive away with two of my children. They jumped in the car and started to drive – they were driving through towering flames and trees falling behind them. They just kept going until they got to Bermagui Surf Lifesaving Club where there were thousands of people gathered. People simply had nowhere else to go – all around you was just black destruction."

After experiencing fire on such a scale first hand, Farrah started volunteering with the SES in Orbost. "Because of those fires in Bermagui the SES has many volunteers. People saw what happened and knew it would happen again so they got involved."

Farrah says she is still searching for her like-minded community. "People are slow to accept that things are changing – they do see the weather is changing but I think there is fear about acknowledging it as climate change. I am hoping that being in the SES I will meet more people like myself."

Farrah says her children have grown up loving nature and they want things to change. "My oldest 26-year-old son who now lives in Melbourne said to me the other day – I don't know if I ever would have voted green but the way things are going they are the only ones making sense. My younger children just want to surf and travel the world. They love nature – but even in school they tended to avoid environmental issues to some extent."

Farrah says of Orbost, which has historically been a logging town and was also affected by catastrophic bushfires in Black Summer, "People are talking about why we suddenly have these winds here, why it's become unseasonably cold. So I do feel like there is hope because people are talking about it through their own circles."

"It's important that people make the connection between the weather and impacts we are experiencing and climate change. Our communities need more people who are facing the reality of what is happening" she says.

““ Our communities need more people who are facing the reality of what is happening.”



Angela Ashley-Chiew

Maidstone

Angela Ashley-Chiew is a grassroots climate campaigner and community organiser, based in Melbourne's west on Kulin Nation, near the Maribyrnong River. She is active in numerous grassroots groups including Parents for Climate, Asian Australians For Climate Solutions, Climate Action Maribyrnong, Extinction Rebellion and Beyond Gas Network.

As a first-generation Asian Australian with Filipino and Chinese-Malaysian roots, Angela's advocacy is shaped by her upbringing and her commitment to ensuring diverse communities are part of the climate conversation. Living in the City of Maribyrnong, where 40% of residents were born overseas and 42% speak a language other than English, she works to bridge climate action with community inclusivity.

"My parents are Filipino and Malaysian-born Chinese. We ran a family restaurant in Adelaide when I was young so we were extremely busy all the time. Mum and Dad were amongst the first Asians in Adelaide. My mum was a nurse and her first station was out in Whyalla – 7 hours drive north of Adelaide through red dirt desert, it looks like Mad Max country! It's hard to imagine how that must have been like for them, so foreign from the tropical environments they came from."

Although Angela says she didn't have many opportunities to get out into nature much as a child, her grandfather was instrumental in setting off her environmental imagination. "My Filipino grandfather was a forest ranger in Borneo and the Philippines – he probably gave me my first images and impressions of nature as a child. I remember him explaining to me how he would measure the distances in a forest between cliffs and other parts of the forest, and his later experiences as a farmer."

Angela says her first real immersion in nature came as an adult when she and her husband would go hiking and take camping trips to Tasmania. "We just loved visiting the rainforests over there. I feel so at home and at peace in a rainforest – also here in Victoria we love visiting the Otways and the Dandenong Ranges."



“ ..we can be campaigning against climate impacts and injustice – but if we don't know how to relate, talk to and look after one another – what the hell is it all for?”

A parent herself, Angela is driven by the need to protect future generations, build community resilience, and push for a rapid transition to a fossil fuel-free future. She actively collaborates with councils and advocates to State and Federal MPs to champion stronger climate policies and legislation.

"We've been living in the west of Melbourne for about 19 years with our two boys who are 10 and 12 now. When we first moved here we were struck by how multicultural Footscray was – and it still is but the demographics are shifting. It felt very different to where I'd moved from in Brunswick – I realised there were a lot more people out here that looked like me."

Angela says gardening was her first point of connection with the community in Melbourne's west – through the community centre and a group called Permaculture Out West. "Many of those same people including myself started getting involved in climate activism – joining groups including Climate for Change, Permablitz, and taking part in the School Strikes For Climate."

"Then we had the 2019 bushfires. It really raised the urgency of climate action to me," says Angela.

Angela says as a non-white person, she has often attended meetings of climate groups and been the only person of colour in the room. "I have grown up with that so I feel less intimidated. But I think for newer migrants it definitely helps to see more people of colour at such community gatherings, to know they are welcome in the room too."

"I try to be a bit of a bridge for the new migrants coming along. I think it's vital to take the time to have one-on-one conversations and actually get to know people – especially recently arrived migrants. So many migrants have moved here for a better life and to get away from threats of violence so they may be wary of getting involved in political activism or attracting attention to themselves."

Connecting with people, empathy and developing truly supportive networks are the things that Angela says give her the most hope. "The on-the-ground relationships and the way that people turn up for one another in times of need. At the end of the day we can be doing all of this campaigning against climate impacts and injustice – but if we don't know how to relate, talk to and look after one another – what the hell is it all for?"

"As well as dismantling all the problems we are facing, we need to be building the world we want to shift to. Connecting with my community is what gives me hope."