

## Statement of Yehansa Dahanayake

Name: Yehansa Dahanayake

Date of birth: 22/05/2008

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> February 2025

1. My name is Yehansa and I am 16 years old. I use she/her pronouns. I live on the lands of the Wallumedegal people of the Dharug nation which is in the Ryde area of Sydney.



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2. I am in Year 12, my final year at High School. I love school, I love learning. I'm naturally a very curious person, sometimes my parents have to force me to stop studying. I also love to paint and draw, creativity is something that I'm super invested in. I'm definitely a hobby hoarder - I always want to do everything: radio, singing, dancing, baking and more. I'm so interested in creating a life that is full of experiences! When I grow up I want to go into climate science or environmental law or human rights law. I'm very passionate about these matters, and I believe it's vital that we harness and consider many diverse and passionate perspectives as we work in this area.
3. I have a really strong sense of justice, I always have since I was little. When I see something is wrong, I go to hell and back to fix it. I remember back when I was in primary school, I learned about racism and I wrote this whole speech and presented it at the assembly because I thought it was so wrong. So, I remember as a young teenager I was so disheartened when the Sussan Ley decision came out (the decision in *Minister for the Environment v Sharma (No 2)* [2022] FCAFC 65)

– it shocked me that it was decided that Australia’s Minister for Environment did not have a duty of care to protect young people from the climate crisis.

4. Climate change is undoubtedly the single greatest challenge facing our planet moving forward. As a young person, I am already experiencing the consequences of that inaction. I know that climate change will have dire consequences for my future, and my family’s, friends’ and other young people’s futures. I think that it’s important to frame climate change as a child rights issue – climate change is and will continue to change childhoods, and we owe protection and responsibility to my generation and the generations to come.

### **My life and how climate change is impacting me**

I was born in Sri Lanka, and I came to Australia when I was a baby. In Australia, I grew up in Ryde in Sydney. Ryde is a really nice area, it’s semi suburban, lots of nature and lots of trees, the community is really strong, and I really enjoy where I live and the schools around us are really nice. Ryde has a lot of nature and bushes surrounding it, you get the coastal breeze. We are close to Parramatta River and some of the beaches and we are relatively close to the city. Parramatta River is quite polluted, you wouldn’t swim in it. I have learnt that when the Parramatta River first started to become polluted, a lot of the native animals drastically declined including the totem of the Wallumedegal people.

5. I live on the border of Western Sydney. Western Sydney is on the other side of Ryde which is a bit of a different area. Western Sydney is more urban and there is a new Western Sydney city which replicates Sydney city. A lot of the Sri Lankan community live in the Western Suburbs and I travel out to Western Sydney a lot with my family. Western Sydney experiences what’s called the “urban heat island effect” meaning at most times Western Sydney is 6-10 degrees hotter than the eastern suburbs of Sydney<sup>1</sup>. That is for a couple of reasons including the topography of Western Sydney and that heat can be more intensely captured in those areas because of vast amounts of concrete. Concrete landscapes absorb heat, becoming a boiling pot for extreme heat and weather events<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, there is not much grass or trees in that area to offset all of the concrete or much coastal breeze, meaning temperatures rise high, and stay high as nighttime residue – which can

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<sup>1</sup> [Untouchable playgrounds: Urban heat and the future of Western Sydney | Climate Council](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Urban heat | Planning](#)

cause health and safety risks, especially in these often overpopulated, lower income vulnerable communities, who may not be equipped to handle it.<sup>3</sup>

6. Whenever I travel out to Western Sydney, I can feel the difference in the heat. I think other people can feel these impacts more severely, but I know that my stress levels increase and I get headaches in the heat.
7. In terms of my eco-anxiety and my mental health, I've struggled a little. I'm very future focused and I love dreaming up new ideas and things we could do in the future – I do bucket lists all the time. It's not productive to stress about things out of your control, and something like climate change is so far out of our control is hard to grapple with. It's confronting and quite terrifying. When I'm not stressed about school or assignments, I'm stressed just about climate change. I don't think it's healthy for a 16-year-old to think this much about climate change – because it feels like such a big thing to solve, I constantly want to be a “fixer”. This is something that I know a lot of climate activists and students are prone to as well because it's such a big thing and we feel the need to fix it right now. I have experienced burn out before. But I try to remind myself that it's a marathon not a sprint, we must sustain ourselves for decades if we want to build a successful movement.
8. I babysit a lot of kids and when I am looking after them I often look at them and think about what's going to happen to them when they grow up. They are just full of energy and optimistic and so cute and I wonder, what is your life going to look like? That's just from a babysitter's perspective too, I wonder what the parents think about this.
9. I know some people who are university age who are thinking about not having kids because they don't want to put a child through climate change impacts. I think about my graduating class, beautiful people I grew up with, and wonder what's going to happen to us and how our careers are going to be changed by climate change. It's terrifying that the future is uncertain because of all this but I also try to remember that there can be beauty and optimism in what we don't know. The fact that we don't know gives us the space to explore, in letting go of “not'-knowing” we can risk everything for the person we are capable of becoming.

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<sup>3</sup> [Extreme heat is getting worse in the west | University of Technology Sydney](#)

## Climate change and its global impact

10. Since moving to Australia, we go back to Sri Lanka to visit family when we can. The UN states Sri Lanka is highly vulnerable to climate change, being placed as one of the top 10 countries at risk of extreme weather events<sup>4</sup>. Growing up, it's always interesting to see the impacts of climate change in Sri Lanka before I see them in Australia.



11. I remember going on a road trip with my dad's friend who is a historian, and she was talking about how the area we were in had changed in recent years because of climate change and had caused intense heat in the area. Sri Lanka relies quite heavily on rice harvesting and the agriculture industry<sup>5</sup>. Impacts of climate change on extreme weather events in the past 20-30 years, such as increased rainfall, onset monsoon delays, and early withdrawals<sup>6</sup>, and the exemplification of these events due to El-Nino/La-Nina and the Madden-Julian weather oscillation can cause drastic effects on the vital industry. This impact can have a drastic effect on the countries' economies, thus having flow-on human rights impacts such as food insecurity<sup>7</sup>.

12. I'm a person of colour so when I talk about climate change and its impact, I tend to think of the disproportionate impacts in the Global South in comparison to the Global North. When I think about my family in Sri Lanka, I'm worried about how climate change will impact them and older family members who are more prone to heat-related illnesses. I also think about my cousins too who are much older than me (almost 3 years older) and haven't graduated high school (whilst I am about too), due to school disruptions, and how that may become worse moving forward. Seeing first-hand how climate change impacts my family overseas, it makes me worry. It's a worry that lots of people of colour in the climate advocacy space have. It is that fear which drives us all forward.

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<sup>4</sup> [Fact Sheet: Climate Impact in Sri Lanka | United Nations in Sri Lanka](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Paddy Cultivation in Sri Lanka | Traditional Agriculture Practices of Sri Lanka](#)

<sup>6</sup> [87aa74d9-6774-4981-a0f2-447bb1d9623b.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> <https://srilanka.un.org/sites/default/files/2023>

13. When I think about Australia, we are one of the world's biggest coal exporters. This is not something Australia should be proud of, I think it is a basic ask to the government to reduce their export quantities. Australia needs to make climate change decisions that recognises that its not just Australian kids who are suffering under the brunt of climate change. Australia's role as a global exporter has consequences for the international world.
14. I am disappointed in the Australian government and the fossil fuel industry for being derelict in their duty to care for the planet. They are supposed to be responsible for leading climate action and should take urgent and decisive action to halt and reverse climate change. But it doesn't seem like they're doing that.

### **My climate advocacy work**

15. I've always been naturally conscious of the environment because my family is. During primary school as well, I remember always being very aware of being sustainable and recycling and was naturally conscious of food waste and how much stuff you use and throw out. Actually, I think my parents are sometimes better climate leaders than me – they call me out when I've been in the shower for too long!
16. I also remember being aware of climate change from a young age too. In classes, we would often watch David Attenborough documentaries at school and my school friends and I would always get sad watching them. I remember in my early teenage years at around 13 years old, I loved the K-pop group, Blackpink. One year, Blackpink went to COP26 in Glasgow and had a video speaking about COP and a media campaign talking about climate change. I know that celebrities talking about climate change is questionable, surrounding greenwashing claims. Still, seeing that, I thought it was fascinating and that made me want to learn more.
17. This was happening around the same time that the Sussan Ley decision came out. Sussan Ley was Australia's Minister for the Environment at the time and she has the job of deciding whether to approve new fossil fuel projects. I remember when that case was decided, I thought "What do you mean that the Minister doesn't think that children need to be protected from climate change?". I really looked up to the youth litigants on that case, and many leaders in the climate sphere. That's when I started getting into understanding more about climate change as a whole. I love science, so I started researching into those areas. And I started to think about climate change as 3D



interlocking, intersecting issue that is not limited to science, but can overflow and effect various aspect of society. I think it was the justice elements of climate justice that really peaked my interest. At that time I joined the AYCC (the Australian Youth Climate Coalition) and started up the AYCC group in my local area, I joined School Strike 4 Climate<sup>8</sup> and Amnesty International and started to get involved with other students and do petitions and working on grassroots campaigns for climate action.

18. I did all of my work for AYCC in my spare time and while balancing my schoolwork too, I'm always really busy. During the day, I was a normal school student and then after school, I go speak at panels and sit in meetings. It made me feel like Hannah Montana –you know student by day, cool climate advocate by night! I think I enjoyed having that double life.



19. I have a couple of teachers at school who like seeing the work I'm doing on climate change and my teachers let me do climate change-related work where I can. They are really supportive. Now I am in my senior year, I haven't been able to do as much. As much as I love grassroots advocacy, it takes a lot out of you sometimes. It's a lot of meetings, organisation and sometimes it doesn't feel like you get anywhere. I've sat in so many meetings with politicians who work at the Local, State and Federal level, and it can be disheartening to feel like we're not achieving success fast enough.

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<sup>8</sup> School Strike 4 Climate was formed in 2018 and is part of a global movement of student strikers committed to ending fossil fuel extraction and securing a safe and liveable future.

20. In 2023, I started working as a youth co-researcher with the University of Western Sydney ‘Young & Resilient Research Centre’ and UNICEF Australia, on a project called “We all deserve to live in a thriving world: child-centred indicators for climate change.”<sup>9</sup> I’ve **attached** a copy of the Report to my personal statement and I would like to draw the Special Rapporteur’s attention to the Aspirational Statement on p 67, which I wrote. As one of the first reports that centred around an integrated youth experience, the Special Rapporteur should look to read this report as a message from young people directly about how they are being impacted by climate change and the solutions that they want to see. The Youth Aspirational Statement in this Report outlines a compiled vision on climate change solution making spoken directly from young people to key decision makers. I believe that its pivotal that our decision makers and Special Rapporteur read this and implement the wants, needs and believes outlined by these young people in the statement.
21. In this project, we talked to 49 young people from all across New South Wales (NSW) to create a world-first set of indicators on climate change. These indicators use directly from NSW youth to understand how climate change impacts us, and to track the impacts of climate change and whether climate action efforts are reducing these impacts. The framework centres young people’s diverse needs, concerns and aspirations and seeks to initiate intergenerational conversations about how to best safeguard their present and build climate resilient futures. It’s mapped alongside current human rights legislation, it measures factors pre and post the pivotal year 2030 and covers over 4 domains and 10 ideal states. This comprehensive tool provides governments, industries and citizens a direct and clear roadmap to designing a better world – it’s up to them to work with us to use it. Together we can make this vision a reality, and I believe it is up to the government and industries to use it!
22. From this research, we can conclude through evidence-based methods that young people feel a disproportionate burden of responsibility when it comes to climate change, similar to of the psychological feeling of being abandoned. Personally, my family and my school is super supportive, and I don’t feel this same sense of abandonment as much as other youth did, especially as many came from disaster-affected and coal communities like Muswellbrook and Lismore.

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<sup>9</sup>Third, A., Chowdhury, F., Dahanayake, Y., Hannah, S., Kennedy, U., Lala, G., & Moody, L. (2024), ‘We deserve to live in a thriving world’: child-centred indicators for climate change, Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University and UNICEF Australia. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26183/t5bc-mk38>

23. It's exciting to see academia to start to consider youth voice as this has been a space that we have historically been excluded from. Young people conversational ideas and solutions are being officially recognised and I think that its so important that these youth voices are brought up and elevated as equal to other adult academic spaces. I think the Australian government has a lot to learn from centres like the one I work for at WSU, understanding that young people do have an intellectual and participatory expertise especially on climate change and this should be a priority moving forward.
24. I do think climate advocacy has undoubtedly shaped the way I grew up. I think it's almost disappointing that I don't think I've had a super normal high school teenage experience. Like even when I'm on school camps, I still bring a computer so I can respond to emails in my cabin, or during my school holidays I'm always working. In my school holidays, I will often go to an AYCC leaders retreat or be doing meetings and organization for a climate campaign. I'm not sure if I've had that average high school experience which is a little disappointing.

### **My art and how I try to stay hopeful**

25. Sometimes I don't even know what I cared about before I cared about climate change. Thinking and worrying about climate change is changing my identity. It's almost weird because if you look around my room, its all climate posters that I've got. No bands or records, just climate posters.
26. I like planning ahead and feeling in control and thinking about who I am and who I want to be, but with climate change sometimes I don't know what those plans look like. Sometimes I don't think of myself as a holistic person, I think of myself as different people in different spaces, like I think of myself like a school student, a climate activist or a radio host.



**@Yehansa Dahanayake**

27. I read a study from UNICEF's "climate change is changing children" campaign which states that a child turning 10 this year, has experienced the 10 hottest years on record. When I think about me, that means



that I've experienced 10 out of 16 years of my life experiencing the hottest years on record. To me, that is so scary and confronting and makes me a little angry.

28. When I'm feeling overwhelmed and stressed, I like to use my art as a way to get my feelings out. I love storytelling through art, theatre and music and sometimes I'll tell my climate stories as a way of hope. I also do some songwriting and I write songs to get my feelings out and to feel more hopeful. When I'm making art about climate change, it feels good and makes me feel hopeful. I think storytelling and art is such an important medium for connection and community – and I think when we use it effectively, especially in climate science or research communication it can be so inspiring. I had a singing teacher who once taught me that nervousness and excitement are essentially the same emotion, and to channel nervous energy into joy and passion guiding performances. I like to utilize this analogy as we advance, that it is in the anxiety, helplessness, anger, and despair we feel facing climate threats - we can channel into hopeful action, in showing up day after day to fight, passionately advocating for a different world.
29. When I started the AYCC Bennelong group, we made an Instagram account (@aycc\_bennelong) and we started this series called "Active Hope" to inspire hope about climate change in our group. At that time, I was really into climate psychology, the works of Per Espen Stoknes, and Rebecca Huntley – looking for ways to inspire optimistic solution-making. To understand that passive optimism or naivety or denial is not productive, but "Active Hope" highlights our climate successes and our losses. It's highlighted to me that it's very reasonable for young people to be stressed about climate change, and interesting conversations are happening in the Sydney space around this!



## **The Australian governments inaction on climate change**

30. I think that if there was concrete evidence that change would be made by the Australian government to take action on climate change, that would really help my eco-anxiety and my mental health.
31. The Australian government's inaction is such a disappointment. How many scientists need to say something, how many records and articles do you need to read to make a change and take action on the climate crisis? We've been recording the increases in temperature for years and the first knowledge about climate change was recorded decades ago. Young people have been screaming and protesting about this for so long. It's just pure disappointment, what else does the Australian government need to hear to make a difference in climate decision making.
32. I think that the Australian government understands climate change, but I think there are lots of political problems, including the fact that the fossil fuel lobby has ties with major parties which means things aren't done. The fossil fuel lobby has too much power and I wish climate change was more bipartisan. I don't understand why it's a political issue. This is going to affect everyone no matter what side of the political spectrum you're on. Climate change is usually framed as a matter of left-leaning policies, but I truly don't understand why this can't be a bipartisan issue. If all sides of Parliament accepted climate science and worked together to create change that would be a dream come true.
33. I think that Australia as one of the world's largest coal exporters has a responsibility to immediately stop their high rates of exports to prevent future emissions and harms that climate change disproportionately causes to young people. Our exports and their emissions do have a wide global impacts. Australia as a global leader and being a multiculturally diverse country, the Australian government has a responsibility to ensure that the places that its constituents are from are also protected. I don't think they've fulfilled their responsibility, they haven't used any of their power to grapple with that responsibility. Legally, Australia doesn't have proper human rights protections on climate change either and it doesn't recognize the value of the Earth beyond what it can do for humans. I think Australia has a responsibility to holistically reduce their exports and emissions and lead the world in effective climate action.
34. The Australian government also needs to centre young people first when it comes to climate change. They ought to have a duty of care, under negligence law, to protect us against climate change. We don't have a vote. We don't have many ways to be involved in spaces that consider climate change. I feel like all politicians should consider young people in all their decisions especially for climate change. The Duty

of Care Bill being campaigned for by Anjali Sharma (another Australian climate activist) is legislation which would create a requirement for politicians to consider young people in their decisions about climate change. That Bill would create a requirement and open up so much opportunity for young people to hold the government accountable for their inaction on climate change.

35. There are currently no legal avenues that young people can take to ask the Australian government to take action on climate change. The extent to which the young people can have their voices heard is limited by the current legal system.
36. I like to frame climate change not as a problem, but as a puzzle and everyone has their place to come together and fix this puzzle. Whether you're a student, a teacher, a parent or carer, a doctor, a surfer, or a politician etc – everyone has a role. If everyone was united, we could work together to solve it and it wouldn't be a disaster, it would be a massive opportunity. Climate change is not just science either, we'll find it creates impact on multiple broad aspects of society. If climate change is the single greatest challenge facing our planet, it is also the single greatest opportunity. It represents a change to not only fix our climate but also to address social inequality in our communities: from alleviating energy poverty to ensuring equity for climate-vulnerable communities, working with Indigenous peoples and their knowledge, and uplifting the voices of young people and communities on the frontline of climate change. This is a chance to unite the world under a common vision, a chance for all of us – no matter who we are – to work towards something meaningful.
37. If the government really wanted to protect Australian children from climate change, they would implement research like this WSU report and listen to young people. In Australia, I think there's a bit of disdain towards kids who are climate activists and who leave school to protest but there are lots of us who are very well informed, who value their education and who have articulated intelligent views about what proper climate action means. The Australian government isn't listening to us and I would really like them to listen and take proper action.
38. Young people are more than capable at envisioning and designing a future that is stronger, more sustainable, and more equal, one that aims to solve climate change and it's intersecting issues. I do believe it is the utmost responsibility of the Australian government to not only hear these plans but back them, and show true loyal support.

I confirm the contents of this statements are a true and correct record of my evidence.

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Name: Yehansa Dahanayake

  
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Signature

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17/02/2025  
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