

climate tech

for a Sustainable Planet

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Voice of Gen Next...



VINISHA UMASHANKAR

Founder,
Solar Ironing Cart, India
TEDx and COP26 Speaker,
The Earthshot Prize Finalist

Vinisha is a student, a TEDx speaker, an innovator, and an environmentalist. She is known for her innovation, the Solar Ironing Cart. She was only a school student when she was selected as the youngest Earthshot Prize 2021 finalist. She spoke along with Prince William, the Duke of Wales, at COP26. Her 5-minute speech went viral on social media and may have been seen over 30 million times. Despite her age, Vinisha advocates change through innovation. She was the recipient of the EarthDay Network "Rising Star" award in 2021 and the Children's Climate Prize in 2020, among many other awards. She lives in a rural town in Tamil Nadu, India.

THERE MAY BE 10 MILLION TRADITIONAL IRONING CARTS IN INDIA, WHICH BURN ABOUT 50 MILLION KILOS OF CHARCOAL EVERY DAY.

You developed a solar-powered ironing cart as a clean alternative to the charcoal-powered version prevalent in India. What inspired you?

In my neighborhood, six ironing vendors use charcoal to heat a heavy cast-iron box for pressing clothes and usually throw the burnt charcoal away with the garbage. It made me think about this being done all across India. There may be 10 million traditional ironing carts in India, which burn about 50 million kilos of charcoal every day. Think of how much CO₂

and toxic pollutants mix with the air! About 7 million people worldwide die every year due to toxic air pollution. I looked for a viable solution and discovered that solar energy could effectively replace the 300-year-old tradition of using charcoal as a fuel, thus eliminating its harmful impact on the Earth, humans, and animals.

At the moment, people have no choice but to breathe toxic air. When scaled up, the solar ironing cart will eliminate the use of charcoal for ironing clothes in India and other developing countries. Prevention is still the best solution!



DRIVING CHANGE IN SOCIETY

In a powerful speech that you have given on various platforms, including COP26, you have emphasized the impact that the younger generation can have on climate change. What are some of the approaches through which young people can induce change in society?

Being able to express myself through speeches is great, but the world requires action. Spreading the word, keeping up the political pressure, using public transport, cutting down on electricity use, buying locally grown produce and locally made products, eating plant-based meals, not wasting food, buying fewer clothes, planting trees, and recycling used products are some of the ways in which everyone can help change society.

Protesting is a democratic choice. But climate change activists are increasingly turning to acts of civil disobedience to make their point, and this can be counterproductive. In April 2022, hundreds of scientists from more than 35 countries planned and synchronized actions, including blocking highways, picketing infrastructure, and spray-painting and pasting large climate posters on monuments. In May 2022, the UK government initiated efforts to ban the climate action group Extinction Rebellion on the grounds that it is an organized crime outfit, in light of the group's plan to blockade oil companies across the country. Such radical actions – and the

official responses to them – will hinder non-destructive climate activism and negatively affect public support for climate change mitigation.

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SCIENCE AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

As an innovator and inventor, what do you see as more important to the transition to sustainability: a shift in consumer behavior, or disruptive innovation to create solutions/products that are sustainable by design?

I would say that both are key to progress. Science can't solve all the problems humanity has created; some we will have to resolve for ourselves through changes to our behavior. We, as consumers, should take full responsibility for our actions. The resources that we are using are finite. We are answerable to future generations.



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If it continues, our reckless use of major resources will hamper the economic and financial well-being of posterity. We have to be responsible consumers.

What support do you expect from society in protecting the environment?

Failing to solve our environmental problems is not an option. No one country or group of countries can do this for the whole world, either. We have to identify, understand, and work collectively to do this.

How can large organizations collaborate with younger environmental activists such as yourself to achieve these goals?

Large organizations can help and collaborate in a variety of ways by engaging with, investing in, and empowering young environmental activists. Young people are taking the initiative to address climate change, from volunteering to raising

funds for environmental initiatives. We need support to develop a climate action framework and a green economy. Large organizations must work with governments to support youth innovations to combat climate change through grants and capital or zero-interest loans to scale solutions quickly.

If you had a superpower to change the way things are today, which would you choose?

I would like the power to turn people who cut down trees and pollute soil, water, and air into rock statues! Deforestation and air pollution are the two most serious environmental issues of the 21st century. Deforestation is happening on a large scale to produce palm oil and cocoa. The land is sprayed with gallons of weed killer, which permanently damages the soil. Air, be it on Earth or in space, is being polluted to the point that clean air may one day go extinct! We have become the most careless people the Earth has ever seen.



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