

# School climate strikes: What next for the latest generation of activists?

February 19 2019, by Marc Hudson

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

School students across the UK (and the world) [went on strike](#) on February 15, leaving their lessons to protest the lack of effective action on climate change. Coordinated school strikes may be a novel tactic, but mass environmental activism isn't. So will things be any more successful this time around?

The first big global wave of ecological concern began in the late 1960s and involved fears of overpopulation, air and water pollution and the extinction of species. It peaked with the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, which kicked off international environmental politics.

The next mass movement began in the late 1980s with concerns over the ozone hole, Amazonian deforestation and newly-voiced fears of [climate change](#) – then known as the "greenhouse effect". That wave peaked with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which sought to tackle both global warming and biodiversity, and marked the beginning of coordinated [climate action](#) through the UN. That conference was addressed by a passionate and articulate young woman representing "ECO" – the Environmental Children's Organization:

From about 2006 to 2010 there was another, climate specific wave, beginning with Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth documentary, and groups like Climate Camp in the UK. It climaxed (or fizzled out) with the 2009 UN climate summit in Copenhagen. This wave saw the creation of various "Youth Climate Coalition" organisations in Australia and the UK.

In academic terminology these periods of concern and relative indifference are known as the "[Issue Attention Cycles](#)".

## **A new wave of activism**

This latest wave of climate action emerged in 2018, in the shape of Extinction Rebellion and its French cousin (or inverse) the [gilets jaunes](#). Earlier in the year, Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg had begun her [solo "school strike"](#) in Stockholm while, more or less simultaneously, activists in America launched the "Zero Hour" youth climate march.

Alongside this activism, the IPCC released its report on what it would take to keep [global warming](#) below 1.5°C, and Mother Nature lent a hand with blistering hot summers in the UK, California and (more recently) Australia.

Previous bursts of environmental activism occurred before climate breakdown had been quite so obvious and severe. This time round, the heatwaves, hurricanes and floods will keep coming, perhaps making the latest wave of enthusiasm last longer.

### **Maintaining momentum**

But what goes up must come down, and the students will find that it is very hard indeed to sustain emotional and physical mobilisation for a prolonged period. Right now, this issue is roughly where the Parkland shooting protests were last year – newsworthy for now, but the media caravan will inevitably move on.

That has consequences: when protests and actions stop getting the same amount of attention, and it seems that momentum is stalling, internal disagreements as to what is the best way forward, beyond a cycle of marches and symbolic strikes, will emerge, and will need to be managed skilfully. Some will want to work "within the system" and get invited onto advisory panels and into consultative processes. Others will have to get on with real life (university, paying the rent, working on, ah, zero-hour contracts).

On one front, the young are lucky – their age means it is hard to see any direct infiltration and "[strategic incapacitation](#)" by undercover police. But the flip side is that social media offers virtually limitless surveillance possibilities.

One possibility is an attempt to discredit and demoralise those who seem

vulnerable. Elements of special interests like the oil and gas industry often try to "pick off" individual scientists or activists rather than take on a whole field – climate scientist Michael Mann has dubbed this the [Serengeti Strategy](#) as it resembles lions hunting the weakest zebras. We are already seeing this strategy in the latest wave of climate activism: recently Greta Thunberg had to address some [rumours being circulated about her](#).

Youth activists also face the problem that they may annoy their parents and grandparents. Yet before offering advice to the young, we [older people](#) have to ask ourselves, why should they listen to us? We've known about the problem and either been ineffective or done nothing. It is children who are owed an enormous apology and expression of humility.

So for the latest generation of climate campaigners, my top four pieces of advice (see here for a [longer list](#)), based on both my activism and my time in academia, are as follows:

- Be aware of emotions. People won't be persuaded just by being given more information on global temperatures or carbon budgets – [psychological skills](#) will matter too.
- Your parents are probably wrestling with fear (aren't we all?) and guilt for not having sorted this out before you had to. Fear and guilt make can make people oscillate from action to inaction, pessimism to optimism.
- Traditional "social movement" activities (marches, petitions, protests, camps) have a short shelf-life. The media gets bored and stops reporting. Meanwhile, those in power learn how to cope with the pressure. Be very careful about getting drawn into the Big Marches In London syndrome. You're going to need to innovate, repeatedly.

Even though time is short, this is still a marathon, not a sprint.

But what would you say? How should we older people offer advice, when, who to, and about what? Suggestions in the comments please.

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