Why the world is watching young climate activists

Researchers break down why the movement and its message are gaining ground.

BY EMMA MARRIS

From Jakarta to New York City, children and teenagers are walking out of class and marching in the streets to demand action on climate change. And the world is taking notice. Communications researchers say these young climate activists are using their moral authority as children, and their social-media savvy, to surf a rising tide of adult concern.

Jamie Margolin founded the protest group Zero Hour in Seattle, Washington, in 2017, when she was just 15. Half a world away, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg started skipping school in 2018 to strike for climate action outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm. The movement quickly went global. An estimated 1.6 million kids in 125 countries hit the streets for a protest in mid-March. That was dwarfed by a global youth-led demonstration on 20 September that was probably the largest climate protest ever.

Young people have been talking about climate change for decades. But the latest generation of protesters is louder and more coordinated than its predecessors, says Dana Fisher, a sociologist at the University of Maryland in College Park who studies activism. The movement’s visibility on social media and in the press has created a feedback loop.
Scientists join climate strikes

Biggest-ever rally against global warming drew millions of protesters worldwide.

BY QUIRIN SCHIERMEIER, KATE ATKINSON, EMILIANO RODRÍGUEZ MEZA, T. V. PADMA, EMMA STOYE, JEFF TOLLEFSON & ALEXANDRA WITZE

Scientists around the world joined the millions of people who walked out of workplaces on 20 September to urge stronger action on climate change. The event, inspired by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg who began a ‘school strike for climate’ one year ago, took place as government and business leaders arrived in New York City for the United Nations Climate Summit this week.

_Nature_ spoke with striking scientists worldwide about their motives and expectations.

MEXICO CITY

Instead of carrying a sign, like most climate strikers in Mexico City, Ana Wegier was holding her three-year-old son. “I believe it’s super important for him to grow up participating in these events,” she says. As a population geneticist at the Botanical Garden of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, Wegier is most worried about the “silent” consequences of a warmer planet. These include a reduction in the genetic diversity of crops and plants on which millions of people depend. “What we’re losing is the opportunity to survive many of the changes to come,” she says.