



*Author's note: Owen Baylis, 7, is a student at Braidwood Central School, as well as being my son. He asked if he could contribute to this article, and given that it addresses the concerns of students, I said yes.

and less habitat for native animals. Their concerns were taken up later by community members, who urged those in attendance to consider planting and propagating native trees, especially acacias.

Owen: I talked about how plastic can harm the ecosystem. I wanted to talk because I care about the environment, and I think every one else should. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't survive. So it's very important to let everyone know that they shouldn't harm the planet.

Braidwood's kids support School Strike 4 Climate

Jessica Friedmann and Owen Baylis*

While younger students raised awareness, older students expressed a mix of frustration, anger, and hope against the odds.

On Friday, 20 September, at 1pm, around 120 students, parents, carers, grandparents, babies, dogs, and community members gathered in Ryrie Park, to take part in the Braidwood School Strike 4 Climate. The weather was in the low 20s, though three days beforehand it had snowed. Walking through the park, it was clear which plants had responded to the sudden increase in moisture, perking up after a long dry winter.

Though many older students had commuted to Canberra to join the large rally there, around 40-50 students who attended home school, St Bede's Primary School, and Braidwood Central School converged at the park, with homemade placards, banners and signs.

Owen: Everybody there cared about the environment and even some people got on stage so I showed how to do it [speak into the microphone].

The 'stage' was a set of outdoor chairs,

arranged in front of Dhurga Rock. Given that the anticipated crowd was primary students, we felt that asking students to stand up and give a speech might be a bit overwhelming. Instead, I invited students to come sit and chat, and answer a few questions about themselves and the environment. Local musician Michael Simic had organised for two microphones and set up a PA system, so that the crowd could hear even the softest speakers.

Owen: Some people from my class were there so I was happy to see them. They were Frankie, Kai, Oscar, Reuben, and some others. Some talked, some did not.

To the crowd's delight, a line of primary students immediately formed, with protesters keen to share their thoughts. For many of the younger students, the most pressing and visible issues were littering and environmental pollution, as well as deforestation.

These students were concerned that fewer trees would mean less oxygen,

Tara, from BCS, got up from the crowd and spoke passionately about the need for systemic change. I wish that I had recorded her speech so that I could quote it here; perhaps she, and the other students who spoke, would consider submitting their thoughts as letters to the editor.

Jack, also from BCS, spoke of his disillusionment with government, suggesting that politicians had no incentive to change policy when the effects of coal, oil and gas were unlikely to become catastrophic in their lifetime, and cosy relationships with industry kept them comfortable.

What was common to all protesters was that they felt that climate change would be the issue of their generation. More than jobs, or housing, or access to education or healthcare, they were striking for the right to a clean and habitable environment.



Owen: If someone said I should be in school, I would say, "No, the ecosystem is more important." We have to tell the government we shouldn't have much pollution. If there was too much pollution, we wouldn't be able to breathe.

After all the students who wanted to speak had a chance to, members of the broader community were invited to address the crowd. Some got up to voice their support for students; one speaker suggested that climate fears were overblown, and urged students not to panic. Though there was a bit of kerfuffle from the crowd in response, the atmosphere remained broadly warm and supportive.

Michael Simic closed the event with two new original songs, and BCS student Harry stayed to play guitar as the crowd drifted off. Staying on to chat,

many older people mentioned that they were reminded of the 60s and 70s, when visible student protests helped change the legal status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, gain an equal wage for woman, and bring about a close to the Vietnam War.

They were aware, as older students no doubt had been, that there had been division within the community over the issue of the climate strike. What had been intended as a small alternative to events in Canberra and Goulburn, predominantly for younger children, became the topic of an astonishing number of online conversations, some of which did not treat students and their fears with much respect.

Much of the criticism came from those who felt that students shouldn't miss school to take part in political action. Both sides of the climate 'debate' were



aired, but at Ryrie Park the message was loud and clear; with a 97% scientific consensus, the question was not 'if', but 'when'.

Owen: If somebody said, "You have to wait until you're grown up to speak about the environment", I would say, "That's silly. I may be small, but I can do a lot."

Young people want the right to grow up without anxiety over shifting weather patterns; they want the adults in charge to take their future seriously. And those of us collectively fighting for the health of the planet couldn't be more proud.

If you're interested in keeping the conversation going, find us on the 'Sustainable Braidwood' Facebook page. Thanks to Michael Simic, Rose Ricketson, Ana Ciolomic and Bec Hamilton for their volunteer contributions on the day.

