

## ‘OK Doomer’ and the Climate Advocates Who Say It’s Not Too Late

*A growing chorus of young people is focusing on climate solutions. “‘It’s too late’ means ‘I don’t have to do anything, and the responsibility is off me.’”*



*Alaina Wood, a sustainability scientist in Tennessee who takes to TikTok to communicate much of her climate messaging. “The science says things are bad. But it’s only going to get worse the longer it takes to act,” she said. Credit...Mike Belleme for The New York Times*

By [Cara Buckley](#)

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things around. They believe that focusing solely on terrible climate news can sow dread and paralysis, foster inaction, and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With the war in Ukraine [prompting a push for ramped up production](#) of fossil fuels, they say it’s ever more pressing to concentrate on all the good climate work, especially locally, that is being done. “People are almost tired of hearing how bad it is; the narrative needs to move on to solutions,” said Ms. Wood, 25, a sustainability scientist who communicates much of her climate messaging on TikTok, the most popular social media platform among young Americans. “The science says things are bad. But it’s only going to get worse the longer it takes to act.”

Some climate advocates refer to the stance taken by Ms. Wood and her allies as [“OK Doomer,”](#) a riff on [“OK Boomer,”](#) the Gen Z rebuttal to condescension from older folks.

Alaina Wood is well aware that, planetarily speaking, things aren’t looking so great. She’s read the [dire climate reports](#), tracked [cataclysmic](#) weather events and gone through more than a few dark nights of the soul.

She is also part of a growing cadre of people, many of them young, who are fighting climate doomism, the notion that it’s too late to turn

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If awareness about the climate crisis has never been greater, so, too, has been a mounting sense of dread about its unfolding effects, particularly among the young. Two-thirds of Americans thought the government was doing too little to fight climate change, according to a 2020 Pew study, while [a survey](#) last year of 10,000 teens and young adults in 10 countries found that three-quarters were frightened of the future.

There is also growing consensus that depression and eco-anxiety are [perfectly natural responses](#) to the steady barrage of scary environmental news. Stalled climate legislation in Congress along with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and its implications for the environmental crisis, has done little to help.

Yet people like Ms. Wood, and her thriving community of climate communicators, believe that staying stuck in climate doom only helps preserve a status quo reliant on consumerism and fossil fuels. Via social media, she and her fellow “eco-creators” present alternative narratives that highlight positive climate news as well as ways people can fight the crisis in their everyday lives.

Along with allaying their own eco-anxiety, they have found a growing audience hungry for what they have to say.

In the summer of 2021, Ms. Wood, whose handle is [@thegarbagequeen](#), began creating TikTok videos [debunking extreme examples of climate doomism](#) — among them that all of humanity will perish within decades — and relaying news of [assorted climate wins](#): the creation of North America’s first whale sanctuary, a planned [treaty to curb plastics pollution](#), the construction of a huge wind farm off the coast of the United Kingdom.

After making that shift, she said her follower count tripled from about 100,000 to close to 300,000 today. Ms. Wood also helped form a TikTok group of like-minded climate advocates called Eco-Tok, and said their hashtag #ecotok has more than 200 million views.



*Caulin Donaldson posts videos on TikTok of his daily pilgrimages picking up trash in St. Petersburg, Fla. He has amassed 1.4 million followers. Credit...Zack Wittman for The New York Times*

Caulin Donaldson, 25, whose handle is [@trashCaulin](#), joined TikTok in December 2019 to chronicle his daily [pilgrimage picking up garbage](#) from the beaches near his home in St. Petersburg, Fla. His short videos were upbeat and playful: In December he posted a “Twelve Days of Trashmas” series. He also furnished his new apartment using secondhand goods, framing it as a scavenger hunt. By October 2020, he had a million followers. Today, it’s up to 1.4 million.

Ms. Wood and Mr. Donaldson say their followers are taking environmental action themselves, online and off.

Ms. Wood, who lives in Tennessee, said she’s helped prompt thousands of people to sign environment-related petitions and to join climate strikes. “I’ve been able to organize in ways I never could imagine,” she said.

On TikTok, Mr. Donaldson highlights videos of his followers, who he says are largely kids 7 to 14, picking up garbage themselves, along with beach cleanups he inspired. By painting sustainability and climate action as positive and fun “rather than this corny or lame thing adults

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do,” Mr. Donaldson aims to be a gateway for youngsters to take bigger action down the road.

“I hate when people say one person can’t make a change,” Mr. Donaldson said. “It takes a whole group, but it takes one person to start. One person to inspire. One person to raise a voice.”

There is debate over what role individual actions play in the climate crisis, given that fossil fuel companies, large corporations and governments are responsible for the overwhelming majority of planet-heating carbon emissions. Focusing on an individual’s impact is a useless, guilt-inducing distraction, detractors say. They point to marketers for the oil giant BP that helped popularize the notion of an individual’s carbon footprint as an example of shifting blame.



*Isaias Hernandez, known on social media as QueerBrownVegan. “Your input still matters. You’re influencing someone around you.*

*Existing and future generations can benefit,” he said. Credit...Shirley Yu for The New York Times*

Yet presenting the climate crisis as too massive or intractable can cause people to go numb and check out, said Sarah Jaquette Ray, the chair of environmental studies at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, and the author of “A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety.” To fight the sense of powerlessness, she encourages people to see themselves as part of a collective groundswell of environmental groups working around the world, and to resist going down the rabbit hole of climate horror stories.

If people don’t have control over geopolitical upheavals, she said, they ought to focus on where they can make a difference. “If the problem is so big and we’re so small, which is what the doom narrative is telling us, then we need to make the problem smaller and us bigger,” Dr. Ray said.

She later added that the climate crisis would be “the fight of our lives, with ups and downs,” regardless of the administration in power, or whether particular policies are implemented. “It takes courage and discipline to keep cultivating community and health right where you are, especially amid such bad news,” she said.

Many climate advocates say there are benefits to pressing for systemic change while also taking personal steps. Individual actions can have wider effects, as was the case with the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, whose lonely school strikes for climate morphed over time into an international movement.

“Both can coexist,” said Isaias Hernandez, 25, who posts climate justice videos on social media under the moniker [QueerBrownVegan](#). “There can be large and local changes at the same time. Your input still matters. You’re influencing someone around you. Existing and future generations can benefit.”

Like many climate advocates, Kristy Drutman went through her own dark period of eco-despair. Ms. Drutman, 26, is of Filipino and Jewish

# The New York Times

descent, and for her, the crisis hit home during her freshman year at the University of California, Berkeley. That's when Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines, leaving 7,300 dead. Not long after, as an anti-fracking activist on campus, Ms. Drutman became dismayed when university and state officials didn't seem to share her sense of urgency.

She began airing her frustration on social media under the handle @browngirl\_green, and soon concluded that many communities of color, already affected by climate change and environmental devastation, lack "the time or privilege to get lost on climate doom," she said. "They have to focus on solutions," she added, "because their survival is literally on the line."



*Kristy Drutman, an activist in Hoboken, N.J., uses social media to promote environmental advocacy. Many communities of color "lack the time or privilege to get lost on climate doom," she said. Credit...Shirley Yu for The New York Times*

Philip Aiken, 29, who hosts the podcast "just to save the world," said that privilege is also baked into the attitude of "it's too late."

"'It's too late' means 'I just want to be comfortable for as much of my life as possible, because I'm already comfortable,'" Mr. Aiken said. "'It's too late' means 'I don't have to do

anything, and the responsibility is off me, and I can continue existing however I want.'"

To ward off his own sense of doom, Mr. Aiken monitors his intake of climate news. He came up with a metric: Focus 20 percent on problems, and 80 percent on solutions. He's come to understand that there's a lifetime of work ahead, and concentrates on grass-roots movements and effecting local change. "That work fulfills me," he said, "and keeps me optimistic about a future in which we can still survive and thrive."

Kate Marvel, a research scientist at the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and Columbia University, said that even she freezes up when she encounters fear-based climate messaging. But her own focus is on all that humans can still do. She pointed out the positive effects of federal clean air and water legislation and the Montreal Protocol, signed in 1987 to phase out ozone-depleting chemicals, which helped to heal the hole in the ozone layer, [prevented millions of cases of skin cancer](#) a year and [headed off even worse](#) global warming.

"We are still facing very dire threats, that's legitimate," Dr. Marvel said. "But that doesn't mean that no policy has ever been effective, and no progress has ever been made. And it certainly doesn't mean that progress isn't possible."

Or, as Mary Annaïse Heglar, a climate essayist and co-host of the "Hot Take" podcast and newsletter, said, "Look at all the lives in the balance between 1.5 and 1.6 degrees." She was referring to the additional drought, heat, flooding and destructive storms that scientists say will result with every fraction of a degree of global warming.

For Ms. Heglar, as bad as climate doomism is, so is what she called "hopeium" — an unfounded optimism that someone else will come up with a magical climate solution akin to a silver bullet.

"Underneath doomerism and hopeium is the question of 'Are we going to win?'" Ms. Heglar said. "That's premature at this point. We need to

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ask ourselves if we're going to try. We don't know till we try if we're going to win. Whether or not we do, it will still have been worth it.”

Audio produced by Tally Abecassis.

Cara Buckley is a climate reporter who focuses on people working toward solutions and off-the-beaten-path tales about responses to the crisis. She joined The Times in 2006 and was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize in 2018 for reporting on workplace sexual harassment. [@caraNYT](#) • [Facebook](#)

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