

Creating a Climate for Change

DANNY MALKOWSKI

The more 24-year-old Danny Malkowski heard, the more convinced he was that young people felt powerless to stop the degradation of their environment. He imagined a science camp where teens could learn about energy conservation. When he reached out for help in creating the camp, the response he received was phenomenal. In the past 18 months alone, teens have gathered for more than 350 Youth Climate Conferences (YCC) throughout Europe and Asia, forums where they can voice their concerns about the environment and talk about real solutions. Here, Malkowski discusses the goals of the YCC, the impediments to progress, and how one person really can make a difference.

Making a Difference

I think I've always been looking for a project where I could do something good and meaningful on a large scale. I believe that everyone has the potential to do something fulfilling with their life, both for themselves and for the greater good. The only limitations are your own imagination and the persistence with which you pursue your goals.

My primary motivation for founding the Youth Climate Conferences was the lack of understanding I sensed among youth about the climate problems we face. We're aware of them, but do we act on them? Young people believe they can't make changes that will have any lasting environmental significance. But they're wrong, and that's what we're trying to show them through the conferences. By changing our consumptive behaviors, we will essentially force the larger industries to change their ways. If the market for energy-friendly technology, devices, and solutions grows, so will companies that move into the field of sustainability.

Birth of a Movement

The idea for the YCC began in 2008, when I was studying nano-medicine at university. I joined the Danish Youth Association of Science (UNF) in an effort to promote nanobiotechnology. The UNF holds summer camps on various themes, and a UNF friend and I envisioned an energy summer camp for maybe 100 kids. We eventually held meetings with people from UNF and MILSET (the International

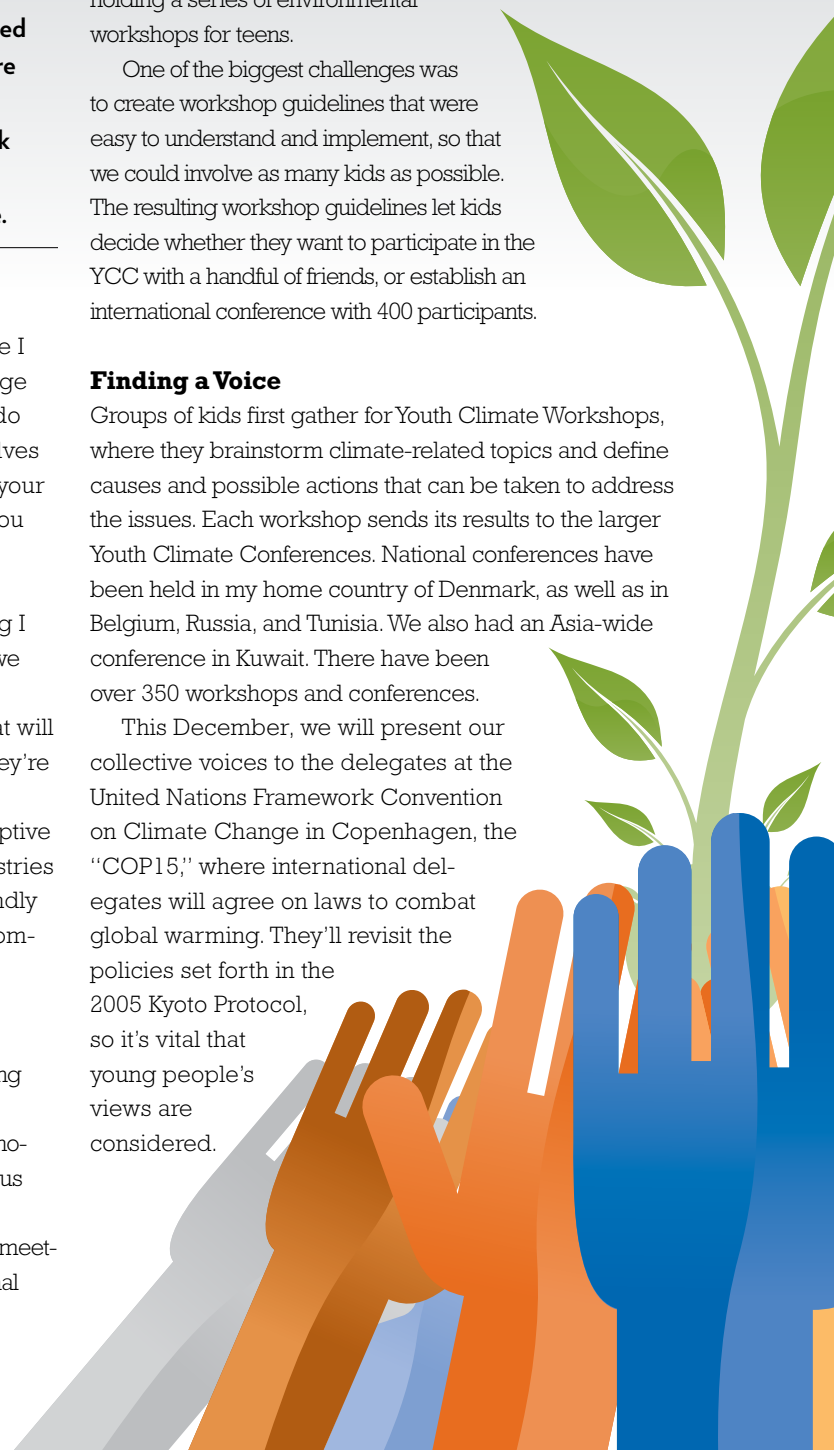
Movement for Leisure Activities in Science and Technology), which promotes science and technology to youth through programs, camps, and science fairs. They had access to a huge network, and together we came up with the idea of holding a series of environmental workshops for teens.

One of the biggest challenges was to create workshop guidelines that were easy to understand and implement, so that we could involve as many kids as possible. The resulting workshop guidelines let kids decide whether they want to participate in the YCC with a handful of friends, or establish an international conference with 400 participants.

Finding a Voice

Groups of kids first gather for Youth Climate Workshops, where they brainstorm climate-related topics and define causes and possible actions that can be taken to address the issues. Each workshop sends its results to the larger Youth Climate Conferences. National conferences have been held in my home country of Denmark, as well as in Belgium, Russia, and Tunisia. We also had an Asia-wide conference in Kuwait. There have been over 350 workshops and conferences.

This December, we will present our collective voices to the delegates at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, the "COP15," where international delegates will agree on laws to combat global warming. They'll revisit the policies set forth in the 2005 Kyoto Protocol, so it's vital that young people's views are considered.





A YCC workshop in Copenhagen (left), and a conference in Kuwait (above)

From Observation to Action

Teens give voice to their ideas through the workshops. Their observations have been very powerful: In Greece, they're seeing longer summers and increasingly severe winters. This year they had snow there; they had never seen snow before. Kids are seeing plants and animals in areas outside their normal habitats, or they don't see them at all.

Then they come up with ideas that can have a direct impact on our environment, such as supporting the research and development of energy-efficient technologies, educating people regarding recycling and other sustainable solutions, and labeling products to document if they have been produced in a sustainable way.

Toward a Global Statement

We haven't had a single workshop in the U.S., which is rather disappointing. From what I read in the news, though, I'm confident that the youth in the U.S. are very aware of the issues we're facing and wish to act upon them. I encourage every reader of this article to download our workshop guidelines from our website. Gather your friends and organize a YCC workshop. Fill out the questionnaire that follows the guidelines, and send it back so that we can combine it with the other workshop reports and present a truly global statement of youth in Copenhagen in December 2009.

We'll have only one to two minutes to speak in front of the decision-makers at the

COP15, but our final report will be distributed to all the participants there, and YCC representatives will mingle with the decision-makers throughout the two weeks of the convention. I believe that by delivering the global statement, by giving an impassioned speech based on the statement, and by continuing the discussion throughout the COP15, our participants—and the voices of youth—will be heard and recognized.

Challenges and Solutions

I'm most overwhelmed by the amount of time it takes to make people see the challenges we face and to be moved to act upon them. I humbly understand that it is not easy for every person, company, or sector to change its behavioral patterns from one day to the other. But the attendees at the COP15 need our full support to reach an ambitious and truly global agreement in December. I believe that we can still prevent the most disastrous scenarios if we act now.

After Copenhagen, I hope that the network we have established, and the discussions among our youth, will continue to grow. Ideally, the Youth Climate Conferences will expand until we have a chapter on every continent, and until we have workshops, climate awareness events, and campaigns in every country. We can hold annual International Youth Climate Summits for each region, and conferences with top professionals and politicians to discuss the progress of the newly formed agreement from the COP15. I am confident that the young people we've reached will continue their efforts to be heard. After all, it is they—and you—who will have to live with the decisions that are being made over these next years. **i**

Read more about Youth Climate Conferences and how to organize your own, find conservation tips, and take the Pledge for Change at www.ycc2009.org.