



**"We need nature
as much as we
need buildings"**

**A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE ON
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN THE ACT
2025**



OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND
THE ENVIRONMENT



“Young people hold the key to a brighter future for all of us. We must ensure their voices are amplified, their needs properly met, and they feel valued and supported, so they can carve their own path towards a better future for themselves and for all of Australia.”

SHARON CALLISTER CEO, MISSION AUSTRALIA

Acknowledgements

OCSE warmly extends its thanks to students and staff from the following schools for their participation in this project:

- Belconnen High School
- Daramalan College
- Erindale College
- Radford College
- St Francis Xavier College
- UC Senior Secondary College Lake Ginninderra
- Woden School

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
A call for a brighter future	4
What young people said	6
1. Conservation	8
2. Waste	10
3. Land use and planning	12
New rules for nature	14
Conclusion	15

A call for a brighter future

Young people in the ACT are deeply invested in the future of our environment. They want to see nature protected now so that it will thrive for generations to come.

In 2024, the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OCSE) engaged high school students across Canberra about actions they want to see taken to protect nature in the ACT. Postcards were sent to schools inviting students to respond to the prompt:

Imagine you can make one rule to protect nature in Canberra.

What's your rule?

This project follows on from the value of OCSE's 2023 report on young people's hopes for the environment, which focussed predominately on the perspectives of primary school aged children.¹

Governments are not only responsible for the wellbeing of the current population, but for ensuring that future generations are given the opportunity to thrive.

¹ Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, 2023. "I want to have a future": A Report on Young People's Hopes for the Environment in the ACT. envcomm.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/1-want-to-have-a-future-report.pdf

However, young people face challenges making their voices heard by those in power. Participants of the 2023 ACT Youth Assembly raised concerns about their limited access to and government support for influencing policy decisions that impact them.² This reflects broader trends, with a national 2020 survey finding that only 13% of young Australians feel that their views are listened to by government.³

The ACT can take the lead by listening to our youth and making meaningful changes based on what they have to say. As such, ministers, policymakers, and those capable of enacting change would be remiss to ignore the perspectives presented here. Ranging from creative to straightforward, the solutions presented in this report provide direction and inspiration for policies that can improve environmental outcomes in the ACT now and into the future.

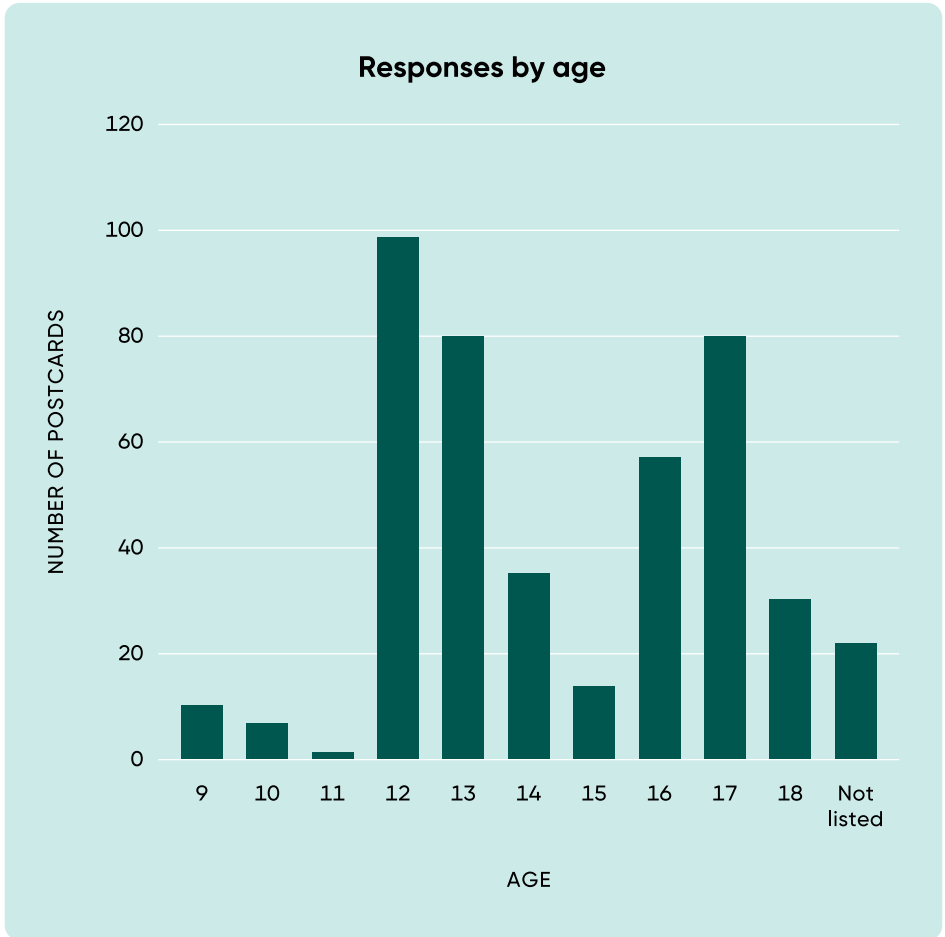


Making voices heard. Source: Flore W

- 2 ACT Youth Advisory Council, 2023. 2023 Youth Assembly Report: Our Voice, Our Impact. www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2404910/Youth-Assembly-Report-2023.pdf
- 3 The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and World Vision, 2020. Our World Our Say: National survey of children and young people on climate change and disaster risk. www.worldvision.com.au/docs/default-source/advocacy/youth-survey-report_2020-08-12_v1-2.pdf

What young people said

OCSE received 435 postcards from 7 schools across the ACT. Ages ranged from 9 to 18 years old, with most students falling within the 12–18 age bracket.



THREE DOMINANT THEMES EMERGED FROM STUDENTS' RESPONSES:



CONSERVATION
46% of postcards



WASTE
34% of postcards



**LAND USE
AND PLANNING**
16% of postcards

Across these themes, students called for stronger laws and regulations, harsher penalties for non-compliance, and increased funding for environmental and sustainability initiatives. Other popular topics included emissions reduction, transport and water.

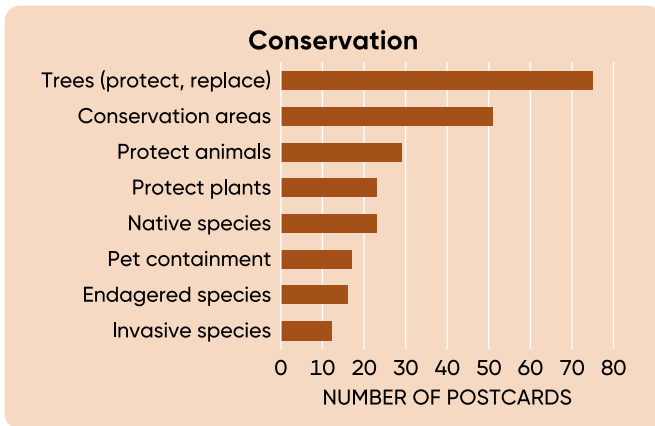


Box-gum grassy woodland. Source: Mark Jekabsons

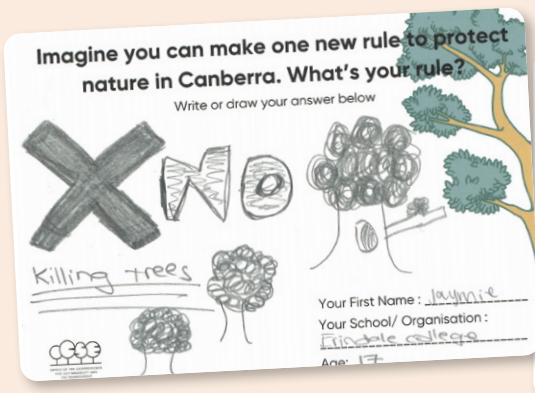
1. Conservation

Conservation was the most dominant theme in young people's responses, featuring in 46% of postcards.

Young people particularly want to see action around protecting and retaining trees, increasing funding for conservation areas and activities, protecting native species and enforcing pet containment.



Scan QR code or [click here](#) to access Storymap



WHAT ACTIONS DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SEE TO ACHIEVE BETTER CONSERVATION OUTCOMES IN THE ACT?

"Spend more money on conservation and protection of animals/wildlife and national parks. This will improve our wildlife and our experience when in nature. Thank you!"

LAWRENCE, 13

"More park rangers to keep nature cared for, and to reinforce rules."

NEMA, 14

"Prevent the removal of trees over a certain age (unless the tree is highly obstructive/ destructive)"

MATILDA, 16

"Trees should be a priority over new roads, stop taking trees out for convenience."

IMOGEN, 17

"More investment in trees and plants."

TEGAN, 12

"Control kangaroo populations and plant native plants."

SOFIE, 13

"There should be heavy limitations on planting non-native flora. This will reduce pest species as well as foster habitat for native species."

SOL, 17

"My new rule would be that only certain parts of the bush are accessible to people and they are only allowed to walk or do activities on that certain part of the bush."

EVA, 12

"Focus on eradication of invasive species, specifically carp and common rabbits."

CALLUM, 16

"All endangered species in Canberra should be closely monitored."

IZZY, 15

Imagine you can make one new rule to protect nature in Canberra. What's your rule?

Write or draw your answer below

I would help enforce the new cat ban!



Your First Name: Mitcher B.

Your School/ Organisation: St Francis Xavier

Age: 16



Imagine you can make one new rule to protect nature in Canberra. What's your rule?

Write or draw your answer below

No cutting down any kind of nature!

Your First Name: Anya

Your School/ Organisation: BHS

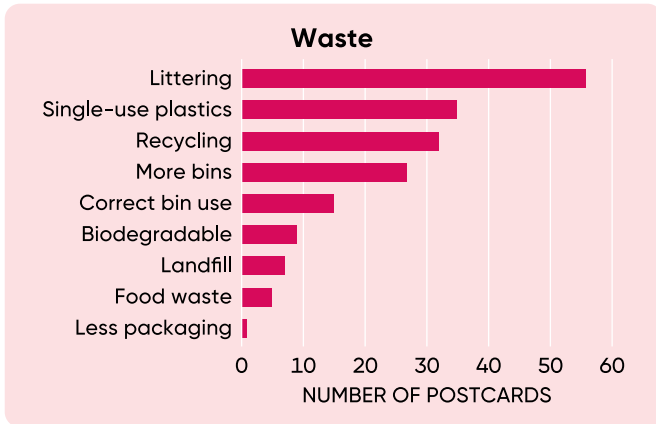
Age: 12



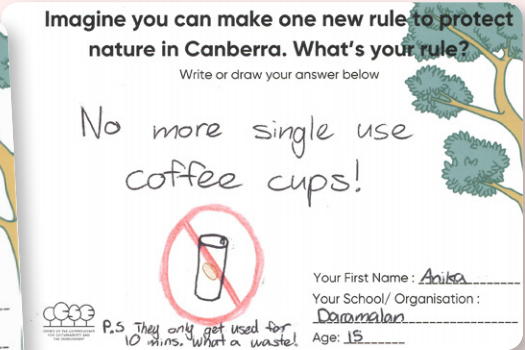
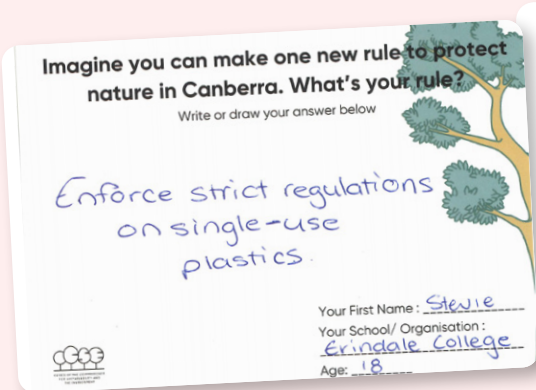
2. Waste

Waste was the second most common concern in young people’s responses, featuring in 34% of postcards.

In particular, young people want to see harsher penalties for littering, swifter action to phase out single-use plastics, stronger packaging regulations (including ensuring packaging labelled as recyclable is genuinely recyclable), and better access to bins at school.



Scan QR code or [click here](#) to access Storymap



WHAT ACTIONS DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SEE TO ACHIEVE BETTER WASTE OUTCOMES IN THE ACT?

"We need better laws controlling packaging on items in the ACT. All packaging should be recyclable in the ACT system and clearly and correctly labelled if it's not actually recyclable."

ISABELLE, 16

"Less packaging overall. More regulations on plastic and recycling."

JOSH, 16

"Actually make recyclable packaging recyclable. Keep plastic with plastic and paper with paper."

SAKURA, 16

"Increased severity for littering and dumping laws to enforce proper use of bins."

ISEN, 18

"More bins in places people hang around, e.g. carpark, hallways."

CARISSA, 16

"FOGO for all states, territories, and cities. In particular Canberra."

RYAN, 13

"More rubbish bins in relevant places."

FAITH, 17

"Red rubbish bins should be reduced in size and every household can only produce an amount of rubbish that fits in the bin each week/fortnight. This would hopefully encourage households to reduce their waste and practice other ways of removing waste such as recycling and compost/green waste."

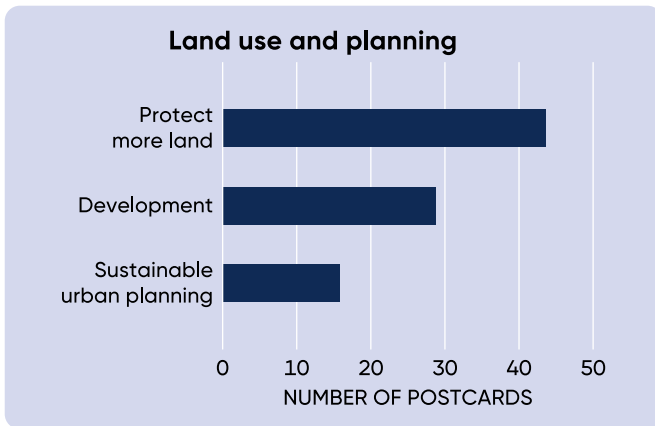
IZZY, 17



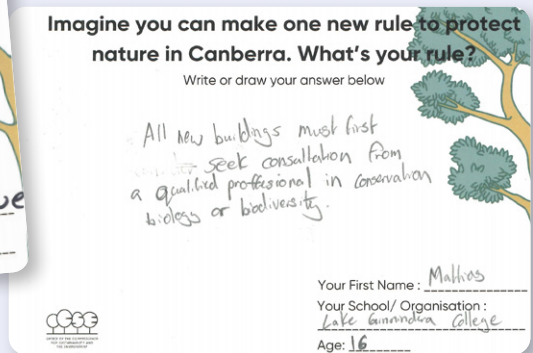
3. Land use and planning

Land use and planning was the third most popular theme in students' responses, appearing in 16% of postcards.

ACT students want to see more land protected in reserves, less development in sensitive areas, and better integration of greenspace in ACT suburbs.



Scan QR code or **click here** to access Storymap



WHAT ACTIONS DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SEE TO ACHIEVE BETTER LAND USE AND PLANNING OUTCOMES IN THE ACT?

"Reduce the amount of space housing takes up so that less nature is disturbed."

LOUIS, 13

"Protect the environment by developing less houses and ruining the environment."

DALLAS, 12

"A min amount of older trees that have to be left in new suburbs as well as greenspaces that need to be included and a minimum amount of new trees/native plants that need to be planted."

EMILY, 17

"Mandate green roofs on new buildings to boost biodiversity and manage stormwater."

JONATHAN, 17

"For every new ACT suburb there should be a nature reserve placed in that suburb to stop over humanisation around Canberra."

RILEY, 18

"Create more nature reserves. Extend current nature reserves."

WILLIAM, 13

"You can't knock down trees to develop new areas."

SAMSON, 17

"I would enforce a law where a specific percentage of land bought for houses and design for architecture must be retained for greenery and kept untouched. Another law would be how undeveloped land is priced as much more expensive compared to pre-developed land; or possibly banning building on undeveloped land at all unless necessary, so builders opt to build on pre-built and pre-urbanised land."

ARNAN, 12

Imagine you can make one new rule to protect nature in Canberra. What's your rule?

Write or draw your answer below

We should be protecting all land with native animals

Your First Name: Rachel

Your School/ Organisation: Radford College

Age: 12



Imagine you can make one new rule to protect nature in Canberra. What's your rule?

Write or draw your answer below

You could build gardens & trees on flat-roofed houses



Your First Name: James

Your School/ Organisation: Belconnen High School

Age: 13



New rules for nature

Summarising the postcards OCSE received, here are nine new rules for nature as recommended by young people in the ACT:

CONSERVATION



1. Establish stronger protections for trees, ensuring trees are given priority over built infrastructure like new roads and houses.
2. Provide more funding for conservation and ensure reserves are appropriately resourced.

WASTE



3. Introduce harsher penalties for littering and dumping.
4. Accelerate the single-use plastics ban.
5. Introduce stricter packaging regulations, ensuring packaging labelled as 'recyclable' is genuinely recyclable.
6. Ensure that all ACT schools have enough bins.

LAND USE AND PLANNING



7. Protect more of the ACT's land in reserves.
8. Restrict development in environmentally sensitive areas.
9. Prioritise more greenspace in urban planning.

Conclusion

Canberra's young people understand the key issues our environment is facing. Through this project, they have identified key focus areas and avenues for action to protect nature in the ACT.

Our environment is precious, and its degradation will have the greatest impact on young people and future generations. Everyone deserves to have a say on issues that affect them, and young people have a right to be included in decision making processes.

Putting strong measures in place to protect nature now will benefit not only our native species and unique landscapes, but current and future Canberrans. As recognised in the ACT's newly introduced Right to a Healthy Environment, the health of our environment is closely linked to human health and wellbeing.⁴ As such, preventing and reversing environmental degradation now is key to reducing future adverse health and financial consequences for the ACT community.

Young people's perspectives are an important resource for policy makers that should not be ignored. There is much to be gained by listening to their valuable insights.

4 Explanatory Statement, Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023 (ACT). www.legislation.act.gov.au/View/es/db_68597/20231026-82204/html/db_68597.html