

Climate action starts at school: Interview with Maya Lingam

Talking the benefits of green action, training teachers in climate literacy, and working with Europe's leading tech-for-good investor with the founder of EcoSpot.

Maddyness is collaborating with YSYS, which connects diverse people with opportunities in business and tech. We've spoken to three alumni from its FoundersDoor incubator programme about how they started their businesses, and the challenges and triumphs they've experienced along the way. Second up is Maya Lingam, founder of EcoSpot.

Tell us what EcoSpot does and how it came about in your own words. Did you have expertise and experience in the field you chose?

EcoSpot is a community platform for climate action. We help young people develop lasting sustainable habits and behaviours.

I started building EcoSpot after going along to a pre-pandemic climate strike and interviewing teenagers who were very aware of the climate crisis, but felt the action they were trying to take in their own lives was insignificant. I'm also

Gen Z and know it can feel pretty depressing to know our generation has decades and decades ahead of seeing the climate crisis unfold.

So, coming from a background in startups, I saw an opportunity to use tech to enable community-led climate action, showing young people the power of the collective impact we have when working together. I also feel it's important to change the narrative away from 'the world is burning', to highlighting some of the benefits of climate action – for your health and wellbeing, for saving money, strengthening your local community and for the biodiversity of your environment.

Because who wants to feel that they're only taking action out of guilt, fear or sacrifice?

Within the platform, schools choose interactive green challenges for their community to take part in together, tracking their collective impact through the achievements dashboard. Schools can create teams internally and compete with other communities using the platform through the leaderboard. Finally, we double up the positive impact for the planet by planting trees through our partner the Eden Reforestation Project every time a challenge is completed on the platform.

Why do you believe that sustainability starts at school? What role will education play overall in combating the climate crisis?

There are more than 2.2 billion children on Earth today who must be equipped with the behaviours needed to live sustainably and protect their futures in a world that will change rapidly around them.

At EcoSpot, we see the education system as a crucial way to reach as many young people as

possible, helping them to develop sustainable habits during their formative years that will last for the long term.

Engaging with schools means we can also reach marginalised communities – those who are most affected by the climate crisis but are typically overlooked in this conversation. And education isn't confined to the classroom; by putting climate action on the agenda at school, we can achieve a much greater impact. Using tech to get young people modelling these behaviours back to their families at home, we can foster behaviour change that goes beyond the school gates and into the wider local community.

A study by Teach the Future showed that 70% of teachers in the UK feel that they haven't received adequate training to educate students about climate change, and most of this teaching is confined to geography and science lessons. At EcoSpot we help teachers introduce climate action that spans across the curriculum; climate action has a place in textiles, English, food technology, physical education... the list goes on and on!

What kind of green action do you facilitate?

Within the platform, people take action towards a collective goal. This could be around cooking with seasonal ingredients, swapping school uniforms, or travelling by bike. Schools are also able to create their own custom challenges which gives the school community a chance to identify the local concerns that matter the most to them; we believe climate action must be community-led for the greatest impact.

How do you go about setting up partnerships with schools and local authorities?

We've been getting to know teachers up and down the country on Twitter and Zoom throughout the lockdowns of the past year and are frequently hearing that students are demanding that their schools do more when it comes to

sustainability.

We are also beginning to work with local authorities to assist them in measuring behaviour change and public engagement towards their net zero pledges.

Tell us about your experience on the FoundersDoor programme and how YSYS has helped you.

I joined FoundersDoor, which is a 6 week pre-accelerator, back in late 2019. At the time EcoSpot was a pretty different solution that only existed on the back of a napkin!

The programme really gave me the push to turn an idea into the first version of the product. Although the product has evolved over time, the programme provided me with the confidence to just get started and the mindset to continue talking to users, building and iterating.

What have been the major challenges you've faced and successes you've had while running EcoSpot?

The biggest challenge we've faced so far was definitely during lockdowns as schools were obviously facing hugely challenging times.

This made it harder to get feedback on the product and meant that we had to delay some pilots. Speaking to your users every week is critical when it comes to building something people want, so it's been great to be able to regularly meet with teachers (virtually!) again.

In terms of recent successes, this month EcoSpot was one of 11 companies out of 315 applications selected for Bethnal Green Ventures Spring 2021 accelerator.

BGV are the OGs of tech for good so we're really excited to work with them over the coming years.

What do you have planned for the future? Will you be fundraising soon, or have you already raised money?

EcoSpot is now backed by Bethnal Green Ventures, Europe's leading early-stage tech for good investor. We're currently focused on launching the platform for secondary schools this term and we'll be raising a pre-seed round in three months time.

Article by FLORENCE WILDBLOOD