

# Youth and Environmental Awareness: Uzbekistan's Experience and Prospects

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**Abstract:** Environmental degradation in Uzbekistan—from the shrinking Aral Sea to rising urban heat stress—has intensified public concern and placed youth at the forefront of sustainability debates. This article explores how environmental awareness has developed among Uzbek youth since 2021, identifies the educational, social-media, and volunteer mechanisms that shape it, and assesses prospects for deeper engagement by 2030. Using a mixed-methods design, the study triangulates (i) a systematic review of forty-three policy and research documents, (ii) statistical analysis of national programme data, and (iii) a qualitative survey of 145 young eco-activists from six regions conducted between September 2024 and April 2025. Results indicate that the nationwide “Yashil Makon” campaign, digital advocacy networks, and curriculum reforms have raised literacy on climate concepts and stimulated tree-planting, waste-sorting, and eco-entrepreneurship initiatives. Nevertheless, knowledge depth and sustained behaviour vary significantly between urban and rural locales, and institutional bottlenecks limit scaling. The discussion situates Uzbekistan’s case within global youth-environment literature and suggests policy measures such as integrated green curricula, participatory budgeting, and streamlined certification for eco-start-ups. Strengthening youth environmental awareness is shown to be essential to achieving national climate-resilience targets and fostering a culture of ecological stewardship.

**Keywords:** Environmental awareness; youth; Uzbekistan; climate education; Yashil Makon; eco-volunteerism.

**Introduction:** Uzbekistan’s rapid socio-economic modernisation has occurred in tandem with mounting ecological stress. Desertification now threatens forty per cent of national territory, while airborne particulate levels in Tashkent periodically exceed World Health Organization guidelines. In response, the government launched the “Yashil Makon” (“Green Space”) initiative in 2021, aiming to plant one billion trees by 2030 and explicitly positioning youth as principal agents of change. By November 2024 more than two-hundred million saplings had already been planted, many through youth-led drives. Concurrently, international partners have invested in youth-focused climate programmes, including UNICEF’s nationwide network of school eco-activists and UNDP’s Youth Climate Dialogues, which underscore the demographic dividend in sustainability transitions. Yet scholarly analyses of how awareness forms and translates into action among Uzbek youth remain limited, often

confined to descriptive accounts of volunteer events. This article therefore asks: How has environmental awareness among Uzbek youth evolved since 2021, what factors facilitate or hinder its consolidation, and what prospects exist for deeper engagement by 2030?

A sequential exploratory design was adopted. First, a systematic review covering January 2018–April 2025 retrieved forty-three documents that explicitly addressed youth and environment in Uzbekistan; sources included peer-reviewed articles, government decrees, UN agency reports, and news releases accessed via Scopus, the National Library of Uzbekistan catalogue, and open-access portals. Second, programme statistics were analysed: the Youth Affairs Agency’s register of eco-volunteer clubs, UNICEF’s eco-activist network database, and progress reports on “Yashil Makon”. Third, primary qualitative data were collected through twenty-one focus groups and thirty-nine semi-structured interviews with 145 participants

aged 15–28 drawn from Tashkent City, Fergana, Samarkand, Kashkadarya, Khorezm, and Karakalpakstan. Participants were recruited from university “Green Hubs”, accredited eco-clubs, and finalists of the 2024 “Green Spark” entrepreneurship competition. Interviews explored definitions of environmental awareness, information sources, behavioural practices, and perceived obstacles. Transcripts were coded in NVivo 14 using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach, with member-checking to enhance reliability. Ethical approval was obtained from the Tashkent University of Information Technologies ethics board (Protocol № 032-E/24).

National survey data reveal a sharp upward trend in climate literacy. A 2022 UNDP poll reported that only 41 per cent of youth could accurately define “carbon neutrality”, whereas the present study finds that 76 per cent now articulate the concept correctly. Focus-group narratives attribute this improvement to the inclusion of environmental science modules in grades 5–11 since the 2022–2023 academic year and to social-media campaigns led by influencers who translate scientific jargon into colloquial Uzbek. Participants cited platforms such as Telegram “eco-channels” and TikTok climate challenges as primary information conduits. Urban respondents in Tashkent and Samarkand demonstrated nuanced knowledge of renewable-energy metrics, while rural counterparts often framed environmental issues through agricultural water scarcity and dust-storm frequency.

The Youth Affairs Agency registered 112 eco-volunteer clubs by December 2024, a threefold increase from 2020, collectively mobilising more than 65 000 members. Flagship events such as the “Train to the Aral Sea” campaign in May 2025 attracted over 600 youth volunteers who planted saxaul saplings in Muynak and installed solar-powered water pumps. Interviewees highlighted that volunteerism fosters leadership and interregional solidarity, yet complained of fatigue when projects rely on short-term grants.

The Youth Climate Actions Network (YCAN), headquartered in Tashkent, has emerged as a transnational platform linking Central Asian youth environmental organisations. Over 7 000 Uzbek members participate in monthly webinars and policy-drafting workshops. Hashtags such as #YashilMakon and #Youth4ClimateUZ frequently trend on domestic Twitter, occasionally pressuring local hokimiyats to accelerate waste-collection reforms.

Green entrepreneurship is gaining traction. In the 2024 “Green Spark” competition, eight of twelve winning projects were led by university students developing biodegradable packaging, IoT-enabled irrigation

controllers, and solar drying units. Participants praised tax holidays for start-ups but lamented ambiguous certification procedures for eco-products, a barrier compounded by limited domestic venture capital.

Comparative analysis shows that Karakalpak youth exhibit heightened ecological concern due to direct exposure to the Aral Sea disaster, yet possess fewer resources for sustained engagement. Conversely, Tashkent offers dense networks of NGOs and incubators but struggles with volunteer retention as eco-activism competes with lucrative IT internships. These disparities underscore the need for region-specific policy instruments.

The findings corroborate socio-environmental theories that posit awareness as a prerequisite for sustainable behaviour, yet caution that cognition alone does not guarantee action. Uzbekistan’s multifaceted approach—combining curriculum reforms, mass campaigns, and digital activism—has succeeded in elevating baseline literacy, but structural constraints hinder continuity. The “Yashil Makon” campaign supplies a unifying national narrative, framing youth contributions as patriotic duty, which resonates in a country where state-led modernisation enjoys high legitimacy. However, over-reliance on event-based mobilisation risks superficial participation. Integrating project-based learning into formal curricula could anchor environmental knowledge in practical skill sets. Likewise, participatory budgeting at the mahalla level would allow youth to co-design micro-greening projects, ensuring accountability and sustained interest.

Digital networks amplify youth voices, yet algorithms that favour sensational content may distort risk perceptions and foster activism fatigue. Partnerships between educators and content creators could curate reliable information and promote critical media literacy. On the entrepreneurial front, streamlining certification for eco-products and expanding micro-grant schemes would lower entry barriers for rural innovators. Finally, mainstreaming youth representation into parliamentary committees on environment—not merely consultative councils—would align Uzbekistan with global best practices and fulfil commitments under the UNFCCC’s Action for Climate Empowerment agenda.

Uzbekistan’s experience demonstrates that rapid gains in environmental awareness are achievable when state policy, international support, and youth energy converge. Since 2021, awareness has translated into measurable actions—from large-scale sapling drives to tech-based ecological start-ups—yet consistency and depth vary across regions and socio-economic strata.

Addressing these gaps requires embedding experiential environmental education into school and university programmes, institutionalising youth participation in budgetary processes, and cultivating an enabling ecosystem for green entrepreneurship. Such measures would not only advance national climate targets but also nurture a generation for whom ecological stewardship constitutes an intrinsic civic value.

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