

Fighting Fire with Fiery Passion: 2026 Goldman Prize Winners

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

Ariana Brocious: Every year, the Goldman Environmental Prize recognizes a small group of people who've taken extraordinary action to protect the planet. Winning the award is a big deal, especially in environmental circles.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, it's widely known as the Green Nobel, and we are super proud of our ongoing relationship with the Goldman Environmental Foundation. We've had the privilege of talking with a number of past winners, and every single one of them has left us in awe.

Ariana Brocious: This year's slate is no different. Each one is inspiring. And for the first time in the prize's history, all six winners are women!

Kousha Navidar: Today we're talking with two of them.

Kousha Navidar: Later in the episode we'll hear from Sarah Finch, who spent years in English courts, using planning law as a defense against the fossil fuel industry.

Ariana Brocious: This tireless environmental advocate won a major UK Supreme Court ruling that now bears her name.

Kousha Navidar: Right! The Finch Ruling.

Ariana Brocious: But first we'll hear from Iroro Tanshi, a Tropical Conservationist and Bat Ecologist who rediscovered a species that hadn't been seen in half a century, and then... watched her field site catch fire.

Kousha Navidar: She couldn't let that be the end of the species. So she built a community movement that eliminated wildfires in the region entirely.

Kousha Navidar: I spoke with both winners in front of a live audience at the Commonwealth Club during SF Climate Week. Iroro Tanshi grew up in Warri, Nigeria, a major hub of the Nigerian oil industry. She recalled what it felt like as a child, surrounded by this massively polluting industry.

Iroro Tanshi: besides being the oil center, we also had a lot of blackouts, uh, electricity blackouts. And so most evenings after you're done doing your homework. You would typically then, you know, go outside and play before you go to bed at about eight, 9:00PM And one of the most striking things every evening with a few exceptions would be the gas flares. It just lit up the sky. I guess I didn't always notice, uh, as a maybe a 5-year-old or a 6-year-old, but you know, my dad would say something like, oh, the refinery is on tonight, or The refinery is off tonight. You know, that was very striking.

Kousha Navidar: because the light was so

Iroro Tanshi: It was so bright. Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Would you read by the light sometimes?

Iroro Tanshi: I wish, but yeah, that'll probably give you eye problems too. but yeah, that was a, that was a very obvious thing. And, and, and there were all the signs like, you know, there wasn't always vegetation 'cause it was such a concrete jungle. It wasn't a lot of highrises, but it wasn't also very green too. 'cause uh, that is not the interest. It's just, let's get the oil and get out,

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. So the oil industry was a core part of the community. It kind of

Iroro Tanshi: was the Yeah, it certainly grew around it. Yeah. Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: Uh, what kinds of environmental destruction did you first witness growing up in that area?

Iroro Tanshi: I wanna say the major one was there was a lot of land filling. 'cause this was very much a swamp forest slash brackish, mangrove system. And so even though I'd grown up in this, what should be, uh, an estuary in mangrove and slightly swamp forest, uh, maybe as you head out of town, I didn't get to see any of that. 'cause it was all sand filled in and, and, and there was a lot of floods. And in fact, I do remember my dad complaining often to say, the reason we have so many floods is because everything's been sand filled and all the natural drainage is gone, and then now you have floods. And, uh, the reason I don't have family photos, uh, from growing up is because they were all destroyed in the flood. Uh, so it was a very significant part of my. experience growing up, if not the time. I didn't think of it as environmental issues. I just thought, you know, calamity.

Kousha Navidar: But Yeah. Like this is, you live with floods, right? How old were you? When, when was it one flood? How, how old were you when that happened?

Iroro Tanshi: do remember being maybe six and waking up and there was that much water. You

just drop your leg from the bed and it was that much water. I mean, tiny feet, but, you know, it was that, that much water close to your knee, you know, uh, that was, I do remember that very clearly.

Kousha Navidar: How did that influence you?

Iroro Tanshi: Uh, in many ways. It got me always thinking about, you know, uh, my dad's commentary about, oh, you know, the government could have done better on this and that. And, um, I guess I never, always thought about, my direct response or how I felt towards it. But growing up, I know that. I also heard a lot about oil spills in the area. Uh, in fact, my grandmother's farm became an oil well.

Kousha Navidar: Mm.

Iroro Tanshi: the government has the right of eminent domain and then that's kind of quickly went away. That just meant my community was always impacted with oil spills. And so that in addition to lots of examples all around the area, you just hear about them over and over and over again. It kind of almost becomes a way of life to have oil spill. I'm sorry. It sounds grim, but, um, it's, it's a life I kind of lived for a while.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's understandable. And, and now you're a tropical conservationist and a bat ecologist, so connect the dots for me. How do you, how does a young woman growing up in an oil town get interested in bats and the forest?

Iroro Tanshi: The, the the connection is in the person. you kind of grow up recognizing that, you love the environment even though you haven't fully lived in it. I love the environment 'cause I also watch a lot of nature documentary. In fact, it was the only form of education my dad would permit at home. So besides going to school, listening to the, you know, six, 7:00 PM news, the only other thing you could do was either watch something about crafts on tv Or nature documentaries. That was it. I grew up with only like four films my entire life. now, I can't watch movies twice 'cause I've watched like a billion times. watched like just four movies, excuse me, like a billion times. So I can't bring myself to watch a movie a second time. Uh, but, but

Kousha Navidar: because you know there's another one that you're missing out on. Yeah. Yeah. Like Terminator two.

Iroro Tanshi: Yes, yes. Um, so, he would record these nature documentaries. I love. It was also, you know, said in the US too, in his VCR cassettes, and we'll put them in the player. He would be labeled, you know, dolphins, one dolphin 2, 3, 4, or sometimes.

Kousha Navidar: yet you didn't get to

Iroro Tanshi: I know sometimes it was bears. Um, yeah. I remember a lot of these, but, uh, I think one of them was really striking was, someone, I can't remember his name now. It was quite little, um, uh, but he was describing the diversity of tropical forests and he had a big jar of jelly beans, different colors, and he talked about how that kind of represents the sort of species diversities you will find, uh, in, in tropical forests. And that's kind of stood with me. and so when I heard about this interesting talk, uh, just right outta college, trying to do a master's degree and, uh, having difficulty landing on one, uh, program, and this professor told me about a student who was working in, west Africa in Cote D'Ivoire. And they would climb into the forest canopy, watch for the bats, and go to the flowers. The bats visit and collect the chemicals. So the flower scent, because he wanted to understand how the chemicals, uh, attract bats. You know? I, um. I was beyond, you know, thrilled there, there were no words to describe how you just lit this light bulb in my head from, oh my gosh,

tropical forests are great. I've never really had a lot of experience with them. But also you can do stuff with them. You can go into the canopy and it's bats, you know, if bats can get you into the canopy, I wanna do that.

Kousha Navidar: I love it. What, what did people think about you going to the forest at night to go look at bats?

Iroro Tanshi: Well, uh, that's also an interesting question. 'cause my dad, my dad, even though he was a land surveyor and, he would talk about, you know, going in the marshes and going in the mangroves, he would never let me come with him. 'cause I was like, God, please take me with you. Oh yeah. You know? Um, and he'd be like, no, you know, you're, you look too frail to go out in the bushes and stuff. so whenever I told him, look, I got a grant to study bats in forests. Instant shock. What? Okay, you wanna study bats, which, how did that come about? You also wanna be in forest. Are you capable of being in the forest? So during my PhD, when I would spend like, you know, four, six months in the forest, he would just be in awe. Like absolute, just, wow. He calls me and he's like, I can't believe you're doing this. That is so amazing. You know, I, I never thought, I never saw this in your future. I'm like, yeah, thank you. You should have seen from all the times I would ask to be taken out

Kousha Navidar: the one that showed me the videos.

Iroro Tanshi: you know? So, um, so that's kind of how it, uh, how it came about.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Let's jump ahead a little bit then to where the, the, the incidents happens. You discovered the only known population of the short tailed round leaf bat in Nigeria. It's a species that was thought to be absent for 45 years. Uh, when I first learned this, I was like, we need to get a picture of this bat. So can we just get a picture of this bat up on the screen because

Sarah Finch: Come on. Aw.

Kousha Navidar: Right. I think it's so cute. It's smaller than I expected. You can see a person's fingernail right there. I love the ears. How they're, they're yeah, they're big ears. Nice little stubby, little wings. Nice fur. The nose is so beautiful. Round nose. It's, it's a very cute bat. And you gave us this picture, right? So thank you for providing us this picture. I wanna know about the moment when you found the bat. What did it feel like to rediscover an animal that we thought was extinct?

Iroro Tanshi: You know, when you, when you're trapping bats in the forest, you're walking through the night mostly. and you really, you go to your net or your trap, you just go in there, there's a bag at the bottom, you stick your hand in, try to gently take your bat out, put a bag. And for this night we were sort of too close to a bat. Roust, I think. So we, we had a flood of bats. So we had lots of bats in lots of bags, and we were like taking them out. Oh, this is, this is recognizable. We know what it is. Quick measurement done. You know, like we're just sending the bats off. And then you take this one out of the bag and you go, your ears are too big for all the bats we've sent away. What are you, you know, I was so curious. I was just like, okay. Um. I had a list before I showed up, in the field, during that season. And I could tell this was nothing like I had on my list. I didn't expect it. I didn't know what it was,

Kousha Navidar: ear, it was the

Iroro Tanshi: because the ears were huge the way, almost twice the length of the typical size for that group, that family. And so I thought, well, this is gonna be fun. Let's try to figure it out. I was flipping through the field guide and, there was an obvious answer. You know, there are two species

that look like that in Africa. One of them is very far from where I was. The other one's right next door in Cameroon. It was obvious. And I, I thought, okay, well, um, what's the deets? I started flipping through again and sort of realized, well, all of the references, it was the last record was like from 1973 or so, and I was just like, oh. Okay, so this was like a, like a 30-second realization of, oh my God. Listen, I gotta tell you this As bat scientists, because we want to hear bats when we record the co-location. This is a digression, but it's important. Listen to

Kousha Navidar: I'm here. with you. Go. Yeah.

Iroro Tanshi: because we want to hear bats 'cause they are, frequency is really high. You, the only way to hear them as a human is to slow down the rate of the call. So you kind of do what we call heterodyne conversion, and I'm sorry to, to use a jargon, but it basically means you're slowing down the frequency. So a bat that will typically sound, will start to sound something like, you really slow it down so you can hear it. My brain went into heterodyne conversion. That's kind of the best way to describe it. You know, we didn't, I kind. Oh

Kousha Navidar: oh.

Iroro Tanshi: my. And on top of that, if you're a rich student, which most students aren't, uh, you might go to the field with another student or someone who is science aware, and you can explain to them what you've just seen. But I was by myself with local assistants who knew very little about bats, at least in the formal sense. and they'd be saying, you know, you've gotta come back next year. You're gonna come back, you know, in two years you're gonna keep working here. We love working with you. And I kept saying, well, I don't know. I, I got money. You know? and so when I made that realization, I was like, how do I explain to them what, just, what I've just found out? So I was like, um, our lives are about to change, was what I said.

Kousha Navidar: Wow. Yeah.

Iroro Tanshi: without knowing what you know, it might lead to, I just thought, you know, I gotta get outta here. I gotta tell people what I've just seen. And that's exactly the moment.

Kousha Navidar: What a story. But it doesn't end there because then just days after that discovery, a wildfire tore through the forest, right? Yes. What was that moment like for you?

Iroro Tanshi: Oh, um, okay, let me tell you

Kousha Navidar: I'm here.

Iroro Tanshi: um, again, PhD student wide-eyed, just really excited to be in this beautiful part of Nigeria - Mountains, forests, everything I've ever dreamed of because, you know, Warri is a flat land in the marshes, devoid of trees, blah, blah. The exact opposite. And I'm here, uh, finally found a project site and I finally made that discovery and just truly buoyed by it and, you know, really happy about all of this happening. And that fire broke. So the instant thought was we got to save ourselves. 'cause our camp was fully covered in smoke. Okay. We were racing down the mountainsides, one of the steepest mountains in the area racing down the mountainsides with heavy bags. And my husband had some on his head. He had some on his back and in front, You know, a couple of us did something similar too. The first thought that came to my mind was, my God. Because we turned around and there was this configuration. It felt like everything within view was covered in fire. Yeah. And I, I thought, well, we haven't even gone out to tell anybody about these pieces. We just found, how do we, how do you even break that into, I don't have any experience with this. I don't, I've never worked at a conservation organization. I didn't know how you would tell someone great discovery, but the

habitat's gone. 'cause that's what I, that's what I saw from the forest, just looking at this vast land just on the fire. Um, and so it was a, I think it was some kind of desperate moment of just, I, think I sort of, it kind of became a, another body experience. I couldn't really be in my body to feel how bad I was feeling in the moment. It was really bad. And

Iroro Tanshi: I went through that and then I called my PhD advisor and said also my PhD size dose. I no longer have a PhD. I don't know what to do. Um,

Kousha Navidar: and

Iroro Tanshi: and so all of this sort of was coming together at the same time until we spoke to community people. I think that's where we started getting.

Kousha Navidar: I wanna ask you about that. What was the community's reaction when you started talking about a zero wildfire campaign?

Iroro Tanshi: The first two committee members said, oh, no one's gonna listen to you. We're trying to fight wildfires for so long. We're like, oh, it's okay. It's okay. Let's, let's at least have a group meeting. Let's not just talk to one person. And when we sat down to have that conversation, um, people had ideas. You know, we had a, we had a chat, we kept making notes and, you know, 'cause so everyone could see what we're writing.

Iroro Tanshi: But this lady just basically stood up and said, you know. She's Nigerian. She said, my daughter. 'cause she's an older lady. That's how you typically address a very young person who knows nothing, by the way. Uh, she said, my daughter, let me tell you, we have been trying to fight wildfires. This is not new. And in fact, we have a very cultural way of making sure we don't get wildfires. And all of these solutions are great, but the biggest thing without any science, she said the biggest thing was in her lifetime, rain patterns have changed and what they could predict no longer aligned with reality.

Kousha Navidar: I see.

Iroro Tanshi: Without knowing what climate change was, it doesn't it, you know, sometimes it doesn't really matter. You know, it's, she was speaking the language she could use in describing the situation. Right. And, we kind of became translators. So when we said zero wildfire, we were kind of almost preaching to the choir. But because we were partners, we weren't preaching to the choir per se. They took it and they ran with it.

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, how working **with** communities enables a fire prevention program to scale.

Iroro Tanshi: the beautiful thing about scale up you get a program that works. And then you find someone who can do it with you.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

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Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I'm Kousha Navidar.

In North America, particularly in the American West, we've been learning a lot about how certain, low-intensity wildfires are actually good for the ecosystems. Small, controlled fires prevent a build-up of fuel that can lead to catastrophic firestorms. These forests have evolved alongside fire, and some seeds actually need the heat to germinate. In fact, Indigenous people have been using fire for thousands of years as means of maintaining the landscape. Let's get back to my conversation with 2026 Goldman Prize winner Iroro Tanshi. I asked Iroro Tanshi to explain how wildfire risk differs in the tropical forests of equatorial Africa.

Iroro Tanshi: So with. Fire adapted systems as, as you have in the American West. you do need those indigenous systems that, you know, maintain low intensity wildfires that take out, uh, a vast amount of the fuel that would otherwise become a high intensity wildfire. In our case, this is an equatorial forest, okay? Mostly moist forest. It doesn't dry out as much as you would have here. In fact, none of the fires progress really fast. It's quite slow moving. So this is not a fire adapted system by any measure. And I mean, if you're in the forest under storage, it's just teeming with life. I can't even imagine fires being a, a regular occurrence here. So the relationship between fires in the American West and Africa, the end. At that point where you say fire adapted versus non-fire adapted equatorial forest versus, you know, tropical, uh, sub-tropical or temperate, um, sort of, uh, systems. And so while wildfires, low intensity here a good, and we typically say that's fighting fire with fire. Mm-hmm. In our case, you just don't want them at all. It has to be down to zero. Oh yeah. Want fire is enough to cause damage.

Kousha Navidar: that we're talking about, the, the, I dunno if it's humidity or just like humidity, the humidity that's in the air. It, So let's cut to how the fire situation has changed in the years that you've been working with the AFI Mountain.

Iroro Tanshi: That's my favorite part.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah.

Iroro Tanshi: you know, annual fires happening the entire time and, um, especially the one in 2016 became a really big fire. And in fact, we could go back to the two thousands when NASA really started collecting data, uh, for fires around the world, or at least archiving that data. And you look through and you see their annual fires. Okay, that's one thing. Also. It's grown in intensity and frequency. And, in case, what we then quickly came to realize was, you gotta do something. Because if you're increasing in frequency and you've got just a 10 hectare area, it's only a matter of time. You know, maybe only a couple more fires and there will be nothing standing. And so, That's why we immediately sprung to action.

Kousha Navidar: And tell me about how the fire situation has changed, like put a point on that.

Iroro Tanshi: Yes. Okay. Thank you. Yeah, because what that then meant is between that time 2016 and 2022, we did a lot of campaigning with the communities. We did a lot of sort of going out and trying to make sure people aren't using fires at the wrong time of day. But in 2022, that's when we really launched the whole system. He had everything legal backing the fire responders, the early warning system, everything. And from that time till today. In fact, I just announced last night that we closed out the fire season. We are down to zero wildfires in five years, zero wildfires.

Kousha Navidar: And last night you mentioned something else that I thought was exciting news, which was a new initiative, which is the Tropical Fire Alliance. And there are some ambitious targets that I wanted to read here that I was taking notes from. The the, here's some of the targets saving 5

billion hectares of forest from wildfire and preventing 20 million tons of carbon pollution from wildfire every year. So how easy will it be to scale up what you've accomplished in the AFI mountain and then apply it worldwide?

Iroro Tanshi: See, the beautiful thing about scale up is you get a program that works. Mm-hmm. And then you find someone who can do it with you. This is why we called it Tropical Fire Alliance. It will become an alliance of people around the world who are taking this simple predict, prevent, and respond approach that we've developed, predict, prevent, respond. Yeah. Yeah. Um, and in many ways I say that and I realize that just like how we weren't necessarily bringing a solution to local people, we were talking with local people about their solution and just helping to facilitate, helping to coordinate. It's gonna be very much the same. It will just be partners on the ground coordinating. We expect that the partners that we would work with, uh, recognize that local people really do have the solution. They may just not be able to translate it all to, you know, climate change or data and stuff like that. We would just support these local partners, with data we, uh, access to, to funds, access to connections, and, we would just really be helping to replicate with the help of people. It won't be us on the ground. 'cause you know, I, I just know Nigeria. I don't know that many places, I promise. But yeah.

Kousha Navidar: You do know bats?

Iroro Tanshi: I do.

Kousha Navidar: And I wanna end this part with a question about that because you've said yourself that everybody knows you for your conservation work now, but your first love, and I can't emphasize this enough, was bats. So what can bats teach us about being human?

Iroro Tanshi: A lot. A lot. So, bats provide a lot of ecosystem services and as humans, we. Sadly, always look to the environment from a utilitarian perspective. So that's the question I get asked all the time. What can bats do for me? Why are you studying bats? You know, this is something I get asked on the ground a lot, but it's okay 'cause bats got us all. Okay? They're already providing a lot of ecosystem services, pollination, sea disposal, maintaining systems, and preventing the insect PEs, uh, uh, population bus. And they teach us that we can look to nature for our sustenance, but we do also need to protect nature

Kousha Navidar: mm-hmm.

Iroro Tanshi: on the human side of health. I wanna say bats are really helping us in many ways. So bats are, uh, an inspiration for lots of medical, uh, achievements and medical discoveries, and in more recent times, understanding how we can live longer. I can have a whole podcast about that, but, um, not for today. I was very excited to hear it.

Kousha Navidar: But for now, I really appreciate your story, Iroro Tanshi, thanks so much for your work and for coming here and sharing it with

Iroro Tanshi: I appreciate it. Thank you.

Ariana Brocious: Now let's go from the Afi [ah-FEE] Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary in Nigeria to Surrey just outside London, where our next guest scored a major win against greenhouse gas polluters in the UK's highest court.

Kousha Navidar: Sarah Finch led a tireless campaign against drilling near her home, persevering through years of escalating court battles until she secured a Supreme Court ruling in June 2024 that finally forced the drilling to shut down.

Ariana Brocious: The Finch ruling, named after Sarah Finch, states that authorities must consider the impact fossil fuels will have on the global climate before granting permission to extract them. This ruling has already had ripple effects far beyond shutting down a single local well.

Kousha Navidar: I had the pleasure of talking with Sarah Finch in front of a live audience at the Commonwealth Club during SF Climate Week.

Kousha Navidar: So you started as a local resident objecting to an oil well near your home in Surrey. At what point did you realize that this wasn't just a case that could protect your neighborhood, but it was a case that would, could change national climate law?

Sarah Finch: Not until after we launched the case, but the case came after a good seven years of objecting to that site and fighting it. So we had been, objecting to successive applications for, drilling wells, testing flows, et cetera. The well had received two previous permissions. and so it was only when in 2019, it finally got permission for full production for 20 years and four new wells that we, we knew all our efforts had failed, and we turned to the courts as a last resort. And when we were looking for legal reasons why this decision shouldn't have happened, we sort of hit on a number of objections, but one of them was that they hadn't looked at the climate impact of burning the fuel before they gave the decision. As part of a planning application for fossil fuel production, the authority has to do an environmental impact assessment, and the wording of the law is that it has to look at all the likely significant direct and indirect effects of that development on the environment, including the climate. And we thought the effects of burning the fuel must be, if not a direct effect, at least an indirect effect of getting it outta the ground because the only purpose of doing that is so that it could be taken off, refined and burned. So we argued among other things that that was a reason why it shouldn't have been permitted, and we got permission to take that sort of case further. And then we realized that it wasn't a one-off mistake by Surrey County Council. It was actually the norm right across the country. Fossil fuel developments were being permitted with no assessment of their climate impact. And that included, you know, a huge new coal mine that it would've been the first new deep coal mine in the UK for 30 years. Giant oil and gas fields in the North Sea, many times bigger than the sort of small on site we are objecting to. So it was after we'd launched a case really, that we realized that we'd actually hit on a national scale problem and not just the local one.

All the time we were making the case that you cannot keep approving these developments without looking at the actual climate impacts. And by this time, we'd had the, Paris agreement, the UK had a net zero target at Surrey County Council, had declared a climate emergency there there was no doubt at all that we, we are in the climate emergency. The scientists are absolutely unequivocal that there is no room for any new fossil fuels to be produced if we were to keep within these Paris targets and there's more than enough oil, gas, and coal in currently operating fields. So it was just sort of a crazy situation that they were being approved. and yeah, we just kept. On making this very simple argument. Um, it seemed, seemed obvious to us. And, um, I use the analogy when, when you're talking about why do you have to look at these emissions from burning the fuel, it's like, well, if you look at a cigarette, when does it harm your health? It's when you smoke it, you know, it's not when it's produced and put in a packet. The oil companies were arguing, we don't have to look at the emissions from use. 'cause our job is done when the oil leaves our gate. So it's like no. And a chocolate cake. When does that affect your diet? Is when you eat it? you know, it's when you used to And oil. Yeah. Oil and gas, greenhouse gas emissions over at least to every stage, including from the production. But like 90% of the impact is when they're burned.

Kousha Navidar: But like these arguments were being made all along the way. What was different about when. You made the argument at the moment that it worked?

Sarah Finch: Well, I think a number of things. I think it was the, type of judges that we had. this,

whole thing was about planning law, the planning law of environmental impact assessment. And the first judge that looked at it was the planning judge and planning policy in the UK. You know, it's written down in numerous documents and the planning judge is used to applying the law as it's written and looking at the um, sort of examples that had happened before that, and just saw it as a planning issue. And then when we went to the Court of Appeal, we lost again, but the first planning judge said, no, it, you couldn't expect the planning authority to look at the full climate impact because how could they, it's impossible. But the Court of Appeal didn't say that. They said, yeah, you reasonably could expect the authority to do that. It's feasible. It's at the discretion of the authority, whether they choose to do that, which that's not good law. That means one authority can make one decision and another, another decision on completely the same situation. So when we went up to the Supreme Court, it seemed, we were talking about simple language and basic principles. It's like, what the Supreme Court really defined was what is an effect of something else. It became a battle of just simple words. But I think things that had changed as well with time. You know, nearly five years had gone by. We'd been making these arguments for five years. They'd been thoroughly rehearsed in the media. More and more parties have got involved in our case. So what started out as me versus Surrey County Council, other bodies attached themselves as interested parties or interveners. So the government and the oil companies joined in on the council side. And then later West Cumbria Mining Limited, which is a coal mining company based in Australia that wanted to dig a coal mine in the north of England. You know, why did they get involved in a case about a oil site in the south of England? It just showed it was a national issue. And then on my side, we had friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to National Environmental Organizations, and then the Office for Environmental Protection, which is a government body, also joined in. So it was a very packed courtroom of national level bodies. And I think, yeah, sort of the, the arguments have been so well rehearsed by then. That the Supreme Court judges probably had a better understanding of what they were dealing

But also more sort of, of a conviction that we, we were right. And a kind of determination. It's like we're gonna carry on saying this. Like there were numerous stages at which we talked about, okay, so we drop out, we've lost at every stage so far, why keep going? You know, but which it just became bloody minded. It's like, I'm just gonna keep saying this until someone agrees with me.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, Sarah Finch reminds us that big change comes from working together:

Sarah Finch: Not everybody is gonna get the wins that they deserve every time, but by organizing together, communities can change things.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Let's get back to Kousha's conversation with Goldman Prize winner Sarah Finch, tireless environmental advocate who won a major Supreme Court ruling in the UK - a ruling that now bears her name. The Finch Ruling requires authorities to consider the impact fossil fuels will have on the global climate before granting permission to extract them. Kousha spoke with Finch along with Iroko Tanshi, another Goldman winner, at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

Kousha Navidar: You're not a lawyer, you're not a scientist. What's given you the confidence or the gumption to go after big oil?

Sarah Finch: Having good lawyers. really. Um, and, um, I didn't do this on my own. I did it. I fronted the case, but on behalf of the Weald Action group, which was a network of fantastic

campaigners, I was part of who had come together to fight oil developments across the Weald region, which is a whole area of Southeast England. So I was just the person who volunteered to put my name to the case, but there was lots of other people involved and we all gave each other confidence to keep going. And then the lawyers we had, we really trusted. And that was something I learned through this experience. I, I think if anything, I had a slightly negative idea about lawyers. I thought they were just people who like made a lot of money from arguing cases, but the ones that we had were absolute climate campaigners, who they, you know, they're activists in the courtroom. So I didn't need to be a legal expert. I just needed to be willing to keep going with it. And to raise the money to pay the lawyers.

Kousha Navidar: I was wondering what's it like to have a ruling named after you?

Sarah Finch: It's really cool. It's like, I love it. It's like nearly every day I read something in the press or an email about the Finch ruling and I Yes. And yeah, so it is cool. But yeah, the downside of it is again, that it does cement this idea that it was, it was me that did it on my own. And it really should be called the Weald Action Group ruling. But it is cool and we have lovely headlines. I'm always being invited to events called, is There Life After Finch? Or, you know, that kind of bizarre thing. So yes, I'm very, very, very proud of it.

Kousha Navidar: I'm really happy you brought that up, uh, about the, the focus on the individual. 'cause this is something that I think about with every, every golden year actually. And I wanna get your perspective on it. 'cause we tend to make heroes out of individuals and in a way the Golden Environmental Prize feeds into that. But, but even though the ruling is named after you, you weren't alone. What do you think of holding up individuals as heroes?

Sarah Finch: Yeah. I feel un uncomfortable about that a little. And I think all of us six, um, Goldman prize winners this year all discussed it. And I think all of us would acknowledge that we couldn't have done it on our own. And it was a collective endeavor. And I think it's also true that sometimes you need leaders, and leaders emerge. And I know that's the case with some of my fellows, and I don't know necessarily that it is with me. I don't think I have that, you know, stand up of leadership quality. But yeah, I think I can see why the Goldman Foundation acknowledges individuals as leaders. But I think it's possibly time for a rethink about acknowledging movements because I think change happens due to movements more than individuals. Hmm. It's interesting.

Kousha Navidar: What, have you learned about working with communities to build a coalition to build that movement?

Sarah Finch: Well, I've learned that it takes time and it's not easy. And when we started out fighting oil and gas applications in the Weald in the 2010s, it was quite a divisive issue because there were people in the communities who were quite happy to have oil and gas. They underestimated possibly the environmental impacts it would have, and they thought it would be quite harmless and create jobs and wealth. And then there were people, there were very much people that were ideologically opposed to it, and there were people that were concerned about particular aspects of it. So it wasn't that there was united opposition and it took a lot of talking to people, bringing people together, acknowledging people's individual issues to create a sort of unified front. but then also I think we underestimated how much people did care about the climate. There were many issues that concerned people about these developments. So things like the tanker traffic, you know, huge big oil tankers on little rural roads with a big thing. The 24 hour light at night noise, local air pollution, et cetera. People were very worried about that. Um, also earthquakes. So at Horse Hill, the site I was fighting, there was a swarm of earthquakes in 2018 when they started some of the drilling and that. It was very frightening. They, these earthquakes were felt for like 10 mile. I, I shouldn't talk about it in San Francisco. I know. They were small. They were small, earth,

you know, people's garden furniture fell over and ornaments fell off their shelves. Large. But some people had more severe damage to their homes. But it's frightening. Yeah. Yeah. So that, so lots of people were frightened about that. And we at first thought we wanted to bring the case about the earthquakes because then we'd have the backing of lots of people and we, we underestimated the extent to which people were concerned about the climate too. And I initially, I was kind of a bit diffident about going and talking to local residents about climate change. But actually when I did that, everyone was like, yeah, yeah, we know the climate is changing. We know we don't need new oil and gas. And there was more support than we anticipated.

Kousha Navidar: Iroro, I wanna bring you into this part too. 'cause I think this is really interesting. Just like building movements. You worked with local communities around the afi, mountain Wildlife Sanctuary and Burning, and in 2019, 0 wildfires were reported during the dry season as we were talking about. How did you get communities to change their behavior?

Iroro Tanshi: I would like to start by saying communities have the solutions. Uh, they just need all the resources that you're required to sort of pull this sort of movement together. And, and that's exactly what we did, is we only just came in with the imputes. We were like, what do you think the problem is? And they say, we're like, oh, that sounds like what we're thinking. What do you think the solution is? And they're like, X, Y, Z. And we're like, ha, we had no idea. You know? So what we've come to learn is that, if you give communities the right support, the right movements, the right resources, things sort of go from there. You kind of grow, you know, um, in the ability to address the issue, the ability to make progress. And that's, that's what we've learned. And I have to just quickly add this, uh, in many ways. I have now come to see our work as just, we are just mere translators. We're just trying to understand from a community perspective, what are the interests? How can we best bring them together?

Kousha Navidar: The key thing that I hear you saying there, it's not, it wasn't about getting communities to change behavior. It was listening, it was equipping, it was finding surprises, like you were saying, Sarah, in the connections between them. Is that fair?

Iroro Tanshi: Yes. That, no, that's correct. And when you say equipping, be it providing the data to make the decision about the right time to burn or providing some of the local equipments, like the backpacks that people would fill with water and that had high pressure pumps to go put out, the fires. At any point in that process, you're really just supporting.

Kousha Navidar: Mm-hmm.

Iroro Tanshi: And that's sort of the language that we've come to speak with communities, is we're supporting and they see it as, we've wanted to do this this whole time, we just need to adapt, you know, some of the interesting behaviors to these new realities. And that's just what we start to call behavior change in this system. But in their case, they really just wanted to do it the whole time. They just needed to adapt to the new realities.

Kousha Navidar: So let's apply this more broadly to climate action. I, I, I wanna ask both of you this, what does your experience with communities teach us about climate action more broadly? And Sarah, if I could start with you, what do you think?

Sarah Finch: I think that communities rise up against a common, an obvious problem. And I think, so the, the arrival of a company that wants to frack in their backyard is an obvious problem and that'll unite a community. Or the desire to no longer have fires that destroy their farms is an obvious problem. I think with climate, it's taken us a long time to. Be able to present it as an urgent problem. And there's so much culture war stuff and, you know, bad actors downplaying the dangers or

denying that climate change exists altogether. That it's, it's very hard. I mean, I, I only know about the UK but I know there's so much misinformation that people who are not stupid or ill-intentioned still will believe we don't need to deal with the climate crisis. And the whole question of whether we should produce oil and gas from the UK North Sea has just become totally a culture war issue. So we need to do a huge job of work of building people's confidence in climate science. and I mean, I, I don't want to overstate the problem because opinion polls always show that the majority of people do understand it. But yeah, it's not, it's not easy to have conversations. Communities sometimes about these things.

Kousha Navidar: There's factors pushing up against it.

Sarah Finch: Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah.

Sarah Finch: And all the issues of, you know, the transition for workers in the oil industry. So they're really important and we can't just say, okay, no more oil. We are moving to a different energy system without making sure that the people that are gonna be affected by that in terms of losing their jobs or whole communities that are gonna lose their income, et cetera, they, they have to be considered and planned for. We need, we, you know, just transition is a sort of easy thing to say, but it needs to be properly implemented

Kousha Navidar: The last question that I wanna ask you both is what would you say to somebody who feels powerless about the climate and what they can do? especially those who think that one person can't make a difference? Sarah, let's start with you.

Sarah Finch: Yeah. Well, I think my story shows that not one person, one group of ordinary people organizing together in their community can make a difference. And they're not all, not everybody is gonna get the wins that they deserve every time, but by organizing together, communities can change things. And I also think there are many reasons to be hopeless and despairing. And the antidote to that is taking action. And I think doing something, I mean. I have terrible climate anxiety, but when I think, well, I, I've done what I can and I'm still doing what I can, that makes you feel better and does give hope. So I think even wherever you are and whatever is in your power to do in your home, your workplace, your community, whatever, doing it, not putting it off, doing it, and then even better joining together with other people and doing stuff makes you feel more positive because there's no doubt the climate is changing. There are gonna be all kinds of terrible impacts, but everything we can do to save any fraction of a ton of carbon from going into the atmosphere will make it that much less worse. Um, so I think we can have hope. It's worth doing whatever you can because you will make the future less worse than it would otherwise have been.

Kousha Navidar: Hope through action.

Sarah Finch: Yeah.

Iroto Tanshi: and just to quickly add to that hope through community, then obviously then leads to action. And in our case, you can see with the fire program with people on the ground. Um, but I, there's a story I would like to quickly see, especially for the audience here today. Uh, the first time we showed up in San Francisco, my husband and I, uh, to speak to the Wildlife Conservation Network. So network of partners from around the world doing conservation work and partners who like to contribute and support in many different ways. One of the people I spoke to, her name is Margaret, she basically said, look, what you guys are doing just gives me hope. And I thought, well, okay. You know, I hear that every, every now and then. And she said, no. I tell you this. The friends,

the two friends I brought to this meeting, they were crying through most of the presentations and said that the next day this, the next day, they told her, this is the most I have slept in many, many years. Just knowing that there are people around the world doing stuff. So when you find those communities that allow you to access, even if you can't be on the ground to access, uh, information and knowledge and opportunity to support action, it does bring hope. And for us, uh, at least, through our work in Nigeria without say an organization like WCN, uh, the Goldman Foundation and lots of the other programs that have supported us and the institutions too. 'cause remember we were doing this well being PhD students, our mentors who sometimes weren't always pleased with the delays in papers here or there, but recognizing that it is critical work. All of that also builds hope for those of us climate containers on the ground, environmental defenders on the ground, because you know, you are not alone. It's that community.

Sarah Finch: Community. Action.

Kousha Navidar: Iroro Tanshi is a tropical conservationist and bat ecologist. Sarah Finch is an environmental campaigner. Both are winners of the 2026 Goldman Environmental Prize. Iroro and Sarah, thank you so much for an engaging conversation and for all that you do.

Sarah Finch: Thank you.

Iroro Tanshi: Thank you. very much.

C1MT

Ariana Brocious: All right, it's the end of our show, and as usual, we have one more thing to share with you. Kousha, what have you got this week?

Kousha Navidar: Ariana, did you know that lightning strikes are getting more frequent because of climate change?

Ariana Brocious: I did not.

Kousha Navidar: Neither did I. So in 2014, a scientist from UC Berkeley named David Romps published a study that found that for every degree Celsius of warming, lightning strikes increase by 12%.

Wow. Here's why. Warmer air makes more powerful storms, which makes more lightning.

Ariana Brocious: So this feels like something we should have known because we know warmer air makes bigger storms, more intense storms. That's kind of one of the, the biggest known impacts we've seen so far. Uh, but I had no idea that it also corresponded to increased frequency of lightning. Does it mean lightning strikes or just lightning activity? Do you know?

Kousha Navidar: Lightning strikes, and here's where that's interesting. It's not just, like, a cool weather fact because, as I also learned, lightning strikes account for the most ignition events of wildfires in North America. So not the most acreage that's burned because of wildfires, but by the incidents of wildfires that happen. Mm-hmm. So, you know, as the world gets warmer, this ignition system for forests that are already drier and more combustible becomes more potent. There's more ignitions happening. So it's a bad feedback loop. And I know Climate One More Thing is normally all sunshine and rainbows, but now it's- ... a little bit of water and lightning.

Ariana Brocious: It's a reminder of how important the climate crisis is and the fact that we really do need to address it, so I think that's a fine place to leave the show.

Kousha Navidar (Radio version): And that's our show. Thanks for listening. You can see what our team is reading by subscribing to our newsletter - sign up at climateone.org.

Kousha Navidar (Podcast version): And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Bisciegia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.