



### *Connecting Islands Virtually for Climate Action*

**James Ellsmoor  
United Kingdom**

James Ellsmoor is a modest 28-year-old island-hopping, globe-trotting, serial entrepreneur and digital nomad. "I was born in a rural area in England," he says. "My parents were farmers, so growing up was my caring-about-the-environment intro." Shropshire, where James grew up, is a picturesque county bordering Wales. It has all the trappings of a fairytale scene – medieval castles, rolling green hills, and a town with quaint brick shops.

Growing up on a farm helped James see firsthand the challenges that rural and island communities share. But he had to travel halfway around the world and back before he fully realized how important his upbringing was in shaping him for environmental advocacy.

At 19, James left home for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with the esteemed Morehead-Cain Scholarship. "It changed the course of my life," James says. "Once I got here, I began living like a digital nomad, out of a suitcase. And I got involved with studying renewable energy in North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean."

At UNC James met his mentor, clean-tech entrepreneur and energy sector veteran Danny Kennedy, who helped him hone his environmental skills. "Danny gave me a lot of the tools I needed to grow and helped me understand how the industry works. If you don't understand that, you'll have a lot harder time making an impact."

At age 21, while a sophomore in college, James joined his first major endeavor, Solar Head of State, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to help world leaders become green leaders." Its vision statement explains: "Working with governments, we install solar photovoltaic systems on iconic buildings, leveraging their visibility and social impact. We support world leaders to champion solar, acting as a catalyst for wider adoption of new solutions for renewable energy."

This small organization made waves with its campaign to install solar panels on the White House during Barack Obama's presidency, and James was brought on board later as a cofounder. "I don't believe in starting up new organizations for the sake of it," he says. "I really believe that this was an opportunity to grow an existing campaign that had stalled and help take it to new heights."

Solar Head of State also made a big splash when they partnered with the President of The Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed. The Maldives, a small island developing state (SIDS), is a chain of islands in the Indian Ocean whose highest point is just 2 meters; they've been seriously impacted by coastal sea rising and even a tsunami. Nasheed, who was featured in the movie *The Island President*, dramatically showed the precarious situation of his country by holding a cabinet meeting underwater, fully dressed in scuba gear. He also made sure that the Maldives was the first country to install solar power at an executive residence.

Other island nations, from Jamaica to St. Lucia, have followed Nasheed's lead. Over the next two years, 12 new solar installations are lined up for Pacific Island nations. The Youth Solar Challenge, put on by Solar Head of State and the Caribbean Youth Environment Network, invites young people to create unique communications campaigns, to educate their communities about green energy. Successful campaigns in Jamaica and Guyana have already been implemented, with more to come. Time and again, James has seen that regardless of the innovation, it is local leaders who drive its adoption. He points to a recent Yale study that showed that community leaders who install solar in their homes convince

62 percent more residents to join them vs. those who didn't. According to James another problem is that too often scientists and techies miss the “soft skills” needed to get their message across. He uses his communication and collaboration skills to bridge this gap.

His experiences with Solar Head of State challenged James to delve deeply into finding solutions for the problems small island nations face. He discovered that they have similar challenges: building roads and schools; recovering from natural disasters; developing sustainable trade practices; and dealing with the isolation of their remote locations. Most significant is the challenge of creating reliable alternative energy resources. “Take, for example, the Caribbean,” James explains. “On average, they pay 3-6 times more for electricity than Americans. This leads to “energy poverty” – people who just can't afford it. And it's not reliable when it's frequently bombarded by tropical storms with high winds, rains, and flying debris.” He adds, “Since islands are the most vulnerable to climate change, it's important to have alternative ways to provide energy, in case of a disaster.”

When he was 24 James's journey led him back to the U.K. to attend the University of Highlands and Islands in Northern Scotland. “The conversations happening on Caribbean islands are also happening on Scottish islands,” James says. “Issues of energy poverty, rural infrastructure, and communication were the same, halfway across the globe. That's when the lightbulb went off!”

From his travels, James had gained a unique vantage point on how things operate in different countries. He knew how to interact with governments and their communities, and how to get investors. He'd seen that solar technology means different things to different communities. In East Africa where the poor use solar, it has a lower-class stigma. This makes it hard to convince people that the technology is worthwhile. “If we want to expand renewable energy, we need to understand where the needs are different, and where they are the same,” James says. “An island-networking community!” And that is how Island Innovation was born.

“Islands are particularly vulnerable to climate change,” James explains. “A single event can knock out an island's economy. A hurricane won't affect 100 percent of the U.S., but it clobbered Puerto Rico. Island people need to work together and learn from each other. What works, what doesn't work. How can we get engineers and politicians to communicate effectively across their disciplines? Things like that.”

Island Innovation brings together business, government, utilities, NGO's, universities, and citizens to explore innovations and share best practices in sustainability on island settings worldwide. In our modern, ever-connected world, it has taken a modern, tech-savvy approach, by a modern, tech-savvy individual, to leverage these new means of communication in the service of island nations. James's mission is to strengthen communities on island nations; strengthen the bonds between them; and build their knowledge base, to help them face their most pressing collective challenge—climate change.

To bring disparate island communities together, James began by asking questions: “What has Fiji done that Hawaii can learn from? How can Scotland have a conversation about sustainability with Jamaica?” He developed the Virtual Island Summit, a free annual online event, connecting global island communities on a common digital platform. During the Summit, people from around the world come together virtually, to share ideas, innovations, and the best practices they've come up with to deal with the challenges of island communities.

When the inaugural Summit was held in October 2019, world-class experts shared their knowledge with more than 100 island communities from the Arctic to the Pacific Islands and beyond. Participants raved about the experience, which was focused on learning and cross-sector collaboration. “Amazing things happened that week,” James says. “Someone in our Facebook group from Vanuatu posted about a solar project. A reply came from Jamaica. Then from Scotland. Then, in a single thread, people from all over the world were communicating. That's what the Virtual Island Summit is all about.”

James believes this kind of remote collaboration will create great change going forward. “Virtual meetings are often seen as a last resort for professional collaboration, but when we're talking about rural island communities, they often don't have the money to travel from afar. This is a new approach to sharing information.” The Virtual Island Summit is already gearing up for an even bigger 2020 event.

James encourages young people who want to get involved in the fight against climate change, and advocate for renewable energy. “Set up your own hubs in your communities. Start conversations. Create partnerships. Strengthen relationships. Every little bit of good helps the cause.”

*No other planet in the solar system is a suitable home for human beings;*

*it's this world or nothing.*

*That's a very powerful perception.*

Carl Sagan

**Call To Action:** Check out The Virtual Island Summit <https://www.islandinnovation.co/summit/> .

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