

Science/Technology

USC Dornsife student follows environmentalist path all the way to UN Climate Change Conference

Murad Jah has been a research assistant for the COP26 conference for a year. Now he's got a virtual front-row seat for the event.

BY **Grayson Schmidt**

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Murad Jah is part of a research team on which he's the only environmental studies major in a group of international relations majors. (Photo/Courtesy of Murad Jah)

Murad Jah has loved the ocean for as long as he can remember.

A scuba enthusiast and ocean photographer, Jah felt a calling to protect the seas — which surprises a lot of people, considering that he grew up in London.

But that calling is what brought him more than 5,400 miles to USC, pushed him to pursue a master's in environmental studies and has now given him a virtual front-row seat at the **2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference**.

“I knew that if I wanted to best tackle my interests and my desire to help the world as much as possible, I couldn't just stay in one place,” Jah said.

“Knowing and understanding the world, to the best of your ability from different cultures, is just going to help with understanding the different issues we face with the climate.”

Jah remembers the first time he saw the human impact on the environment. He was scuba diving.

“I was really sad to jump into water that was filled with plastic and rubbish,” Jah said. “This was that time when we were figuring out the science behind global warming, and it was all more negative than positive.

“From quite a young age I knew I wanted to do as much as I could to maybe turn that negative into a bit of a positive outlook.”

USC student researched for U.N. Climate Change Conference

For the past year, Jah has been a research assistant for the U.N. conference — also known as the Conference of the Parties, or COP26 — under **Shannon Gibson**, associate professor of international relations and environmental studies at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

Gibson and her team of students traveled to the **USC Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies** on Catalina Island to attend COP26 virtually, as observers. The group has been investigating how protests and grassroots activities impact language and communication about climate change, particularly at formal conferences like COP26. Students are also researching how the COVID-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities for climate justice organizations and activists.

After Jah took an international relations class with Gibson and showed his passion environmentalism, he was asked to be a part of the research team under Gibson.

One of the reasons I asked [Murad] to be part of my research team was his clear passion for global environmental and health challenges.

Shannon Gibson

“One of the reasons I asked [Murad] to be part of my research team was his clear passion for global environmental and health challenges,” said Gibson.

“These are the crises that his generation will be tasked with dealing with, and in class he always showed a unique ability to understand the systemic root causes of these problems while also shifting to the local level to think of innovative solutions.”

“She saw the way that I approached environmental-based topics in international relations — kind of thinking with that environmental hat on,” Jah said.

Jah — the only environmental studies major in a group of international relations majors — has facilitated discussions between non-governmental organizations and climate change activists, studied past U.S. climate change negotiations and conducted outreach with non-governmental organizations around the world to assess their climate change platforms.

Though Jah admits that tuning into the conference in the middle of the night due to the time difference in Glasgow hasn’t always been fun, he recognized the opportunity. It’s one that he knew was only possible at USC.

USC faculty members’ “genuine interest” in climate change

“Speaking with the faculty that are in the marine bio and environmental studies departments, I just felt that they genuinely wanted to help the environment,” Jah said.

“There’s a genuine interest more than other places, in my opinion, so that sort of brought me here — it wasn’t just teaching classes for the sake of teaching classes, it was a genuine interest.”

But as he sat in front of his computer all week at his temporary home on Catalina Island, he couldn’t help but feel a mix of optimism and disappointment. Despite seeing extensive coverage of demonstrations and protests surrounding the conference, he’s disappointed that the younger generation of environmentalists still don’t seem to have a seat at the table within the conference.

“A lot of negotiations and promises have been made, but there’s not enough substantial action,” he said.

However, in those protests and demonstrations, Jah sees others like him — a generation of environmentalists that are passionate and ready to change the world.

“With this COP getting so much media attention — whether good or bad — it’s bringing attention to the actual COP, and I think that’s very important,” Jah said. “It does feel fantastic to be able to work towards a goal and know that you’re making a difference.”