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Venture capitalist Sailesh Ramakrishnan, co-founder and managing partner at Rocketship VC, delves into the data-driven approach of Rocketship VC in identifying and investing in climate and sustainability startups. Learn about the challenges, opportunities, and innovative solutions in the realm of AI, venture capital, and sustainable innovation. Hosted by Mike Lepech, professor of civil and environmental engineering at Stanford's School of Engineering.



Transcript

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

These next few decades to the rest of the century, you're going to see the pace of innovation accelerate so much that things are going to be different from when you went to bed to when you wake up.

Mike Lepech:

Hi and welcome to Move Fast & Fix the Planet. I'm your host, Mike Lepech, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Stanford. I'm also an associate faculty director of STVP, the Stanford Engineering Entrepreneurship Center, where we empower aspiring entrepreneurs to become global citizens who create and scale risk responsible innovations. Of course, one of the biggest global challenges we face is climate change and the sustainability of our planet.

In each episode of this podcast, we'll talk to a different expert about entrepreneurship in climate and sustainability and what's different about it, if anything, from entrepreneurship in other spaces. On today's show, I'm thrilled to welcome Sailesh Ramakrishnan, co-founder and managing partner at Rocketship.vc, a global quantitative VC that finds and invests in companies through the power of AI. Sailesh has also served as CTO and co-founder of Lockbox, which was acquired by Square, and Director of Engineering at Walmart Labs.

His early career includes roles at NASA Ames Research Center where he focused on contingency planning for the Mars Exploration Rovers Mission. Sailesh has a bachelor's in civil engineering from IIT Madras, a master's in construction management from Virginia Tech, a second master's in intelligence systems from the University of Pittsburgh, and he was a PhD candidate in artificial intelligence at the University of Michigan. His academic work includes applying AI to cancer modeling and contributing to the development of robotic assistance for the elderly. Sailesh has been passionate about sustainability for a while, and along with a coworker, made biodiesel from waste vegetable oil during his time at NASA. Welcome, Sailesh.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Thank you so much, Mike.

Mike Lepech:

So I have all kinds of questions to ask you about the intersection between investing AI and sustainability. I mean, this is a confluence or a Venn diagram of things that, for me, is totally cool and amazing at this point in time. So Rocketship.vc has a particular approach to investing based on data science. Could you talk a little bit about Rocketship's approach and how it's applied to climate and sustainability investments and some of the things you're seeing in that space?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

So Rocketship is both at the cutting edge of what we think is a massive wave of AI disrupting pretty much every field that we know of, but it's also a confluence of me and my fellow partners' personal interests and abilities as well. We realized that we were at a very unique confluence of having gotten the skillset of being AI and machine learning scientists and our interests with startups, and we also were very inspired by the quantitative funds on Wall Street. We realized that not many people, or hardly anybody had tried our approach, or tried this approach of quantitative investing, which it's almost like waving a flag in front of a bunch of scientists, saying, "Hey, here's an open problem nobody's worked on or solved for." And so we decided to try that out.

The way it applies to climate and sustainability is even more interesting because we didn't know this when we started doing this, but a quantitative approach to investing where we take massive amounts of data, train models on them to help identify and rank the most promising startups in the world has many interesting features that come out of this approach. Algorithms stack rank a bunch of companies, but then when you do take a step back and slightly think about what kinds of companies are showing up, where are they showing up from, which countries, which sectors are these companies and what problems they are trying to address, you start to spot meta trends.

And this is where the intersection with the climate change and sustainability is very strong because the algorithm started identifying this trend of a wide variety of startups being created to address the problem of climate change and sustainability way back from 2016, 2017 onwards. And so we've been

watching this trend and trying to understand it because, and Mike, you know this very well as well, the climate change and sustainability is such a broad spectrum of efforts and problems and potential solutions. And so we were both excited and surprised to find the wide spectrum of companies from many, many different countries showing up that were trying to tackle the problem of climate change and sustainability.

So over the years, as our algorithms have nominated these companies to our ranking system, evolved our understanding of what areas of climate change and sustainability are best suited for a fund of our size. To illustrate, we are an early-stage investor, so which means we typically invest in seed and series A of companies, sometimes series Bs as well, but earlier. And during that time, not a lot of information is available about the potential viability of the company, the viability of the idea, and so on. And so we had to evolve our own understanding of what kinds of climate change and sustainability companies would be appropriate for a fund of [inaudible 00:05:59].

Mike Lepech:

One of the things that can often be challenging for investors, or even founders, is to think about the climate and sustainability business aspect and trying to find really good businesses in this space. The spectrum of what we consider climate and sustainability focused startups is massive. I like to say it's somewhat analogous to med tech, which goes all the way from Fitbit to genome sequencing, and there's a lot in between there when it comes to the level of tech, so to speak. And it seems as though by training the AI models, you're able to identify climate adjacent businesses.

And what I mean by that is businesses that are core really good businesses that can scale, that check all the boxes that a venture capitalist needs to check in order to get the returns that they need to see via the power law and everything else that we know fits with venture. But you wouldn't normally sit there and say, "Oh yeah, this is climate," but it's close enough that it hits both those sweet spots of making an impact around climate and sustainability, but still fitting what is often a very challenging set of criteria to be a venture backable firm.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely. Mike, that's a very insightful observation, and this is actually one of the challenges that I think our approach addresses very well. As you mentioned, any company even tangentially addressing climate change would be an interesting company to look at, but maybe very far away from a viable business model. But an algorithmic approach like the one that we are using identifies the most likely viable companies. And so our job, actually, is a little bit simplified in that we already know these companies are going to be at least near viable, but then that still leaves a whole other set of considerations for us to understand and de-risk, if you will, before making a commitment.

And let me illustrate that with an example. Maybe four years ago, many of the business models seem to depend on some sort of government support. Either it was going to be a government subsidy or government regulation, and while those could be a very stable source of revenue, they may not end up being supportive of a venture-backed ecosystem where you can build a massively successful company.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah, scalability is hard if you're relying on government as part of the revenue model because at some point you hopefully out-scale the government.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely. And then the second aspect also closely related is the regulatory aspect. So there's subsidy and then there's regulation. So what if the regulations change or sunset or actually become more stringent? How does that impact the companies that we are considering? Those are all very relevant questions for us to try and understand, and that's where we started, as I said, evolving our own internal thesis about what constitutes an appropriate climate change and sustainable company for Rocketship to invest in. And so we came up with three or four specific features.

We decided that while the spectrum is so broad, we would focus significantly on two aspects. They should either already have a product in market as they're actually selling either a device or a service and generating revenue. So that was a minimum requirement. The second is that they should be significantly technology enabled because technology enablement is usually a reasonable hedge towards future proofing or changes that happen. And so these two considerations helped us really narrow in or zero in on particular kinds of companies that would be appropriate for Rocketship. The second category of considerations was about the need for large amounts of capital because some of these companies are very excited and want to solve a very large part of the climate change problem, but consequently, that requires a large amount of investment.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah, capital efficiency is not always a good fit with climate and sustainability startups.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

You're absolutely right, and that correlation of the amount of capital needed also introduces an additional risk in that the macro environment plays a big role in it. So if the economy and the venture ecosystem changes in any significant way, that change and the tightening of capital markets can very significantly adversely affect companies that acquire capital. So with these few considerations in mind that allowed us over and above what our algorithms were identifying, we were beginning to identify some really exciting companies all over the world.

And this is the other thing that I'm reasonably happy to observe, that climate change at least has caught the attention of pretty much everybody in the world, that we are seeing amazing solutions and efforts coming from many, many different countries. The US is still a significant leader, I'm very proud to say, but we are seeing lots of it even from developing world countries in Africa where they're looking for recycling plastics and rubber and so on, which traditionally they used to burn as fuel, into something that can be reused in making roads or building blocks and so on, has been very exciting to see.

Mike Lepech:

For those that don't know, your algorithms have shown to be very good at finding very successful companies at very early stage. You've had a good record as an investor, if I may say so. One of the things that every early-stage VC has to think about is what is that exit? Is there a pathway to some kind of liquidity at the end of the road for most of these climate and sustainability focused startups that you're seeing?

M&A is by far the most common liquidity event, but the kinds of firms that work in these spaces are not normally tech firms with these high-gross margins and large capital and large cash pools and things like this, right? They tend to be, once again, more commodity businesses where you have gross margins that are much lower, and so therefore the M&A capacity, let's say, might not be quite what it is. And even the market, the capital markets might not view these in the same way that they view tech startups, and you get that initial equity pop.

What are you seeing or thinking about as that pathway towards liquidity? Or are you pretty confident that this is going to be that same kind of exit that makes the power law in this space work, or will the power law shift in this space so that there is some different portfolio theory that is in between traditional portfolio theory and the power law?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

It's an interesting question and it's something we thought about. The advantage we have, as you identified, is we are early stage investors, and so it's always been the case that we would be entering into sectors that are early in their development, and therefore the exit scenario is not very clear or well understood.

Specific to climate change, what we are happy to see, and this is also what has led us to our narrowing of our focus to a couple of those features that I mentioned, is that the traditional expansive, large fundamental research type of companies that may require large amounts of capital, a new way of battery chemistry that may require seven, 10 years, I think you're absolutely right. The exit scenario is not completely clear, most likely M&A, you are right, but the valuations you would ascribe to it and when that would happen, all of those are not necessarily very clear. But for the kinds of companies that we are looking for, whether it is already a reasonable product in the market, much more of the traditional metrics startup line, "Is this company generating revenue? What are the margins? How fast is this growth?" And this is where we are super excited because this is totally greenfield for many of these use cases.

Another company we invested in is a company that tries to harness water from air. Now that may seem like a very expensive way of getting water when you have ubiquitous water supplies, but then when you start digging into it, there is three different use cases or groups of use cases that make this a tremendously large opportunity. There are significantly added countries where there is only seawater and diesel is very, very, very expensive, and you still have to be near the coast and transport water. But most places still are not zero humidity places. There is still some relative humidity from which you can extract water from. So that's one use case. Second is pharmaceuticals and beverage industry require highly purified sources of water, and water extracted from air is actually very, very pure because it doesn't have any other groundwater impurities.

So once you start looking at these use cases, you realize that the kind of people who need this, they already exist. The potential acquirers already exist. And so it's just a question of marrying this opportunity with the right acquirers in order to deliver this M&A. Now, while you are also correct that M&A is the most likely outcome, because the fact that climate change and sustainability companies have always been at the intersection of multiple fields, there is the possibility of few of those to really break the mold, if you will, and go all the way, create a new kind of company that did not exist before because it's a unique combination of sectors where no one company can potentially acquire them, and hence they are able to stand alone. And that is completely a function of the rapid rate which they can grow, and that's another aspect that our algorithms help us identify.

So the companies that we are investing in, not only are companies that are in market, but also are some of the companies that are growing very, very rapidly. So for example, [inaudible 00:17:08], they are in the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue already. So very, very fast, and for all measures, they're only a three, four-year-old company, and it's unheard of for companies to cross that 100 million revenue mark that quickly. But this is an example of how large the opportunity is, and hence how fast a company can grow.

Mike Lepech:

We hear often that a change in the form of venture capital needs to happen in order to allow climate and sustainability ventures to get funded. Of course, a lot of people are talking about more patient capital and saying, "Oh, it works a lot better if you have evergreen funds that have much longer timeframes on this growth." And it sounds to me like what you're saying is there are a lot of opportunities in this space that actually don't need that kind of patient capital, that you can find businesses that scale to the size on a timeline that is reasonable for the traditional 10-year fund venture capital model, that the answer is not always "We just need more time," that you don't think that's always the case.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

In fact, I would go as far to say I am contrarian on that. I don't think we need patient capital. Patient capital is another way of saying, "I'm going to be working on this idea for so long that I'm going to keep needing large amounts of capital infusion and may at some point put at risk my level of accountability and potential returns." Now, that's not to say that there aren't things that take 10, 15 years to develop. Fundamental research does. But I think what you want is capital that is connected with accountability.

And so somebody who's funding a company that is creating the next generation nuclear reactor, for example, isn't going to just sit and wait and say, I'm going to wait 10 years and come back and see what's happening. They are going to keep checking every year that milestones are being hit, right? And so what is actually needed, in my opinion, are innovative ways to rethink how these companies are constructed so that there are significant and well-understood milestones, some of which could be even milestones that would be secondary revenue sources on that path to the eventual discovery.

Here's another example to illustrate this. This is a space tech company and one of the biggest needs in space today is the current lack of infrastructure for things like communication, orbit keeping, collision avoidance, and so on. Those are hard problems to solve, but on the way to solving them, you can create things like a ground station that does laser communication that you can immediately start putting into market right away. So while the eventual solution and the full fruition of this company is 10, 15 years away, revenue is only about four to five years away.

And so that approach, I believe, offers more discipline and more innovation in the way in which you think about companies and structure them, rather than saying, "Give me a large pot of money and don't come back and ask me for 10 years until I produce this enormously successful discovery," I think that leads to lack of discipline, wastage, but also does not force you to think within these constraints and generate a revenue source that you may not have considered before, but as an ancillary, actually, is potentially very important.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah, I really appreciate your contrarian viewpoint on this for two reasons, right? One is that I think there's a misconception that venture capital is great to fund anything that we need to have built for the economy, when in fact venture capital dollars are not perfect for every type of business and every type of need. It is not a panacea to all of our problems that we need solved. And so I think that the recognition of that is really important.

And the second thing is we hear and we know that the climate is changing, and we know it's happening fast, probably faster than we had originally thought. And so the idea of patience is not one that we may be able to afford, and so the pressure that is naturally applied by the venture capital model, and the GP that is making the investment, I think are well aligned with the speed and urgency in which we need to address the problem, provided that we don't create secondary effects which were unforeseen and exacerbate other problems. But that's why I actually really appreciate the fact that you say, "No, patient is not the answer. It should be fast."

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Right. But I think you also point out this interesting caveat, right? And the reason for this is what you said, that there is this common misconception that venture capitalists make unreasonable demands of founders and hence force them to take suboptimal choices and solutions just because capital is at risk and returns have to be delivered and so on. And while that does happen, it's not actually the most common way in which venture capitalists operate. Most of them want the biggest outcome possible, and so what they are actually looking for in terms of feedback from the entrepreneur, the founders, is to operate with a sense of urgency and efficiency, rather than take suboptimal choices.

And so it's more a question of understanding that we are operating in an ecosystem where there are resource constraints, and therefore constraints usually are a great source of innovation. When you have constrained problems is when you think of out-of-the-box solutions. And so I think that's the kind of discipline and pressure most successful venture capitalists bring to the problem rather than the misconception where a venture capitalist is forcing a company or a founder to make suboptimal choices and hence leads to a much worse outcome, because those outcomes are actually worse for both the founders and the venture capitalists. So why would a partner want to shoot themselves in the foot, in some sense, right?

Mike Lepech:

Yeah. No, you're right. In a professionally managed fund, an experienced venture capitalist, incentives are thoughtfully aligned rather than put in competition with one another between the founder and the investor, and that is the hallmark of the professionalization of the venture capital community.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely, absolutely. The one other thing I also wanted to add in this discussion is I think it's also very important, and then perhaps a little bit of training or education that is needed for some of these new class of founders. Because in the climate tech space, for the first time, we are getting founders who are completely cross-functional, cross-disciplinary, coming from multiple different departments, and many times they may not have the necessary business savvy, if you will, to transform what they thought was a fantastic idea into a business.

And so there's a little bit of an education gap there as well, I think, which is relevant, where at the very least they have to learn to find ways to effectively communicate the progress and the transitions that

they're making and how big a difference that is. I mean, a VC may not be able to appreciate the fact that you increase battery efficiency by four percent until you realize that even making a 0.1% increase in efficiency in a chemistry that is so not well understood is actually a big deal. And so I would say the challenge is solvable, but by contributions from both parties, from the founders to have that understanding of where the VCs are coming from and hence help communicate the progress they're making, and the tangible progress they're making, as well as the VCs realizing for the most part that it's a win-win to be supportive, but also to hold folks accountable in the progress they make.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah. So I want to drill down a little bit more on one of the comments that you just made. You're using a very complex AI algorithm to identify a broad spectrum of possible investment opportunities, and then you layer on some other considerations that you had talked about before. You want to make sure they have a product in the market, that traction is growing, that it's highly tech enabled to make sure that you're insulated from some of the policy and regulatory fluctuations. You want to make sure it's capital efficient and you want to make sure that the macro economic environment is amenable to the solution that's being proposed.

I want to talk more on something you had just said about the founders. You had said the founders that you're seeing maybe are more interdisciplinary, their training is different than what we have traditionally had in the venture space. Can you talk more about whether you think that founders in the climate and sustainability space are different? How are they different, and does that create new and different challenges for the typical GP?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

I need to think about that a little bit more, but my first thought, and this is something we have observed in the last three, four years, is that this is actually a tremendously important aspect of the potential for success of these companies, this interdisciplinary-ness, because I think before to contrast this with traditional founders and how they build companies, usually you're looking at founders who are reasonably experts in a particular field who are bringing a lot of their experience to it and have identified a problem and a solution. But I think the space of sustainability and climate change requires knowledge of so many different things that most of these founders aren't super experts in one or the other. They need to be at least a jack-of-all-trades of at least a few trades, if you will. And that actually has been very important a characteristic in the potential for success of the company, and it's important in two ways.

One is in the vision in which these founders are constructing their company, and two is in their ability to attract talent among the wide variety of disciplines that are needed to bring together. It could be engineering, it could be chemistry, it could be robotics, it could be computer science. You need to bring people together in order to solve for this. So more than a challenge, I think, as a VC, I get more excited when I find teams that are this interdisciplinary coming together because that tells me that not only is this problem more likely to solve, but the team has the right capabilities among it to address most of the common challenges. This mix of talent coming together usually is a very good sign that you have the right ingredients for a fantastic recipe coming together.

Mike Lepech:

I think that makes tremendous sense. And one of the things that we have found at Stanford is that we used to think about training what we called T-shaped people that have breadth, and that's of course the

crossbar of the T, but then depth in one area so that you do have something that you bring to the table for any team. And we've changed our mantra as we get closer into the climate and sustainability space from training T-shaped people to training Pi-shaped people. And I don't mean the food, I mean the Greek letter. And where yes, you still have that crossbar, that horizontal piece that allows you to relate to other disciplines and to be a great leader, but you have more than one area where you can rely on some depth so that you can then be that translator between disciplines in order to bring together solutions that are truly world-class and something people have never seen before.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely. And let me illustrate that by another example of one of our portfolio companies. This is a company out of the UK and what they are doing, and this is climate adjacent, but their use cases are actually very relevant to climate change and sustainability. The field of chemistry has not seen significant innovation except in a very few narrow manufacturing processes. So the traditional way in which you create a new chemical, let's say it's a new glue or a new lubricant, still is through a laborious process of lab work where chemists and technicians are putting together a whole multi-step 20/30 step set of reactions in order to validate whether the end chemical has the properties that they are expecting. And literally, this is a brute-force search process in that sense, which has been very time-consuming and resource-consuming in terms of how companies develop these chemicals.

This entrepreneur and the team he put together from the UK, he had the unique combination of being both a roboticist and a world-class chemist. And it is the combination of those two skills, so exactly to your point, that Pi, where one leg was on chemistry and the other was in robotics, allowed him to create a company where he, along with a bunch of other chemists and engineers, were able to create a robotic chemical workbench where you describe the chemistry in software form and you have the robotics to execute that end to end.

Now so imagine what would take weeks and had to have many humans in the loop can run now autonomously over hours. And if you have many of these systems, you can do the search for the new chemical much, much, much faster, orders of magnitude faster. And so this company investment is called Chemify, and that's what they do. And this is exactly the example of a Pi-shaped person, an expert in two fields, but then he also has enough of the other savviness, the business side, the ability to connect with other companies and so forth.

Mike Lepech:

I love that real-world example, and now we're going to be looking around for all kinds of Pi-shaped people from here going forward, right?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely.

Mike Lepech:

So the podcast is called Move Fast & Fix the Planet. And we already talked about the move fast piece, where maybe the idea of patience is not what we need, but rather the urgency that we normally get from venture is a good thing in this space. With your background in AI, both as a researcher and an investor, what opportunities do you see for AI and machine learning to help us move fast and fix the planet?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

The number one thing, and this is the thing that we see every day, is AI is accelerating the search space. So most of the solutions that we are looking at are searches, searching for a better material, searching for a better process, searching for an engineering solution. They're all searches, and AI is one of the best ways of intelligently searching the space. And the way to think about what we are doing at Rocketship is our AI is our copilot, and we are investing in other AI copilots that are enabling these fields to have tremendous amounts of innovation happen at a much, much more compressed timeframe. I mean, the AI is continuously working even though the human researchers are asleep.

So this is like a 24/7 large computational problem that we are able to make significant inroads on. And you are already seeing a lot of the value of, especially in the newer type of models, the large language models. Most people think that, "Oh, that only applies to techs," but a lot of what we do is language. Chemistry is a lot of language. A lot of genomics is language, right? The genome is the language of how we are built and constructed. So if you consider that approach and apply it to many, many different domains, you have the opportunity to accelerate tremendously the surge for the kinds of solutions, and those machines and those computers don't need sleep, don't need downtime, hopefully, and will identify solutions way, way, way faster.

It still requires a human to validate, understand, and have built and guided these systems. So humans are still very much in the loop, but the brute force work of the search I think is going to go away significantly fast and you're going to start seeing the innovation pace increase. Now, I think it's very common to have seen graphs of the rate of pace of innovation changing in human civilization, but you haven't seen anything yet. These next few decades to the rest of the century, you're going to see the pace of innovation accelerate so much that things are going to be different from when you went to bed to when you wake up.

Mike Lepech:

I think that in the vernacular of Silicon Valley, we're still on the first part of the hockey stick.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Absolutely.

Mike Lepech:

Not on the really vertical part of the hockey stick yet. Yeah, and I think that also brings us full circle to sort of that Venn diagram that I talked about between AI, climate and sustainability, and investing and how it's all coming together. So before we finish, we have a segment called Four To Fix The Planet. These are four questions we ask to all of our guests about climate and sustainability. You ready?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

I'll try my best. Go for it.

Mike Lepech:

So first up, what's on your bookshelf, playlist, or feed right now?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

One of the books that I've been excited to read, and I go back to it again and again, is a book by Ben Horowitz about making hard decisions, how to make hard decisions. And the reason why this is an important book to keep coming back to is a lot of decisions we make are hard in very nuanced ways because sustainability is such a wide space. Every problem is important. Clean water is important and so is clean energy, so is the discovery of the next genomic solution to help particular diseases that were caused by pollution.

So you have to make these hard decisions, these hard choices, and how you make them is just as important for us as investors, but also is one of the biggest things that we mentor our founders about, is how they can make hard decisions in their own companies. So that's one of the books. The other podcast I've been listening to is that Climate BC podcast about the interesting things that keep coming up. All I can say is there is so much going on, it's very hard to keep up, and I'm hoping podcasts like ours and others, other guests that you will have on this podcast, are opportunities for us to keep up with the tremendous wave that we are a part of at this time in terms of innovation that's happening in climate and sustainability.

Mike Lepech:

Agreed. And the book by Ben's a great recommendation. Next up, what's keeping you up at night? What's something in this space that you think needs more attention?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

This is hopefully not going to sound controversial, but I'm actually unfortunately very disappointed with our national governments and their lack of commitment to this change. Now, I don't think the solution is completely only in the hands of national governments. I think the solution is in our hands, you and I, common people, people who are teaching others, people who are investing in others, people who are going to become founders. It is that the solution is mostly in our hands, but I think governments, as our representative, as the deployers of capital from our tax dollars, I think need to be a little bit... Not a little bit, perhaps, but significantly more responsive to the challenges of climate change. And they are responding to constituents like ours raising the voice. But I am disappointed that the pace at which and the seriousness with which they are treating it is still not matching the seriousness with which perhaps you and I and the rest of the folks here feel.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah, I think that's a very fair criticism. On the contrary to that, what's giving you hope? What's something that's promising that you've seen?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Oh, the flip side is the excitement, energy, and innovativeness that comes from entrepreneurs all over the world. These are founders who don't see any walls anywhere, and if they do, they have the strength and will and energy to break through them. Climate change has seized the imagination of people all over the world and isn't stopping anybody from taking steps in their own backyard. Like I said, we've been seeing examples even in countries like Africa where you would think when basic needs are in question, would they be willing to think about sustainability? But that's not the case. They are thinking about sustainability because even more than us here in first world or in developed world countries, the

problems of climate change and pollution are actually making a bigger impact on their lives and that the things that they can do to fix there make a change much, much more tangible for them.

Mike Lepech:

Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. The things that I see are truly exciting in that space. And then finally, what's your favorite sustainability hack? Something that people listening could do in their day-to-day lives that you think could help?

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

This is going to sound a little small and a little trivial, but I try my very best to not use paper as much as I can, and this changes from most of our offices are already electronic or mostly paperless, but everywhere I go there is still paper involved. I mean, you go to offices, you go to government offices, they ask you to fill a form. You go to a doctor's office, they ask you to fill a form. And I keep asking everywhere, "Is there an electronic version that I can fill?" One of the other common sources of paper is cash register receipts. I am a standard no on anybody wanting to give me a piece of paper, and that's my tiny teensy hack. And perhaps it's counter to have a policy of where you're supposed to keep receipts and whatnot. Blame me, but I don't keep receipts,

Mike Lepech:

And that's something that we all can do. It's the rare person that wouldn't be offered a receipt or a form to be filled out. So Sailesh, we could go on for hours. I have so many interesting topics about space exploration, civil engineering, AI, climate, and sustainability. But I want to thank you for spending your time with us today and all of the insight that you've provided us in this, once again, really unique intersection of three spaces that I think are incredibly important.

Sailesh Ramakrishnan:

Thank you so much, Mike. It's also been a pleasurable conversation to have this with you. And I also want to thank the organizers of this podcast and yourself. I think the work you're doing in terms of spreading the word, talking about stories of people who are involved in this, I think are exactly the thing we need, not just to encourage and enthuse folks, but also to spread the word on what amazing things are going on all over.

Mike Lepech:

Today's guest has Sailesh Ramakrishnan of Rocketship.vc. If you enjoyed this show, be sure to subscribe to Move Fast & Fix the Planet wherever you get your podcasts and help others find it by rating, reviewing, and sharing it. Learn more about this podcast and related work at stvp.stanford.edu/sustainability. Move Fast & Fix the Planet is hosted by me, Mike Lepech, and produced by STVP, the Stanford Engineering Entrepreneurship Center. This episode is supported by Stanford Ecopreneurship Programs. Our producers are Holly McCall and Anthony Ruth. Editing is by Stanford Video. For more podcasts, interviews, and articles, please visit stvp.stanford.edu/ecorner.