

Climate Change is Always in Season

Why climate change fell from focus and how addressing it can save lives.



Taxi covered streets of New York and the beautiful foliage of northern Arizona.

Story by **Mira Theilmann**

Photographs by **Gabrielle Theilmann & Diem Pham**

Save the Planet. At 10 years old, I was convinced saving the world was the end-all-be-all career. Saving the environment consumed my every thought. It was my mission to convince my parents to buy 50 solar panels, make a solar oven, buy a composter, and sell the mini-van for a tesla and a camry. The need to protect the environment and reduce waste seemed like a no-brainer to me. I wanted the world that looked like *Planet Earth* documentaries and not the terrifying depiction of *Trashed*. I didn't see the endless layers of political bureaucracy and

looming economic energy conglomerates as road blocks. Saving the earth was something I just had to do.

The general public has a habit of being rather quick to judge climate change science and environmental activism. Social media related to the environment is almost entirely diluted with controversy and conspiracy about how climate change is a giant money making scheme created by an unknown mastermind behind the scenes.

2007. The actual conversation on what climate change is and why we should be trying to reduce our waste has significantly waned over the years. In a recent study by Forbes contributor Kalev Leetaru, the peak of web searches about “global warming” and “climate change” was around 2007. After this point, the interest in searching for related topics has significantly decreased.

I remember 2007 to be a time of dozens of HGTV shows about how to install the latest solar technology and low energy washing machines. Shows were about the greenest houses and the most sustainable living that could be achieved. Composting was something that schools taught with enthusiasm and recycling was an everyday conversation. *Planet Earth* was watched by every kid I knew, and everyone was astounded and in awe of the planet. Within a year, news channel morning shows, school curriculums, and tv channels stopped talking about sustainability.

For some reason, climate change became equivalent to a fad. Being aware of how much waste you produce and wanting to change the environment became a topic only addressed by those formally known as hipsters or tree huggers. Even I found myself being less concerned with what I recycled and how much energy or water I used.

Climate change conversation is often only brought up after a severe and devastating natural disaster or, in the case of the Pope, a famous celebrity or political tries to incite change. Part of this is because speaking on climate change has almost become a cliché. The science behind climate change can be confusing and complicated when faced with piles of social media screaming one conspiracy and conservatives adamant that wasting money on climate change is unnecessary. The science does exist, and it is not nearly as controversial as the public may assume it to be.



Dust and pollution smothering Egypt's cities.

Us vs. Them. In the United States, the biggest roadblock is often politics. Republicans hate Democrats in Congress, in the voting booths, and in everyday communities. It has become nearly impossible for a Republican and Democrat to have shared views on a topic. Therefore climate change has become almost entirely a liberal agenda. Not a single 2015 Republican presidential candidate has been willing to focus on climate change as a critical part of their campaign. For a nation with the highest energy use in the world and a struggling waste management system, it is quite shocking that Republican candidates are more worried about losing to Donald Trump than improving the health and safety of the nation.

In a divided government, throwing in more demands often only slows down the legislative process. Therefore environmental policy has been slow coming and activism for climate change is being side-lined by a lack of government interest. It can be frustrating as a citizen to see the lack of progress being made in a government constantly at war.

It is often easier to turn away from addressing the issue and dismiss its importance when compared to impending wars and terrorism. Climate change is not something the public can see on a daily basis in most of America. The current media is slammed with coverage of protests, terrorism, and violence. When a natural disaster occurs directly in concurrence with an act of human terrorism, it seems more tangible to try to fix the effects of a few individuals or an organization.

In a world where human violence can be found on every channel and every website, climate change does not seem as pressing of an issue. What everyday Americans don't often realize, is how great the potential death toll is that we have created with our own lifestyles.

“The destiny of world civilization depends upon providing a decent standard of living for all mankind.” - Norman Borlaug

Voice of Reason. Pope Francis is the self proclaimed pope of the people. He sleeps in humble housing, visits people stricken by tragedy as their beacon of hope, and is an adamant speaker for the lower classes without a voice. His speech on climate change is perfectly in line with this model of goodwill and charity.

The conservative media reaction was often absolute shock that the Pope would take up such a political voice and take up a liberal opinion. Before his encyclical on climate change, catholicism and climate change seemed to be on two different planets. To acknowledge that humans have the ability to affect the planet and agree that the science is accurate was a huge step towards uniting the parties.

Climate change will affect the lower classes and least developed countries at a much higher cost than that of suburban America. Natural disasters easily destroy cities with high density populations and feeble housing. Governments of these countries have little funding to deal with destroyed cities and losses of thousands. The individuals and families who are hit by these earthquakes and hurricanes often do not have the money, food, or transportation to survive such an incident.



A family trying to survive in a Bangladesh, a critical area affected by climate change.

Everyday Citizen. In ignoring climate change, we are ignoring the potential to save thousands, possibly millions of lives. America is a country where volunteering is practically a requirement at every level of schooling and a staple of college applications. There are hundreds of corporations preaching buy a pair give a pair or donate for a cause. We are surrounded by opportunities inspiring our good natured tendencies. Helping other humans and helping make a difference comes naturally.

Volunteering and donating money and clothes to places in need is an easily quantifiable way to make. When people are confronted with the concept of addressing climate change, it is both daunting and terrifying. If international governments have struggled with addressing climate change and uniting over the energy crisis, how can a single individual solve a problem that affects the entire planet.



The New York city skyline. A city that is teeming with life from dawn till night.

Addressing climate change requires that we realize that it is not a daunting concept for humans to change the environment. For example, the Berkeley Pit in Montana is a lake of mine tailings saturated with toxic metals. The area has become the largest superfund site in the US and is nearly impossible to tackle economically. Mismanagement can destroy entire ecosystems and send corporations running in the opposite direction.

The everyday citizen can't veto the actions of oil and mining conglomerates, but they can attempt to reduce their own impact. If the interest in climate change spikes due to the good will of citizens looking toward the future, there is more likely to be united action. Simply limiting your own waste and advocating for attention to waste in the community can save lives in the long run.

Even though Arizona is thousands of miles away from devastating hurricanes, earthquakes, and pollution, there are thousands of people suffering from a lack of clean water, destroyed homes, and nowhere to go. Living sustainably is one of the most economically cheap and safe options to help save thousands of lives.

Zero Waste Project. Although I am still just as impassioned about the planet, I am very new to the field of environmental science. At my first year here at the University of Arizona I was recently involved in a Zero Waste Project in which we are trying to reduce waste flow in the architecture building. By relabeling and relocating the recycling bins and adding compost we hope to lower the amount of recycling being thrown in the trash.

The project has been a fantastic learning experience in which we conducted waste audits, surveyed the building, and implemented a possible solution. Due to the free range of the project, I was able to create a survey to ask students and staff of the building what they felt needed to change. The response from this survey was incredibly surprising, with over 50 individuals sending in surveys, many with commentary.

The changes we made were not drastic and only affected one building. However, the overwhelming support and interest in the project was incredibly encouraging. We will be conducting the final waste audit for this project in the following weeks and we are hopeful that the amount of recycled materials is higher than our initial audits.

How does this one project relate to an entire nation? The problems we were faced with, confusing recycling bins, a lack of coordination between administration and waste management, and a barrage of regulations, can easily be found anywhere you look. Dealing with climate change will not require further complication of the system. Simplification and communication are the key tools to reduce waste.



Bikes available in New York city for pollution free travel.

It is incredibly important and beneficial for each individual to be aware of how much energy they use and how much waste they generate when compared to the rest of the world. Without regulation, we create both economic and environmental chaos. This does not require going off the grid or eliminating all processed materials. Living a sustainable lifestyle requires taking into account future generations.

Health-care provides an economic safety net, the education system creates the next round of teachers and doctors, and protecting the environment creates a livable and safe country for everyone to live in. Taking the proactive steps to realize the lives that can be saved in the long term is crucial to addressing climate change. Climate change was created by humans and it is our responsibility to protect the planet for the sake of all people on the planet. We only have one planet, let's not waste it.