

## High School Grand Prize Winner (Essay)

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“Climate Change & Capitalism”

9th Grade, Dougherty Valley High School

Four hundred and eighty-three. This is the amount of people who were killed in Kerala in 2018, when my native country experienced the worst floods it had ever seen in the last one century. The other 5.4 million people who survived lost their homes, roads, railways, bridges, power supplies, crops, livestock, and more. Over 1.4 million were displaced from their homes and stuck in refugee camps. My uncle’s home was flooded by the Pampa River, stuck on the top-most floor of his house for three days with a few biscuits for food. His newly bought car was destroyed, and the entire lower portion of his house was destroyed. Nobody could immediately save them because of the limited supply of helicopters, and because they weren’t in the “dangerous category” of citizens that needed immediate help, which included anyone who was above eighty years old. My great-uncle, only in his sixties, wasn’t a priority, and when he was finally rescued, he had to spend over a month in a refugee camp.

Now the reason for such a deadly calamity? “No one could have predicted this amount of rain! It was the mismanagement of dam reservoirs! It was because of the careless mining and construction in the Western Ghats! It’s because Kerala has forty-four rivers flowing through it!” These are the answers our government gave us, and while they were indeed factors, they overlooked the real reason behind a flood that could have been avoided if humans simply paid attention to their planet. India’s summer monsoon has always been a factor in floods, but the rapid increase in flood risks since the 1950’s is due to one thing only: global warming. Warmer temperatures are speeding up glacier melting in the Himalayan Mountains, thus increasing the output of the Ganga and Brahmaputra Rivers, which flow throughout the country. But why did I have to research this? Why have world governments been silent about climate change for the last sixty years? Throughout science classes in high school, we’re taught the adverse effects of greenhouse gases, the dangerous quantity of carbon emissions, and our withering ozone layer. So

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how can it be explained that no serious steps have been taken to reverse the adverse effects of climate change, despite that 97% of scientists around the globe argue that climate change is in fact a threat to humanity? One simple word: capitalism. Different sectors of capitalism have lobbies that impose their wills on politicians in every country, perfectly content with exploiting millions while destroying the environment, specifically auto-manufacturers and oil companies. It's the interest of these enormous enterprises that oil continues to be the world's primary fuel source.

Until recently I always considered climate change as an environmentalist- only issue, a separate problem only affecting future generations that would have to deal with the turmoil. This mentality changed when I realized that global warming is caused by the people who are least likely to face its consequences. Capitalist policies and monopolies allow companies to resort to fossil fuels since it is cheap and requires no innovation so that companies can save money. Environmentalist policies are the ones that restrict carbon emissions and production of fossil fuels, but the capitalistic society that we live in has created a mindset of greed, where short term wealth is preferable to long term certainty of stable future conditions. By prioritizing their own wealth, they victimize the poorest of the poor. People with limited financial resources cannot adapt quickly to natural disasters, and globally, it is mostly women and children who are most vulnerable. In third world countries, a majority of women work in agriculture, so when climate change destroys crops with droughts and famine, they lose their entire livelihood. Meanwhile, those of us privileged enough to live in America are less prone to face the life-wrecking effects of natural disasters, unlike developing countries like Haiti and Nepal, whose governments don't have the funds or means to rebuild their nation. When we only think of climate change as an environmental issue, it's easier to for companies to convince themselves that they aren't doing any additional harm by adding a couple more tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, but when we correlate climate change to pressing social issues of poverty, starvation, displacement, uprooting, and overall loss of their means of survival, then we can finally have a chance at convincing lobbyists to lay out sensible environmental reform.

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Since I was a little girl, my favorite trips were to Yosemite National Park. My lifelong dream is to visit every national park in America, to see how beautiful our earth truly is before it all goes away. Nature is the biggest part of my life. Whenever I need to calm myself down, I walk outside and observe the *life* around me. Whenever it rains, I stay outdoors for hours feeling the rain on my skin; the relief is almost instant. Nature is what enables us to be humble human beings. Only when you connect with the world around you do you realize that we as humans have no right to destroy the homes of millions of animals and plants for the sake of harvesting oil. We've grown accustomed to using the earth without any regards for the rest of the life that lives here.

Yet I know change is possible. Ever since the pandemic has forced companies to shut down with stay-at-home orders enforced, we've seen immediate changes in the environment. The canals in Venice are clear for the first time in decades. Swans and dolphins are returning to the city, and the fish are finally visible. Carbon emissions have been cut drastically across the board. While the situation in which the world was forced to isolate is far from ideal, it only gives us more proof that change is possible if companies and countries simply take the initiative to give back to the earth.

My idea of a perfect world is one where we can successfully coexist with the life around us. I do not want to live in a world where older generations feel no remorse for their mistakes that have caused issues amongst younger generations. I don't want to live in a world where the weight of every mistake that humanity has made concerning climate change is placed upon our shoulders, as if we're equipped to deal with something so severe. My vision of a just and healthy world is one where a happy, fulfilled life on this planet is certain for everyone, not the current mindset of exploiting individuals for profit. Now I understand that this is no longer simply a distant hope of my generation. As citizens living in a country as prosperous as America, it's time for us to all come together and hold corporations accountable for their wrongdoings against the environment. The future is in our hands now, and it's our duty to give back to our planet for everything our earth has done for us