

High School Essay

Honorable Mention

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“Our Planet, Our Problem”

Our planet does not differentiate between its inhabitants. The lines that we draw between and amongst ourselves mean nothing to Earth. When one country bombs another, and the first country cheers while the second weeps, Earth only shudders with the pain of the new barren indentation on its surface. If you could feel the pain of every starving polar bear in the melting ice cap of the Arctic, of every choking koala in the burning bush of Australia, of every dying human in the violent hurricanes of the Caribbean, you would do everything in your power to protect all of these living things—just as you would protect yourself.

The reality is that this is how climate change operates, albeit slightly more subtly. A tree that falls in Brazil has ramifications for all of us around the world, and the negative consequences set off a chain of reactions extending far beyond the death of a single tree. Although climate change does not affect everyone equally due to gender, racial, wealth, age, and geographical disparities, the consequences that we each face are consequences we face as a human race.

In 2020, we have seen what concerted global efforts can do to remediate a problem. In the ongoing fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, every single person plays an important role, whether researcher, politician, grocery store worker, celebrity, or ordinary citizen. The choices we make every day—to isolate, to wear a mask, to wash our hands, to call a loved one, to donate to a cause—have indelible impacts. Contrary to what we have been taught, the greatest thing we can do to make a difference in stopping the path of this virus is to lay low: not leave our homes and not physically interact with people. Nothing about this is showy; unlike receiving in-person thanks from someone, there is no immediate visible impact here. Nonetheless, there is an impact.

Clearly, with preventing the spread of an infectious disease, each person on the team has a role that is of the utmost importance. However, how can one individual save lives in the face of climate change, a global issue that comes as the result of centuries of human evolution? When the Industrial Revolution began centuries ago, our ancestors had the intention of improving the lives of everyone belonging to the human race—and they did. Without the inventions from that time—electricity, steam power, and the associated technologies—we would not be where we are at today, with light in every home and cars for every household.

Our ancestors brought us to this point with their creativity, their drive, and their conviction in their work. Unfortunately, the benefits of fossil fuels and other unsustainable practices, such as consumerism, are quickly being overtaken by the costs. Now, it is our turn to do something revolutionary, for the betterment of everyone's quality of life.

This is not about turning off the lights that our ancestors worked so hard to create, but about finding a way to keep those lights on for generations. The humans of the future may not be able to thank us, face-to-face, for reversing the trajectory of climate change and saving the planet. Even so, this is the right thing to do. Being a part of something bigger is what humans are made for; it makes us different from all other living things. Human ingenuity and collaborative action have brought us this far: to longer life spans, to better quality of life. You also possess that power—use it.

Will tackling climate change solve all of humanity's other problems? No. But this will bring us closer to eradicating injustice. The ideal world is not one that is perfect, but rather one in which everyone stands together to strive for a better world for all. Everyone has a part to play in resolving the global issue of climate change, whether that role is outspoken and eye-catching, as with Greta Thunberg's activism, or more quiet and unconventional. COVID-19 has united us as global citizens in the fight for the freedom to live healthy. The pandemic has impressed upon us the qualities of strength, ability, and resilience that we share as a race and that become amplified when we grow as a team. With all the lessons we have learned and all the knowledge we have gained, we are now poised to take on the biggest crisis in human history: climate change.

The journey towards an ideal world began with the humble beginnings of humanity and it continues with us. You and I face a different problem now than the generations before us, but the fundamental issue remains the same: injustice—for us, for all the other things living alongside us, and for the planet. Resolving this issue is possible once you start to believe that the problem ends with you.