A FIERCE GREEN FIRE

Viewers’ Discussion & Resource Guide

by

Mark Kitchell
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Liking Berkeley in the Sixties, my previous work which has become one of the defining films about the protest movements that shook America during the 1960s, A Fierce Green Fire started with the idea that a big-picture synthesis of environmentalism was needed. It’s the biggest movement the world has ever seen, yet so broad and diffuse that we’ve lacked a larger sense of what it was about. This film is meant to take stock, explore the historical meaning of the environmental movement, and witness where we’ve come from and where we are heading.

The first iteration of this project was a six-hour series. Edward O. Wilson, the eminent biologist who was advisor to the film, told me we’d never get something so big funded -- and, if we did, no one would watch it. He urged us to focus on five of the most important and dramatic events and people, to build a shorter and more entertaining film around them. We selected:

- David Brower and the Sierra Club halting dams in the Grand Canyon
- Lois Gibbs and the people of Love Canal battling 20,000 tons of toxic waste
- Paul Watson and Greenpeace saving whales and baby harp seals
- Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers saving the Amazon rainforest
- (what else could we end on?) the twenty-five year battle to deal with climate change

We discovered that each is emblematic of a part as well as an era of environmentalism, so we built those five main stories into broader acts that encapsulate whole strands of the movement. We shaped the acts like an hourglass. Each begins wide, looking at origins and context. Next we narrow in on the main story more fully told. Then the acts open up again to explore ramifications and evolution of that strand and how it connects to the next phase of environmentalism.

The film went through two rounds of shooting interviews, gathering archival material, scripting and editing a rough-cut. That’s how documentaries get made, an intense creative process of trial and error. Some stories like wildlife and biodiversity fell out. Other issues like population didn’t have enough activism to fit. The act on climate change was put off until there was more funding. The interviews were shot just after COP 15 in Copenhagen, a pregnant and conflicted time. We worked on the acts in pieces and I wasn’t sure it would all connect to become the synthesis I had in mind. By May of 2010 we had a cut of the full film. It showed a lot of promise. The middle acts were working well but the first and last acts needed to be taken further.

The fine-cut phase turned into a third round of interviews, scripting and editing, which led to extensive improvements. By the fall of 2011 we had a 135-minute cut. Consensus feedback said it was too long. Upon acceptance to Sundance Film Festival, two great editors working with me cut the film down to 110 minutes and shaped it as a whole. That cut got a great response. Even so, in the completion round we cut another fourteen minutes – took the film the final 5% of the way, added five celebrity narrators, revised the opening and closing, licensed and mastered archival film, and polished A Fierce Green Fire into a work of beauty.

I think we succeeded in capturing that big-picture synthesis of the environmental movement, and I hope you find it useful. We made it for the generations who will live through the storm, and figured they would want to know how things began and that someone fought for their future.

--Mark Kitchell
Overview

The environmental movement is one of the most important developments of the 20th century – and one of the keys to the 21st century. Understanding the history of this movement, where it came from and where it is heading, is timely and necessary as we confront environmental crises from global resource depletion and biodiversity loss to industrial pollution and altering the energy system of our entire planet. In the largest sense, environmentalism is about the struggle of humankind to regain a more realistic and healthier perspective of our role in the biosphere. It arose at a time when our industrial civilization grew so powerful that it threatens the natural world on which we depend for survival. It has become the battle for a living planet.

A FIERCE GREEN FIRE: The Battle for a Living Planet explores the environmental movement, grassroots and global activism spanning fifty years from conservation to climate change. It differs from the usual environmental film in two ways: First is its focus on activism instead of issues. It’s a more impassioned approach that allows the audience to witness ordinary people fighting against all odds – and succeeding more often than not. Second, the film brings together all the diverse strands of an extraordinarily broad and complex movement, and connects the pieces into an overall arc. It shows how environmentalism evolved from our own backyard to the whole planet, from saving wild places to saving human society. At its heart is the ecological insight that, as John Muir put it, “everything is hitched.”

Our story unfolds in five acts. Each encapsulates a part of environmentalism and an era of the movement:

- **Act 1** is about conservation, the first wave that began in the 1890s and became a mass movement in the 1960s, concerned with saving wild places and wildlife.

- **Act 2** explores the new environmental movement that arose in the 1970s, with its emphasis on pollution, toxic wastes, human health and more people-centered issues.

- **Act 3** covers the 1970s as well, but looks instead at alternatives, from going back to the land to renewable energy, and links them to “ecology” movements like Greenpeace.

- **Act 4** unfolds in the 1980s amid global-scale resource issues and crises, from saving the greatest rainforest on earth to movements across the global South.

- **Act 5** spans from the 1990s to the
present, focusing on the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced and how it is forcing a transition from top-down politics to bottom-up movements.

Featured in the film are thirty-one interviews and historical figures including:

- The incomparable Lois Gibbs, still fighting for all the Loises thirty years after Love Canal
- Paul “I work for whales” Watson
- Bill McKibben, author, activist and founder of 350.org
- Paul Hawken and Stewart Brand, ecology visionaries
- Martin Litton, at 92 years of age still thundering about how you’ve got to have “hatred in your heart”
- Brazilian rubbertapper, union leader and environmental martyr Chico Mendes
- Green Belt Movement leader and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai of Kenya
- Carl Pope and John Adams, longtime heads of the Sierra Club and NRDC
- Bob Bullard, environmental justice advocate who closes the film on a universal note, saying, “There’s no Hispanic air. There’s no African-American air. There’s air! And if you breathe air – and most people I know do breathe air – then I would consider you an environmentalist.”

**Using the Film & Viewers’ Guide**

*Fierce Green Fire* is modular by design, meant to be used in pieces as well as shown whole. Total running time is 100 minutes and the five acts each run approximately 20 minutes. Activists, you can show just the parts that are relevant to your cause. We encourage you to hold discussions around the film, explore its subjects in more depth and extend its content to issues and events that are more local or current or relevant to your audience.

This viewers’ guide is appropriate for groups concerned with issues of social and environmental justice. Activists may find this guide included as part of the screening resources at...
Bullfrog Communities
(fiercegreenfire.bullfrogcommunities.com),
a valuable additional resource.

Finding a sustainable path to the future
means reinventing not just the way we
make and do everything, but reinventing
the way we think about our place in the
natural world. It is the greatest challenge
of the coming century and the central
cause of generations now on the rise.
We hope this film and viewers’ guide will
help raise consciousness -- reveal the
scientific, economic, political and social
dimensions of environmental crisis and
change.

OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What have you learned from the
stories of the environmental struggles
featured in this film?

2. Do you find them relevant to today’s
struggles, or do you think that climate
change, for example, is a problem of a
different order of magnitude requiring dif-
ferent strategies?

3. Do the featured stories inspire you to
act in your community?

4. If you had been the filmmaker, would
you have highlighted different stories
and, if so, what and why?
Act I: Conservation

“Every now and then, some issue arises that is elevated into a stratospheric focus of public attention. It becomes symbolic, and the rallying cry for a whole generation of activists.”

~Doug Scott

Saving nature was at first a concern of elites. Environmentalism did not grow into a mass social movement until after World War II. The first American environmentalists were hunters and socialites, people like Teddy Roosevelt and groups like the Audubon Society, who worried about squandering the nation’s natural resources and destruction of beautiful places and wildlife. Their prescription was conservation – but there arose an argument about what that meant. Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, saw it as the efficient use of natural resources for the “greatest good to the greatest number of people for the longest time.” Pinchot’s view of nature in service to humans contrasted with others who saw wild places as refuges where humans could reconnect with nature, the divine, and themselves. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, wanted to preserve wilderness for its own sake. The two sides came to blows when the City of San Francisco proposed to dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. The Sierra Club battled for ten long years, but in the end Hetch Hetchy was dammed. Still, the controversy fueled the rise of the Sierra Club and its idea of conservation until it was the dominant view.

Three further fights over dams turned the tide. During the 1950s the Sierra Club waged a seven-year campaign to stop a dam in Dinosaur National Monument. They won – but there was a terrible price. They agreed not to oppose another dam down the Colorado River at Glen Canyon. Too late did David Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club, realize what a terrible mistake had been made. Glen Canyon was lost and Brower never forgave himself. But his chance at redemption would come soon. In 1965 federal dam-builders proposed two power dams in the Grand Canyon, and a tunnel to connect them that would have taken almost all of the water out of the Colorado River. Brower was a man
on fire. But halting the dams looked like a lost cause until he placed ads denouncing the dams. They aroused not only a wave of support, but retaliation by the I.R.S. Public sympathy rallied to the Sierra Club and Congress was forced to halt the dams.

It was a complete victory for the Sierra Club and a pivotal point in the conservation movement. Public opinion turned toward saving the last wild places, stopping the onslaught of development that threatened to “pave paradise and put up a parking lot.”

Just as the conservation movement flowered, the man who had done more than any other to advance the cause, David Brower, was forced out of the Sierra Club. He was pushing against the limits of conservation and wanted to speak about the whole earth as an ecological unit and talk about the role of humans on the planet. Brower soon re-emerged as Friends of the Earth, the first international environmental organization -- at the very moment that a new wave was emerging.

It was propelled by many things: air and water pollution; sprawl and development; massive fish kills and endangered birds; the Cuyahoga River catching on fire and oil spills. But the real consciousness changer was seeing Earth from space. The first Earth Day in 1970 came as a revelation; twenty million people from all walks of life came out to demonstrate their concern about the natural world and what we humans were doing to destroy it. Like water bursting through a dam, a new environmental movement emerged, consisting of new people with new concerns.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think that basic human needs, like water and other resources, are the most important considerations in thinking about nature? Is nature ever valuable for its own sake?

2. Why do you think we decide that some places are “pristine” and “beautiful” and worthy of preservation, and other places are suitable for industrial development?
3. What is “progress?” What did it mean in the early 1900s? Can protecting wild places or not damming a river be part of “progress?”

4. Why do you think environmentalists were successful in stopping the dams proposed for Dinosaur National Monument and the Grand Canyon in the 1950s and 1960s when John Muir and the Sierra Club failed to stop the Hetch Hetchy Dam in the early 1900s?

5. Why were/are dams so controversial? What are their benefits, and what are the environmental drawbacks to their use?

6. Why do you think some members of the Sierra Club disagreed with John Muir’s “whole earth” idea? Do you think it was right of him to split with the group and form his own?

7. What are other environmental groups you know of that try to protect and preserve wild places? How do their missions and goals differ from the Sierra Club? How are they similar?

8. How did environmentalists use images in their public relations campaigns to protect wild places—specifically, how did the Sierra Club use them in its fight to save Grand Canyon? Why were the images so powerful?

9. Name some environmental disasters from US history that may have helped inspire the environmental movement. Did any of them occur near where you live? If so, how did they affect your community?

10. Think of some wilderness areas and/or parks in your neighborhood, community, or city that have been preserved in their natural state. How are these areas beneficial to the community? How do you use them? If they were threatened by building or development, what methods could you use to ensure their protection?
Act II: Pollution

“When Love Canal came, it was a new segment of the movement. It really was about people and peoples’ health. It wasn’t that we don’t care about the forest, but it was the people-focus that set us aside from other elements that had come before us. If the fish are dying and the birds are dying, we’re gonna die!”
~Lois Gibbs

The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 sparked widespread concern and controversy over the unregulated use of chemicals and the effects of pollution on both humans and non-human life. DDT, which had saved millions in the fight against malaria but proved lethal to wildlife, was Rachel Carson’s main target. But other chemicals as well as sewage and toxic waste, smog and air pollution, lead and mercury, strontium 90 from nuclear testing fallout... a witch’s brew of poisons threatened Americans. Earth Day brought pollution issues to the fore and created a tide so strong that it swept up both Republicans and Democrats. President Nixon jumped aboard, creating the Environmental Protection Agency. Congress passed a series of landmarks laws including the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and Superfund to clean up toxic wastes. New environmental groups consisting of lawyers and experts became the enforcers. They helped write regulations, then sued the violators and the government if they didn’t live up to the regulations. The “golden era” of environmental progress ended with the oil crisis of 1973. Industrial America realized that this was a fundamental threat to the way they do business and they mounted a powerful counter-attack. They exempted old factories from the Clean Air Act and then, rather than build new factories, kept operating the old ones dirty. They made jobs versus the environment into a powerful issue. They were unable to roll back environmental protections, but slowed progress.

The issue of toxic waste bubbled up at a place called Love Canal. Buried beneath a Niagara Falls, NY neighborhood were 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals. When a local journalist exposed the problem,
Lois Gibbs led the “angry housewives with sick children” in a two-year battle to be evacuated. They proved relentless -- protesting and petitioning, conducting their own health study and forcing state and federal agencies to do likewise, even taking EPA officials hostage until President Carter agreed to relocate them and buy out their houses. Lois Gibbs took her settlement money, moved to Washington and started a group to help other Loises. She became the nexus of a web of grassroots groups fighting pollution and poisons in their own backyards. 50,000 toxic waste sites were discovered in the wake of Love Canal. Lois’ strategy was to “plug up all the toilets.” Amazingly enough, they succeeded. No new toxic waste dumps have been built in the US for twenty-five years. Now the focus has shifted from end of pipe to front of pipe, detoxifying manufacturing materials and processes. The McToxics campaign that banned clamshells made of poly-vinyl chloride is a sterling example of CCHW’s success.

Out of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) campaigns grew the environmental justice movement. Bob Bullard’s pioneering study Dumping in Dixie showed how all of the incinerators and most of the dumps in Houston were in black neighborhoods. The catalyzing event came in 1983 in Warren County, North Carolina, where a black community fought against a toxic waste site being dumped on them. Charges of environmental racism led to the forming of a movement. They fought against a lead smelter in Dallas, a rayon factory in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, a pesticide factory in West Virginia, and many more. Neither the environmental movement nor the civil rights movement got it at first and it took two decades for those movements to merge. But their struggle for human rights – clean air and water, healthy communities – continues today.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How was the new “environmental” movement different from the “conservation” movement? What did they have in common?

2. What are some of the different types of pollution, and how do they harm peo-
1. How is human health related to the health of the environment?

3. What do you know about DDT? Can you name any other chemicals that were once widely used that are now known to be dangerous to human health?

4. What role do you think the government should play in protecting people from environmental harm? What are some of the ways government does this?

5. How did the environmental movement grow and change after Love Canal? What issues became the most important?

6. Is public protest an effective method of bringing about change? Why or why not. Can you think of any examples to support your opinion?

7. Talk about the phrase “Not In My Back Yard”. What do you think it means? How does it relate to the idea of “environmental justice”?

8. The New York State Health Department referred to the community health study conducted by Love Canal residents as “useless housewife data.” How does this compare to how government officials responded to the EPA’s study on chromosome damage among Love Canal residents? What do the differences in these responses tell us about the values our society places on science compared to the lived experiences of people? Which data would you trust and why?

9. How did gender, race, and class figure into environmental struggles? How did this differ from earlier struggles to preserve “nature”?

10. Can you name any other men or women like Lois Gibbs who became nationally recognized after fighting against environmental injustice and/or pollution in their community?
Act III: Alternatives

“We were asking the question, ‘Okay, the war in Vietnam’s over. What are we gonna do next?’ And the answer to that question was, ‘We’re gonna start an ecology movement. And the first thing we’re gonna do is we’re gonna go save the whales.’”

~Rex Weyler

Alternative ecology movements arose alongside mainstream environmentalism. Their concerns were less stopping bad stuff than developing good alternatives – “Let’s re-imagine what it mean to be a human being,” as Paul Hawken puts it. They went back to the land and built domes, windmills, organic gardens, solar heaters, composting toilets, even a Living Machine that used aquaculture to clean sewage, grow food and heat their Ark. The Whole Earth Catalog was their bible and its guru was Buckminster Fuller, whose “doing more with less” became a mantra. His vision of Earth was a spaceship that needed to be guided by humankind if we were to survive.

Resource questions came to the fore with The Limits to Growth, the first computer modeling of future environmental trends. The standard run led to over-shoot and collapse in the 21st century. It arrived just as the oil crisis gave impetus to developing alternative and renewable energy sources. Research spurred development of wind turbines, photovoltaics and solar thermal arrays in the desert. Prototypes of experimental vehicles were built. Most federal funds went to big energy: coal gasification and breeder reactors. But renewable energy technologies flourished with tax subsidies. Physicist-turned-activist Amory Lovins developed the soft path to an energy future based on efficiency and a transition to renewables. President Carter even put solar heaters on the White House. Then President Reagan killed it all and the US lost its lead.

Out of the same counter-culture cauldron grew Greenpeace, a ragtag band of ecologists who brought passion and excitement to the environmental movement. They began by protesting nukes. But at the end of a meeting, when an elder pacifist said, “Peace,” someone shouted,
“Make it a green peace!” Greenpeace brought together anti-war and ecology movements for the first time -- and the issue that launched them on the wildest ride of any group was whaling.

They decided to stop the Russians by putting their bodies between the harpoons and the whales. They used media to create what they called “mind bombs.” It had an explosive effect, making Greenpeace famous all over the world and launched a host of campaigns. One, to save baby harp seals, was dreamed up by Paul Watson -- and led to his ouster. The first year, Greenpeace got out on the ice and confronted the sealers, but held back from spraying the seals with dye that would make their pelts worthless. Paul was bitter about compromising and came back the next year determined to stop the slaughter. He grabbed a sealer’s club and threw it in the water, then chained himself to a pile of pelts, whereupon the sealers dunked him in the icy waters. Paul was kicked out of Greenpeace for breaching their ethic of non-violence. He’d gone too far. However, Paul set up his own group, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, got himself a ship and went after whalers. Within a year he cleared the Atlantic of pirate whalers – and then went after whaling nations.

It took everyone working together to ban whaling. For ten years, radicals, mainstream NGOs and governments like the U.S. worked to turn the International Whaling Commission from hunting to saving whales. A moratorium finally passed in 1982 and in time it became a permanent ban on whaling – one of environmentalism’s biggest successes, yet a battle that must be waged over and over again. Greenpeace grew into an international environmental colossus and took on a host of new causes, including its first, opposition to nukes, both bombs and power – which put it at the forefront of environmentalism rising across Europe.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about Greenpeace’s policy of non-violence, and Paul Watson’s decision to break that policy? Can non-violence be an effective tool in activism? Why or why not?
2. Is it ever permissible to break the law to save an animal or protect the environment?

3. Do you think Paul Watson’s radical actions, such as dying the fur of baby seals to prevent their poaching, were acceptable? Can radical actions and groups like the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society benefit more mainstream efforts, or cause harm?

4. How important are the media and images in changing the way people think about issues? How do activists use the media and images to achieve their goals?

5. What are “mind bombs”? How do they work? Can you think of any similar campaigns you have seen that use shocking imagery to convey their message?

6. According to what you’ve seen in the news, what does an environmentalist look like? Do you think this depiction is accurate? How does it affect how you think about environmental issues?

7. Are alternatives all about stopping bad things from happening or are they also about developing new ideas and solutions to environmental problems? How do alternatives fit in the mainstream environmental movement?

8. Why do you think government has chosen to give the bulk of federal funds and tax benefits for energy to the fossil fuel industry and continues to do so?

9. Name some alternative sources of energy, and talk about their history.

10. How are the environmental movement and anti-war movement related? What issues do they have in common?
Act IV: Going Global

“The theme that runs through all these movements is the loss of the commons. That’s what people are fighting for, is the right of subsistence and the right of access to clean water, to food, to forests. The right to live.”

~Vijaya Nagarajan

The world’s forests are home to nearly ninety percent of terrestrial biodiversity and hold over forty percent of global carbon stores. Worldwide, 1.6 billion people depend on forests for fuel, medicinal plants and subsistence. Struggles to protect these important ecosystems and the livelihoods of people who depend on them are key to the history of the environmental movement in the twentieth century. The ongoing fight to protect the Amazon rainforest from logging and industrial agriculture mirrors global struggles to preserve both biological and cultural diversity.

By the 1980s the Amazon faced threats from mining and oil, hydroelectric dams, logging, ranching and a disastrous colonization scheme. Efforts to save the greatest rainforest on earth turned on an unlikely environmental hero, a union organizer and rubber tapper or seringueiro named Chico Mendes. The seringueiros squatted on the old plantations, produced rubber and subsisted off the land. They were protected by being in the remote western Amazon where roads had not penetrated. But as ranchers arrived and began clearing land to claim it, Mendes organized his fellow seringueiros to defend their territory. Through nonviolent resistance, they were able to halt the clear-cutting of their forests.

In 1986, Chico allied with environmentalists protesting development financed by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. The banks financed the paving of roads in the Amazon, facilitating the development of ranching operations the seringueiros were fighting. In Washington, D.C. Chico and his U.S. allies lobbied members of Congress and met with the banks’ funders, which ultimately led to negotiations between the seringueiros and bank officials.
Chico built alliances at home as well, forming a national council of rubber tappers. Concluding that a lack of land use rights was preventing them from defending the forest, Chico came up with the idea of extractive reserves. The rubber tappers wouldn’t own the land but it would be theirs as long as they worked it. It was a breakthrough that came from within, not imposed from outside – and has grown into a great movement in Amazonia. The rubber tappers decided to establish the first reserve at Cachoeira, the plantation where Chico was born and lived. But the land had been bought by a rancher named Darli Alves. It turned into a showdown. Darli vowed to kill Chico, who was fearless in the face of danger. The rubber tappers won at last. Cachoeira was declared the first extractive reserve in the world. But two days before Christmas in 1988, Chico Mendes was assassinated. His death proved to be the turning point to an era of reserves that now total a third of the Amazon.

The battle to save the Amazon was part of a larger movement across the Global South that tied together indigenous rights, social justice, and environmental issues during the last quarter of the twentieth century. From India’s Chipko or Tree Huggers, to Kenya’s Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai, indigenous people organized themselves to protect the natural resources upon which their livelihoods depend. Their struggles brought attention to questions of equity and sustainability in a global economic system dependent on the exploitation of natural resources. They also called for a new model of protection, one that did not remove people from the land and pose nature and human beings in opposition to each other.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What are common resources all humans depend on? Who controls these resources and who profits from this control?

2. Why should people living in the United States be concerned with struggles over natural resources in the other parts of the world?

3. Do you think access to clean water, to food, and to forests is a universal human
right? Why or why not?

4. Modernization and development are generally seen as positive things. What are some examples of development in the Amazon? How have they benefited the people that live there, and how have they done harm?

5. Compare and contrast the struggles of the seringueiros in Brazil, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and the Chipko movement in India. What resources sparked conflicts in each region? Who profited from control of these resources? What strategies did local people use to resist outside control of resources?

6. In what ways were the actions of Chico Mendes and Lois Gibbs similar? What methods did they have in common? Where did they differ?

7. Think about the major historical actors (people and institutions) in Act 4. Compare them to the actors in Love Canal, Hetch-Hetchy, and in the Greenpeace campaigns. What are some similarities and differences among environmental activists, their causes, and the strategies they used? Were they fighting against similar forces?

8. How did the movements in the Global South depicted in the film bring together social justice, indigenous rights, and environmental issues? Can these issues be separated when thinking about these movements? Why or why not?
Act V: Climate Change

“There’s no question in my mind that, as people who care deeply about the environment, we keep looking for love in all the wrong places. And that’s from our political leaders. If we haven’t learned yet, then we should get it now. This is not going to be top-down. It goes right back to the hundreds of millions of people on Earth who are trying to find and craft and create solutions every single day.”

~Paul Hawken

In A FIERCE GREEN FIRE, Jennifer Morgan of the World Resources Institute calls global warming the “problem from hell”... “You have to go at the cars, and the oil, and the power plants, and the way we farm, and which food we eat. It’s everywhere. And associated with those sources are huge political and financial stakes.” Unlike previous issues, activists encountered great difficulty building a movement equal to what many agree is the greatest challenge humankind has ever faced. It’s too big an issue for the environmental movement to take on alone.

Scientists have been aware of the earth’s rising temperatures since 1900, but couldn’t tell whether the warming would be half a degree or three – “the difference between no big deal and Oh my god!” as Stephen Schneider puts it. The key moment of its emergence was the summer of 1988, the hottest on record, when Dr. James Hansen testified to Congress that, “the greenhouse effect has been detected and it is changing our climate now.” In 1992 world leaders signed a landmark treaty known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Yet, due to pressure from the United States, limits on greenhouses gases were purely voluntary.

In the US, industrial actors – particularly big oil & coal – mounted a campaign to thwart climate legislation. Deep resistance to any measure forcing industrial polluters to limit carbon emissions emerged in the public and political spheres, and Americans were bombarded with arguments against collective solutions to climate change. In 1997 the world’s leaders gathered in Kyoto to negotiate a follow-on treaty. While Europeans pushed for aggressive controls
on global carbon emissions, the United States resisted any mandatory measures. Vice President Al Gore arrived at the last minute to forge a compromise and United States signed the Kyoto Protocol. The treaty, however, was dead on arrival. It was never submitted for ratification, and, upon taking office in 2000, President George W. Bush rejected Kyoto.

Disasters brought back the issue of climate change. Hurricane Katrina; a heat wave in Europe that killed 70,000 people; drought and fire in Australia and the American Southwest; Arctic ice disappearing; coral reefs bleaching – everything was happening faster than scientists predicted.

At last, a movement started to emerge: Avaaz on the international front; and 350.org in the U.S.

In December 2009 as world leaders gathered in Copenhagen for COP15, millions marched in hope that at last the United States and China, the world’s biggest emitters of greenhouse gases, would join with the rest of the world and take action before it was too late. However, COP15 turned into another case of top-down political failure. The U.S. declined to offer significant emissions reductions and China backed out of negotiations. Deadlock loomed when President Barack Obama salvaged a last minute accord. But it was a pledge exercise, not a binding treaty. And it became meaningless when climate legislation died in the U.S. Congress. Climate change remains the impossible issue: impossible to deal with, yet impossible to ignore.

Paul Hawken flips the film from top-down political failure to bottom-up movements, sharing his insight from *Blessed Unrest* that there are two million organizations worldwide working on issues of environmental and social justice.

“It’s growing, it’s growing, it’s growing because it’s not a movement. It’s in a sense humanity’s immune response to the despoliation of the environment, the degradation of living systems, the corruption we see in economic systems, and the pollution of the industrial system.”

~Paul Hawken
**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is global warming? What are some of the causes of global warming?

2. Is climate change a global issue? How might climate change affect different countries around the world?

3. Do you believe that addressing climate change is a social and moral responsibility? Why or why not?

4. Is climate change simply an environmental issue, or does it also have social, cultural, and economic implications? If so, what are they?

5. The film claims that, “Climate change remains the impossible issue – impossible to deal with, yet impossible to ignore.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Identify the political and economic challenges world leaders have contended with in their quest to address climate change on a global scale.

6. Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, argues that global warming is too large an issue for the environmental movement to take on. Do you agree? If the environmental movement cannot fully take on this issue, who should?

7. Do you believe that addressing climate change is a social and moral responsibility? Why or why not?

8. Discuss the Kyoto Treaty. Why is it important for many countries to try and reduce their emissions and polluting? Can countries act on their own to impact climate change?

9. Why might some officials and industries oppose the Kyoto Treaty and similar efforts to reduce emissions and pollution? Why might they support it?


**Internet Resources**

The Discovery of Global Warming: A Hypertext History of How Scientists Came to (Partly) Understand What People Are Doing to Cause Climate Change [http://www.aip.org/history/climate](http://www.aip.org/history/climate)

The Environmental History Timeline [http://www.environmentalhistory.org](http://www.environmentalhistory.org)


Greenpeace [http://www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)

Love Canal Collections: A University Archives Collection [http://library.buffalo.edu/libraries/specialcollections/lovecanal/index.html](http://library.buffalo.edu/libraries/specialcollections/lovecanal/index.html)


Sierra Club [http://www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org)

United States Environmental Protection Agency [http://www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

Whole Earth Catalog [http://www.wholeearth.com](http://www.wholeearth.com)


**Films**


Gasland. Directed by Josh Fox. Produced by Trish Adlesic, Molly Gandour, Josh Fox, and David Roma. 2010.


