

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE CHANGE

OLIVIA SHELDON AND JESSICA BISBEE

Olivia Sheldon:

On July 11, my friends and I piled in the car to take a trip to Woodlawn Beach just twenty minutes away in Blasdell, New York. Walking through the sand to find a spot for the day felt normal, setting up our blanket and snacks. "Let's go down to the water, it's hot", says my friend. Walking down the water, my friend notices something floating. "It's a big fish!" I say, "Wait, it's a catfish. Wait - it's a dead cat fish". The dead fish, floating along the shore, was not the only one. Soon after taking pictures, the group and I noticed the multitude of fish carcasses and skeletons around our feet and in the back of the photos. We then noticed the kids. The kids swimming with their siblings and cousins and friends. The kids getting so close to the bloated and big fish, avoiding animal-control trying to remove the deceased. The saddest part was not the kids dodging the carcass, but the return to normal conversation and beach games that happened. The picture taking and pointing fingers faded and pressed play on their speakers and into the cooler for another drink - while the kids

played among dead sea life, and whatever bacteria was killing it.

Henry David Thoreau, an author, poet, and philosopher wrote "In wildness is the preservation of the world". In attributing nature and the state of the environment to an equivalent state of humanity, Thoreau's complicated words become fairly simple - the protection of our planet and its abundant resources will be what saves us a human race. With that, the question that lies is -what are we to do about the fish at Woodlawn? Is this even an issue for those around us? For those making laws and policies? The ultimate question reveals itself as what are we going to do about it?

The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature defines the rights of nature as "the recognition that our ecosystems - including trees, oceans, animals, mountains - have rights just as human beings have rights". Under the rights of nature, it is acknowledged that these ecosystems and all of nature have the right to exist, persist, and maintain their

cycles. This may seem simple in theory - that living ecosystems and organisms should be given and protected, but if it were - would there be an influx of dead organisms at our feet? The topic of climate change has been refused since its origin, arguments posing themselves as 'too complicated' because the science behind climate change and the data used to prove that global warming is happening may often seem too complex. The argument of denying climate change is easier to understand than the complicated scientific theories behind the destruction of the planet. Some may argue that since we have lizards, birds, or beautiful gardens in our backyards that climate change is not visibly occurring to the naked eye. So is it really a problem?

These arguments may seem sound, but there is truth underneath lies and commercial greenwashing that our generation has noticed. In 2015, Greta Thunberg took the world by storm and started speaking out against climate change from a young person's perspective to world leaders. In speaking to the Members of Parliament at the Houses of Parliament in April 2019, Greta reveals "around the year 2030, 10 years 252 days and 10 hours away from now we will be in a position where we set off an irreversible chain reaction beyond human control, that will most likely lead to the end of our civilization as we know it". That timeline to 2030 is now dangerously short - from today,

October 16th 2023, it is 6 years, 2 months, and 15 days away. I share that fear. My peers share that fear. The noticeable difference in September's and Octobers in my home of Western New York over the years of my youth contribute to that fear. The Septembers and Octobers when I used to wear sweatpants under my school uniform shivering at the bus stop to Fall Semester classes being moved locations because it's too hot to sit in a room without air conditioning. The endangered and extinction notices of animals I grew up with or the red fox that now is forced to find his habitat in the school parking lot across my home because their home is being stripped from them. I fear that my kids will grow up in a world without elephants, tigers, penguins, or diverse sea life. I'm not alone in that fear.

Fellow Niagara University students were asked about their feelings on climate change and our current state of the planet, there were varied responses. These responses are represented on the scale below. The first end of the scale exhibits plausible deniability.

"Our climate is fine. Won't matter until my kids' kids."

The next, or middle area of the scale shows the concern with the changing climate, but with a tone of optimism:

"The climate is always varying. That being said, there are actions that do need to be taken to mitigate the impact of humans on our environment. I think climate change

will slightly affect us in our lifetime but not to the point where our generation will be greatly impacted.”

However, the end of the scale represents the fear that Greta speaks to. The recognition of the destruction of our planet, which is why I’m here talking to you today.

“I think the state of our climate now is in disrepair. For this reason, my future as I grow older will look very different from my parents and my grandparents, and will affect my decision on whether or not to have children.”

This end of the scale is where Jessica and I along with my peers who were with me at Woodlawn Beach stand, it is mainly where our generation lives.

These different perspectives on this scale represent the utter truth and confusion that our generation has about the future. The uncertainty that my children will be able to swim in the lakes and oceans. We are living in this confusion and exhaustion, with virtually no way out. The weary predictions that one day soon our water will not be drinkable without harsh filtration are becoming true. The already visual effects of deforestation and corporation infiltration into habitats of species in our backyards happens daily. The effects of climate change and the lack of rights for our ecosystems and its resources such as our drinking water have dire

consequences that are not coming in the future. Rather, they are here, in our lakes, gardens, backyards, schools, and oceans.

Jessica Bisbee:

Pennsylvania is a pretty landlocked state for the most part, but I am fortunate enough to live a short drive away from Lake Erie. My friends and I frequently drive to Presque Isle State Park to enjoy the beach, just like everyone else. But more often than not, there are always headlines on the local news warning people about the state park, saying that certain “parts of the beach are closed due to harmful bacteria in the water,” “do not bring your dogs to Presque Isle State Park because there is bacteria in the water that is extremely harmful to pets,” “people have contracted a flesh eating bacteria after spending the day in the water at Presque Isle State Park.” My friends and other people I know contracted flesh eating bacteria and had other mysterious rashes after spending time in the water, yet the news always says “certain parts of the beach” but is it not all the same beach? Does swimming at the opposite end of the same beach where people contracted flesh eating bacteria really protect me from getting the same bacteria? In previous summers, my friends and I would go to Presque Isle every other week. This summer, we only went once and we did not go into the water because the anxiety of getting some sort of ailment from going in the water is so high.

As time goes on, people are becoming more aware of harmful bacteria in Lake Erie and it is becoming more and more difficult for people to ignore. In December of 2019, the Erie Coke Corporation plant - which "made coke by heating coal in batteries of ovens to burn off impurities and create a fuel source that is used in a variety of industries, including steel mills" - was permanently shut down after discovering that the plant had violated the Clean Air Act for at least four years. The plant was located to the east of Presque Isle State Park. The reports showed that the coke plant had dumped their waste into a bluff that goes directly into Lake Erie. This reckless action that went on for at least four years introduced carcinogens and other toxins into the water. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Environmental Protection cleaned up 180 acres of Lake Erie and it cost over seven million dollars to clean it up. But water travels. This was an issue that harmed more than the 180 acres of water that the EPA and DEP cleaned up. Think of all the boats that traveled through that water over four years, the people and pets who swam and ingested that water for four years, the wildlife who lived in that water. If the Erie Coke plant could get away with contaminating the lake for four years, think of all of the other corporations that do the same. And who knows how long these corporations get away with it, because I feel pretty comfortable betting that the Erie Coke plant harmed Lake

Erie for more than four years. Lake Erie does not just affect Pennsylvania and New York. It also affects Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario, Canada. Lake Erie may not be the biggest body of water, but millions of people and wildlife depend on it everyday for survival.

While living in Erie, Pennsylvania, I think about Lake Erie all of the time and all of the carcinogens and dead catfish that are in the water. I think about how all of these different invasive species are infesting the lake and killing off the indigenous species. I think about how I am already anxious about swimming in Lake Erie myself and I think about all of the children who swim in the water, who live in an ignorant state of bliss because they do not know what is really in the water. While the EPA did shut down the Erie Coke plant, I also frequently think about how deeply ingrained corporations are in our politics and how easily corporations can manipulate and sway government officials to benefit them. If corporations can continue to have this much power over our government and if some government officials continue to allow it or not to care about it, who do we have to trust to protect us? It feels as if we cannot trust that our government will set regulations to keep our water clean and protect our environment. It feels as if the government and corporations care more about how much money is in their pockets than protecting their own children. Everyday that passes, we get closer to making climate

change irreversible and who knows what will happen to the world once we get past that threshold. As a young person, it feels like it is up to my generation to fight for the environment because it is the rest of our lives that are at stake. And your generations have failed mine. My generation has to do more because yours did less. We have to grow up with different worries than you all grew up with because our futures are uncertain. You all got to grow up and live the lives you wanted, but people my age have to seriously consider if the place we want to live in will be highly affected by climate change, if we want to bring children into a dying planet because the cost of living is steadily increasing yet the quality of life on the planet is decreasing. My outlook on the future is bleak. But people in Erie, Pennsylvania, Tonawanda, New York, Love Canal, and Toledo, Ohio were able to hold dirty corporations accountable through collective action, and that is the hope that I hold onto.

Notes:

1. "What Are the Rights of Nature?" Global Alliance of the Rights of Nature.
<https://www.garn.org/rights-of-nature/>
2. Thunberg, Greta. "You did not act in time": Greta Thunberg's full speech to MPs," The Guardian, 23 April 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-full-speech-to-mps-you-did-not-act-in-time>
3. Palattella, Ed. "Erie Coke site seen as 'potential threat to human health and the environment,'" Erie Times-News, 11 August 2023.
<https://www.goerie.com/story/news/local/2023/08/11/erie-coke-contaminants-found-to-have-adversely-affected-lake-erie-benzene-dep-carcinogens-indictment/70561021007/#>