

Building a Just and Sustainable World

DISCUSSION GUIDE | ISSUE 45 | CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and caring the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

You can find the articles mentioned below on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You are welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.



Global warming is no longer a question of whether. It's a question of how much and what do we do. The scientific consensus is in: We have a short time to make large changes if we want to leave our children and grandchildren a world without enormous climate disruptions.

As governments continue to move slowly on addressing this challenge, majorities of citizens worldwide (see the graphic "Who's Willing to Step Up," p. 22) are ready to make significant changes to the way they live, and to pay additional taxes, in order to stop global warming.

But what can we really do? The scale is so large, the downside so daunting, that it's easy to be discouraged. This issue of YES! explores solutions to climate change and finds practical, feasible ways to make big differences through our own actions. It also looks at what's out there in policy and technology that can bring down carbon emissions and turn down the heat.

In this discussion guide we'll look at four articles:

1. "First, Step Up" by Bill McKibben (p. 18)
2. "Global Fairness" by Tom Athanasiou (p. 23)
3. "Beyond Lightbulbs" by Brooke Jarvis and Doug Pibel (p. 44)
4. "What We Can Do About..." Buildings (p. 30), Electricity (p. 32), Transportation (p. 36), and Food & Forests (p. 39) by Guy Dauncey

First, Step Up

McKibben calls global warming "the biggest problem humans have ever faced." It has the potential to change the face of the Earth, as coasts are flooded, ice caps melt, and drought sweeps continents. Or, says McKibben, it has the potential to bring out the best in us: generosity, resourcefulness, and community. "Most of all," he says,

“we need a political swell larger than the civil rights movement—as passionate and as willing to sacrifice.”

1. McKibben’s article covers a broad range—from calling climate change as big a threat as thermonuclear war to affirming the natural human desire for connection and community. How do you feel after reading this article? When you think about climate change, what do you observe that worries you? What gives you hope?

2. What does McKibben’s statement that global warming is “a whole new lens through which we look at the world” mean to you? What difference has your awareness of global warming made to you? What do you see differently?

3. What can you do in your community to join with others to build the broad, diverse coalition McKibben says we need? Does McKibben’s experience with helping to build StepItUp provide any insights that are relevant to your community? What strengths does your community have in taking on this issue? What special challenges?

Global Fairness

The Bali climate change negotiations didn’t produce a detailed action plan but, says Tom Athanasiou, no one thought it would. In this report from Bali, Athanasiou tells of important positive steps toward a fair approach to the challenges of climate change. The G77 nations of the global south have signaled a new willingness to make binding commitments to limit emissions. And the climate and global justice movements have started a long-overdue dialogue, and are discovering that they have more in common than they’ve realized.

1. Athanasiou says that wealthy countries have an obligation not just to control their own carbon emissions, but also to supply technology and funding to developing countries. What is your reaction to that statement? What risks and benefits can you see to making this kind of commitment?

2. What does the encounter between the climate change movement and the global justice movement mean to you? Do you identify more strongly with one group or the other? What difference might it make to your thinking if the two movements joined more closely?

3. Do you agree with Athanasiou’s statement that “to be serious, you have to admit that wealthy countries became

wealthy by following a fossil-fuel-intensive development path that led directly to today’s climate crisis.” Is this an overstatement? Does it imply any responsibility on people today living in those wealthy countries? What about the fact that China is now the world’s leading emitter of carbon?

Beyond Lightbulbs

The average U.S. carbon footprint is large, so where to start? How expensive is it, and how much sacrifice will it take? The story of the Jones family is one path to shedding 30 tons of carbon. They don’t do anything radical or heroic, and it doesn’t happen overnight. But taking a few steps each year means that at the end of ten years, they’ve made a huge dent in their carbon footprint by eliminating carbon from their household and transportation.

1. What’s your reaction to this story? What parts of this are you tempted to try? What aspects seem too difficult? What do you think would be the most effective first step you could take? Which would be the most fun?

2. “Count Your Carbon” gives you conversion factors you can use to calculate your actual carbon footprint. How do you think you compare to the Joneses?

3. Some of the steps we’ve had the Joneses take are expensive—not everyone can afford a high-mileage or hybrid car (right now, no one can buy a production model electric car). How much difference would it make to your carbon emissions if you took only the low- or no-cost steps?

4. What changes can you make on your own, and what would require a community-wide or nationwide effort (new regulations, new transit options, for example)?

In response to our email announcing the climate issue, dozens of readers wrote in to tell us the climate change action they have taken that gave them the most pleasure. (See www.yesmagazine.org/climatecomments). What is your reaction to the ideas these readers had? Which, if any, sound like things you’d like to try? What’s holding you back?

What Can We Do About...?

Guy Dauncey acknowledges that the age of fossil fuels has produced the climate crisis. But, he says, we should

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also give it credit for producing the tools and technology to meet the challenge. Dauncey looks at where we produce much of our carbon—heating, cooling, and lighting buildings; generating electricity; getting people and things from place to place; and producing food and wood products. He points to some of the most promising ways we can reduce the atmospheric carbon associated with each of those sectors, and says that we can have a carbon-neutral world that’s both livable and prosperous.

1. In light of all the gloom and doom around global warming, do you find Dauncey’s articles encouraging or do they seem unrealistic? If you find them unrealistic, why?
2. What do you think is standing in the way of implementing the big, government- and industry-level solutions Dauncey suggests?
3. What do you think is standing in the way of implementing the local and individual steps toward reducing carbon emissions?
4. Beyond the immediate changes in fuels and buildings, what sort of society do you think will emerge as we begin to build a more climate-friendly world?

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