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POWERFUL IDEAS, PRACTICAL ACTIONS

DISCUSSION GUIDE | ISSUE 52 | CLIMATE ACTION

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.

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Keeley Harding

The YES! special issue on climate action highlights what people across the country and around the world are doing to tackle public denial, build widespread political will, fight corporations that are trying to stymie climate solutions, and move the world toward the kind of sweeping action we'll need to avoid catastrophic climate change. The issue focuses on activism; global, economic and cultural change; and a new definition of heroism—climate heroism.

This discussion guide focuses on the following articles:

1. Mark Engler, "Rise, People"

2. George Marshall, "Why We Find It So Hard to Act Against Climate Change"
3. Annie Leonard, "Life After Stuff"
4. Tara Lohan, "Neighborhood Revolutions"
5. Colin Beavan, "What the Greatest Generation Knew"

Rise, People

Climate change activists around the world are finished waiting for someone else to save the climate, says author Mark Engler. A climate movement is growing in the U.S. and other countries. Events like the October 24 day of action for 350.org have proved that the movement is global and can command major media attention. Several other demonstrations are planned this fall in the lead-up to the international climate talks in Copenhagen in

December 2009. Activists are taking to the streets, risking arrest, using the power of media to inform the public, and putting pressure on their governments to take action.

1. Engler says we need bold action. What are you willing to do, personally and politically, to help solve the climate crisis?
2. Throughout history, how has civil disobedience been an effective means to create change?
3. What are some ways you could step up your political activism on climate change? Try brainstorming a list of ways that you might take action.

Why We Find It So Hard to Act Against Climate Change

George Marshall explains why so little progress has been made in response to climate change, when the problem could be easy to address with existing technology. But a culture of denial, willful ignorance, and powerlessness has blocked meaningful action. Climate change has been dubbed an “environmental” issue since 1992, and its economic, military, agricultural, and social implications have been sidelined, hindering nonenvironmental groups from getting involved. The best way to move forward is to help people envision positive outcomes. For instance, seeing solar panels everywhere would give people the inspiration to become part of the trend.

1. Why has it been so easy for people to ignore the issue of climate change? Why is it, say, the one issue they leave out of conversation? What are some reasons people give for not taking action, and how could they be effectively countered through dialog?
2. What are some communication strategies for showing people that climate change affects every other issue they may care about? How can we bring about emotional responses and stay away from only dispensing facts?
3. Marshall says people need to hear from trusted communicators before they feel inspired or empowered to become part of change. How might you use this idea to reach out to others to spread awareness of the urgency of climate action? Whom do you trust as a source of infor-

mation and ideas?

Life After Stuff

When Annie Leonard looks at a product—whether it’s a disposable coffee cup, cell phone, or item of clothing—she sees its entire life cycle flash before her eyes and imagines where it will end up when it becomes trash. Leonard views garbage not as the end point but the entry into deeper issues. We need to address the often-related forces behind the massive amount of waste our society generates and other issues, like climate change and economic inequity. Leonard’s groundbreaking online film, “The Story of Stuff,” has helped millions of viewers around the world make those connections.

1. Do you think about a product’s social or environmental impact on the world before you buy it? Do you consider, for instance, how it will impact the environment, whether it relies on sweatshop labor, or where it will go when you discard it? How would considering these factors cause you to rethink your buying habits?
2. Leonard says many of the drivers of our social and environmental problems are the same. How does our culture of consumerism drive our production of waste? Brainstorm some ways that we could compel companies to produce fewer, more efficient, and longer-lasting products.
3. Leonard says we should “turn up the volume” on conversations about how our stuff and our consumption affects the planet. How could you start such a conversation, in schools, with neighbors or family, in faith groups, on campus, with your local government, or with other institutions?

Neighborhood Revolutions

Tara Lohan writes that many towns could lose a lot as climate change worsens. Some of these communities are leading efforts to become low-carbon. The Transition Towns movement began in the U.K. and is less than two years old in the U.S., but all kinds of people are finding common ground and developing creative tactics to build these emerging grassroots efforts. Local governments are also leading the way. U.S. mayors began committing their cities to Kyoto goals in 2005. The Mayors Climate Protec-



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tion Agreement now has more than 1,000 signers.

1. How might you encourage your community to get involved in climate action?
2. What new skills might your community need to become low-carbon? Do you know people with these skills? How might you organize ways for people to learn needed skills?

What the Greatest Generation Knew

Colin Beavan says the whole country needs to be involved in solutions to climate change. During World War II, Americans united behind the war effort by organizing from the bottom up. To involve the nation today, we need to find a similar sense of ambition and victory. The NoImpactProject helps people translate their personal actions—like eating locally or reducing their electricity use—into a political movement.

1. The idea of personal sacrifice has historically been a strong part of American values. How can we motivate Americans now to be willing to change their lives to save the climate? How can we shift the American dream to focus on happiness, simplicity, and sustainability, rather than on consumerism?

2. What have you done or will you do to lower your carbon footprint? How have your actions affected your lifestyle? What have you learned, and how could you use this knowledge to encourage your local community and civic organizations to lower their carbon footprints?

3. Beavan claims that his life has changed for the better since he started making more conscious choices. He mentions the joys of spending time with people he loves, and the fun he has riding his bike, for example. Make a list of positive “side effects” of your own climate-friendly choices.

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