

**Introduction by Aimée Christensen of
An Inconvenient Truth
17th Annual Conference of the National Association of Environmental Law Societies
and the DC Environmental Film Festival
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Those of you who know me, know that I am an optimist – I believe in and hope for the best of humanity, the potential we all have to come together to address the challenge of climate change, and the incredible power of nature to restore herself when given the chance – but today I wanted to provide a bit of a reality check, an urgency for us, updating the news for those of us who've seen *An Inconvenient Truth* before, and an appetizer for those of us here seeing the movie for the first time.

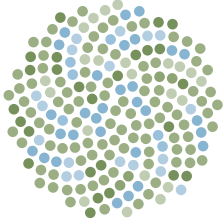
In 2000, former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan commissioned a global assessment of the state of the world's ecosystems and the consequences of global ecosystem change for human well-being. 1400 scientists in 95 countries conducted a global inventory of ecosystem functions such as the ability of soils to produce food, of forests and wetlands to filter and store fresh water, of coastal mangroves to protect from storm impacts, of coral reefs to sustain life. According to the assessment, nearly two-thirds of the planet's ecosystem services are degraded as a result of human activities such as polluting the atmosphere with excess greenhouse gases, draining freshwater aquifers, over-harvesting our forests and fisheries, polluting our oceans and introducing alien species to new regions.

As a result, 20 per cent of the world's coral reefs have been lost, 40 per cent of the planet's rivers have been fragmented, and our climate has been disrupted. Due to increased ocean temperatures, at this rate less than 5% of the Great Barrier Reef – the incredible coral ecosystem, will remain by 2050. Coral reefs provide a home to over 25% of all marine life. They are also vital for people and business. They provide nurseries for many species of commercially important fish, protection of coastal areas from storm waves, and are a significant attraction for the tourism industry.

A recent report by the Global Footprint Network and World Wildlife Fund found we are consuming the planet's resources 25 percent faster than the earth can renew them, a rate unprecedented in human history. To keep it up, "we'll need two planet's worth of natural resources by mid-century, and 'exhaustion of ecological assets and large-scale ecosystem collapse become increasingly likely'... Humanity's ecological footprint more than tripled between 1961 and 2003, outpacing the global population, which more than doubled in that time period."

Unfortunately we are already paying the financial cost of this degradation. Without functioning ecosystems to provide clean water, without fertile soils to provide food, we have to add human-engineered solutions and pay for these items ourselves, and we are much less efficient at providing these services. For instance, when New York City needed more clean water, they considered building a new water treatment facility at a cost of \$7-9 billion whereas restoring the watershed upstate by planting more trees would cost just \$1 billion. They chose the latter for obvious reasons – it's cheaper because nature does it better. Without nature, we will have to pay much more for these services, money that otherwise could further address poverty and further improve quality of life.

And it is the poor who rely most on the free services provided by planet's ecosystem services – clean water, for instance – 2 billion live in dry regions at risk; flood mitigation – trees and vegetation hold soils and store water; storm impact protection from mangroves and wetlands; and medicinal plants – impoverished communities have little access to modern health services.



Perhaps the most important message from the Millennium Assessment is that our ability to meet the Millennium Development Goals is at grave risk as a direct result of the increasing cost we have to pay for poverty alleviation without being able to rely on the free services nature provides. And with increasing impacts from global warming, instead of fighting chronic challenges like poverty, dollars will flow to emergency matters like floods, storms, droughts, and climate refugees – from inundated islands as well as drought ridden areas.

So, the final piece of my reality check are five current climate tipping points that make clear that words and policies will no longer matter if we do not act now.

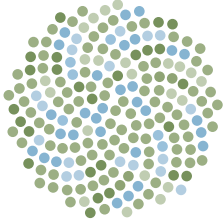
1. **Methane – with twenty times the global warming potential of CO₂** – is rapidly escaping from Siberian permafrost;
2. **Carbon stored in our forests is rapidly being lost:** forest fires from drought and heat are up four times in the U.S., and forests are being decimated by exploding numbers of native insects that have longer seasons in which they survive and do their damage;
3. **The Arctic ice is melting fast:** it reflects 80 percent of the incoming energy back into space, but if current trends continue, within 10 years we will have a four-fold increase in the rate of melt, and ALL the Arctic ice will be gone by 2040 during late summer;
4. **Ice on Greenland is acting badly:** Greenland used to lose and regain the same amount of ice each year. Ten years ago, Greenland was melting about 1 Nile River per year. Today, it is losing 3 Nile Rivers per year – about a cubic mile per week is dumping into the ocean; and
5. **The Antarctic ice is breaking up:** scientists recently discovered a massive river that is surging deep under the surface of the Arctic.

The sea-level rise numbers in the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report do not reflect the impact of changes on Greenland or the Antarctic. The IPCC avoided including hard numbers from the two largest ice masses on the planet because they can not accurately predict the size, scope and pace of the melt.

So, are you ready for a little good news? Global Warming is the first most clear impact of our unsustainable path to date, and the good news is that with our climate system, as well as on other ecosystems, reducing our impact on nature will also create many co-benefits like better health, better jobs, greater income (from sustainable livelihoods), and improved quality of life.

There are lots of good examples of job creation, of provision of services to improve quality of life, without harming ecosystems – and businesses and non-profit entrepreneurs are innovating and leading the way. From Wangari Maathai's approach of tree planting for poverty alleviation and water storage as well as sequestration of greenhouse gas emissions; to Jane Goodall's community smart stoves that reduce the amount of wood needed for cooking, the time spent harvesting wood, and help protect the Gombe and the gorillas; to Majora Carter and Sustainable South Bronx's work creating green jobs restoring local nature here in the United States – these improve quality of life. There are many creative solutions that we can help to scale.

I see our planetary degradation as an opportunity for us – we can make the world a better place, we can come together to fight against this common challenge to which no one is immune.



This is the chance for all of us to be activists, all of us to be advocates. Those of you who are law students have incredible opportunities to make a difference right now – and you will have many opportunities coming your way as attorneys. As law students you can join with Campus Climate Neutral, bringing together business and engineering students and show your universities and communities how to go carbon neutral and save money. You can lobby for investment responsibility policies to minimize the extent to which your university's endowment is financing further global warming. And you can engage our political leaders at the local, state, and federal levels.

To all of us, it's time for more.
Don't be afraid to be an advocate.
The facts are on our side, we will be proven right.

When I first started at the Department of Energy, I was 24 years old and part of a team to identify electricity replacements for the dangerous Chernobyl-style Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk reactors, and I asked the group whether wind power was a potential resource. They laughed – it was only coal, and maybe natural gas. But within a year or two, Secretary O'Leary was working with the former Soviet Union and countries like Georgia and around the world to develop their indigenous wind and other sustainable energy resources, as well as energy efficiency programs. Throughout my life as a lawyer – including in the private sector advocating to my clients, I have found as an advocate we can make a real difference – and my clients and those around me come to see the wisdom of the information. Take strength in knowing the truth of your words. Even now, at Google.org, I find myself advocating holistic approaches to poverty and health, restoration of our planet's ecosystems to improve quality of life and help ensure our survival. No matter where any of you are, you can make a difference.

In our personal lives we must make an impact, it adds up as each of us takes steps: first, I have a little saying that my friends in green building and energy efficiency taught me – caulk is cheap! Caulk windows and doors, change to compact fluorescent lightbulbs, change transportation habits, buy green power, eat lower on the food chain – that can be the number one thing to do to reduce your impact on global warming.

And get to the streets – join Step It Up, nature writer Bill McKibben's national day of climate action on April 14 – there are nearly 1000 rallies planned in all 50 states.

Finally – get political. Join Climate Pledge, pick a candidate, educate them, and hold them accountable.

As a final note, I was recently sitting with Tom Lovejoy, a pre-eminent scientist and leading advocate for the preservation of our global biodiversity and natural systems, who heads the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, and as I grew increasingly passionate about nature's wonders, I said, "Nature Rocks, Tom." We laughed – it's a little embarrassing to be almost 38 years old and saying things like nature rocks – but as we finished our meeting, he signed his book for me that day – "To Aimée, for knowing Nature Rocks, and for many other reasons too." I was honored and I hope that all of you will continue to be wowed by the amazing natural world around us, and celebrate it, steward it, and show nature that we can live up to her hopes for all of us. Here's to nature and to you ALL for knowing nature rocks!

Thank you!