

An Inconvenient Truth

Reviewed by Jenna Coriddi

“There are good people...who hold this at arm’s length because if they acknowledge it and recognize it then the moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable” (Gore, 2006).

This documentary film about global warming was inspired by the campaigning work of Al Gore, the former United States Vice President, to raise awareness of the issue and encourage action against climate change. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in Sundance, Utah in 2006, and has since won an Academy Award and become the fourth highest grossing documentary of all time. The content of the film largely derives from lectures delivered by Gore at a number of universities and schools around the world. The presentation includes impressive visual supports which demonstrate the level of climate change already wrought from our consumption of carbon. He details the elements of the modern environmental movement and traces the development of his interest and involvement in climate change from his university days onward. The film’s title alludes to the hesitancy of politicians and governments to address climate change because of the tough and potentially unpopular actions that are required to tackle the issue, the financial cost of changing to less environmentally damaging energy sources, and the need to alter our lifestyles and means of production. Gore details some of the elaborate and underhanded efforts by United States government officials to hide the truth about global warming from the American people.

The film is accessible and communicates the science of global warming in a manner that is understandable even for those without a scientific background. Gore explains the basics of how the earth’s temperatures are kept constant, but how human interaction with the natural environment since the Industrial Revolution has caused carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels to rise and with it the planet’s average temperature. He also illustrates how warmer temperatures cause the melting of glaciers, which in turn affect the salt levels in the sea, increase ocean temperatures, affect currents and strengthen storms.

While understanding the science is important, it is often easy to disregard the direct impact that these incremental changes are having on a daily basis. The film does an excellent job of addressing how the effects of global warming have affected millions of lives around the world: deaths due to extreme heat waves, homelessness due to flooding, and the more regular occurrences of drought, mudslides, hurricanes and typhoons. Gore also outlines the impact of minute daily temperature rises on ecological cycles

such as birds that starve because caterpillars hatch early and forests that are destroyed by extended feeding periods of pine beetles. Most frighteningly, the film points to a catastrophic future for the planet, its ecology and inhabitants unless immediate action is taken. The viewer is horrified by scientifically calculated images of China, San Francisco and Manhattan, all partially submerged by rising sea levels which will result from rapidly melting glaciers, and by a computer-generated image of a polar bear, swimming miles in search of ice on which to rest.

The film intersperses the lecture with personal and professional reflections from Gore that include a family history in the tobacco industry, family loss, bereavement and a high profile career in politics. Gore frequently revisits his controversial loss of the US Presidency in 2000, including in the film a short montage of images from the disastrous Florida election which first gave Gore the presidency and then took it away. While his reflections are meant to illustrate his personal motivation to educate about climate change, the bitter political undertone does detract from what the film is supposed to be about: global warming. Students who are unaware of American politics could also become confused about what happened in the 2000 elections and the pertinence of these segments to the film as a whole.

The film closes on an optimistic tone that suggests that there does not need to be a choice between the economy and the environment. Humanity has the technological and scientific knowledge to address the problem, and what is needed is the determination and public will to change our life-styles and consumption patterns. The closing credits are used to highlight small but effective actions that viewers can take to make a difference: walk, ride your bike, use green energy, plant trees, vote, drive a hybrid, *learn*, and put that knowledge into action. Some development educators may argue that the film does not go far enough in proposing actions that will support good educational practice. It could be described as disempowering in the sense of highlighting the enormity of the problem but not responding with the required radical actions needed to address it. Conversely, global warming sceptics say that the film was exaggerated and that the effects will not be nearly as drastic as portrayed. Animal rights activists questioned the omission of findings from the United Nations *Livestock's Long Shadow* report, which stated that 65% of human-related nitrous oxide comes from the world's livestock industry, more than from transport (Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Castel, Rosales & de Hann, 2006:114).

These criticisms do not appear to have slowed down the educational impact of this film. In fact, it has begun to be integrated into several colleges and high schools as part of the mandatory curriculum. It was added to the science curriculum for fourth- and sixth-year students in Scotland

and has been made available to schools in Spain as well. As part of the Sustainable Schools Year of Action to promote sustainable development and environmental awareness, copies of the film were distributed to secondary schools in Scotland, Wales and England despite legal battles over factual accuracy in parts of the film and schools' responsibility to present an approved opposing view.

An Inconvenient Truth has played a significant role in raising public awareness of climate change to a new level and has been a significant educational tool in upper post-primary schools and at third level. Al Gore's recent Nobel Peace Prize for his campaigning work on climate change will add weight to the message of his film which, despite shortcomings, represents an important starting point in engaging the public with the issue of global warming.

References

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