



An Inconvenient Youth
Alec Loorz
Washington

Young Alec Loorz was awestruck when he found himself standing on a stage with former Vice President Al Gore. "He told me he'd read my letter," he says. "That day I felt like I was in a dreamworld, on stage with my hero."

For Alec, watching *An Inconvenient Truth* when he was just 12 years old was a turning point in his life. "It gave me that spark to really take action. Before that, I was aware of climate change in a roundabout way. But that film made it real for me. And I wanted to do something about it."

When Al Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* was released in 2006, it created a renewed interest in the climate conversation globally – and that was his goal. The conversation around the impending climate crisis had gone stale, and needed to be reinvigorated. As a popular political figure, Gore knew he could influence change. Alec was among the countless environmental advocates inspired by the film, which to this day continues to create passionate climate activists.

From the moment Alec saw the film, he started spreading the word. Most people Alec's age weren't aware of the climate movement. "I got into an argument with one of my friends about it," he says, with a laugh. "Over time, I did a lot of research on the issues, and my own story became intertwined. I felt a sense of calling to be a part of the transition to a sustainable society."

Alec learned a lot on his own. But he knew he needed to be around top experts to really be able to make the wide-ranging impact he wanted to. So he decided to go straight to the source of his inspiration. "Mr. Gore's organization, the Climate Reality Project, had a training program. However, they had an age cutoff - and since I was only 13, I was turned down." But Alec didn't let that stop him; he worked privately, behind the scenes. "I even sent a letter to Mr. Gore, saying how I was rejected from the training, but I still wanted to be involved."

Now, standing on the stage with his hero, Alec's persistence had paid off. Mr. Gore told Alec that anybody with his passion should definitely be involved in the cause. The very next week Alec got an invitation to join the next training in Nashville, where he would become the youngest person ever trained. "That was an unbelievable three days," Alec says. At the end of the program, he was equipped with a CD full of slides and directed to go out with it, into the world.

Alec had begun his environmental journey while still in middle school, by founding Kids vs. Global Warming. He constructed signs throughout his coastal city of Ventura, California, warning about the impacts of sea level rise. News of his work began to leak out to the national press, and an intense public speaking schedule emerged. All through high school Alec was a popular speaker: he gave more than 1,000 presentations to over half a million people, most of them youth. And he received prestigious awards, including the Coretta Scott King A.N.G.E.L. Award, and the Brower Youth Award from the Earth Island Institute.

In 2010, at age 16, Alec cofounded iMatter with his mother, to support youth-centered climate action. They held the first worldwide youth climate march in 2011, with 45 countries participating. The same year, Alec and other iMatter leaders acted as plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the U.S. federal government, on the grounds that it has not lived up to its responsibility to protect the atmosphere for future generations.

“We actually made it all the way to U.S. federal court,” he says, proudly. “But then the fossil fuel lobby got involved. They intervened in the case and sent some really good lawyers, and they defeated it.” But, he adds, “The fact that they sent their best lawyers to shut us down showed we were considered a serious threat – and we will continue to be. While we lost that lawsuit, this legal approach goes on today. And will in the future.”

Alec continued to campaign. But he knew that the movement’s strategy couldn’t be to just keep writing letters and having protests. “It felt like that famous Einstein saying, like we were doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I got frustrated. And so I decided to go out in search of other perspectives.”

Alec visited Iceland, where he walked on a glacier that scientists say will be gone in 100 years. He crossed the United States multiple times, visiting and learning from organic farming coops that have a healthy relationship with the land and their communities. He visited indigenous people in Ecuador whose land was threatened by extractive industry.

By 2017, Alec’s travels had led him to southeastern Utah. Here, at the Bears Ears National Monument, he participated in a retreat as the Kalliopeia Foundation's Spiritual Ecology Fellow.

Bears Ears is a national monument that was established in 2016 to protect around 1.3 million acres from development. But in 2017, at the very time Alec was on retreat there, a fateful announcement was made – the protected land area was to be reduced by about 85 percent, to open up the lands to mining operations. Simultaneously, nearly 900,000 acres was to be slashed from the Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument. Being there at the time, Alec had an insight.

“If I try to identify what’s missing with the movement, it’s this core feature, this idea of ‘us vs. them’. On one side, it’s the people trying to protect Bears Ears, and on the other, it’s those who see the land as a resource to exploit. Yes, we have differing viewpoints, and their actions can be damaging.” He pauses, then adds. “But I don’t think that the ‘us vs. them’ mentality will stop it. We’re all just people. If we keep this kind of thinking up, we’ll just be repeating the same cycles of division that got us standing on opposite sides of the issue in the first place. We’re all together in this world, so we should come together and listen to one another. It’s our only choice.”

Alec realized that in all his travels, whether he was in Iceland, the United States, the Amazon or the Andes, there’s one tried and true method to bring people together in their reverence for a land and its people – and that is through telling stories. “My work has led me to the point where I think that telling stories about places and people is the way forward. We can’t approach climate change as this whole big abstract thing, where we’re saving the whole wide world. It’s too broad. The only way to approach the depths of this, to really change *how* we live, is to deep dive into specific spaces; and to explore the human relationship with these spaces through storytelling.”

Now, through filmmaking, writing, and photography, Alec hopes to explore new ways of telling stories which can address the depth and complexity of this situation. Coupled with this change in his perspective, he also believes that more people, including more young activists and advocates, need to actually get out into the world and spend some significant time in nature, to gain a different perspective on what we really need to do to heal our planet.

“Go outside--and keep going out,” he says. “This is not emphasized enough. For anyone who wants to do this work, it’s going to be difficult. It’s emotional, and at times even heart-wrenching. But it’s also freeing, to take a stand on behalf of something bigger than yourself. We will lose ourselves if we don’t connect with the places in our world that are real, and wild, and alive.”

Despite his struggles in coming to terms with what to do about such a big problem, Alec’s message to youth is one of hope. “The potential of young people is greater than we realize,” he says. “Sometimes we tend to think, ‘We can try, but we’re just kids, so no one will listen.’ But I’ve found the opposite to be true. There’s something in young people standing up and doing what they feel is right that is deeply powerful. We have this opportunity to come together in a new way. And to create the future we want to grow up into.”

Alec’s story of coming of age in a time of radical transition can inspire young people today. Let’s start telling the stories of people like Alec, and others who have devoted themselves to fighting for our planet. It’s time to let those stories help us all find ways to live lives that we can feel proud of.

I have always been fascinated with those who try to look over the horizon and see things that are coming at us.

Al Gore

Call To Action: Learn more about Alec's story and support his work at alecloorz.com
The Climate Reality Project, please visit <https://climateresearchproject.org> .

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com