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Opening extract from

An Inconvenient Truth

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Introduction

MY CHILDHOOD WAS spent in two places. I grew up half in the city and half in the country. My father was a senator from Tennessee and worked in Washington, D.C., so that's where I went to school. But summers were spent on our family's farm in Carthage, Tennessee. I'd go from living in a small eighth-floor apartment whose windows looked out on concrete parking lots and buildings to a sprawling farm with animals, sunlight, open sky, and the sparkling water of the Caney Fork River.

Over time, I came to love my days on the farm more and more: the soft grass, rustling trees, cool lakes. I often walked every inch of the farm with my father. He taught me many lessons about nature on our walks. He showed me how to help preserve the soil by using rocks or branches to stop rivulets of rainwater from washing away the topsoil. These days, when I walk on what is now my farm with my children and grandchildren, I teach the same lessons my father taught me about our duty to care for the land.

I first learned about the Earth's vulnerability to human hands from my mother. When I was fourteen, she read a book called *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. She thought its message that human civilization now had the power to seriously harm the environment was so important that she read it to my sister and me. The book's lessons made a huge impression on us. The way we thought about nature and the Earth was never the same again.

Then in 1968 when I was in college, I learned even more about how the natural world I loved so deeply was in peril. A great teacher of mine at Harvard, Dr. Roger Revelle, opened my eyes to the problem of global warming. Like all great teachers, he influenced the rest of my life. He shared with me and my classmates what was happening to the atmosphere of the entire planet, and how that enormous change was being caused by human beings. During my twenty-four years in government and now as a private citizen, I have always worked to alert people to the dangers of global warming and help figure out how to stop it.

Global warming may not seem like one of our biggest dangers, but it is. Science has now proven beyond a doubt that the Earth's climate is changing, and changing much faster than originally feared. Because of it, we are witnessing such awful results as Hurricane Katrina in 2005—results that leave so many people homeless and cities devastated.

Global warming is not caused by natural forces beyond our control. No asteroid has struck; the Earth is not moving closer to the sun. Human beings are the main cause of the problem. And so it is our responsibility to fix it.

Your generation has grown up much more aware of environmental problems than mine. You already understand that our relationship to nature is not a relationship of "us" and "it." You know that we are all part of the same ecosystem, that we are all in it together.

Yes, this is a crisis. However it is not hopeless. I like the fact that in Chinese, the word "crisis" is made up of two characters: 危机. The first one means "danger." But the second means "opportunity."

I hope the readers of this book will see the opportunity to live differently and to make changes that will help end the climate crisis.

Al, his sister Nancy, and their parents on the Caney Fork River, Carthage, Tennessee, 1951



chapter one

Our Changing Planet

THIS IS THE first picture most of us ever saw of the Earth from space. It was taken on Christmas Eve, 1968, by one of the astronauts aboard the Apollo 8 spacecraft. For the very first time, a manned spacecraft was circling the moon (whose surface you see at the bottom of the picture), scouting for possible landing sites for future missions. The work of Apollo 8 led to the amazing moment the following summer when Apollo 11 touched down on the moon.

The entire time Apollo 8 traveled around the far side of the moon, the Earth disappeared from view. The astronauts were alone in the black void of space, with no radio contact, as NASA had expected. Total isolation.

Then, as radio contact was reestablished, the crew looked up and saw this spectacular sight.

Author Archibald MacLeish wrote a day later on Christmas, "To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together. . . ."

This famous photo became known as "Earth Rise." It literally changed our view of the planet, and in doing so, it did something much more important. It changed our attitude toward the Earth as well. We saw its beauty in a new way. During the next few years in our country, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the first Earth Day all came about.



These magical images of Earth were created by a friend of mine, Tom Van Sant. He went through three thousand satellite images taken over a three-year period and carefully selected the ones showing a cloud-free view of the Earth's surface. He then digitally stitched together the images to create a composite view of the planet, in which practically all its surface is clearly visible. (Antarctica is not in view.)







