

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission

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Summary:

The global energy and food crisis has been a stark reminder that environmental and resource issues must be addressed by everyone because the consequences are truly diverse and far reaching. In these critical times the global debate about the future of our planet has an air of urgency, as we strive to make the transition to a sustainable society. The time is ripe for truly global discussions and solutions, as our societies begin to experience the results of our catastrophic mismanagement of resources.

Essay:

The human race seems to be hurtling down a path of ecocide, where we destroy the fragile ecological support system vital for our very survival. This destruction has now passed beyond being merely aesthetically and morally regrettable but into the realm of being economically and socially disastrous. Overpopulation, environmental stresses, resource depletion, habitat destruction and catastrophic mismanagement of resources appear to have combined in a perfect storm, where each factor aggravates the growing food and energy crisis. Food and energy prices have increased significantly in recent years, with the two sectors becoming increasingly interwoven. The way we produce energy and food must change in order to improve the wellbeing of society as a whole.

Globalisation has meant that the fate of the developed world has become inextricably entwined with that of the developing world. It is estimated that 20% of people consume 80% of the world's resources. The way in which poorer countries aspire to reach standards of living similar to the First World poses a pressing dilemma. As it stands the earth cannot sustain the lifestyles of developed nations. Ultimately developed nations must reduce energy and resource consumption and developing countries must reduce population growth. It is obvious now that developing countries must strive to develop in tune with the clean technologies currently available.

In the past there has been a tendency to view environmental problems as a concern for affluent First World citizens; the glaring reality is that the environment is fundamental to all peoples continued survival. The global energy and food crises have been a reminder that environmental and resource issues must be addressed by everyone. From fuel poverty in developed countries to starvation in developing countries, the consequences are truly diverse and far reaching. A community of millionaires in Three Rivers, Oregon turned to solar power in the 1980's to supply nearly all of their electricity needs. Kenya may be a developing country but it has the highest rate of household solar ownership in the world with over 150,000 solar home power systems. Every facet of society must be involved in the changes our world now faces. We are faced with global challenges; the solution must be an inclusive global one.

The price of basic food staples has risen dramatically in recent times. Waves of riots swept through more than 25 countries caused by the unavailability and rising prices of basic foodstuffs. In Bangladesh 10,000 workers rioted over rising food prices. The situation was compounded by the very fact that agriculture relied heavily on fossil fuels, and this caused yet more drastic increases in food prices. The UN estimates that the recent food crisis could set the fight against poverty back over 7 years. In all countries, developed and developing, poverty threatens food stability and supply.

With the growing global population, finite potential of land use and the unsustainability of many farming techniques, it might appear as if we are heading for a Malthusian situation. Soil erosion, acidification, alkalinisation and salinisation are all problems stemming from unsustainable practices. There must be focus on sustainable land management, attempts to improve productivity while preventing degradation of natural resources.

An immediate change in attitude towards food is needed. Food must not be treated as merely another product, but as a vital commodity. Countries should prioritise food stability and a policy of food self-sufficiency. A community orientated and sustainable food system would allow community self-reliance and social justice. When people do not have adequate nutritious food supplies, the situation rapidly turns into a maelstrom of social and political turmoil.

So too energy plays a major factor in development of society and economy. In these times of unstable oil prices, the transition to renewable energy must be achieved. The biggest challenge is not developing new and innovative technological solutions to the energy crisis, but implementing a complete re-evaluation of the political, economic and social frameworks currently in place. What is needed is not new technological advancements, but the political will to implement the knowledge and technology we already have. There are many barriers to the widespread adoption of clean technologies, but they are mainly due to lack of an integrated outlook on the potential of renewable energy. We must create political and social institutions that foster sustainable growth and the transition to renewable energy. Government subsidies in favour of traditional energy distort the market; there is insecure financing of renewable energy products. The technological horizon appears promising, with ever more creative fuel sources being uncovered (such as diesel secreting yeast and recycling of coffee ground for biodiesel to name two). The fact remains though, that current standards fall spectacularly short of what is already achievable.

Bitter fights rage worldwide over oil and mineral resources. Less fortunate nations, who have not been blessed with traditional natural resources such as oil and coal, remain increasingly vulnerable to rapidly fluctuating commodity prices. It is these areas which stand to gain the most from renewable energy. There is now a chance for all countries to loosen their dependence on importing fossil fuels and instead create for themselves a power supply based on almost universally available solar and wind power. Estimates put the number of people worldwide with no access to electricity at nearly 2 billion. Decentralised renewable energy systems managed by communities offer a remarkable opportunity for developing countries to bring energy to isolated areas and catalyse development. Energy is vital for overcoming poverty as well as addressing important needs such as healthcare facilities, cooking, lighting, sterilisation and storage of medical supplies.

In these times the global debate about the future of our planet has an air of urgency. And so it should. Now is the time to lay the foundation for meaningful growth, instead of transient booms and busts of a society focused on the short term markets. Politics, economics and ultimately society are at risk of disintegration, as interacting crises loom. The time is ripe for truly global discussions and solutions. Let us not squander our future through inaction during these critical times.