

Research and Essay Writing

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The following are overviews of eight essay assignments related to *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Assignment #1: Research essay topic: “Water wars?”

Reading:

Indo-Asian News Service. “China's damming of Brahmaputra could trigger catastrophe.” October 25th, 2006. <<http://in.news.yahoo.com/061025/43/68qvq.html>>

China's plans of building a dam over the Brahmaputra river and diverting water into its arid provinces have been opposed by regional governments in India's northeast. 'Large-scale diversion of water would adversely hit the state's economy and could even lead to environmental problems and affecting the surface water table in the (Indian) northeast,' Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi told IANS.

The warning follows media reports that Beijing was planning constructing a dam and diverting water to its parched northwest and northeast territories, which includes the Gobi desert, from the mighty Brahmaputra river.

The 2,906-km long Brahmaputra is one of Asia's largest rivers that traverse its first stretch of 1,625 km in China's Tibet region, the next 918 km in India and the remaining 363 km through neighbouring Bangladesh before converging into the Bay of Bengal.

'Damming the Brahmaputra in China would have a cascading effect in the northeast and could lead to a natural calamity here. We have sought Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's intervention to persuade Beijing not to go ahead with their plans,' said an Arunachal Pradesh government spokesman.

The Assam government asking New Delhi for urgent intervention made similar appeals.

'We have decided to form an expert committee to study the impact of such a move by Beijing,' the chief minister said.

According to media reports, China was planning to divert 200 billion cubic metres of water to feed the Yellow River in an attempt at easing acute water shortage in Shaanxi, Hebei, Beijing and Tianjin.

The Brahmaputra is the lifeline for a vast majority of the people in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Bangladesh - most of them depend on the river for irrigating their agricultural fields, fishing and transportation of goods.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the economies in both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with nearly 80 percent of the 27 million people in the two states eking out a living through agriculture.

'We are worried as many areas in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and even Bangladesh would go dry if the Chinese went ahead with their plans. This move would severely affect water flow to the region which in turn would adversely affect agriculture,' said H. Nath, an agriculture scientist.

An Indian external affairs ministry official has been quoted as saying that New Delhi would take up the issue during Chinese President Hu Jintao's proposed visit to Delhi next month.

There has been no official reaction from Beijing to India's concern about damming the Brahmaputra River.

Assignment:

Al Gore argues that global warming is a “little-discussed contributing factor” to outright war and genocide in geopolitically volatile regions like Darfur (116—117). Imagine that Secretary General Ban Ki-moon of the United Nations has appointed you to investigate the crisis described in the article about China and India above and recommend a course of action. Secretary-General Ban wants you to research and study:

1. the analysis of Al Gore and others about the role that global warming has played in causing the violence in Darfur;
2. the modern history of the political relationship between China and India;
3. China's and India's respective national policies and plans for use of natural resources like fresh water and hydroelectric power;
4. and the historical role that the U.N. has played in successfully resolving similar problems and tensions between countries in the past.

Based on your analysis and report about the four topics above, your final task is to recommend a list of steps that China, India, and the United Nations should take within the next three years in order to BOTH prevent future military conflict between these two Asian nations AND relieve the suffering of local populations affected by the water shortages. Remember that your job is support this recommendation with hard facts from your research.

Assignment #2: Research essay topic: “Dogs fighting over bones”

Reading:

Mellgren, Doug. “Hot race for riches in Arctic emerges: Nations scramble as ice cap melts.” Associated Press. March 25th, 2007.
<http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2007/03/25/hot_race_for_riches_in_arctic_emerges/>

Barren and uninhabited, Hans Island is very hard to find on a map.

Yet these days the Frisbee-shaped rock in the Arctic is much in demand – so much so that Canada and Denmark have both staked their claim to it with flags and warships.

The reason: an international race for oil, fish, diamonds, and shipping routes accelerated by the impact of global warming on earth's frozen north.

The latest report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says the ice cap is warming faster than the rest of the planet and ice is receding, partly due to greenhouse gases. It's a catastrophic scenario for the Arctic ecosystem, for polar bears and other wildlife, and for Inuit populations whose ancient cultures depend on frozen waters.

But some see a lucrative silver lining of riches waiting to be snatched from the deep, and the prospect of timesaving sea lanes that could transform the shipping industry the way the Suez Canal did in the 19th century.

The US Geological Survey estimates the Arctic has as much as 25 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas. Moscow reportedly sees the potential of minerals in its slice of the Arctic sector approaching \$2 trillion.

All this has pushed governments and businesses into a scramble for sovereignty over these suddenly priceless seas.

Regardless of climate change, oil and gas exploration in the Arctic is moving full speed ahead. The State-controlled Norwegian oil company Statoil ASA plans to start tapping gas from its offshore Snoehvit field in December, the first in the Barents Sea. It uses advanced equipment on the ocean floor, remote-controlled from the Norwegian oil boom town of Hammerfest through a 90-mile undersea cable.

Alan Murray, an analyst with the consulting firm Wood Mackenzie, said most petroleum companies are now focusing research and exploration on the far north. Russia is developing the vast Shkotman natural gas field off its Arctic coast, and Norwegians hope their advanced technology will find a place there.

The climate changes could open the North Pole region to easy navigation for five months a year, according to the latest Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, an intergovernmental

group. That could cut sailing time from Germany to Alaska by 60 percent, going through Russia's Arctic instead of the Panama Canal.

Or the Northwest Passage could open through the channels of Canada's Arctic islands and shorten the voyage from Europe to the Far East. And that's where Hans Island, at the entrance to the Northwest Passage, starts to matter.

The half-square-mile rock, just one-seventh the size of New York's Central Park, is wedged between Canada's Ellesmere Island and Danish-ruled Greenland and for more than 20 years has been a subject of unusually bitter exchanges between the NATO allies.

Canada, Russia, and Denmark are seeking to claim waters all the way up to the North Pole, saying the seabed is part of their continental shelf under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Canada says the Northwest Passage is its territory, a claim the United States disputes, insisting the waters are neutral.

Assignment:

Al Gore argues that one ideological cause of the global warming crisis is “our false belief that we have to choose between a healthy economy and a healthy environment” (270). Imagine that U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has appointed you to investigate the conflict among Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States described in the article above, and recommend a course of action that is environmentally sustainable and economically responsible. The Secretary-General wants you to research and study:

1. Gore’s support and logic for his argument that “if we do the right thing, then we’re going to create a lot of wealth, jobs, and opportunity” (271);
2. the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report on the warming of the ice cap;
3. the Northern Territory Seafood Council’s report that global fish stocks could collapse by the year 2048; and
4. the national oil and alternative energy policies of at least three of the above countries;

Based on your analysis and report about the four topics above, your final task is to develop a fact-based argument that would convince these five nations to stop pursuing natural resources in the Arctic, declare Hans Island a protected zone kept free of commercial ventures, and still address the economic and energy needs of these five countries. Remember that your job is support this recommendation with hard facts from your research.

Assignment #3: Research essay topic: “The Polar Bear in the Room”

Reading:

Kay, Jane. “U.S. accused of silencing experts on polar bears, climate change: Scientists told not to speak officially at conferences.” *San Francisco Chronicle*. March 9th, 2007. <<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/09/MNGBQOIBMG1.DTL>>

The federal agency responsible for protecting Arctic polar bears has barred two Alaska scientists from speaking about polar bears, climate change or sea ice at international meetings in the next few weeks, a move that environmentalists say is censorship.

The rule was issued last month by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service but was made public this week. The federal government has proposed listing the polar bear as a threatened species, and the wildlife agency is receiving public comment on the proposal.

"It's a gag order," said Deborah Williams, a former high-level Interior Department official in Anchorage, Alaska, who received documents on Wednesday from Alaska scientists who chose to remain unnamed. The documents make the subjects of polar bears, climate change and sea ice off limits to all scientists who haven't been cleared to speak on the topics.

Two of the memos are copies of those prepared for Craig Perham and Janet E. Hohn, who are traveling to Russia and Norway this month and in April. The scientists "will not be speaking on or responding to these issues" of climate change, polar bears and sea ice, the memos say. Before any trip, such a memo must be sent to the administrator of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington.

According to the memos, agency scientists must obtain a memorandum designating which official, if any, is allowed to respond to questions, particularly about polar bears, and include "a statement of assurance that these individuals understand the Administration's position on these issues."

Tina Kreisher, communications director of the Interior Department, which oversees the wildlife agency, said in an interview Thursday that the government isn't trying to prevent scientists from talking about their findings -- but doesn't want them to make policy statements.

At a news conference, Fish and Wildlife Director H. Dale Hall denied that the memos were a form of censorship. He described the content of the documents as part of a policy to establish an agenda and the appropriate spokesperson for international meetings.

Considering the high-profile nature of climate change and the issues that might come up, it was prudent to know ahead of time what everyone was going to discuss, he said.

"We are not gagging scientists," said Hall. They can speak with other scientists at international gatherings in conversations or at dinner but may not speak for the United States government in a formal setting, he said. The agency would frown on their going to news conferences in a host country, he added.

When asked for the administration's position with which the Alaska scientists would have to be familiar, Hall said, "The Earth is warming, and we have to understand how to deal with that and to slow down greenhouse gases and manage the changes that will occur." The agency has taken steps to evaluate whether the polar bear should be listed and has significant questions about scientific studies, including those dealing with when sea ice will melt and the effects on the bear, he said.

Environmentalists who petitioned for the new protections for polar bears hope that a listing would force mandatory limits to greenhouse gases. At present, the administration prefers voluntary programs to cut emissions and has taken the position that carbon dioxide, the predominant greenhouse gas, can't be regulated as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act.

Kieran Suckling, policy director of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that submitted the petition to list the polar bear, said muzzling of scientists at international meetings isn't appropriate. "That type of memo might be appropriate for the State Department and purely political issues," he said. "What we're dealing with here is science. How many polar bears are there? Why are they going extinct? What is the cause of the ice melting? It's completely inappropriate to ban scientists from talking about science."

Williams, an attorney who received the documents about rules for scientists' speech, was special assistant to the secretary of the Interior under the Clinton administration for six years. She now heads an environmental consulting firm, Alaska Conservation Solutions. "I worked very closely with Fish and Wildlife and other Interior agencies, and a memo like this is truly inconceivable," she said. "This is an issue of international significance, and you want your professional public servants to be able to discuss these issues. It is unconscionable to gag them."

The Bush administration has been under fire for several years for allegedly trying to curb the speech of government scientists who produce studies that contradict the administration's positions, particularly on global warming.

Scientists in the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have been chastised for speaking to reporters, and some have been asked to submit papers and lectures to high-level managers for review. Political appointees at NASA have turned down journalists' requests for interviews with scientists, and the Mineralsjournalists to interview scientists, including on polar bear observations, only if the agency could record them.

The agencies challenged scientists over studies revealing negative effects of oil development on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the drownings of polar bears possibly associated with shrinking sea ice. The beloved furry Arctic animal has become a symbol for the dire effects of a warming world. The plight of the bears, including the deaths of polar bears observed floating in Arctic Ocean waters that may be attributed to the long swim from the diminishing sea ice to land, were reported by *The Chronicle* last year and captured worldwide attention in former Vice President Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

Assignment:

Reread and consider the quotation from Kieran Suckling: "That type of memo might be appropriate for the State Department and purely political issues," he said. "What we're dealing with here is science. How many polar bears are there? Why are they going extinct? What is the cause of the ice melting? It's completely inappropriate to ban scientists from talking about science". This impingement of politics upon science is the same problem that Gore's audiences highlight in their frequent question, "Why is [global warming] a political issue at all" (284)? Gore's answer to their question is that the "truth about global warming is [. . .] unwelcome to some powerful people and companies making enormous sums of money" (284).

Imagine that you are a reporter newly hired by the *New York Times*, and your editor has asked you to write an article answering the question, "why would anyone try so hard to stop scientists from discussing their research about 'polar bears and sea ice?'" As part of your search for answers to this question, research some of the people and companies named in Gore's book. Include among the targets of your research at least three of the following topics:

1. Phillip Cooney, former chief of staff of the White House Environment Office
2. Exxon Mobil Corporation
3. American Petroleum Institute
4. The Bush family's ties to the international oil industry
5. The Kyoto Treaty

Assignment #4: Short revised essay topic: “I just can’t relate”

Gore recounts the story of how, as a child, he learned the importance of “the moral necessity of caring for the land” by watching his father manage the path of rainwater as it drained through farmland (124). He muses, “Had I not learned those lessons early while watching him do the work with his own hands, I might have found them impossibly abstract, with no relevance to me” (124). In this story, Gore suggests that sometimes, it can be difficult for a person to relate to a body of knowledge – even a very important or necessary one – if that person has never had the chance to learn about it through direct experience. Do you agree with him? Explain whether you agree or disagree with his idea, supporting your argument with examples of knowledge that you have gained both through your academic coursework and through your own life experiences.

Assignment #5: Short revised essay topic: “I am with you, and know how it is.”

Before stating his belief that in losing touch with the natural world, “our civilization has come perilously close to forgetting what we’ve lost and then forgetting that we’ve lost it,” Gore hesitates in a moment of self-criticism, thinking, “[m]aybe I shouldn’t generalize from my personal experience” (162). Do you think that you can make important and valid generalizations about “our civilization” based on your own “personal experience”? What are the benefits of this kind of reasoning? What are the risks?

Assignment #6: Short revised essay topic: “That is one big assumption”

In one depressing passage, Gore describes how quickly we ran out of time to keep making mistakes:

Scientists thought this ice shelf would be stable for at least another century—even with global warming. But starting on January 31, 2002, within 35 days, it completely broke up. Indeed, most of it disappeared over the course of two of those days. Scientists were absolutely astonished. They couldn't figure out how in the world this had happened so rapidly. So they went back to assess why their estimates were so off. They found out that they had made an incorrect assumption about those melting pools of water on top of the ice mass. They had thought that the meltwater sank back into the ice and re-froze. Instead, as they now know the water keeps thinking straight down and makes the ice mass look like Swiss cheese. (Gore 182)

Here Gore describes what happened when an untested assumption led to a misleading conclusion. When did you make an incorrect assumption that led to a faulty conclusion? Why did you make this incorrect assumption? How did it affect you or someone you know? How can both you and your reader learn from this experience and grow wiser, yet still be able to make everyday decisions without becoming paralyzed with self-doubt?

Assignment #7: Research essay topic: “Learning to swim”

Imagine that you are the appointed Chief Environmental Officer of a large district in any of the following regions – Calcutta, Manhattan, Shanghai, Beijing, San Francisco, Florida, or either of the countries of Bangladesh or the Netherlands. You have received preliminary reports that half of Antarctica is beginning to break up and may collapse into the sea within two years. Just as Gore reports, your national government’s scientists are predicting an imminent rise of 18 to 20 feet in the ocean surrounding your district (196—207). Sucks huh?

Create a report to the president of your country, describing:

1. a list of the most dramatic effects of this rise in sea level;
2. what forms of assistance the local populations will need;
3. damage to the infrastructure such as power, roads, and municipal water systems;
4. the impact upon the national economy; and
5. the actions you recommend your government take to alleviate these problems

Try to also include in your report any unexpected positive or beneficial opportunities that may arise from this work – remember that, as Gore points out, “the Chinese expression for ‘crisis’ consists of two characters [. . .] ‘danger’ [and] ‘opportunity’” (10).

Assignment #8: Group project: “Getting priorities straight”

1. (In-class large group discussion) Now that you have read the entire book, let’s go back through it and put on the board a list of the various negative effects you remember.
2. (In-class writing) Choose one of the negative effects and describe:
 - a. Why it is bad
 - b. What if anything might be good about it
 - c. Whether it is a long-term or short-term change
 - d. Whether it is a local change or a global change
 - e. What unforeseen consequences may arise from this effect via the “domino effect”
3. (In-class small group discussions) Now discuss with your groups and write down a mission statement – what, in your group’s view are the worst aspects of global warming? What things do you value and want to protect the most?
4. (In-class large group discussion) Now, after hearing the mission statements read aloud, let’s arrange all these negative effects in a hierarchy – from the most urgent and dangerous to the least urgent and dangerous.
5. (Out of class, individual research assignment) Now select what you feel is the worst problem caused by global warming, and create a plan to solve it.