



# Climate Change and Climate Justice

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# Climate Change and Climate Justice

**Weather** is a blizzard, a hot day, or an afternoon thunderstorm. It happens over a few hours, days, or weeks. **Climate** is the average weather conditions in a place over a long period of time—like 20 or 30 years. **Global climate** is the average climate over the whole world.

The earth's global climate is changing. Science tells us that people are causing some of these climate changes by burning fossil fuels like oil and gasoline. Burning these fuels creates gases like carbon dioxide that trap heat from the sun in our atmosphere, like a greenhouse, heating up the earth. To prevent more damage to our environment, we need to reduce the amount of carbon pollution we put into the air. Individual people can create greenhouse gases by driving cars, for example. Businesses and governments create greenhouse gases, too. They have factories that burn fossil fuels, or fleets of vehicles that burn gasoline or diesel fuel. These large corporations are responsible for creating the majority of greenhouse gases.

As a result of Earth's temperature increasing, the weather around us is becoming more extreme and unpredictable, and the impacts of climate change can be felt worldwide. Rising temperatures are causing polar ice caps and glaciers to melt, causing flooding in coastal areas. Extreme weather events like polar vortexes, wildfires, hurricanes, and droughts are destroying nature and our communities, endangering people, animals, and crops. Right now, 1 million plant and animal species also face extinction due to loss of their habitats.

## What is Climate Justice?

Climate justice is recognizing that climate change affects people and that it impacts poor and vulnerable people more than wealthy, privileged people. Globally, people in less industrialized places have done the least to cause climate change but suffer the most from its effects. Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) are more at risk to experience heat, pollution, and other impacts of climate change. In many areas, a history of redlining, including negligent urban planning, discriminatory lending, and disinvestment, has resulted in a majority of BIPOC being segregated and forced into neighborhoods that have less tree cover and experience greater exposure to heat. This extreme heat causes the most weather fatalities per year for climate hazards (with much higher rates among BIPOC populations), affecting human health, the environment, and even our infrastructure. Furthermore, with record-breaking heat waves expected to worsen as the climate crisis intensifies, BIPOC populations are at a higher risk for heat-related deaths.

Similarly, women and girls are uniquely impacted by climate change. They often have fewer resources than men and boys, and they face gendered expectations about caring for homes and people when faced with disaster. Of those people affected by natural disasters, in recent years, 80 percent of those displaced, or forced to leave their homes, were women and girls. During natural disasters, women and girls are most likely to be negatively impacted or even killed.

Climate justice requires justice for all, so addressing climate change must involve centering BIPOC communities, women and girls, and other marginalized groups. We need better city preparedness plans, affordable and green housing and infrastructure, investments in clean public transportation and energy, and support for policies that address environmental, racial, gender, and economic inequity. Climate justice means that the actions taken to combat climate change should be implemented in ways that are fair and that people suffering the most impact should be heard, respected, and included in the effort. It recognizes that those who have benefited the most from fossil fuels and deforestation should pay for and do more of the work to reduce greenhouse gases and restore forests



# Trees and Climate Justice

Around the world, climate change is damaging the ability of forests to grow back on their own. Better environmental stewardship, especially reforestation and planting trees, can be one of the solutions to species loss and climate change.

In cities, trees help cool communities, reducing the heat island effect created by buildings, machines, and pavement that hold heat. Tree planting provides habitat for wildlife, creates shade on hot summer days, cleans water, and removes asthma-causing air pollution.

Unfortunately, places suffer from the lack of trees and so do people. People of color and people with low incomes tend to live in neighborhoods with fewer trees, and it's often these same communities and groups who feel the biggest impact from climate change.

Working to plant or protect trees helps the earth and helps create tree equity, meaning that every place has enough trees for everyone to experience trees' benefits.

## What happens when there aren't enough trees?

**Heat islands:** Without trees to provide shade and cool air, buildings, pavement, and machines in neighborhoods hold and generate heat, creating pockets of excessive heat or "heat islands." A lack of trees also means more air pollution. The higher temperature and dirty air are dangerous to peoples' health.

**Floods and mudslides:** Trees help prevent or lessen natural disasters. When it rains, trees slow down the flow of water by absorbing it through their roots and holding soil in place. Areas that lack enough trees can experience serious flooding and landslides.

**Loss of homes, medicines, and clean air:** Rainforests create 20 percent of the earth's oxygen and absorb carbon contributing to climate change. They are home to millions of Indigenous people who have lived there for thousands of years. Rainforests are also home to half the plants and animals in the world, 90 percent of the world's birds, plants needed to make medicines, and all kinds of foods. Rainforests are being destroyed by people needing space to live and by businesses and governments cutting down trees to harvest wood, make room for crops, and to build dams.



## Planting trees can help fight climate change!

The Girl Scout Tree Promise is a tree planting and conservation initiative. Planting 5 million trees can help ease the effects of climate change and address the issue of climate justice. Climate justice is crucial to make a better world for all.

Did you know...

- A large tree absorbs 40–50 pounds of the greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, per year.
- In its lifetime, a single tree can capture and store one ton of carbon dioxide.

- In one year, an acre of forest can absorb up to twice the carbon dioxide produced by the average car in that year.
- Trees properly placed around buildings can reduce the need for air conditioning by 50%.

Find out more about the Girl Scout Tree Promise [here](#) and learn more with the [Power of One Tree](#) handout in the Program Toolkit.



# Engaging Girl Scouts in Climate Action

Climate change can be stressful and overwhelming—it's not a problem we can solve on our own. Kids today know this and they're both angry and afraid. They know about the impact of climate change and are worried about the future of our planet.

You can make climate change less scary by supporting youth to learn what causes climate change, how people can help address it, and what they can do.

## Here are some tips for talking to youth about climate change:

- **Share the science.** Provide simple and concrete explanations about the causes of climate change. Share basics like information about weather versus climate, how a rising temperature leads to extreme weather, the role of trees, and how human behavior contributes both to creating and preventing climate change.
- **Provide resources.** When discussing climate change and justice, share information with your Girl Scouts about what is happening right in their own community, along with resources about research and efforts on the state, national, and global levels. Encourage them to research the issues and organizations working on them.
- **Turn fear into motivation.** The climate crisis can be very scary. Paralyzing, even. When discussing climate change with your Girl Scouts, ask how they feel. Acknowledge their fear, anger, or anxiety. Then provide examples of when people have faced very challenging situations in the past and have made big changes or advances, such as how communities respond to natural disasters with humanitarian aid, how scientific research makes places and buildings safer and more resilient, and how the world has worked together to prevent the spread of serious illnesses, like the flu, polio, or COVID-19.
- **Start small but think big.** Get Girl Scouts thinking about changes they can make individually and then “zoom out” to what their families, communities, states, the nation, and the world can do. Remind them that they can be leaders, advocates, and activists at every level.
- **Balance your examples.** When discussing the impact of climate change, balance your examples of harmful impacts with positive ones, highlighting how people are making a difference: citizen scientists gather data; engineers develop alternative energy sources and ways to remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere; people plant trees, preserve existing forests, and design urban areas to prevent erosion or heat islands; etc. If you can, find local and relatable stories of girls and others working to create change for inspiration.



# Engaging Girl Scouts in Climate Action

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## Not sure how to start the discussion?

Check out these questions to use with youth:

- **The Basics:** What's the difference between weather and climate? Have you noticed changes in the climate or weather? What things are people doing to make climate change worse? What are some unique ways people are dealing with climate change?
- **Community Impact:** Have you noticed parts of our community that have more or fewer trees than other parts or have been impacted by climate change? What are your friends and family members saying as related to climate change?
- **Climate Justice:** How are climate change and climate justice related? How does climate impact different parts of our community?
- **Climate Action:** How does thinking about climate change make you feel? What are some activities that you would be interested in that help climate change? What type of support or more knowledge do you want when exploring climate change?

