

## But it's Just a Myth

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I haven't visited in many years, but the Virgin Islands make their way into my family's home—almost 2,000 miles north—all the time. They make their way in the form of Johnny cakes; reggae blasting in the car; my mother and father's slang, and my own slang; and, almost literally, once every year or two, when either of my grandmothers pays a visit. But what I remember most clearly from my last trip to Saint Croix is the beach. On a day without a cloud in sight, my mom took my brother and me on a small ferry ride from the coast of Christiansted, her hometown, to, what locals called, the Key. After strolling through the Key's shops, taking photos of Christiansted on our disposable cameras from the shore, we waded into the calm green-blue water. I think this moment of my time in St. Croix sticks out to me more than any other because of how greatly it contrasts with my native New Jersey. I was in a blue tranquility in my mother's native home, so out of step with suburbia's hurried pace.

But despite its beauty and utter difference from my home state, I don't want to focus on this beach at all—I want to talk to you instead about climate change. First and foremost, climate change is *real*. And while it may not *seem* real for many of us, it is a very real phenomenon. At present, the nearly 1 degree rise in global temperatures since 1850 has meant increased likelihood and strength of droughts, in tandem with more intense rainfall in other parts of the world. Habitats at every corner are threatened with extinction. But what I think many forget is that climate change reveals a stark contrast between the developed and developing world.

Historical emissions from the United States and Europe are responsible for the vast majority of the warming we're currently experiencing. We're inviting a new regime of climate for which the globe is unprepared, and this looming carbon externality deals its hardest blows to those least economically capable of adapting. St. Croix is one of these areas. And so when I reflect upon that day on the beach in Christiansted, I also see a flash of seas risen 1 meter, groundwater spoiled with saltwater, and bleached coral reefs.

I didn't fully grasp the economic selectivity of climate change in my classes here, but rather when I left the university altogether. In my sophomore and junior years, I travelled to Brazil and Iceland to study renewable energy and sustainability, and I travelled like Harvard students always do. I ate luxuriously and bought many souvenirs, enjoyed all sorts of excursions, and flew in large airplanes—all exercises of great economic privilege. All the while, I also contributed to immense greenhouse gas emissions on a per-capita basis. In fact, my trip to Brazil constituted about 40% of my total emissions that year, at about *2 tons of carbon dioxide*. And while that surely was not the first time I changed the climate and *surely* not the last, a ceiling in my cognitive dissonance had burst open when I returned to the states. My sense of hypocrisy only grew and gained profundity upon further inspection: I study environmental engineering at a school that invests heavily in fossil fuels and has little to say about it. Think about this irony for a second: the university has a detailed emissions reduction plan, but ultimately fails to see that it has its hands in the pockets of the fossil fuel industry. My flights abroad were literally powered by fossil fuels, but the question remains open on the extent to which my own education is powered, built, and financially dependent on fossil fuels.

So, as an agent of climate change, who will suffer so little in the short term, what can I do? I can substitute red meat with lower-carbon sources of protein. I can institute green practices in the home. And I can make room for a mental prioritization of reuse over recycling, and reduction over reuse. These changes are trivial in the grand scheme of global warming, but they are something. Certainly, if the major emitting countries ever commit themselves to mitigating dangerous levels of warming, immense political and economic changes would be in the works—if you see me in the dining hall, I can go on about this for a while. But these personal changes are constructive in fighting feelings of helplessness and hypocrisy, and invite some introspection into actions I would otherwise not think twice about. By exercising this sort of mindfulness in my consumption, I can feel as if I'm creating a different future. I hope to visit again that beach in Christiansted, still beautiful despite our changing climate.