

**\$1,000 will be awarded to the applicant that provides a well-written essay describing in his or her opinion what is the greatest threat to the environment today. 500-750 words.**

“It’s inescapable: at this very moment, within the synapses of your brain, leaves are fueling thoughts of leaves” (Jahren 64). As I read these words from the relatable work of Hope Jahren’s *Lab Girl*, I could not help but think about the miraculous capabilities of the human brain. But when you break Jahren’s statement down, it is a plant’s capabilities that are miraculous, rather than a human’s. Plants have a unique ability to make sugar out of nonliving inorganic matter, something no other thing is capable of doing. And we owe a giant thanks to all of our fellow plants because it is the sugar they produce that moves along the food chain and eventually enters our body allowing our brains to stay alive and well, freshly supplied with glucose. However, the question becomes: what do we do for plants?

At the risk of coming off as the ultimate pessimist, the greatest threat to the environment today can be summed up in the words of Pogo the Possum on the very first Earth Day in 1970, “We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us” (Walt Kelly). Rather than wallow in the ubiquity of anthropogenic impacts, I would like to take a more optimistic approach and say that while yes, humans are killing the earth, it is individual ignorance that poses the greatest threat to the environment today. The reason for the use of the word optimistic is because individual ignorance implies that *if* one were enlightened, the situation might be more hopeful.

As self-preserving as it can be, ignorance is no excuse. While the truth can be ugly, choosing to remain in the dark only accelerates the issue at hand. Author of *Eating Animals*, Jonathon Foer stated, “It’s always possible to wake someone from sleep, but no amount of noise will wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.” Jonathon’s indictment of the factory farming industry and American agriculture epitomizes the developed world’s attitude toward the environment today. The facts and statistics regarding this industry are astonishing, but when given the choice to know or not know them, most people will choose the latter. I myself am a vegetarian, a personal choice I made after devouring multiple books that both supported and opposed vegetarianism as a lifestyle choice. When I stumbled upon *Eating Animals*, the choice to not eat animals was fairly obvious; it was the first book that made me understand that factory farming isn’t producing meat; it’s producing money, a health epidemic, and an environmental crisis.

Despite the fact that 97 percent of scientists agree that climate change is a real and pressing issue, we have a President who openly dismisses environmental issues and uses false propaganda such as “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make the U.S. manufacturing non-competitive,” (President Trump) in order to divert attention, money, and support away from environmental education and advocacy. The issue with this blatant falsification and dismissal of environmental issues is easy for many people because within the developed world we perceive climate change as a distant problem. Because we do not see the chickens that are packed body to body so sick they need antibiotics and so unhealthy they can no longer naturally procreate, and because we cannot see that 37 percent of methane emissions are the direct result of factory farming, we distance ourselves from the issue and continue on with our day. We do what is easy: eat meat, use shower products that emit

chemicals, use superfluous amounts of water, only recycle when it's convenient, and ignore any of the facts that might cause some slight cognitive dissonance. It is easy to be ignorant and so we remain uninformed on purpose because "meat tastes good" and the people who are affected are often oceans away.

The answer to the opening question, what do we do for plants, is simple: we provide the carbon dioxide they need for photosynthesis. We continue the cycle. But so do all animals that breathe. The truth is that we cannot survive on this planet without plants, but plants can survive without humans. And without the knowledge that our ignorance is causing potentially irreversible effects on the environment, the earth will quickly become uninhabitable for humans. Human ignorance poses the greatest threat to the environment today, but educating ourselves, our communities, and the generations below us to choose knowledge over convenience can change the trajectory of a problem we have created for ourselves.