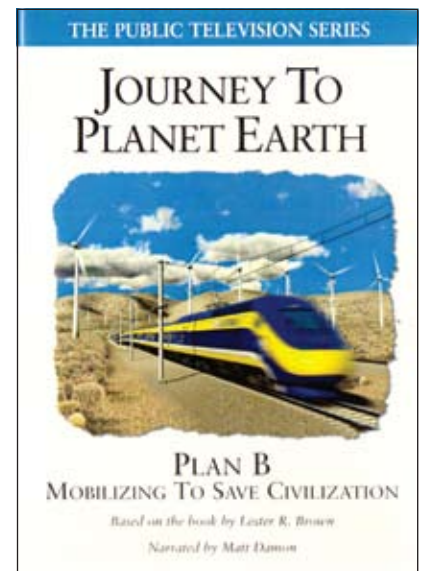


# Climate Change: Where We've Been, Where We're Headed

*A Film Review of "Plan B: Mobilizing to Save Civilization"*

Lori Kumler



“Plan B: Mobilizing to Save Civilization,” has much to offer nearly any social studies classroom from 9th grade to college levels. The film is based on Lester R. Brown’s book by the same name and is the 12th episode in the *Journey to Planet Earth* public television series. With Matt Damon narrating, the film follows well-known environmentalist Lester Brown on his travels to China and beyond to discuss climate change with world leaders. Brown conveys the difficulties posed by climate change in a clear and simple manner throughout the film, undoubtedly in part due to his diverse careers ranging from farmer to U.S. government agriculture analyst to founder of both the Worldwatch Institute and the Earth Policy Institute.

The film illustrates the complexity of climate change and its connections to social and natural sciences, making it ideal for social studies classes. While all of Plan B is relevant to the social studies classroom, the film is divided into chapters that can be shown independently to highlight specific issues or to emphasize particular social studies standards. The film is particularly well suited for geography, government, and economics courses with two chapters highlighting history connections (see Table 1 for the course connections discussed in this article). While chapters can be shown independently, I would recommend showing

**Table 1. Selected film chapters with prominent social studies connections.**

Chapter number and title	Principal social studies connections
II. Distress signals from 35,000 feet	Geography
III. Who will feed China?	Geography/government
V. Ancient civilizations	History
VII. Failing states	Government
VIII. The economic truth	Economics
IX. The 29 <sup>th</sup> day	All
X. Plan B	All
XI. Poverty, population, and diversity	Government/economics
XII. Reducing CO <sub>2</sub> emissions	Government/economics
XIII. The new energy economy	Geography/government/economics
XIV. Can we change fast enough?	History/government

several chapters in order to adequately communicate the interconnected nature of climate change issues.

Plan B can be used in a variety of ways: as a springboard for discussion, to illustrate concepts, or to introduce a research project. Chapter 14, for example, asks whether it is possible to change fast enough to mitigate climate change impacts. Brown points to numerous historical examples of revolutionary change: unprecedented increases in industrial production during World War II, the civil rights movement, the election

of the nation’s first African American president. In Chapter 5, Brown draws historical analogies to our environmental crises, including those faced by Great Zimbabwe, Ancient Sumer, and the Mayan civilization.

The film highlights several connections between natural resources and governance. For example, Chapter 7 emphasizes the concept of failing states, linking Haiti’s failed condition to its striking deforestation (only two percent of its forests remain). When discussing China’s dilemma of feeding its popula-

tion in Chapter 3, Brown notes that today’s Chinese leaders remember when thousands starved due to lack of food and thus will do anything in their power to prevent this from happening again. In regards to climate, he points out that while we might share resources in common with other countries—the atmosphere, rivers, oceans—our governance is not typically shared. Such segments can lead off classroom discussions or research projects: what obligations do governments have to provide basic necessities for their people? What types of policies can protect natural resources while also improving quality of life? How can we address the issue of shared resources and separate governing systems? What examples can students find of transnational governance of natural resources?

The film likewise presents substantial content for geography and economics classes ranging from the glacier fed rivers of populous eastern China (Chapter 2) to population growth rates (Chapters 9 and 11) to externalities (Chapters 8 and 12) and fossil fuel substitutes (Chapter 13).

Brown presents his solution to the climate crisis, dubbed “Plan B,” in Chapter 10. Just as the issue is multifaceted, so is his four-pronged plan: (1) cut carbon dioxide emissions 80% by 2020, (2) limit population growth to eight billion, (3) eradicate poverty, and (4) restore natural systems. The chapter then goes on to explain how these facets are interrelated.

Perhaps the best part of the film is the substantial resources available to support it. While the Educators Guide cannot be accessed via a stand-alone DVD player, it is available both online in PDF format ([www.pbs.org/journeytoplanetearth/education/teachersguide.html](http://www.pbs.org/journeytoplanetearth/education/teachersguide.html), scroll down to choose Episode 12: Plan B), and via computer on DVD in both Microsoft Word and PDF formats. The Guide includes:

- Listing of connected national science and social studies standards

- Pre-viewing activities including:
  - List of geographical locations and features from film
  - List of terms used in film
  - Short list of introductory questions to consider
- Viewing activities by chapter
- Special project ideas (relevant for history, geography, economics, or government courses)
- Resources

Even more useful than the Educators Guide are the many resources available on the Earth Policy Institute website ([www.earth-policy.org/index.php?/books/pb4](http://www.earth-policy.org/index.php?/books/pb4)). Brown’s complete book by the same name is provided here along with links to data sets for each chapter (such as “Annual Consumption of Key Resources by China and the U.S.”) and a slideshow presentation that illustrates key film and book concepts. Analysis of data provided here would be an essential activity for university and advanced secondary courses.

Because talking about climate change and environmental degradation can emphasize “gloom and doom,” it is impor-

tant to counterbalance this with successes. Both the bottom half of the webpage provided in the previous paragraph and the slideshow presentation (slides 42 and 43, “Pieces of the Puzzle”) provide a solid list of positive environmental accomplishments in countries around the world.

Finally, no discussion of such issues is complete without providing students with an opportunity to get involved. The final slide suggests some options (e.g., communicate with elected officials or take action in an area that excites you) and the Educators Guide does as well (conduct an energy audit in your school). Ideally, however, your students will have their own ideas that you can assist them in undertaking and reflecting upon as they practice the art of citizenship. 🌍

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