

Baby boomers pass blame for climate inaction

Written by: Leonardo Castaneda

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The Muppets are making a comeback. They've had a well-received movie and Elmo's involvement in child abuse allegations bodes well for the impeccably moral Kermit the Frog. However, Kermit's trademark, "It's not easy being green," is still as true as ever, particularly for youth in the U.S.

During a recent interview with KPBS, San Diego author Richard Louv criticized younger generations for not leading the charge in climate change advocacy. He blames what he calls "youth's nature deficit disorder" on the fact that today's youth "don't go outside much."

He told the story of a "very hip young woman" disillusioned with the fight against climate change. How did he know she was "hip?" Because Louv said she bore the undeniable mark of coolness—tattoos. Louv isn't alone. A recent Time Magazine story also discussed the idea of youth environmental disillusionment. During the interview, Louv perfectly summed up the criticism, saying, "it's been asked recently, in several articles, 'Where are the young people? Why aren't they in the streets, almost, about climate change?'"

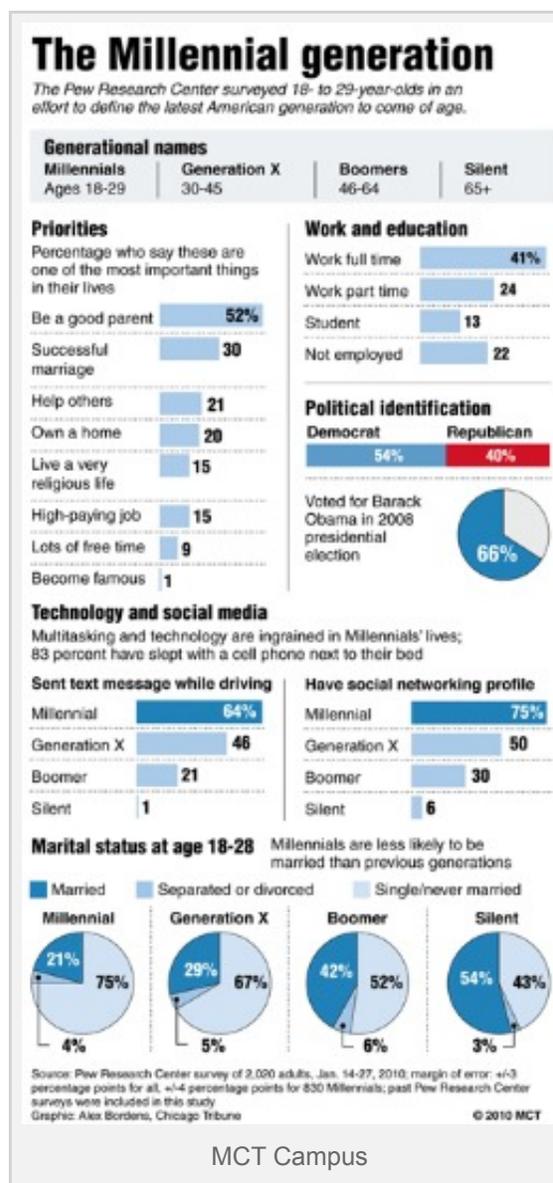
So, are video games making today's hip youth insensitive to climate change? No. A Pew Research Center study shows 64 percent of millennials (people born in the 1980s and 1990s) believe there is solid evidence of climate change and 43 percent believe it is caused by human activity. Compare that with Louv's baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964), where only 55 percent believe in global warming and less than a third believe humans cause it. To be fair, the number of millennials who believe in global warming is down from roughly 80 percent in 2006, but the decline is a trend common among all age groups. Across the board, millennials have higher support than baby boomers for alternative energy and a reduction of fossil fuels.

If millennials believe in global warming and government intervention to prevent it, maybe Louv takes issue with their lack of political participation. Yet once again the facts don't back him up. In 1972—the first year of the presidential election to allow 18 to 20-year-olds to vote and a time when the baby boomer generation was starting to come of age—18 to 24-year-olds had a 55 percent turnout rate. However, it soon declined to 48 percent in 1976 and 45 percent in 1980. In turn, millennials 18 to 24-years-old had a 49 percent turnout rate in 2008 and in 2012, youth's share of the electorate increased to 19 percent.

Millennials believe in climate change and are more politically active than baby boomers were at the same age. Yet, Louv wants to know why the youth isn't doing more to solve the problem his generation maybe didn't create, but definitely exacerbated. Perhaps this generation isn't doing more because it's dealing with massive unemployment. 20 to 24-year olds have unemployment rates more than twice as high as 55 to 64-year-olds, and 18 to 19-year-olds face unemployment more than four times worse.

Even if millennials were doing more for climate change, the impact they would have is questionable. Voting-age millennials represent a considerable 21 percent of the population, but baby boomers are 26 percent. In a presidential election supposed to be about the economy, baby boomers singlehandedly made Medicare an issue because they have the numbers and wealth to direct the public agenda.

Louv—or the articles he references—asks, “Where are the young people?” The real question is where are the baby boomers? Why aren't they in the streets, almost, about climate change? They have the money, time, education and political influence to completely reshape the U.S. policy toward global warming, even if they don't think they have the number of tattoos necessary to be considered hip. They could singlehandedly make the Kyoto Protocol and carbon caps international law, yet all they seem to do is blame the youth.



I agree with Louv in saying the youth should do more to help fight climate change, by pressuring politicians to take action as well as leading more environmentally conscious lives. It would be great if we could all go camping more, but somehow I think this is an issue that will take a lot more to solve. Its not fair to expect our generation to lead in the fight against climate change when we are drowning in student debt and unemployment and it's not fair to expect baby boomers to do it alone. When I see Louv marching the streets to protest global warming, I promise I'll be right there beside him. Until then, I'll keep my eyes on those unemployment reports.

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You are so right - the best thing you kids can do is insist your parents (us) live up to what we started at your age... we lost track of our original ideals, and who better than our children to give us the kick in the ass we need to get back to 'em.

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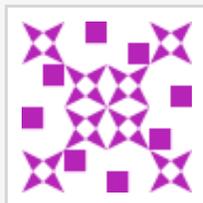
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Mr. Castaneda is right: Young people did not set the stage for inaction on climate change or for the human disconnection from the natural world which undermines that fight. Nor do they bear primary responsibility for action. All generations must act, on both fronts. I usually communicate that more clearly, and in the KPBS interview, I didn't. Here's a piece I was writing the day I was invited to the station: <http://www.childrenandnature.org/blog/2012/11/27/a-new-generation-of-environmentalists-fighting-global-warming-by-reconnecting-people-to-nature/>.

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Leonardo is a senior double majoring in journalism and economics. He is the current Editor in Chief of The Aztec, 2012-13 Opinion editor and an Opinion columnist from 2010-12.



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