

# Leaving a Livable World for the Next Generation

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When former NASA Scientist James Hansen speaks to audiences about climate change, he invariably brings up his grandchildren. At an age when most retirees are taking time to relax, Hansen is driven to action (and occasionally civil disobedience) by the knowledge that younger generations will bear the brunt of our environmental legacy.

Hansen, 73, is one of the most prominent champions of *intergenerational justice*, the idea that we owe future generations a healthy world.

The Iroquois Confederacy enshrined this concept in their constitution hundreds of years ago: “Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.”

Today, environmental organizations are echoing this call for intergenerational justice.

While many are familiar with the late Nelson Mandela’s legacy as an anti-apartheid hero, fewer know about his commitment to younger generations. In 2007 he established an organization called The Elders, a collaboration of independent world leaders devoted to solving some of the biggest problems facing humanity.

In early 2014, The Elders Chair Kofi Annan wrote about the group’s position on climate change action [in an op-ed for the \*Washington Post\*](#):

“The international community has reached a fork in the road. In one direction, a terrible legacy could be handed to our grandchildren and their children. In the other is the opportunity to set our world on the first steps toward a fairer and sustainable future. No one wants the generations to come to say that we failed them.”

For many, our predecessors’ legacy is already taking its toll. The nation of Kiribati in the Pacific is succumbing so quickly to sea level rise that the government has recently [purchased 6,000 acres of land in Fiji](#) to locate future refugees.

Mary Beth Hartman drove home the impacts that sea level rise will have on younger generations with a series of photographs taken by artist Mary Brandenburg for Florida Atlantic University.

In the photos, children and young adults are pictured standing in water representing the sea level rise their communities will face by the time they are senior citizens.

“I’m a scientist and a Floridian, but above all, I’m a mother,” Keren Bolter said about her kids’ participation in the project. Miami, where Bolter lives, is expecting a devastating three-foot sea level rise by 2078, within her children’s lifetime.

Despite young people’s engagement on climate issues, and despite the disproportionate harm they will undergo, they are seldom taken seriously by decision-makers. From [to Durban to Warsaw](#), many young people have been suspended from UN climate talks for challenging that event’s failure to produce meaningful action.

“[My grandkids] deserve better,” said Keith, a man who participated in a 100-mile [“Walk for Our Grandchildren”](#) from Camp David to Washington DC in the summer of 2013. He and other walkers put intergenerational justice at the forefront of their march.

The choices we make today carry more weight when we realize the impact they will have on young people, especially those close to us. Is there a young person in your life who inspires you to take action? Tell us about them in the comments section below.

**More information:**

[Mom's Clean Air Force](#), EDF

[What Sea Level Rise Looks Like When Today's Kids Grow Up](#), The Weather Channel

[iMatter Youth Movement](#)

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IMAGE: When Lauren reaches her life expectancy (2078), sea level in Miami Beach, Florida, will be 36 inches higher. (Mary Beth Hartman, [Center for Environmental Studies, Florida Atlantic University](#))