



## *Divestment for a Sustainable Future*

Alyssa Lee

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As a freshman at the University of California-Los Angeles, Alyssa Lee had an eye-opening experience. “What really woke me up was a speech by Van Jones on plastic pollution as a social justice issue. It was the first time I had ever heard the term environmental justice. It was the first time I had heard of environmental issues related to issues of class and race.”

Alyssa was eager to discover where plastic pollution comes from, how it’s disposed of, and where it’s shipped and processed. What she learned was devastating. “It’s all about the hidden costs, and the ‘sacrifice zones’ of living the way we live; and who has to bear the brunt of that.”

Alyssa began changing her habits. She started small by using less plastic; then, one thing led to another. She and a few students started a food cooperative that focused on environmentally friendly products, as well as issues of labor justice. The more she came to understand American society’s dominant institutions, the bigger the issues she began to focus on. “And what bigger issue does the environmental community face than fossil fuels?”

Digging down into the research, Alyssa was shocked to discover that many universities across the country were investing in and profiting off of the very fossil fuel companies that were causing environmental catastrophes. She just couldn’t stand to see the negative impact of an influential institution such as hers on the next generation of young leaders. So in 2013 she started the Fossil Free UCLA Divestment Campaign—and by 2020 it was announced that the investment portfolio for the entire University of California system, not just UCLA, was fossil free.

Initially the divestment movement targeted universities, demanding that they change their investment strategies away from fossil fuel companies, and redirect and reinvest their funds in renewable energies, and programs that build community wealth, well-being, and regeneration; and that is where it all began. “There’s a tradition going back a long ways,” Alyssa says. “I’m just carrying the banner of so many great environmentalists before me. Recognizing the great work of pioneers from the past is essential to creating lasting change.”

In 2015, Alyssa expanded the divestment movement by joining forces with the Better Future Project, where she started working as a divestment organizer. There she provided coaching and mentorships to hundreds of students in New England who were working to get their colleges to divest. But by 2018, the Better Future Project was at a crossroads: organizations like 350.org and the Divestment Student Network were no longer actively working on fossil fuel divestment. The Better Future Project was fighting the fight alone. So they decided to form Divest Ed to fill this crucial gap, and Alyssa moved into a new role as its director.

Divest Ed is now the national training and strategy hub for student fossil fuel divestment campaigns. It works specifically on training, coordinating, organizing, and refining the skills students need to engage in effective activism both on campuses and in their communities. Divest Ed tasks students with taking on the roles of civic leaders. It also helps create alliances between colleges to help them take a stand against environmentally irresponsible corporations. “It feels great to be reinvigorating the movement when it was in a lull,” Alyssa says. “It’s great to be able to be the voice of the people and the communities that are so disproportionately impacted by fossil fuel consumption.”

In 2020, Alyssa and her team organized a national day of action, with students at more than 50 academic institutions across the country who are participating in divestment campaigns. And on February 13, Alyssa's actions culminated in a radio appearance on NPR. "We have an enormous opportunity as students to really shape our institutions to make a very powerful political statement about not just climate change, but specifically the fossil fuels industry," she said. "And divestment is one of the most powerful statements they can make."

The divestiture movement spread: worldwide, as of 2020, hundreds of institutions, 1200 institutions possessing 14 trillion dollars divested from the fossil fuel industry – including 60 colleges and universities, religious institutions like the Catholic Church in Greece; municipalities, like the City of Denver; state pension funds, like New York City's; foundations, for example, the Rockefeller Foundation; and entire countries, like Norway, have taken a stand for the environment and against fossil fuels by divesting.

Currently Alyssa is working with Future Coalition, a national network and community for youth-led organizations and youth leaders supporting the youth vote and climate movements. "One way or another, I've been fighting the fossil fuel industry directly for about a decade," she says. "Now we are taking the next step by fighting the *financers* of the fossil fuel industries - not just the institutions themselves. We are making sure that banks, asset managers, and insurance companies understand the harm they are contributing to when they fund these efforts. We work with great partners like the Stop the Money Pipeline Coalition. And where ancestral lands are being invaded, we are making sure the testimony of indigenous peoples is paramount in all that we do."

Alyssa now lives in Medford, Massachusetts, where she supports social justice initiatives that strengthen the health of the most vulnerable populations in her community. She is passionate about remedying environmental and social injustice in vulnerable populations, especially in Massachusetts prisons. DeeperThanWater (DTW) is a coalition of organizations dedicated to exposing the rampant human rights abuses that prisoners in the U.S. are subjected to.

On January 27, 2021, some of the goals Alyssa has been working for years began to be realized when President Biden signed an executive order, announcing that it would harness the purchasing power of the federal government to buy clean, zero-emission vehicles manufactured in the United States, and that he would be asking Congress to eliminate subsidies to big oil companies—a massive investment "to the tune of \$40 billion." His multicultural administration is committed to environmental justice by addressing the disproportionate health, economic, and environmental impacts on communities of color.

"How we decide to live is a lifelong process," Alyssa says. "It is a constant, iterative, dynamic experience. It is never too early or too late to decide you want to fight for justice. At the center of this decision is the choice to make a connection against all odds. Connecting to those whose circumstances are completely different from yours; connecting to the earth's history, and to its wisdoms and pains; and connecting to yourself. Making these connections is hard, emotional work. It requires rigor, self-interrogation, and living with constant uncertainty. But if you accept all this, fighting for justice, at its core, is about the capacity to build radical joy for yourself and for others."

Alyssa has a message of resilience especially for youth who want to get involved remedying social justice, sustainability, and other environmental issues. "Being a good person and fighting against injustice is a constant battle. It's not always easy. But when you make a difference, it is all worth it. I wish I had learned earlier how to be okay with being uncomfortable and being uncertain, because some of the greatest personal gains I've made are when I've come out the other side of a difficult situation."

She also believes in the importance of an intergenerational approach to community building. "When we create these imaginary dividing millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and so on, we separate our problems from one another. We become weaker this way. And we lose out on so much mentorship and wisdom with divides like this. There are tons of people who were involved in movements before us who have been through it. We need to invest in learning from them and from each other." But she adds, "Don't stop believing in yourself. If there's anything that working with students these last ten years has showed me, it's that there's good reason to have hope in the future generation."

*Fire made us human, fossil fuels made us modern, but now we need a new fire  
that makes us safe, secure, healthy, and durable.*

**Amory Lovins, Rocky Mountain Institute**

**Call to Action:** To get involved with one of the many educational institutes, nonprofit organizations, and community programs taking on fossil fuel consumption through divestment campaigns, please visit - <https://divested.betterfutureproject.org>.

**Stone Soup Leadership Institute**  
[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)  
[www.soup4youngworld.com](http://www.soup4youngworld.com)