WHY IS 17-YEAR-OLD ALEC LOORZ SUING THE GOVERNMENT OVER GLOBAL WARMING?
By Raising Rippers

Last May, while most normal high school students were out breaking curfew or killing time until summer, 17-year-old Alec Loorz from Oak View, California, had other plans: He was suing the federal government for global warming.

His lawsuit is part of a nationwide surge of youth-led litigation, filed in every state, arguing that the atmosphere is part of the public trust and that the government has an ethical responsibility to protect it for present and future generations. It’s a bold move, especially since the so-called Public Trust Doctrine has never been used to protect something as invisible and intangible as the air we breathe and the atmosphere we live in. And never by plaintiffs who are too young to vote.

“The kids living today are the ones who have the most to lose,” says Julia Olson, executive program director for Our Children’s Trust (http://www.ourchildrenstrust.org), a nonprofit that’s helping spearhead the iMatter legal campaign in partnership with Alec’s organization, Kids Vs. Global Warming (http://kids-vs-global-warming.com/Home.html), and is releasing mini documentaries each month about the youth plaintiffs to raise awareness of the eco blitz. The federal case seeks to compel agencies for present and future generations. It’s a bold move, especially since the so-called Public Trust Doctrine has never been used to protect something as invisible and intangible as the air we breathe and the atmosphere we live in. And never by plaintiffs who are too young to vote.

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So urgent, in fact, that it may already be too late for Alec and the other youth climate plaintiffs. Even if a 6 percent recovery plan is implemented in 2013, Alec will be 104 by the time the climate returns to equilibrium. I checked in with the boy wonder of climate activism about taking the really long view.

RR: How’d you get involved in climate change?
AL: Watching "Inconvenient Truth" was the spark for me. Before that, I knew nothing. We barely recycled at home. When I saw the movie, something clicked inside of me. I was 12. The next day at school, I had a heated argument about global warming with my best friend. It made me so angry that I went home and spent hours looking up scientific reports and making a presentation to show my friend the next day. That's when I knew this was something I wanted to fight for.

Then what happened?
I wanted to be trained by Al Gore, but they rejected me. I was too young. Eventually I did get trained, and now I give presentations at schools around the country as part of the organization I started, Kids Vs. Global Warming. I think I've spoken to 250,000 people total so far.

Yeah, everyone in the environmental movement is wondering the same thing. Al Gore and his Climate Reality Project (http://climaterealityproject.org/) just released a new presentation arguing the real science. A lot of people are talking about green jobs instead, but that’s avoiding the issue. The answer is going above that. It’s bigger than climate change. It’s sustainability. It’s about living as if our future matters.

Do you get ever overwhelmed by how much there is to do?
That’s the biggest thing I’ve struggled since I went to Iceland two years ago and saw the glaciers melting. The main thing I’ve figured out is to remember that my generation is being called to solve this crisis. We were born to help our community transition to a sustainable culture. I’m always impressed by what young people can do.

Like file law suits...What made you and your fellow plaintiffs decide to take legal action?
We are all in imminent danger. Scientists have said we have 10 years to make changes if we want to stabilize the climate by 2100—and that was back in 2005. We’ve already wasted five years. Climate change is a symptom of corruption and unsustainable mindset. We care more about money and power than we do about future generations. The judicial system is the only branch of government not bought out by corporate interests.

How does the public trust work?
The government has a legal responsibility to protect the atmospheres for future generations, and we have authority to take legal action against the government for not protecting this trust. It’s like your dad gambling away your college fund. Young people can’t vote. We have no official political recognition. All we can do is trust. Government has allowed money and power to come before our future. The courts have the ability to protect that trust.

Are you optimistic?
The lawyers are all pretty hopeful. If it goes through, it would be a landmark decision. Even if they try to compromise, at least it’s on the table. If it were up to me, though, I wouldn’t compromise. Six percent is the bare minimum of what we need. And for each year we don’t do anything, that number goes up.

Even if we do get a climate recovery plan, we won’t see the benefits of a stable climate within your lifetime. What’s it like to realize that you might not be around to reap the benefits of your efforts?
It’s kind of weird, but I feel like I’m dedicated to this fight. It’s for the future.

What do you do to reduce your carbon footprint?
We recycle and compost, and I ride my bike as much as I can. We got rid of our SUV and have a smaller, more efficient car. We’re working on a solar hot water system. And we changed our light bulbs—all that basic energy-saving stuff.

Is it hard to justify all the flying you do?
Yeah, pretty much one flight cancels out any positive action over the past year. I’d love not to travel. I

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travel about one week a month. I’ve started home schooling because I travel so much. But if I reach 100 people and they each talk to 10 people, that’s 1,000 people. Still, if I were to think, how am I going to solve climate crisis on my own—that’s unhealthy. This is an intergenerational issue. The government needs to be the one to make the plan. The scientists say that we still have a chance if we act now.

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