

Reader's Guide

# let my people go surfing

The Education of a  
Reluctant Businessman

Yvon Chouinard

patagonia®





# introduction

In a business world commonly characterized by greed, obsession with short-term gain, and environmentally destructive practices, Patagonia is undoubtedly unique. An immensely successful company, it is driven not by an addiction to profit but rather by a mission to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis. In *Let My People Go Surfing*, Yvon Chouinard discusses the origin of his company, the uncompromising vision sustaining it, and the philosophies that continue to inform its practices. Like his company, Chouinard's memoir is distinct. He blends autobiographical writing with a larger discussion of business philosophy and sobering, yet hopeful, environmental commentary. As such, his text appeals to a variety of readers. This reader's guide was designed with this diverse readership in mind; it has a broad focus and features a range of questions and activities that individual readers and reading groups/book clubs should find useful.

This guide has four sections: discussion questions, thematic questions and activities, research topics, and a related resources section. Finally, this guide should provoke meaningful reflection and action as it supports several of Patagonia's guiding philosophies: lead an examined life, support civil democracy, and do good.

# Discussion Questions

These questions can be used to inspire individual reflection or group discussion.

## Foreword

- 1 In her foreword, Naomi Klein writes, “Moreover, at a time when our economic system is failing us so profoundly, the virtuous practices of any one corporation aren’t going to make much of a dent in the problem” (p. viii). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your reasoning.
- 2 According to Klein, what are some practices that separate Patagonia from other so-called socially responsible companies?
- 3 “These various projections are the equivalent of every alarm in your house going off simultaneously. And then every alarm on your street going off as well, one by one by one” (p. x). What projections is Klein referring to here? What is truly at stake?
- 4 What is the nature of the conflict between our economic system and the planetary system? What must happen to resolve this conflict?





### **Preface to the Second Edition**

- 1 What is the significance of the quote from Wang Yang Ming that frames this section of the book?
- 2 Based on the preface, what do you believe is one of Patagonia's central missions?
- 3 In the preface, Chouinard references Gallup polls from 2007 and 2008 that reflect public opinions about global warming. See if you can locate additional, more recent polling data. What do the data reveal?

### **Introduction**

- 1 Why is it difficult for Chouinard to call himself “a businessman”? What does this reveal about him?
- 2 What is Chouinard's take on capitalism? Do you agree or disagree with his view? Why?
- 3 Why does Chouinard refer to Patagonia as “an experiment”?



### History

- 1 How did Yvon Chouinard's early life experiences influence his values and lead to some of his later pursuits? Think about your own childhood and explain how some of your early experiences shaped you in fundamental ways.
- 2 "We American climbers were brought up reading the transcendental writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and John Muir" (p. 10). What do you know about these writers? How did their works seem to influence Chouinard's climbing practices and business philosophies?
- 3 What is Zen? How did it impact Chouinard? Are there any Zen principles that you particularly appreciate?
- 4 What placed Chouinard Equipment on "the path to becoming an environmental villain" (p. 26)? How did this actually produce innovation?

- 5 Why do you think the excerpt from the *American Alpine Journal* (p. 34) is included in the book? What sort of relationship with nature is conveyed through this short passage?
- 6 Why was “Patagonia” chosen as the company name?
- 7 “One of my favorite sayings about entrepreneurship is: If you want to understand the entrepreneur, study the juvenile delinquent” (p. 38). What do the two have in common? Is this saying applicable to Chouinard himself?
- 8 According to Chouinard, what does it mean to be an “80 percenter”? How does this concept apply to both Chouinard and Patagonia? Do you find the idea of being an “80 percenter” appealing? Why? Why not?
- 9 “Despite our own growth at Patagonia, we were able, in many ways, to keep alive our cultural values as we grew” (p. 49). What practices and priorities allowed the company to do so?
- 10 While practicing his “MBA theory of management, management by absence” (p. 51), Chouinard notices changes in the natural environment. What does he see? How do these observations (and his related research) help evolve Patagonia and its focus?
- 11 What are some of the business challenges that Chouinard discusses in this section? How did he and his colleagues confront these challenges? What lessons can you learn from this discussion?
- 12 What particularly strikes you about the company values statement on pp. 61–62?
- 13 “But I did know that we had become unsustainable and that we had to look to the Iroquois and their seventh-generation planning, and not to corporate America, as models of stewardship and sustainability” (p. 64). What is the seventh-generation principle? How is this philosophy evident in Patagonia’s business practices and activist work? As a philosophy, how does the seventh-generation principle differ from belief systems commonly embraced by corporate America?
- 14 What does Chouinard finally say is his purpose for being in business? What are your thoughts about this?
- 15 Overall, how do you describe Chouinard’s writing style and focus in this section of the book?

### Product Design Philosophy

- 1 The philosophy section begins with a discussion of how the company's philosophies are interpreted as guidelines instead of rules. What is the difference between these two? Why is this distinction important?
- 2 Why does Chouinard assert that quality must be "absolutely objective and definable" (p. 77)?
- 3 In what ways does a durable, multifunctional product also serve as a sustainable product?
- 4 Why is repair considered to be a radical act? Related to this, what is the difference between a consumer and an owner? Which one are you?
- 5 What is the Patagonia Ironclad Guarantee? How does such a guarantee likely affect customer perception of the company?
- 6 Examine the cotton pesticides table on pp. 98-99 and choose one pesticide to research in detail. How widely used is the substance? What are its most dangerous environmental effects? Overall, how important do you believe it was for Patagonia to embrace the use of organic cotton?





### Production Philosophy

- 1 Why do you think this section is framed by a quote from an unknown author about Irish women knitting sweaters?
- 2 “Again, the key word is *discovering* instead of *inventing*” (p. 110). What argument is Chouinard making here? Do you agree or disagree?
- 3 What is a “concurrent approach” (p. 112)? How is this approach evident in Patagonia’s business practices? Compare and contrast this approach with assembly-line manufacturing.
- 4 What does it mean to be Fair Trade Certified? Why is this important?
- 5 Which principle do you believe is most important in this section of the book? Why?

### Distribution Philosophy

- 1 Why is it important for a company to have a diverse distribution system?
- 2 What strikes you about the discussion of the environmental cost of transportation on p. 122? In addition to Chouinard’s recommended ways to help minimize the environmental impact of transportation, are there other recommendations/solutions you can think of?

- 3 How does Patagonia's "Philosophy of Architecture" (p. 127) reflect central tenets of the company's overall philosophy?
- 4 What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of the four means of distribution discussed in this chapter?
- 5 What exactly is the "Walmartization of retail" (p. 131)? What are the larger consequences of this phenomenon? How are small retailers especially affected by it?



### Marketing Philosophy

- 1 What does Chouinard mean when he states, "Patagonia's image is a human voice" (p. 136)? In general, how does this idea compare to mainstream corporate imaging/branding?
- 2 How do the many images in this chapter complement and reflect the content of the "Photography" section on p. 137? What are some specific narratives that are transmitted through these photographs?
- 3 How is Patagonia's catalog an unconventional one? What are its different purposes?
- 4 If more companies had promotional guidelines similar to those listed on p. 152, what larger business trends do you think would change/emerge?



### Financial Philosophy

- 1 The section of text that frames this chapter states that businesses are fundamentally responsible to their resource base. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
- 2 How important is profit to Patagonia? In general, how important do you think profit should be to a company?
- 3 What makes the “Don’t Buy This Jacket” ad on p. 157 both unconventional and powerful?
- 4 “We are a privately owned company, and we have no desire to sell the company or to sell stock to outside investors...” (p. 158). What are the advantages, financial and otherwise, of maintaining private ownership?

### Human Resource Philosophy

- 1 “Corporate life did not appeal; it was regarded as inauthentic, illegitimate, and toxic” (p. 162). In what ways do the practices and policies outlined in this chapter contrast with the perception of corporate life depicted in the quote above?
- 2 Who is the ideal Patagonia employee? How would you characterize the company’s hiring practices

- 3 What is the *Let My People Go Surfing* flextime policy? In general, how does it compare with flextime policies of other businesses?
- 4 Overall, how does Patagonia's workplace culture compare to your own?
- 5 Describe Patagonia's child-care system. How does an on-site corporate child-care center benefit both families and the business itself?



### Management Philosophy

- 1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of hiring independent-minded employees? If you were in charge, what type of employee would you prefer? Why?
- 2 “No one has a private office in our company, and everyone works in open rooms with no doors or separation” (p. 172). How can such a physical layout democratize a workplace?
- 3 What is the difference between a manager and a true leader?
- 4 What does company size have to do with bureaucracy or the lack of it?
- 5 Compare and contrast a more top-down style of management with one that is more collaborative/democratic. Which one do you believe is better? Why?

### Environmental Philosophy

- 1 “If government, the private sector, and science don’t begin to cooperate immediately to address issues of environmental degradation, the earth will lose its ability to regenerate” (p. 179). What do you think is currently preventing these three entities from working in conjunction with each other?
- 2 Yvon Chouinard describes himself as being pessimistic about the fate of the natural world. Do you feel the same or different? Explain.
- 3 The “Warning” statement on p. 180 indicates that a significant segment of the scientific community recognized the precarious state of the natural world in 1992. Are you surprised that despite the age of this warning, we still face the same situation today?
- 4 “I’ve always believed that the key to the government’s doing the right thing is to base its planning on the premise that the society will be around for a hundred years” (p. 182). If our government actually did this, how do you think it would change our environmental reality?
- 5 “Much of what I know about achieving any measure of sustainability in an economic activity, I learned in trying to grow my own garden” (p. 184). How do you think such a connection can be made between sustainability, economic activity, and gardening? If you have any experience with gardening, can you identify with Chouinard’s statement?





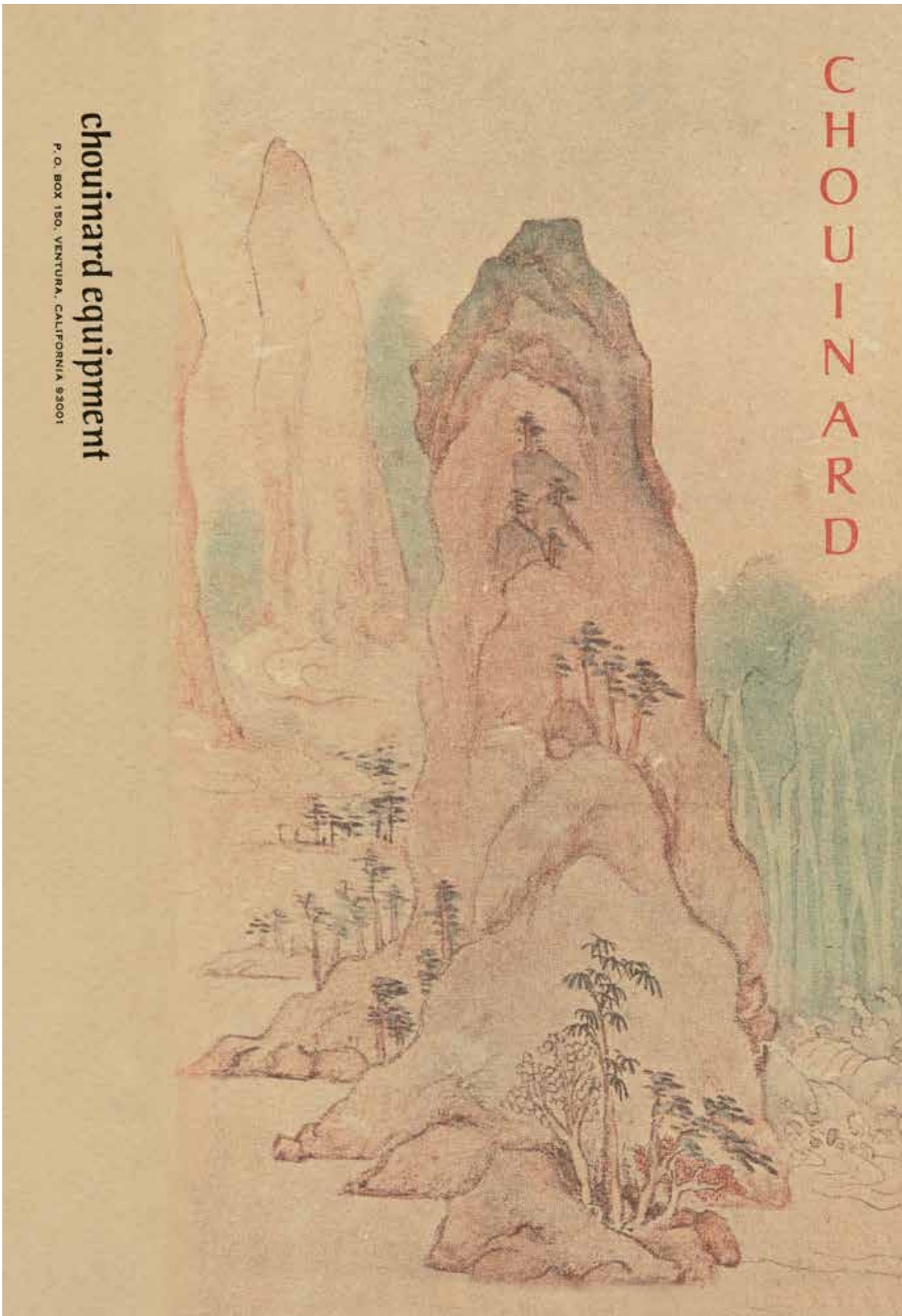
- 6 In what ways can Patagonia, as a company, be compared to a healthy natural environment?
- 7 What are the six elements of the Patagonia environmental philosophy? Are they all equally important, or do you think one or several should be prioritized?
- 8 What does Chouinard mean when he says that “sustainable manufacturing is an oxymoron” (p. 194)? What are the implications of this statement?
- 9 What strikes you about the image on p. 199? What, if anything, do you think is preventing other companies from pursuing similar environmentally supportive innovations?
- 10 What is Patagonia’s Worn Wear program? How is it an environmentally supportive practice?
- 11 How did Patagonia assess its own environmental impact? What changes did this examination provoke?
- 12 “In the early days of our country and until the end of the nineteenth century, we had three powerful social forces: the federal government, local government, and civil democracy. And now we have one more, corporations” (p. 212). What factors allowed corporations to become a powerful social force? How can their power and influence be controlled and used to do good?

- 13 Why are small grassroots citizens' organizations so important? What has Patagonia done to support them?
- 14 "Modern food production is one of the main culprits in the destruction of our planet" (p. 218). Why is this such a significant problem? How should it be addressed?
- 15 What are the goals of Patagonia Provisions? In what ways does the company help guide the food revolution?
- 16 How exactly does "1% for the Planet" work? What kind of impact do you think this organization could ultimately have?



### Turn Around and Take a Step Forward

- 1 "The original definition of consumer is 'One who destroys, or expends by use; devours, spends wastefully'" (p. 231). Given this definition, would you call yourself a consumer? Why? Why not?
- 2 What does Chouinard mean by his statement, "We can turn around and take that step forward" (p. 234)?
- 3 "I believe the way toward mastery of any endeavor is to work toward simplicity; replace complex technology with knowledge. The more you know, the less you need" (p. 235). How can you work toward this form of simplicity in your own life?



CHOUINARD

chouinard equipment

P. O. BOX 150, VENTURA, CALIFORNIA 93001

# Thematic Questions and Activities

This section features a variety of questions and activities that connect with several of the book's central themes.

## **Navigating the Tension between Growth, Profitability, and Environmental Sustainability**

- 1 In her foreword to the book, Naomi Klein writes, "After all, Patagonia keeps on growing, and we keep buying more of its products" (p. ix). How concerned are you by this fact? Despite everything that Patagonia has done to become an environmentally responsible entity, does the company's continued manufacturing and selling of products worry you? Is the fact that Patagonia is ultimately a product-driven business a threat to its environmental mission?
- 2 "The word 'sustainable' is another of those words—like 'gourmet,' and 'adventure'—that has been so overused and misused as to become meaningless" (p. 182). What do you think about Chouinard's statement? What does it mean to truly be "sustainable"? How can the word become meaningful again?
- 3 Take a closer look at Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" ad on p. 157. What do you notice about the advertisement? What makes this both an effective product advertisement and a striking environmental statement? Using traditional artistic methods (pens, paper, etc.) or digital tools (one such free tool is <https://www.canva.com/create/posters/>), create a similar advertisement for a product of your own creation. Like Patagonia's ad, your image needs to highlight and promote your product while also making an environmental statement.

# DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



It's Black Friday, the day in the year retail turns from red to black and starts to make real money. But Black Friday and the culture of consumption it reflects, puts the economy of natural systems that support all life firmly in the red. We're now using the resources of one-and-a-half planets on our one-and-only planet.

Because Patagonia wants to be in business a good long time—and leave a world inhabitable for our kids—we want to do the opposite of every other business today. We ask you to buy less and to reflect before you spend a dime on this jacket or anything else.

Environmental bankruptcy, as with corporate bankruptcies, can happen very slowly, then all of a sudden. This is what we face unless we slow down, then reverse the damage. We're turning about on heat, water, topsoil, fisheries, wetlands – all our planet's natural systems and resources that support business, and life, including our own.

The environmental cost of everything we make is astonishing. Consider the F2™ jacket shown, one of our best sellers. To make it required 135 liters of

## COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE

### REDUCE

**WE** make useful gear that lasts a long time  
**YOU** don't buy what you don't need

### REPAIR

**WE** help you repair your Patagonia gear  
**YOU** pledge to fix what's broken

### REUSE

**WE** help find a home for Patagonia gear you no longer need  
**YOU** sell or pass it on

### RECYCLE

**WE** will take back your Patagonia gear that is worn out  
**YOU** pledge to keep your stuff out of the landfill and incinerator



### REIMAGINE

**TOGETHER** we reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace

water, enough to meet the daily needs of six glasses a day for 45 people. Its journey from its origin as 100% recycled polyester to our Reno warehouse generated nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, 24 times the weight of the finished product. The jacket left behind, on its way to Reno, two-thirds its weight in waste.

And this is a 100% recycled polyester jacket. Not even close to a high standard, it is exceptionally durable, so you won't have to replace it as often. And when it comes to the end of its useful life we'll take it back to recycle into a product of equal value. But, as is true of all the things we can make and you can buy, this jacket comes with an environmental cost higher than its price.

There is much to be done and plenty for us all to do. Don't buy what you don't need. Think twice before you buy anything. Go to [patagonia.com/CommonThreads](http://patagonia.com/CommonThreads) or scan the QR code below. Take the Common Threads initiative pledge, and join us in the 1th "1%" to reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace.

**patagonia**  
patagonia.com



TAKE THE PLEDGE

\*To see the full story of Patagonia's environmental work and join the Common Threads initiative, please visit our web page on [patagonia.com](http://patagonia.com) or visit our store.



### **The Importance of Social Advocacy and the Role of Company as Activist**

- 1 What does it mean to be an activist? Have you ever participated in activism? What environmental issues would you defend, protest, or champion? Why?
- 2 In your reading group (or on your own), identify one environmental issue that the group feels strongly about. This could be an issue that affects your state or a larger problem that affects the country or the planet as a whole. Compose a letter to the President describing the issue and demanding specific actions from the government in response to the environmental problem/threat you have selected. Submit the letter according to the guidelines located here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/mobile>
- 3 In what ways can Patagonia itself be considered an activist? Perform research and identify several other “activist companies.” Who are they? What causes do they support? Share your findings with group or others you know.

### **The Connectedness of Customer, Company, and the Natural World**

- 1 Patagonia is a company that is tied closely to the natural world. How do you characterize your own relationship with the environment? What memorable experiences have you had in the wild? Do you have outdoor hobbies that you pursue? How does doing them affect your life?
- 2 In what ways does Patagonia Provisions reflect a deep commitment to both the customer and the natural world? What particular environmental crisis does it address? How does it do so?
- 3 In his book, Chouinard mentions Zen philosophy, the Iroquois and their seventh-generation planning, and other ways of thinking/being that reflect balance, connectedness, and foresight. What are some other similar belief systems you can identify? How would corporate America change if it adopted these philosophical frameworks?





### **Confronting Consumerism and the Environmental Crisis**

- 1 To what extent do you consider yourself to be part of the environmental problem? Do you blindly consume, or are your own consumption practices informed by an awareness of their environmental consequences?
- 2 Patagonia established its Worn Wear program to keep clothing in use for a longer period of time and subsequently reduce waste and resource consumption. Take a look at “The Stories We Wear” blog at <http://wornwear.patagonia.com>. Read several of the stories here for inspiration. Next, look through your wardrobe and locate an older item of clothing you have successfully kept out of the landfill. Either bring in the item or a picture of it and share its story with the group. If your item of clothing is made by Patagonia, consider submitting its story here: <http://wornwear.patagonia.com/submit>.
- 3 What does the term “planned obsolescence” mean? Do you think most consumers are aware of this term? How does this phenomenon contribute to the environmental crisis? Bring in an item you own that you believe has intentional obsolescence built into it and present it to the group.

# Research Topics

These topics provide individual readers and reading groups with opportunities for extended investigation and analysis:

- 1 “For our government leaders, the environment is barely on the political agenda. Voters say they want a healthy planet to live on, but it’s not proven at election time, when it takes a backseat to all the other issues like security, healthcare, the economy, and the loss of the middle class” (p. 207).

Scrutinize the voting records and campaign contributions of your local and state legislators. Do your findings reveal that these individuals are truly supportive of the environment? How do your findings differ in terms of the affiliated political parties? Is one party more environmentally supportive than the other? Extend your analysis to other political figures at the national level (such as the President) and share your conclusions with the group.

- 2 “Since 2005 the health of our home planet has not been doing so well. The general public in the developed world is becoming increasingly aware that our planet is getting dangerously hotter through our own doing” (p. xii).





What exactly is climate change? How is it caused by human activity? How can it be combatted? Despite nearly worldwide consensus from the scientific community regarding its existence, why do some citizens and politicians continue to deny the reality of climate change and/or its connection to human activity? Do you believe that governments around the world are doing enough to address climate change? Perform research to answer these questions.

- 3 “Yet it pains me to bear witness to the sixth great extinction, where we humans are directly responsible for the complete destruction of so many wonderful creatures and invaluable indigenous cultures” (p. xiii).

What exactly is the sixth great extinction? Are humans primarily to blame for it? What are some specific species and habitats that have been wiped out? Research these questions in order to not only understand the phenomenon but to also conceive of ways to combat it. Is it too late? Is humanity ultimately capable of changing course?

- 4 Part of Patagonia’s mission is to serve as a model for other companies. What are some companies you can identify that have been influenced by Patagonia? In general, what other like-minded companies can you find? What makes these particular companies similar to Patagonia? Additionally, locate several businesses with philosophies and practices contrary to those of Patagonia. Would you say these companies are “successful”? Pay close attention to ownership, business practices, and philosophies as you research.

# Related Resources

These resources relate to *Let My People Go Surfing* and its themes and subjects.

## Further Reading

***Family Business: Innovative On-Site Child Care Since 1983***

By Malinda Chouinard and Jennifer Ridgeway

***Patagonia Tools for Grassroots Activists***

Edited by Nora Gallagher and Lisa Myers

***The Responsible Company:***

***What We've Learned From Patagonia's First 40 Years***

By Yvon Chouinard and Vincent Stanley

***The Fisherman's Son***

By Chris Malloy

***This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate***

By Naomi Klein

***Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist***

By Bill McKibben

***The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History***

By Elizabeth Kolbert

***Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash***

By Edward Humes

# Related Films

***DamNation***

<http://damnationfilm.com/>

***180° South: Conquerors of the Useless***

<http://www.180south.com/>

***Unbroken Ground***

<http://www.patagoniaprovisions.com/pages/unbroken-ground>

***Jumbo Wild***

<http://www.sweetgrass-productions.com/jumbo-wild/>

***The Fisherman's Son***

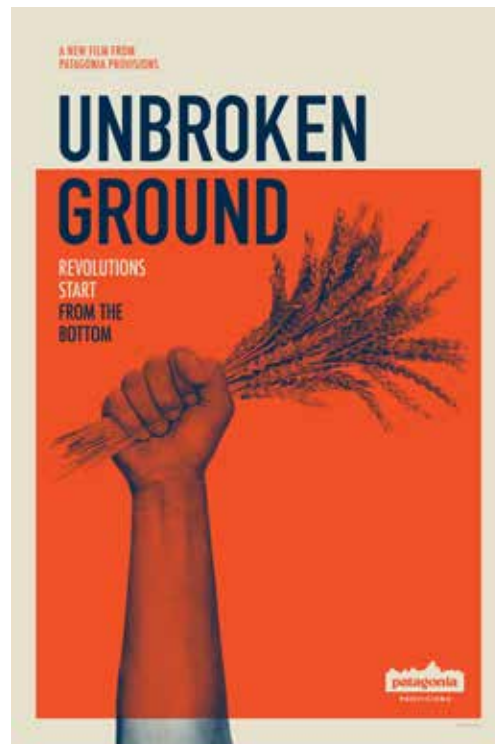
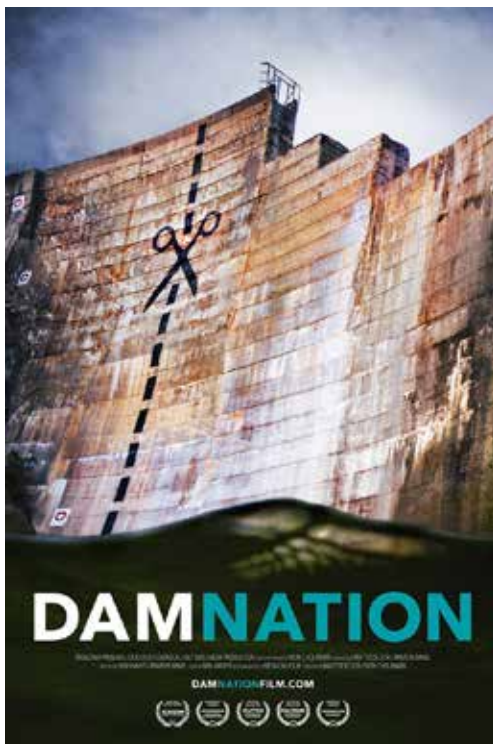
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VMMrUzOhIk>

***Worn Wear: a Film About the Stories We Wear***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z20CjCim8DM>

***The Story of Stuff***

<http://storyofstuff.org/>



# About the Author of This Guide

Chris Gilbert is a former high school English teacher and current doctoral student who lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina. He is also an avid writer. His work has appeared in *The Washington Post's* education blog, "The Answer Sheet," NCTE's (National Council of Teachers of English) *English Journal*, and he has also written a number of First Year and Common Reading Resource Guides for Penguin Random House. He is a 2013 and 2015 recipient of NCTE's Paul and Kate Farmer Writing Award.

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