

Northwestern | ONE BOOK 2021–2022

The Story of More by Hope Jahren Book Group Discussion Guide

The Story of More: How We Got to Climate Change and Where to Go from Here by geologist Hope Jahren, is Northwestern's One Book selection for the 2021-22 school year. The latest by the bestselling author of "Lab Girl," the book is an exploration of the consequences of population growth — from 3800 years ago in Mesopotamia when the population was approximately 100 million to the present day — and human habits of consumption on the planet and the actions that we all can take to fight back.

Hope Jahren is an award-winning scientist-teacher who has been pursuing independent research in paleobiology since 1996, when she completed her PhD at University of California Berkeley and began teaching and researching first at the Georgia Institute of Technology and then at Johns Hopkins University. She is the recipient of three Fulbright Awards and is one of four scientists, and the only woman, to have been awarded both of the Young Investigator Medals given within the Earth Sciences. She was a tenured professor at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu from 2008 to 2016, where she built the Isotope Geobiology Laboratories, with support from National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health. She currently holds the J.Tuzo Wilson professorship at the University of Oslo in Norway.

Discussion Questions:

1. Jahren's narrative traces how human patterns of invention, consumption, and destruction— especially in the past 50 years—have led us to our current climate crisis. However, Jahren also explores what we consume and throw away, how we power our lives, and the inequities that define what she calls the “global geography of need.” What parts of Jahren’s narrative did you find most interesting, troubling, or challenging?
2. Did you find Jahren’s narrative to align with or challenge your prior understanding of our current climate crisis? Were there any issues, events, or considerations you were surprised she did or didn’t address in the book?
3. 2021 has been marked by a number of serious climate change-related natural disasters, from forest fires to floods. What climate changes have you observed in your own environment? What changes have you observed since your childhood?
4. In her chapter, “Throwing It All Away,” Jahren notes that “twenty percent of what American families send to the landfill each day is, or recently was, perfectly edible food” (p. 77). How should we address our food waste issues? Should we change the way we eat or dispose of food? How many issues that arise along the supply chain should be addressed by consumers?

5. Jahren writes that “all of the want and suffering in the world—all of it—arises not from the earth’s inability to produce but from our inability to share” (p. 88). Accordingly, Jahren advises we embrace a new mantra: “use less and share more.” What do you see as the primary obstacles to adopting this approach yourself and encouraging others to do so as well?
6. In her criticism of both climate change deniers and alarmists, Jahren describes how “separated into two camps, we flame each other across the Internet as if the atmosphere cared what we think, as if we could shout the rising waters back up into the glaciers they came from, as if winning an argument accomplishes something in and of itself” (p. 152). What did you make of Jahren’s critique of America’s polarized response to climate change?
7. Why do you think that the US is still more dependent on nuclear energy and fossil fuels than other countries? Do you think renewable energy sources, such as wind turbines, solar panels, and hydroelectric power plants are worth investing into, despite their space constraints and relatively limited efficiency? How do you see individualism and imperialism being manifested in Jahren’s explanation of fossil fuels and renewable energy sources?
8. Jahren repeatedly implores readers to examine their own consumption habits and contributions to our climate crisis. Did you feel motivated to change any of your personal habits? If so, what parts of the book inspired you the most to reexamine your own habits?
9. Jahren lives up to her first name and maintains a sense of hope amidst our climate crisis. Where does this hope come from for her? Despite humanity’s pursuit of more rather than less, where do you find hope?
10. Have you observed any examples of organizations, companies, and/or individuals advancing effective solutions to climate change and challenging our culture of consumption? What do you think are the most effective ways organizations and companies can inspire individual consumers?