

A long time ago, in another galaxy far far away

Dear Galactic Governance Collaborative,

Those of us who colonized Planet X now find ourselves in dangerous straits. We request urgent assistance due to escalating environmental instability. You're thinking it's not easy to screw up an entire planet. You're right about that. Sadly, though, it's also not impossible. Yeah, that's what we did. Yes, we know that we'll be interstellar laughingstocks for having blundered so badly. Unfortunately, there's nothing funny about our current predicament.

As you know, when the exploration ship reached Planet X thousands of years, the planet was cold and icy, with more glaciers than we could find names for. The few colonists who landed at that time were able to eke out a living but barely established a toehold. Would you believe they had to resort to hunting huge elephant-like creatures? By the time recent waves of colonists got here, the ice age was over. There were still icepacks at the poles, with a large zone of comfortable — if sometimes bracing — weather in the mid-latitudes, and the usual warm, humid equatorial area. Really, the planet was perfectly adapted for us. Humanoids, as you know, have fussy requirements temperature-wise, so that was a real stroke of luck.

Even better, we were able to accelerate industrialization due to a quirk in the planet's geology. For some reason, large deposits of decayed, petrified plant matter accumulated in the crust as almost pure solid carbon. Other decayed plant matter liquified and was absorbed into sedimentary rocks. Living atop a graveyard of past jungles has its advantages. We took full advantage of the high energy content of these decay byproducts. We didn't even need the usual solar, wind, and fusion resources. Everything was sailing along fine. Or so we thought.

What happened next was a big surprise, at least to us. It turns out — I'll bet even most AIs don't know this — the oxidized carbon byproduct of our fuels has a nasty tendency to pile up in the atmosphere. Even more surprisingly, that changes the atmosphere's radiation profile. What with various feedback loops, the results were pretty startling. We were shocked to discover that we had destabilized the climate on Planet X.

We now face a far more hostile environment, plagued by mega-droughts, heat waves, huge floods, and vanishing glaciers. That of course destabilized the ecosystem. If the planet had been like this when we arrived, we probably would have looked elsewhere for friendlier habitats.

As it turns out, something similar happened on the home planet at the dawn of our civilization and set things back by centuries. Although some archaeologists started talking about that decades ago, they had a hard time getting anyone to listen. It seemed on the one hand ancient history and on the other hand, too far in the future to worry about. Unfortunately, “far in the future” has turned into “now” shockingly quickly. Humanoid temporal myopia strikes again!

Now, of course, we’re scrambling to create the normal zero-emissions energy system we skipped earlier. Or at least, half of us are. The other half are wedded to burning decayed plant residues as the major source of energy. The politics are almost as unstable as the climate system.

We realize that this is a mess of our own making and that we’ve only confirmed the stereotype of the bumbling, short-sighted humanoid. We’re not ashamed to admit it: We need help from more advanced species, and we need it now.

We’d consider moving, but there isn’t another habitable planet in the system. Please send help ASAP!

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours truly,

@ZØrk☒

On behalf of the inhabitants of Planet X

Dear @ZØrk☒:

Thank you for your inquiry. Your welfare is important to us. Your message has been queued and will be addressed by the next available agent. There are 1,937,473,510 messages currently in the queue. We appreciate your patience.