

## **Our Community's Environmental Responsibilities**

**By Mary Kate Grilz**

A walking trail runs along the west side of my family's yard. People and their pets love to use this trail every day. I can remember the countless times I skipped down the trampled path and watched my dogs sprint off into the distance, before quickly returning to my side. This trail has become a constant in my life. It has always been there for me when I need to clear my head, exercise or explore my thoughts. One warm, sunny day I went out to get some fresh air and right from the beginning of my walk I noticed soda cans and potato chip bags littering the soft green grass. I stopped and ran back to the house, grabbing a trash bag so I could clean up the trail as I walked. My initial bewilderment subsided as I thought about all the places where I have seen litter laying untouched, almost becoming a normal sight. That personal experience led me to look for and pick up trash everywhere I go. Many communities have also started to unite citizens in widespread trash cleanup efforts such as Adopt A Highway and neighborhood clean up days. These small concerted efforts by individuals and larger communities are a step in the right direction of acting with purpose and planning to effect positive change for the environment.

Acting to solve these many environmental issues alone is very daunting but working with others who share your passion can result in a much bigger impact, showing that communities have the responsibility to make a concerted effort towards a shared goal. We can better approach issues by changing how we act, and approaching problems with well thought out and thorough plans that benefit the environment. People sharing similar concerns should unite together as a community and work towards a common goal. Shannon Dosemagen, cofounder of the Public Laboratory for Open Technology and Science, explores how communities are forming locally and cross-nationally with the same goal of major environmental issues. Finding new ways to come together can provide many opportunities, like reaching new people and providing education for a wide variety of topics. Communities are also using social media as a

tool that can be a “pressure point to prompt and encourage support during specific campaigns.” Working with people who share similar concerns to build a greater sense of community is an effective way to solve a shared problem. On the other hand, Neil Gross, professor of sociology at Colby College, asserts that differences in living standards, education levels, and other disparities are becoming a larger barrier to forming community coalitions. People focused on their differences can face difficulty when trying to address problems of any size. The separation of smaller groups within a larger community can cause conflicts and halt progress being made towards the bigger problem at hand. Sociologist Dana R. Fisher, Director of the Program for Society and the Environment at the University of Maryland, has found that activists for climate change are “working to diversify their ranks.” However, despite these efforts, trust continues to be lacking for a “truly large-scale environmental coalition.” In communities there will always be differences and similarities, but the ability to find a balance is key to utilizing the strength of the community and the people in it. Finding balance between people is not easy to obtain without changing the way we approach each other and community efforts.

In order to enable positive change in the environment, we must alter how we act in response to environmental issues. Sean Connaughty, a local Minneapolis resident, is a strong example of taking personal action in response to an environmental problem. He wanted to mitigate the negative impact of lake pollution near his home, to ensure others can have a peaceful place to relax. In his frequent visits to lake Hiawatha, Connaughty formed a community of 60 volunteers and cleaned more than 4,500 pounds of trash from the water, while voicing his hopes to “change the way we think about water and our connection to it.” Connaughty started his actions alone, but found others who share his passion towards keeping Minnesota lakes clean. Through his efforts to preserve clean water, he demonstrates to his community the importance of taking action when a problem is identified. Another example of changing behavior in response to environmental issues can be seen in the use of social media hashtags to “link local movements to larger environmental questions.” Shannon Dosemagen pinpoints the areas where social media is affecting the environment. In her research, she identifies that when people post on social media and use hashtags and geolocations, it can quickly raise awareness to problems such as “#californiadrought.” Geolocations enable people from all over the globe to quickly support others experiencing environmental hazards firsthand. Social media has become a

very powerful tool for connecting people and allowing them to still have ways to communicate and educate others during environmental crises and even during a pandemic.

Forming an approach to a decision by scrupulously thinking and considering all differing opinions is a key aspect of taking action in a community. LaToria Whitehead, environmental justice officer at the CDC, is an example of how important it is to change our behavior in response to environmental issues. She advocates for equal environmental representation within communities. Equal representation is crucial because if only one person has the opportunity to make change, the solution that is developed will only reflect a singular perspective. In a community where all voices are heard, and people can share their firsthand experiences, the solutions developed will have the potential to reach a wider audience and may even act as a catalyst for future collaboration to mitigate additional environmental hazards and risks. Ted Nordhaus, founder of an environmental and human development research center, sheds light on the optimistic and pessimistic sides of climate debate and argues how in the real climate debate there is a universal understanding of the “relationship between human emissions of greenhouse gasses and a warming climate.” The purpose of fake climate debate is arguing for the gain of one side and the loss for the other with the desired outcome being to determine who is right, not to learn about the differing perspectives and trying to come to an agreement or compromise. Learning about others' ideas and perspectives when trying to resolve a problem is a very important aspect of coming up with a widely agreed upon solution.

When I saw the problem of trash littering the bed of soft green grass along my neighborhood walking trail, it inspired me to take the initiative to keep the trail clean for myself and others. As I walked along the trail, I realized how doing the things that made me happy while helping the environment was the best of both worlds. Communities present the opportunity to meet new people, share stories, and create memories while still combating environmental problems. Diverse communities can express the differing views within the people, and explore ways of including and developing thorough plans that benefit the environment. Taking action towards such a widespread issue can be intimidating but beginning by making an effort to have a positive impact on something personally meaningful is a great way to start.

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