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THE NEW GENERATION: EDUCATED ACTIVISTS

For the first time, the writing of an undergraduate is highlighted in an issue of *Ecospirit*. The author, Heather Holtzer, is a student at Moravian College. Her article "What Can I Do For The Earth?" was a paper prepared for a course in Religion and Ecology, offered in the Fall term, 1989.

There are two reasons why her research is appropriate for an issue of *Ecospirit*. First, Heather Holtzer's thinking reflects the congenial balance of philosophy, science, and environmental activism espoused by this journal. Second, we want to draw attention to a new generation, one that is being educated ecologically. We sometimes forget that such a generation is being formed in our rush to meet the dire need for thought and action in the present.

Heather's article made me reflect on and compare this student's thinking and experiences with my own undergraduate education. As a member of a state evaluation team, I recently revisited the first college I attended over thirty years ago. In many ways the students were receiving the same education I received. There was one dramatic difference. Present-day students are aware of the environment and their place in it in a way that was not possible when I was an undergraduate. The word "environment" was not even mentioned during my education. I heard about, and believed in, the "glories of science" -- those already achieved and those "just around the corner." Everything industry was producing as well as all it might produce in the future were unquestionably for the good of all. The ability of our planet to continue to sustain such a process never came into question. The world I was raised in was far from a happy place: the Second World War had just ceased and the Cold War was beginning. However, the world did not appear to be too complex, and seemed infinitely malleable by humans. It was an innocent worldview by today's standards, when even junior high school students discuss the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. Colleges offer courses in environmental science, students discuss animal-rights issues, and celebrate Earth Day! In the process, ecology has become a household word for many Americans, and environmental issues are finally political issues. None of this was the case thirty years ago.

Perhaps these changes provide a basis for a guarded optimism. In any case, we must constantly recognize the need to educate for the future, as well as to act in the present. I readily entrust future environmental thought and action to Heather Holtzer and to the many students like her who will soon take their places on boards, in volunteer groups, and in government where they can act as informed and responsible adults.

-- Paul Larson

WHAT CAN I DO FOR THE EARTH?

by Heather Holtzer

As we leave the 1980's for the 1990's, we are entering what some predict to be the "Ecological Age." Individuals and groups with growing concern over our Earth are taking actions to defend her. Many are left wondering, "What can I do?" While no one has all of the answers, I can give a few suggestions. Not everyone is prepared to be a "Rainbow Warrior," sailing the seas and putting their lives between evil-doers and Nature. Often, the most needed changes begin at home with our own personal lifestyles. In the words of Gandhi, "What you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it."

Before going into details for present action, some background into the environmental movement will be helpful for perspective.

Nature has had a profound impact throughout the history of the United States. Europeans left their homes to settle this amazing land of plenty. From the words of Bryant, Thoreau, and Emerson, the images of the Hudson River School of Painting, to the modern song of Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, and Paul Winter, the magnificence and vulnerability of Earth have been a source of inspiration for American art.

In the early 1900's, Conservationists and Preservationists argued over the goals of their movements. Today, television images of the Valdez oil spill and chemical accident at Bhopal, India, along with the scientists' warnings about global warming and Earth's ozone have served to focus our goals to some degree. Now, disagreement lies in how we are to achieve these goals.

Traditional, mainstream environmental organizations focusing on federal legislation have become bureaucratized. They are also "crisis-oriented", concentrating on cleaning up things rather than preventing these situations. In response, new militant groups have arisen who are centered on direct-action techniques. Although they criticize the traditional movements' conservative tactics,

they share a common goal. Also emerging are a number of local movements which focus on community and quality-of-life issues (Gottlieb, 14).

This new grassroots movement is significantly different from the traditional environmental groups because it focuses on democratic participation. "Risk" analysis should not be left to the experts, these people say, the public must be involved. "Most significantly, they have begun to demand an accounting of how people's day-to-day lives are affected by the decisions made by industries and developers, by government agencies as well as private institutions on a broad range of issues ranging from energy usage to economic dislocation and environmental destruction" (Gottlieb, 15).

Although this new grassroots movement with its strong democratic thrust plays an important role in the "new environmentalism," the traditional lobbying groups and the more action-oriented organizations both have an indispensable role to play. It is essential to maintain a balance of all types, since extremists often cause a conservative backlash. As Wattenberg warns in a highly negative article about environmentalists, "Environmental exaggeration makes an easy political target. Liberals, remember and beware: Excesses by various cause groups helped elect Ronald Reagan" (Wattenberg 32).

Many of our present environmental problems stem from the development of the modern consumer society. We have been exploiting our natural resources at an incredible rate for the production of consumer goods. In the U.S. alone, 250 million tons of hazardous waste are produced yearly simply in the manufacturing of our consumer goods (Jordan, 4). This is something few of us consider as we walk through supermarkets and shopping malls stacked with products for our consumption.

We are living in a "disposable" society. Our lives are supposedly made more convenient by this proliferation of

disposable items: pens, razors, lighters, diapers, cameras, cooking pans, etc. Walking down any supermarket aisle one can find a wide array of single-use, single-serving products. Each of these is enclosed in colorful, plastic, advertising-gimmick packaging. When was the last time we could buy a single apple or a pair of nails without any wrapper? We are facing a solid-waste crisis as our landfills are closing. Yet, the amount of packaging seems to keep increasing.

Recently, claims of degradable or photodegradable plastics have been made. Archer Daniels Midland Company has announced a cornstarch additive to replace six percent of the plastic in trash bags, allowing it to break down after sunlight triggers a chemical reaction. Mobil is pushing its photodegradable grocery bags which also break down in sunlight (Sherrid, 52). These can still cause trouble, however, when their chemicals leach into the groundwater. According to J. Winston Porter of the Environmental Protection Agency, there is little information about what these plastics degrade into and the heavy metals used for coloring are a serious concern (Sherrid, 52). In addition, it must be kept in mind that landfilled material is rarely exposed to sunlight for very long, and examinations of material landfilled for 20 years have revealed recognizable foodstuffs and newspapers with no sign of aging.

Where are we going to put all of our garbage? Several proposals have been made for dealing with our trash. Although incinerators went out of popularity decades ago, they are back again, now hailed as trash-to-steam plants or "Resource Recovery Facilities." On the surface, this seems like a good idea to many: "just burn it--it will go away." Unfortunately, there are many issues that must be considered. First, for every three tons of trash burned, one ton of ash is left to be landfilled. This bottom ash tests toxic thirty-eight percent of the time. Secondly, there is the problem of dangerous gases and fly ash being

released into the atmosphere. Fly ash tests toxic one-hundred percent of the time (Connett). Ninety-nine percent of fly ash can be contained if the plant is burning at proper temperatures, if trash is properly sorted, and if very expensive, high-technology scrubbers are installed in the release stack. These are rather large "if's." As the past track record shows, incinerators are frequently mismanaged. Often there are shortages of trash, or inappropriate objects such as batteries are not being removed, or the scrubbers are so expensive that they are rarely used in municipal incinerators. A third problem with incinerators is that they serve as a disincentive to recycling; the combustible materials most sought after for burning are also the best for recycling.

Though incinerators may generate some electricity, poor management and maintenance as well as trash shortages result in frequent shutdowns. This lack of reliability excludes their use as a primary source of energy.

Overall, incineration is simply "bad news." Plants are extremely expensive, create few new jobs, and convert our natural resources into a state in which they cannot be "recovered."

A much more sensible way of dealing with trash is an integrated plan of source reduction, composting, and recycling. Such a plan is much cheaper, less labor-intensive, more cost effective and environmentally-sound.

Source reduction generally involves both the reuse of available goods and a reduction in the rate of creating new ones. Supermarket bags are an example. A simple paper bag can be reused many times and in many ways. People can bring one along to the supermarket rather than get a new one. Bags can also be used for anything from storage to bookcovers to a floor covering when painting.

Composting is a means by which food and lawn wastes are piled and allowed to degrade naturally. The remaining material

is then used as a fertilizer. This can be done on many levels. Many people have compost heaps in their backyards for use on their own gardens. Organic farmers, who do not use chemicals, often accept materials and sometimes pay for them. Recently, some towns have developed community composting for use by all residents.

Recycling, in its wider meaning, includes composting and re-use. Anytime something is used constructively rather than simply discarded, it is being recycled. In a narrow sense, recycling means the recovery of specific materials to be reused in manufacturing new products. There are four steps to recycling: sorting material by type, collection, reclamation (recovery of materials into usable form), and end-use (Council, 3). Aluminum cans and newspapers have been the leading materials for recycling. Often non-profit groups will collect these materials and sell them to recycling centers as a means of fundraising. Glass is also frequently recycled, although it must be sorted by color.

Major advances are being made in the field of plastics recycling, according to the plastics industry. "Because traditional recycling methods have been unable to guarantee that recycled resins are as pure as 'virgin' resins, the plastics industry does not yet make recycled plastics into packaging products that come in direct contact with food. This has fostered the myth that plastics are not recyclable, a belief widely held in spite of current levels of plastics recycling" (Council, 3). Regardless of environmental or ideological concerns, plastics recycling seems to have a secure future since it has continued to stay below the cost of virgin resins (Council, 4). Despite the good news on plastics recycling, one must keep in mind that plastics are not biodegradable and will not "disappear" if landfilled.

While not often considered, durable goods also pose a disposal problem. A community-based recycling center could

include shop for durable goods. Such goods could then be resold to help pay for the center (Connett).

In addition to problems with normal household products, there is a major concern about cleaning supplies, paint, and other chemicals in the home. "The household products on supermarket shelves contain more than 55,000 chemicals. Little testing has been done to assess their toxicity alone or in combination" (Jordan, 4). For years we have been taught that our homes must smell like these chemicals in order to be clean, and have given little thought to the affects on us or our environment. These chemicals are hazardous. They become toxic problems when poured down the sink, dumped in the street or on the lawn, and when thrown away with regular trash. The Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes and other community groups often run programs in towns to collect such products and dispose of them properly.

As an alternative to dangerous chemicals, many people are going back to "Grandma's ways," using baking soda, vinegar, and borax to do their cleaning. These products are environmentally-sensible and much cheaper than store-bought cleaners. Also, there are many new companies, such as Shaklee Products, that sell specially formulated and environmentally safe cleaners, often through mail-order catalogs.

I spent this summer canvassing with Clean Water Action and went door-to-door, speaking to people about environmental issues. Many people voiced their concerns about companies and their products, but then sighed defeatedly, "Well, there is nothing we can do about it," or "You can't fight big business." That is nonsense! People have amazing power when they stand up for their beliefs.

One example is the campaign to eliminate the damage to wetlands and waterways caused by phosphates found in detergents. For years citizen and environmental groups had been lobbying for

the phosphate ban that passed this summer. Many of the companies involved had already stopped using phosphate because a consumer boycott had affected their profits.

Another great example has been "McBoycott." McDonald's is one of the world's largest users of polystyrene, which is non-biodegradable. Consumers began sending their used styrofoam containers back to the President of the company with a letter explaining that they would no longer eat there. In some parts of the country, McDonald's is already using cardboard containers.

Although we have a long way to go, the message is clear: when consumers refuse to spend their money, they can have a profound impact. According to Wendy Benchley, founding member of The Princeton Area Committee,

"If only 5 or 10 percent of the market changes, the margin (of profit for consumer goods) is so small that manufacturers will scramble to change in response. So it is not a useless exercise to ask consumers to change their buying habits. It is a very powerful force for change" (Jordan, 4).

While the connection to the environment is obvious with "McBoycott" and the phosphates, others are less clear. Over the past few years, public concern about the tropical rainforests has grown. Much of this land is being converted into cattle ranching in response to the growing U.S. demand for cheap beef. "One of the most important steps toward preserving the region's tropical rainforests is to educate the American public about the social and ecological consequences of their eating habits" (Nations, 19).

As a "conscientious consumer," it is important to investigate the overall environmental records of companies. Whether or not there is any formal boycott, one can

avoid patronizing companies with poor records, so as not to contribute to their wrong-doing. The Council on Economic Priorities publishes annually a convenient guide, "Shopping for a Better World." It has a simple rating system for each company regarding the environment as well as women's and minorities' advancement, animal testing, military contracts and more. One can also write to companies and inform them why you are boycotting, or why you are supporting them.

One of the most vital activities of environmental groups is election work. First of all, if people do not vote, democracy does not work. Citizen and environmental organizations can usually supply the records of candidates and sometimes make endorsements. Outside of election work there are plenty of ways that one can have political impact. Stay informed, write your legislators and attend public meetings. Environmental groups often sponsor rallies and letter-writing campaigns. Some important tips for letter writing include the following. Form letters are usually thrown out, so take the time to write a personal note in your own words and on your own stationery; keep letters short and to the point; and back yourself up with facts and references when possible.

One of the most important steps anyone can take is to become informed. Read articles with opposing views in order to understand both sides. Attend meetings and lectures on relevant issues. Encourage friends and relatives to join you. There is strength in numbers, and it is empowering to know you are not alone.

After becoming aware of problems and solutions, become active! A popular phrase heard at the Clean Water Action office is, "If you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem!" If people allow the exploitation of and disregard for the Earth to continue without doing anything, they are contributing as much as those directly responsible.

There are many problems today. But

don't let that fact overwhelm you. Every little bit counts. Taking the first step may seem difficult, but action itself is empowering; the confidence and self-satisfaction gained makes the next step easier.

To save our Earth from the destruction which now threatens her, we must engage in a basic rethinking of our priorities and our relationship to the Earth, as well as restructure our lifestyles and institutions. This cannot happen overnight. Meanwhile, we must all do what we can.

I would like to conclude with a quote from James Lovelock's book on Gaia (all of the interactive, interdependent systems that make up our Earth): "There can be no prescription, no set of rules, for living within Gaia. For each of our different actions there are only consequences" (Lovelock, 140).

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Word for the End of a Pond

Now it is over.

Bulldozer and backhoe have gone back
across timothy and alfalfa.
Your sons walk over the soft earth
to the marshy circle a foot across
and think of fish.

It is not mentioned at supper
nor later in the wooden chairs on the porch
how starlight no longer shatters
on the wings of dragonflies,
how the deer have wandered away.

Nor do you say ever
how as you slept there came a slow schooling
of eyes and dark backs near the bed,
and a wet wind dimpling the shallow sheets
and a popping of small mouths near the
window.

Even the prayers you remembered
did not help, nor thinking of the buoyant
breasts
of women, nor the narrow road curving into
the hills.

Only the rustling of weeds
and something standing in moonlight.

Think how for years and years
as you walk through town or drink with
friends
you will remember that night
swirling near the eye's dry corner
or in the bead along the side of the glass,
the way it all froze and thawed and froze
and spread out like a season
behind the muskrat's head.

How you will never forget the heron's cry
above the woman who once walked toward you
shining and naked from the pond.

-- Harry Humes

At the Shad Festival

My father never fished for shad,
but each Good Friday he would leave at noon
and return at dusk with daffodils
for my mother, and stories about men
with nets beneath a river bridge,
and the way his friend boned the shad,
and later the peppery taste of watercress
fresh from the stream behind a springhouse
miles and miles from our house
in the valley of coal mines.

And so I think of him
this half-sunny afternoon
while we wait in line for our paper plates
with their white and brown flesh,
baked potatoes, and mint tea,
of how he's been gone these twenty years
and that it's taken me that long
to understand his solitary trips
to his friend's house to eat shad
and talk of the surge of that great fish
up the channels and pools of the Delaware,
the females circling the gravel bottom.

I think of the way he would walk to his
garden
to bury the bones he would carry home,
how he would pat the earth down
between pepper and tomato plants.
And then on Holy Saturday
gather us to his idleness
and take us uptown to the firehouse,
and one by one sit us in the driver's seat
of that great red truck, each of us higher
than we would ever be again.
How for a day his white hands
miraculously circled us, planted in us
a direction we would think half our lives
was none but our own.

-- Harry Humes

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