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Student Perspective: Margaret Chase Smith Library 2011 Essay Contest:

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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2011 Essay Contest

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for Maine high school seniors. The focus of the 2011 contest was environmental protection. The essay prompt quoted a 1972 statement from Sen. Smith: "We must recognize that we're not going to eliminate pollution overnight. It's going to be a hard, long fight. It's going to take a long time and a lot of sacrifice on the part of each one of us." By happy coincidence, the essay contest topic fits perfectly with the subject matter of this special issue of Maine Policy Review on sustainability. We feature here the three 2011 prize-winning essays, which draw upon contemporary and historical examples along with the personal experiences and opinions of these talented young people.

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

Change From Within

By Zoe Anderson

Earth is a magnificent planet, harboring beautiful life forms as it drifts peacefully through the cosmos. From the beginning, it has endured the births and expirations of numerous species; they come wave after wave, leaving little trace behind. Creatures called humans evolve; we are emotional, intelligent, and complex. Our rapid progression, however, is what makes us dangerous. When my father was in first grade, the earth's population was 3.9 billion. Now, 40 years later, there are about seven billion people. As this number continues to rise, our planet's health plummets into the darkness of endangered animals, disappearing rain forests, pollution, and other environmental holocausts. Interestingly, "human" comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning "dirt," yet we are slowly destroying the foundation of human existence. While it is impossible to prevent human side effects altogether, we can lessen our impact through government regulations, technology, and changing the frameworks of businesses and households; however, unless each individual understands his or her role in the environment, it will be difficult for us, as a species, to make a difference.

Throughout the last 40 years, the U.S. government has supported several proposals regarding pollution, natural resources, energy, and other serious issues. For example, the Clean Air Act (1970) was closely followed by the Clean Water

Act (1972). In 2005 the Energy Policy Act was enacted, which encouraged efficient and clean energy production. Powerful interest groups, including the Environmental Law Institute, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Natural Resources Defense Council, have also been created and are actively protesting and submitting new ideas to the government. There is, however, an ongoing list of unsolved problems remaining that demand the government's control. For example, potent pesticides continue to negatively affect the environment, poisoning the water, soil, and consumers themselves. These impacts can be lessened using the basic, but more time-consuming alternatives of crop rotation and diversified planting along with low-toxicity pesticides (Waters n.d.). Although these techniques have been proved successful, they are not widely practiced among the agricultural industries. The government, however, could encourage change by paying farms to host free organic agricultural programs and having pesticide manufacturers dilute the chemicals or use natural ingredients. Studies show that many wild plants produce chemicals that can alter insect metabolism and can be used to decrease commercial crop damage (Chiras 2010). Many of these pressing problems could be at least partially solved if the government gave the producers enough incentive to support environmental protection.

In addition to needing an increase in government intervention, the environment would benefit from a finer remodeling of the economy's supply and demand. Store items labeled "organic" are scattered throughout the market, but an even larger array of green alternatives is necessary for there to be any significant improvements. For instance, if more reusable products, such as cloth grocery bags and metal water bottles, replaced their wasteful counterparts,

there would be less waste. We are a part of an ecosystem that reuses everything in an endless replenishing cycle; Ecological Earth, a green business, states on its web site that “mankind’s modern, plastic-cup way of life is simply not sustainable. The resource-depleting, disposable, one-way approach to living and doing business can only go on for so long. Planet Earth—our life-support system—can only take so much.”

The ecocentric market, however, is growing; renewable energy is no longer rare; and purchasing green products is on the verge of becoming a fad. What is there to worry about? Although more and more “environmentally friendly” opportunities are becoming available, the reasons to participate in this green movement are often undervalued. Why invest in an expensive wind turbine when you can simply tap into the power lines that pass through your property? If we, as consumers, are not fully aware of our impact on the natural world, it may be difficult for us to realize the benefit behind these lifestyle changes. Even if we understand the significance of our actions, without deep emotional connections how can we be fully engaged? Rachel Carson once pointed out that “if facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.”¹ We have to be willing to get our hands dirty.

Furthermore, most of America’s attention is fixed on improving the economy as a whole when realistically we may be better off channeling our energy into each household. Ironically, the word “economy” is derived from the Greek word *oikonomia*, meaning “household management;” for there to be any significant remodeling in the economy, people must be prepared to change their perspectives and their core way of life. How can we persuade humans to reunite with the

Earth? How can we show them that this gentle orb of vitality needs their help? There are several ways, but the most powerful methods lie in hands of the media and the younger generations. Cogent documentaries, such as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, along with numerous advertisements advocating green consumerism, have enlightened the public. Many economists believe that the media was the spark that ignited this movement. Children are also being used as promotional tools through community and national leadership such as the Environmental Kids Club (EPA). After witnessing the young network of determinism others are more likely to participate. In short, once people realize that improving the environment is an important goal, they will be empowered to self-reflect and change their lifestyles as my family did three years ago.

Reflecting on Hermann Hesse’s statement that “the truth is lived, not taught,” my family and I sacrificed the comforts of Rhode Island suburban life to begin a self-sustainable farm in Washington, Maine. We garden, preserve food, raise chickens, and hope to purchase a small herd of milking goats in the future. This year, my father researched and began a hydropower project in a stream running through the land. Unfortunately, settling into a small solar house and returning to the land is not on everyone’s agenda, but each household is capable of small steps, such as taking shorter showers, recycling, cleaning with natural products, and using less electricity.

We can no longer hide the fact that we are altering the very fabric of our planet’s ecosystem; neither can we deny our knowledge and potential to improve our dwindling relationship with Mother Earth. Rather than being present in each individual, however, the motivation to change is concentrated in pockets of

environmental activists and other organizations; the majority of society seems to be myopic or lacks the incentives to change its way of life; some do not recognize the beauty and fragility of this life-supporting planet. Carson also wrote that “the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.” By realizing the delicate networks that make up our planet and the impact of each individual, people would be more willing to change their lifestyles to favor our planet’s future. 🌿

ENDNOTES

1. Quotes by Rachel Carson come from the Rachel Carson National Refuge’s web site: From the Writings of Rachel Carson: www.fws.gov/northeast/rachelcarson/writings.html [Accessed March 29, 2012]

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moved from Connecticut to a small organic farm in Washington, Maine, where she was home-schooled until

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SECOND PLACE ESSAY

The Little Things in Life

By Ali Clift

Whether you prefer to call it “global warming” or “climate change,” the earth’s conditions are changing rapidly. After wearing blinders during the 20th century, humanity has finally begun responding to the biosphere’s plight. However, instead of being a continual, gradual process, our attempts at fixing or changing our habits have been sporadic and brief, simply a green, ecofriendly vogue. One year it’s reusable bags, the next year, reusable water bottles; as gas prices rise another year, the trend shifts to small fuel-efficient/hybrid cars, public transportation, and riding bikes. But once the good-deed feelings wear off and gas prices fall, we forget the reusable bags in the car or at home, buy water from vending machines because it’s more convenient, or switch back to our larger cars. We are looking for one giant solution that will smoothly be incorporated into our lives without our notice or effort. In reality, it is the small, day-to-day changes in habit that we must decide to make for our home in the universe to be around for the next day, week, year, millennium. Conservation through moderation is the friendliest method for the environment and the easiest to incorporate into society.

We can begin by taking baby steps, realizing where we can easily make changes in our daily lives. Once new, simple habits are formed, they become second nature,

and new habits can be tackled. An easy starting point is gradually working on reducing our trash and increasing the amount we recycle, reuse, compost, trade, donate, and simply eliminate from our lives. Items no longer needed can be donated or traded for something of more value and use. My friend lives minimally, choosing to own a few clothes, bed, small bookcase, iPod, phone, and guitar, only possessing necessities and a handful of pleasures. He always knows exactly what and where everything is in his room, and there are few things in his room that he doesn’t use regularly. My house, along with my grandparents’, on the other hand, is packed with *stuff*. Stuff that is valuable, stuff that may be valuable depending on the market, stuff with sentimental value, stuff that isn’t valuable at all, and it is all mixed together, impossible to discern any value at first. To find something, you are given at least three possible general locations, and must dig through piles of papers, objects, things that are used, things that aren’t used, and *just things*.

We, as a society, are told that to be happy, we must have *things* and the more *things* we have, the happier we will become. If the *things* are shiny and new, we will be happy; if they are old and dull, we will be sad and lonely. As Best Buy’s new “Buy Back Program” commercials of “You buy it now, we buy it back when the new thing comes out!” illustrate our obsession to have the newest, coolest technology and attempts to hide and excuse our erroneous wasteful habits. We are forced to throw our perfectly fine electronics away after two years because the parts used to make them are already obsolete and out of date, made smaller, a different shape, out of a new incompatible material, or faster than our “ancient” device can handle. To reduce the effect we have on the environment, we must begin

to remove our shackles of *things*.

Along with reducing our need for *things*, we also need to slowly reduce our chemical effect on the environment. According to the movie *FLOW: For the Love Of Water*, unnatural chemicals used in medicine, cleaning supplies, industry, and agriculture can rarely be broken down into natural or safe states, so they have nowhere else to go except into the environment, into our water supply, and into the food web. Birth defects numbers in Mexico increase near agricultural areas while fertility rates in Europe decline in areas where heavy pesticides are used. By using natural and biodegradable chemicals, such as baking soda, the compounds and mixtures would decompose into harmless substances, leaving no trace in our water or our bodies. Filtering systems in U.S. homes that provide our tap water are better at providing safe and healthy water because “the U.S. government does not require that bottled water be tested for [unnatural] chemicals” (Beavan 2009: 196). Buying a water filter and reusing a metal bottle does less harm to the environment and your health than buying bottled water, produced in a bottling plant where materials and energy are wasted making the container and other packaging, filling it water, and then delivering it to your home, grocery store, business, or vending machine. Already, countries such as Bolivia, India, and South Africa and the state of Arizona have to import clean water or have private plants come in to “clean” the water for them to use because they have run out of a basic resource and right (Beavan 2009). The state of New Mexico only has ten years of drinking water left and the EPA “estimates that in the next five years, if water use continues unchecked, 36 American states will suffer water shortages” (Beavan 2009: 194). Water is our

most valuable resource; without clean water, all forms of life will suffer.

Along with helping to solve both the obesity and traffic problems, alternative transportation helps reduce both our carbon footprint and our consumption of fossil fuels. By walking, running, biking places, not only will we be exercising, but we will also be avoiding most of the traffic and not producing carbon except from breathing, the same amount we would have produced sitting in a car. Even public transportation or carpooling would be better than riding alone as it would reduce carbon emissions. In New York's Transportation Alternatives 7th annual commuter challenge, a cyclist, driver, and bus/subway rider completed a five-mile course to compare time and carbon footprint. Biking was the fastest mode of transportation at 16 minutes and had zero carbon footprint; the bus/subway rider produced one pound of carbon dioxide, but took 29 minutes to travel the five miles; and the driver took 22 minutes but produced six pounds of carbon dioxide: (www.streetfilms.org/bike-vs-car-vs-transit/). Even though weather plays a major factor in deterrence, people in major cities like New York or in rural area like Standish, Maine, would be much more willing to commute via walking or biking if the weather was pleasant and the roads had sidewalks, trails, or wide breakdown shoulders to be safe from vehicles (Beavan 2009). Many cities in Europe have roads solely dedicated to bikes and foot traffic. In more densely populated areas, public transportation should also be made available to help move large amounts of people around the city. Spending less time driving our own car and more time carpooling, taking public transportation, and exercising will help improve our lives on multiple levels: less money shelled out for gas, no need for a

gym membership, and more time to ponder, visit, and enjoy the outdoors.

Another good habit is supporting local sustainable farmers and local businesses that are more aware of their products and resources they use. According to the "What Is Local" page of the Sustainable Table web site, local farms tend to "reinvest more money into local economies by purchasing feed, seed, and other materials from local businesses." Using local produce means fresher food, less genetic modification and pesticides, less energy spent transporting, and less packaging (Beavan 2009). Along with buying locally, some crops, like herbs, lettuce, carrots, and tomatoes, we can easily grow on our own, in pots on window sills or steps instead of which would greatly reduce the environmental and monetary costs associated with transportation. Although availability of the locally grown produce is dependent on the seasons, they can still be consumed in the off seasons if pickled, preserved, or frozen. My family seasonally picks large quantities of strawberries, blueberries, apples, beans, tomatoes, and many other fruits and vegetables from local farms and then freezes or cans them to be enjoyed out of season. Not only do these frozen and packaged foods still taste better than the "fresh" produce found off season in stores, but less carbon dioxide was produced transporting them and the local economy was supported. Sustainable farming practices have been shown to increase food production while also benefiting your wallet, health, local economy, and environment.

People imitate role models and people they trust and respect. One person on his or her own won't end our crisis, but by living her or his live differently while others look on, these habits may spread to others. Slowly, environmentally

friendly habits will be incorporated and passed on, becoming a true part of society. Then the little things will become big things, quietly and continually returning the environment to a healthier state where we can rest a little easier about the fate of tomorrow. 🌿

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THIRD PLACE ESSAY

There Is No Excuse

by Allaina Murphy

The planet is in trouble! It has become routine to hear of the litany of problems affecting the environment—pollution, acid rain, climate change, the destruction of rainforests and other wild habitats, and the decline and extinction of thousands of species of animals and plants. People are moving from rural to urban areas, roads are widening, and there has been an increase in the construction of buildings and the operation of vehicles. Humans have caused the threats posed to the environment and now it is time to take responsibility and fix the consequences of such actions. It is not plausible to wait, nor is it feasible for bureaucrats to afford to fund large, expensive conservation projects. Problem solving cannot be left entirely to the governmental experts; it is the responsibility of the population as a whole to protect the environment.

A Native American proverb states, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.” People must learn to live in a sustainable way; they must learn to value and protect their natural resources including, air, freshwater, forests, wildlife, farmland, and seas without damaging them. Each person, regardless of age or social and economical standing, can take action to help slow down and reverse some of the damage to the planet. This has become necessary to ensure a world

for future peoples. A simple and inexpensive action is recycling.

A lot of rubbish is created by the human race. Between 1992 and 2008 household waste increased by 16 percent and now approximately a half a ton per person is produced each year. Most waste is buried in landfills or burned in incinerators. Both of these actions are dangerous for the environment. Much of what is thrown away can be used again; it certainly does make sense to re-use and recycle. Rates of recycling have increased to the point of recycling 35 percent of household rubbish.¹ However, this number could be even higher. Most of the waste is made up of glass, metal, plastic, and paper. Natural resources such as trees, oil, coal, and aluminum are employed to make everyday products and resources will one day be completely used up. Cutting down on energy consumption has become necessary. People should incur additional costs of waste disposal if they refuse to recycle. In this economy, no one wants to increase their expenses, therefore, this fee would undoubtedly improve recycling compliance.

Organic material such as potato peelings, leftover food, and tea leaves can be transferred straight to a compost heap in the garden and used as a natural fertilizer. Composting can be easily accomplished for those who live in rural areas, but can be a challenge for those in urban areas. A compost bin should be created for urban areas similar to bottle redemption centers. Incentives would need to be developed to entice the public to participate. Ideas could be tax credits for those who drop their organic matter at a depository or give the waste to the farmers who will reuse the material in their own gardens. Tax credits would incentivize participation and not be an out-of-pocket expense for either party.

Plastic products are difficult for the environment to break down, and have become difficult to recycle. Every possible attempt to avoid using plastic should be made. Just as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves drug use, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should approve the sale of products that are in the best interest of the environment. They should restrict the manufacturing of plastic disposable products. The use of disposable plastic bags at grocery and department stores should be prohibited. Advertising the impact of reusable bags to the consumer, including waste-disposal costs as well as the purchase of plastic and paper bags should be publicized. Unless people know how it directly affects them, in terms of dollars and cents, then they are less likely to participate. A marketing campaign to educate consumers that the use of reusable bags directly reduces their costs would encourage participation. The EPA should also set limits on the amount of paper and plastic that is used in packaging.

The manufacturing of paper requires the use of bleach and other chemicals, which eventually end up polluting rivers and streams. Using recycled paper saves trees, energy, water, and landfill space, thereby protecting the forests, watersheds, and ecosystems. Paper can be recycled repeatedly, providing environmental savings many times over. The practice of recycling creates strong markets for local community-recycling-collection systems, thereby improving local job markets. Schools should require the use of recycled paper for all work. The cost of recycled paper is comparative to virgin paper so additional costs will not be incurred and a habit will be created so that as students become active citizens, using recycled paper would be the norm. This also creates jobs for local economies and does

not add additional expenses; it merely involves a change in behavior.

Recycling clothes, shoes, belts, handbags, and stuffed animals not only provides the poor, both at home and abroad, with much needed clothing, it also helps to protect the environment. Volumes of discarded clothing and accessories end up in America's landfills; these items can take hundreds of years to decompose. Landfills are only part of the problem. When clothing isn't recycled, more has to be produced, which means more pollution of the air and water. The manufacturing of cotton destroys farmland and pollutes waterways by the use of pesticides. The production of just one cotton t-shirt requires one-third of a pound of pesticides, which enters the ground water and streams and affects birds, bees, animals, the farm workers, and eventually all humans.² Recycling clothes conserves raw materials and natural resources. Synthetic polyesters and nylon are made from petrochemicals, a byproduct of oil refining, which increases the need and reliance on oil and increases harmful pollution. By reusing these items, less has to be extracted, refined, transported, and processed. Energy needed in the manufacturing of new products is also conserved. Less energy used means less needs to be generated, resulting in smaller carbon footprints and less greenhouse gases and emissions. Taking old clothes to the local Good Will, a form of recycling, is a win-win for everyone and a nice way to help those less fortunate.

One must analyze the impact of implementing a strong recycling program on the manufacturing of new products as there naturally would be a change in the demand for new items. However, some of the loss experienced could be absorbed with increased production of recycled goods, and increased local jobs related to

the recycling process. The government should take action and protect the environment just as they do endangered species by imposing restrictions on the production of products that negatively affect the atmosphere. Tax incentives currently reserved for big businesses should be pared down and a portion of them used to entice participation in the various recycling programs previously outlined. Recycling of food and manmade products takes time and can be arduous, but actually requires little out of pocket expense. People just have to be educated on what is the benefit to them. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. once said, "We could have saved the Earth but we were too damned cheap."³ It now seems as if a recycling and preventative program would be affordable. Is there still any excuse? 🐼

ENDNOTES

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