

Perspectives

Start small when beginning environmental activism

An environmental viewpoint



Summer Starling
Environmental Columnist

Often times, students feel as if the war on the environment is something they are powerless to halt. An individual student's ability to completely eliminate environmental degradation is, in fact, a fruitless battle.

But there is a multitude of ways in which individuals can reduce the negative impact on our planet, the simplest of which require only a few extra seconds and some forethought, while more detailed ways call for rigorous lifestyle adjustments.

If students choose to adopt either of these or anything from the rainbow in between, largely significant changes may come.

Each choice that students make regarding consumption and disposal affect three central issues of the environmental threat: energy, waste, and global integrity (defined as matters surrounding world human rights, economic justice, labor practices, etc.).

Students have the power to immediately reduce stress imposed on the planet, whether on an occasional or dedicatory scale.

Beginning with habits of reduction that require no money and very little extra time, such actions are made possible just by utilizing the facilities already available on campus.

Regarding waste, it is helpful to know that the majority of waste students are accountable for is generated from our eating habits. Becoming conscious of how much

food we leave on our plates can lessen our impact immediately.

Only using styrofoam cups for coffee and ice cream in the cafeteria to go, and walking the extra three feet to get a mug or bowl when planning to eat inside would make an enormous dent in UNCA's waste collective.

If you see a piece of litter in need of a proper home, pick it up. Choose to walk to the end of the hall to sort and recycle all of your trash.

Save your printouts with blank backs and reprint new assignments in these spaces. Likewise, write on the backs of notebooks' pages and save entire notebooks worth of paper waste.

To begin conserving energy, opt to walk, ride a bike or catch the city bus to run errands downtown. Not only does this lessen the impact of a vehicle on the road and in the city, but choosing to walk or ride promotes further funding and legislation for alternative transportation.

Also, make a habit of conserving electric energy by turning off lights and appliances whenever leaving home.

Concerning global integrity, the simplest thing to begin doing is to

support local businesses as opposed to Wal-Mart and other huge chain corporations. Consumers in Asheville are blessed with a plethora of smaller, more centralized businesses from which to purchase food, clothes, school and cleaning supplies, and anything else in high demand among students.

Moving to actions that heighten environmental impact reductions calls for more investments in both time and money. Each person's waste production can plummet in this area through the use of reusable containers.

Low on initial cost, purchasing sturdier cloth bags for grocery and other shopping, washable containers for meals, and, one of the best items, a long-lasting drink bottle, will eliminate almost all container waste.

Also, choosing snack foods with no packaging, like fruit or sandwiches, lessens waste. Although not all food vendors will accept containers, many smaller places will, including Café Ramsey for smoothies.

Reducing waste also equates to investing more money into common products for more sustainable ingredients or packaging. As

students, our use of paper throughout campus has huge effects not only the environment, but on the paper industry also. Post-consumer paper, envelopes and notebooks sold at the bookstore and elsewhere help minimize this impact.

This connects to global responsibility also. In choosing products that promote a healthy cooperation of all of the Earth's inhabitants, such as animal-testing free products, the demand for sustainable products will increase. Several companies have chosen to create a healthier line of sales by eliminating animal testing. Some of these companies include Revlon, Avon, Estee Lauder, Mary Kay and Gillette.

Energy reductions initiatives include organizing carpools, purchasing bus passes for regular use and investing in CFLs (Compact Fluorescent Fixtures). These slightly more expensive fixtures reduce the amount of electricity used without compromising comfortable lighting.

Finally, for those among us who would like to make consequential adjustments in their daily routines and ways of living, the challenges are greater. Actions necessary to

soften a lifestyle's environmental costs require rigorous questioning and researching.

Clothing companies such as the Gap, Banana Republic and Old Navy are responsible for harmful deforestation. Many large corporate retailers such as Wal-Mart are being investigated for the alleged violation of many international labor laws. These realities make environmental consumer choices urgent and far-reaching.

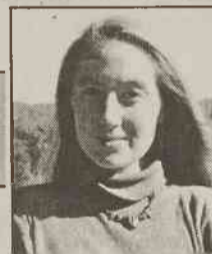
Choosing to take the steps of environmental consciousness, beginning with the simplest actions and working toward a more environmentally responsible existence gradually elevates thinking to a truly alert mind frame.

With each of these proposed actions, the more enthusiastic efforts directly correlate with stronger environmental responsibility, and thus, with more pronounced sustainability.

These issues have varying priorities with different students, but with every student, giving minimum effort, our environmental harmfulness as a student body would take a lovely dive. This is not an inflated, idealistic statement—this could be our reality.

Anti-sweatshop movement at universities

An environmental viewpoint



Candice Carr
Environmental Columnist

The clothes you are wearing were probably at least partially made in a sweatshop, perhaps many sweatshops. Low tariffs, thanks to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that the World Trade Organization was created to enforce, make it very cheap to ship goods, especially raw materials, over borders.

This means that a shirt could start as cotton grown in India by an American company, then be sent to Indonesia to be spun into thread, then to El Salvador to be woven into cloth and then to Mexico to be cut and sewn before getting sold in America for less than ten bucks. How could it be cheaper to do it that way?

Criminally low wages, physical abuse, forced labor and almost non-existent tariffs make it easier for rich corporations to make a buck anywhere in the world. At the same time, the structural adjustment policies enforced by the International Monetary Fund keep poor countries in an economic position to accept these conditions, often favoring brutal dictatorships. It's slavery.

So, sweatshops exist. What can we do about it? Several years ago, the United Students Against Sweatshops began their campaign to get sweatshop-made apparel out of

university stores. The campaign caught on like wildfire, and last year, hundreds of schools took steps to try to eliminate sweatshop-made clothing from their stores. Unfortunately, it is a very tangled situation.

First of all, there is the human rights issue. According to the National Labor Committee, workers in Burma work for 4 cents an hour, often in chains. If we are trying to help the workers, do we want them to lose their jobs? No. That might have been the best job available for them.

The idea here is corporate accountability. Wouldn't that be nice? The way that this can best be done is by mandatory factory disclosure, which is the listing of the names and addresses of all factories that a company buys from or owns, which would allow human and labor rights advocates to do drop-in inspections.

There is a group that pretends to be a watchdog group called the Fair Labor Association. The FLA was started with good intentions, but human rights and labor rights groups dropped out when the corporations began to build loopholes into the policies of the organization. You can find their affiliates and charter online at www.fairlabor.org. Good luck staying awake.

The way that they "ensure" that there is no sweatshop labor in their factories is as follows. They have inspectors who are on the company payroll go look at these factories. The factories are given prior notification of the impending inspection, which gives them ample time to prepare.

And best of all, they are only required to inspect 10 percent of factories, and not even ones chosen at random. Factories can refuse or accept inspection.

With their wads of corporate money, the FLA began to promote themselves shamelessly to universities. E-mails were sent out, trying to recruit university membership in the FLA, and one came here to our chancellor. Concerned about the issue, our chancellor called a meeting with the folks at the bookstore.

Hesitant to pay the hefty yearly membership fee, they thankfully decided to not to join the FLA, and tried to find a solution to the sweatshop issue on their own, by asking that each company and distributor that the bookstore orders from send written assurance that they do not use sweatshop labor or buy from companies who do.

I would like to commend the bookstore's Virginia Mankins and Mike Small for their whole-hearted efforts on this issue. They receive a letter every year from each company that explains the code of conduct and assures that they do not use sweatshop labor. The only problem is that we must take the word of the company.

Do you trust corporations? I know I don't. While it seems difficult to know what else we can do, there must be steps that we can take to get full factory disclosure.

Two years ago, the USAS began to

create their own watchdog group that would monitor factories and push corporations for full disclosure. Especially with the goal of FLA to tag their clothing "sweatshop free," it becomes increasingly important to get the truth out to the public. Last year, the Workers' Rights Consortium was born, and they are already visiting factories.

A USAS delegation just got back from visiting a Nike Factory in the Dominican Republic. You can check it out at www.usasnet.org and www.workersrights.org.

The hope is that WRC can create pressure for corporations to have good conditions and living wages so as not get reported to labor groups, and to fully disclose all factory locations.

The list of schools joining forces with one another is growing all of the time. My hope is that, one day, UNCA will be on that list, and all schools will be on the WRC's. It is important that grassroots efforts have the support of the institutions of learning, especially when such institutions have so much buying power and influence on markets.

If we are against slavery and corporate dominance, we must fight sweatshops. I am glad that our bookstore has an active interest in finding an answer to this problem, and is so willing to talk and work with the students who are interested in this issue. In most universities that have anti-sweatshop campaigns, students must stage sit-ins and banner hangs to try to force their administration into adopting an anti-sweatshop policy.

It is another demonstration of the greatness of UNCA that we are able to sit down and agree on these things.

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