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Earth Day: Environmental education has failed. But we can fix it.

Despite more than 40 years of Earth Day events and more environmental awareness now than ever, humanity continues to degrade the Earth. Environmental education hasn't translated awareness into action. Fortunately, there are easy ways to cut back our consumption.

By Charles Saylan and Daniel T. Blumstein / April 22, 2011

Los Angeles

We've both been participating in Earth Day events since they began back in 1970. We've manned booths that teach people about water pollution, we've organized environmental clean ups in the Santa Monica Bay and judged Earth Day posters at schools in Pakistan. But regardless of what we have done or where we have done it, we've been struck by one simple, glaring fact. Despite more than 40 years of organized Earth Day events, and the heightened awareness of environmental issues that they create, humanity collectively continues to degrade the Earth.



Gallery: Earth Day 2011

Since Earth Day began, we humans have fished down the seas, scoured the Earth for fossil fuels and rare earth elements, pumped more and more CO2 into the atmosphere, and created dead zones and Texas-sized garbage patches in our oceans and bays. How can this be? We're more environmentally aware than ever before.

The problem is that environmental education has failed to translate awareness into action. To be effective, it must go beyond creating awareness to creating measurable changes in our behavior. Our future and our children's future depend upon it. Fortunately, there are easy ways to cut back our consumption.

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Where traditional environmental education went wrong

Everyone learns about pollution, either in school or from TV. Many of our K-12 schools teach children about the environment – and how to respect it. Some schools even take kids outside to learn about nature first hand. But somehow, environmental education has uniformly failed to teach us how to change our unsustainable behavior.

Traditional environmental education assumes that environmental awareness will somehow translate to action, but it doesn't teach how

to take that action. Whatever action this education has produced has proven grossly insufficient to keep pace with environmental degradation. If this traditional “raising awareness” model works, why is public opinion shifting away from supporting any meaningful climate legislation. And why is it so easy for “climate-change deniers,” often backed by industrial or oil business lobbyists, to discredit credible scientific opinion on climate change?

Environmentalism isn't a choice. It's a responsibility.

Environmentalism is not a political or lifestyle choice. Unlike religion or political affiliation, environmentalism is not a choice we make. It is a civic responsibility and fundamental aspect of any cohesive society, like respecting the law. If we breathe, if we consume anything, then we are each responsible for our part in that consumption, like it or not.

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Not only students, but all of us must understand the consequences of consumption. Environmental educators must now develop ways to practically empower us to reduce it. Unbridled growth simply is not sustainable. Conservation is the single, easiest first step toward reducing humanity's negative impacts on Earth. Not recycling, but real conservation. Using less. Reusing and repurposing things.

We can learn a lot from the generations who survived the Great Depression. Frivolous consumption was unfathomable to them. They bought quality goods and replaced them only after they couldn't be used or repaired any more. This simple lesson is one way to reduce our consumption. But there are many more.

Simple ways to reduce our consumption

Simply cutting back ten percent of our consumption could be done virtually overnight and would not only make significant short-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such a reduction would buy us all some time to develop and implement the long-term solutions we desperately need. Cutting back our consumption is easier than we think. Keeping houses a little colder in wintertime and a little warmer in summer would make significant impacts on energy usage if we all just did it – starting tomorrow.

Eventually, our lifestyles will likely need to undergo some real changes, but we can all make big differences in the short run by simply doing what we already know will work. And we can do it with minimal impact to our comfort.

Charles Saylan is executive director of the Ocean Conservation Society. Daniel T. Blumstein is chair of the department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and a professor in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. They are authors of the forthcoming book “The Failure of Environmental Education (And How We Can Fix It).”

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