

ELEVEN

PEACE & THE ENVIRONMENT

The Earth Is Alive



Who hears the rippling of rivers will not utterly despair of anything.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Peace and the environment are intimately related. As the integrity of our natural systems erodes, resources necessary for survival become scarce. Land, water, minerals, and fossil fuels will be the battlegrounds of the twenty-first century. Already, communities everywhere are struggling with competing interests over short-term economic benefits versus the long-term sustainability of natural resources.

As we treat the Earth, so we treat each other. A culture of peace is a state of mind that values partnership and respect. We must approach the Earth in the same way. When we seek to dominate the natural environment, or take what we want without regard for the consequences or without respect for the living processes by which those resources

are available, we destroy the peace of the whole sacred web of life, of which we are but a small part.

91 REALIZE THE INTERDEPENDENCE

Nature is one vast interconnected web of life. What happens in one place affects the whole web eventually. All life needs each other to thrive and survive.

Not only do we need each other, but we *are* each other. We drink water that came from the rivers; the minerals in the rocks are also in our bones; the sun warms us from the outside and through the life force in the food we eat. A true culture of peace requires that we live in ecological balance and harmony with all life.

- Honor “all your relations.” Native American peoples acknowledge each and every being (whether two-legged or four-legged; the ones who fly, the ones who swim, and the ones who creep and crawl, the stone people and the plant people) as a relative. Greet the sun, a blade of grass, a frog, a bird as if it were your beloved cousin, aunt, or uncle.
- Sit by a tree. Think of all the ways your life depends on trees. Feel the sun on your face. Think of all the ways your life depends on the sun.
- Sift a handful of dirt through your fingers. Think of all the ways the soil depends on you. Dangle your feet into a stream or river. Think of all the ways the river depends on you.
- Name three things you do that support and enhance the environment around you. Name three things you do that harm the environment around you.
- Pick any one of your “relations” from the natural world—a bird, an insect, a plant. Learn what you can about that being: What is its habitat? Who are its natural enemies? Where does it get what it needs to survive? How has it been affected by human interaction?

92 TRACE THE NATURAL RESOURCES YOU DEPEND ON

We take so much for granted. We go through our days with food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and access to all sorts of activities, without ever taking the time to wonder how we are able to have what we have and do what we do.

Yet everything humans have and do can be traced back to the natural world, either directly or indirectly. When we pay attention to how this is so, we grow in appreciation and in a commitment to a good relationship with nature.

Ask yourself the following questions. Think carefully not only about what human activities are involved but also what natural life processes go on to make it possible for you to live as you do:

- How did the food get to your table? Take the food from any one meal and trace it back as far as you can, to see where it came from. Work backward from the table to the natural state.
- Where did the materials from which your house is constructed come from? Trace these materials in the same way as you did your food. What do you notice?
- How do you heat your home? How does that fuel come to you? Do the same exercise, following your warmth back to the elements.
- Where does your drinking water come from? How is your waste system (water, toilet, laundry) managed? Do the same tracing.
- What about the clothes you are wearing—what is their origin and journey from the natural state to your closet?

What do you learn from this exercise?

93 BECOME AN ENVIRONMENTAL CHAMPION AND STEWARD

Environmental problems are all around us: issues of water quality, air pollution, pesticides, dangerous waste products, mining and logging practices, dying oceans, climate changes, and many others.

These issues are too important to ignore. The choices we make now will affect our children many generations into the future. Each

of us must commit to securing a sustainable future. We must act now to steward the precious resources of this Earth and to champion the cause of a healthy, balanced ecology.

- What are the local issues? Find out what your neighborhood, town, state, or region is struggling with. Find one issue that has particular interest for you.
- Get information. Inform yourself on this topic. Find out about the science involved; discover the different views being offered for solutions. Use this information to decide your own course of action.
- Get your whole family involved. We are in this together. Promote environmental awareness starting at home, by encouraging partners, children, parents, relatives, and friends to join you in addressing the concerns that affect us all.
- Think and act locally and globally. The immediate issues relate directly to your everyday life. The larger picture may seem more remote, but it is nonetheless important. Join a local action group, and also become a member of one of the large environmental groups dealing with similar issues at the level of national or international policy.

94 DO AN ENVIRONMENTAL INVENTORY OF YOUR HOME

Getting a good picture of your current relationship to environmental matters is the place to start your action.

ENVIRONMENTAL INVENTORY

Answer the following questions using this scale of frequency: 1—Never 2—Sometimes 3—Often 4—Always 5—Not applicable or not sure

In my home I (we):

- 3 Recycle plastic
- 4 Recycle newspapers
- 3 Recycle junk mail

- 4 Recycle computer and office papers
- 4 Recycle cans
- 4 Recycle bottles
- 4 Make compost from kitchen and yard waste
- 3 Turn off electric lights and appliances when not in use
- 3 Turn off running water when not in immediate use
- 3 Refuse to buy articles wrapped unnecessarily in plastic
- 2 Use recycled paper for stationery
- 4 Use reusable cloth bags for grocery shopping
- 3 Use environmentally friendly household products
- 1 Test the water for contaminants periodically
- 1 Test the house for radon, asbestos, and other dangerous substances
- 2 Take care to store and dispose of hazardous products (paint, thinners, propane, kerosene, solvents) properly

Look at all the answers in the 1 or 2 range. This is the area where you can make the greatest change in your environmental habits.

95 CHANGE ONE THING IN YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL HABITS

Habits have a strong hold on our behavior. Something becomes a habit because it is repeated over and over again. To change a habit takes two things: commitment and practice.

Commitment comes when we make choices. Am I really willing to change? Do I say an unqualified "Yes" to this change? Will I follow through, even if I run into obstacles or if it's easier just to go back to my old way of doing things? Practice means doing the new behavior again and again as necessary until it is established as a familiar pattern.

- Review the results of your environmental inventory. Pick one habit from the inventory you seriously want to change. Make the commitment to change.

48
16 - not
32 - o.k.
48 - pr
64 - be

- Picture the new habit. Imagine what you would do differently if you were to make this change. Get information from others if you are not sure how to do it differently.
- Practice your new habit. Remind yourself gently when you forget. Recall your commitment to change. Is it still strong? Ask friends or family members to help you remember.
- Evaluate your success. After some time, retake the inventory to see if you have succeeded in changing your environmental habits.

96 GREEN UP YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Much can be done to make our own surroundings more environmentally sound. When we speak of “greening up” an area, we mean to make it more beautiful and alive. This means planting flowers, fruits, and vegetables; it means cleaning up trash; it means helping a paved area revert back to nature.

- Get creative with empty lots. If you find a piece of land being neglected or unused, join with others to find exciting ways to bring it back to nature (with permission of the owner, of course). Plant a wildflower garden; make a habitat for birds or small animals; make it into a mini-nature preserve; plant fruit trees or Christmas trees.
- Design a nature trail. Wherever you live, you can find some places of nature’s beauty and wonder. Work with others to create a walking trail that goes through a natural area, with signposts and descriptive brochures to help people understand the marvel of nature they are witnessing.
- Plant flowers for beautification. Wherever there is a tiny piece of land or even room for a flower box—on street corners, on the green strip of lawn between street and sidewalk, beside the mailbox on a dusty country road—we can plant flowers for color and beauty, and to attract butterflies and birds.
- Do community trash clean-ups. Pick a street, a neighborhood, or a roadside, and go with a group of people and plenty of trash bags to clean up the mess.

- Include children in all these activities. Children can enjoy and learn from all green-up activities that environmental stewardship can be fun and is the natural responsibility of everyone in the community.

97 GROW FOOD

Growing food requires intimate participation in the processes of life and in the cycles of nature. All the elements come together to produce food. The Earth, sun, rain, and fresh air all are needed by the seeds to grow to their greatest potential.

Even in the largest cities, we can connect in some way with the life cycle by raising our own food and feeding our friends. When we plant, tend, harvest, and eat this food, we remember that we too are part of this sacred chain of life.

- Plant windowsill herbs. Parsley, oregano, thyme, dill, basil, and other cooking herbs do well in small pots in sunny windows.
- Plant container gardens on roofs or patios. Big buckets, pots, or planting boxes are great for places where the earth is covered with concrete or brick or where there is little space for a garden.
- Join community gardens. Each person or family might have their own garden within a larger plot of land, or people might work together on a single garden. If there are no community gardens in your area, start one.
- Join a gardening co-op. Look for or start a garden where one person tends the crop while members provide the cash necessary for the labor and equipment, and then are entitled to a share of the produce.
- Support organic gardening. Whether you get your food from your own backyard, a garden co-op, a local farmer, or the grocery store, insist on food raised organically—without the use of harmful fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, and other chemicals.
- Barter for produce. If you cannot grow your own food but know others who do, offer to barter. Give something you have or can do in exchange for the produce you want. This honors the cycle of reciprocity.

98 GROW BEAUTY

Beauty, like peace, is our soul's birthright. We nourish ourselves in the deepest way when we make and share beauty. Beauty provides inspiration as well as sanctuary. It helps us attune to that place of deep inner peace at our core. It encourages balance and serenity.

When beauty is connected to nature and to nature's cycles of life, it is even more compelling. Then we are reminded of our place in the universe and of the natural harmony of all creation.

- Add color to your surroundings. Inside your home and outside, have flowers that are colorful, vibrant, and cheerful.
- Turn eyesores into places of special beauty. Choose an overgrown piece of land, a trash heap, a barren strip of asphalt, or a neglected or abused piece of city property. Gather the resources—human, financial, technical—to turn it into a place of beauty—perhaps a park, a playground, or a sculpture garden.
- Build sanctuaries and peace gardens. The smallest area, beautifully planted and designed, can be designated as a peace garden, a sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.
- Combine natural beauty with human art. Add murals, sculpture, graphic designs, music, and poetry to gardens, parks, and woods.
- Support public use of natural areas. Help keep the parks clean and accessible. Encourage the creation of nature trails and bike and walking paths. Insist on public access to waterfront property and beaches. Support city, state, and national parks and monuments. Work to ensure that these areas stay beautiful as well as available.

99 GIVE THANKS

Being grateful goes naturally with feeling joy and peace. Our gratitude for life itself—for the processes of nature that allow us to be present in this body, on this Earth—is a way of connecting with the web of creation.

Gratitude is also a way of giving something back. Nature gives to us all the time, without judging our worthiness. If we just take and never give back, it's like only breathing in and never breathing out.

Saying "Thank you" is how we return a blessing for the blessings we receive every day. It is how we stay in balance.

- Adopt an attitude of gratitude. Let gratefulness be how you are and move in the world. See everything—especially every part of the natural world—as the gift that it is.
- Practice thankfulness rituals. For each meal, for each glass or water, for all that the Earth provides, develop personal and family rituals to show your gratitude.
- Make offerings. Give something back to the Earth. Offer prayers to the land where the land is especially bountiful or where it is especially hurt. Go to a river and place a flower on the current to carry your thankfulness downstream.
- Be aware of the bounty. Life is lavish with its gifts. Nature's abundance sustains you a thousand ways every day. Take a moment to recognize the feast that is spread before you through the generosity of Earth and sky.
- Provide for others. Show gratitude for all you receive by sharing generously with others, especially those who may not have all that you do. Pass along the bounty of nature's gifts to those who are without access to healthy and abundant food, clean water, or a safe and warm home.



REVIEW

Practice the Four Principles of Peace and the Environment

COMMUNITY

Remember your core connection to the natural world, and be an environmental champion and steward.

COOPERATION

Work with others to make gardens, parks, and places of natural beauty.

NONVIOLENCE

Open your heart in gratitude for nature's endless gifts.

WITNESS

Be a living model of environmental awareness.



AN ENVIRONMENTAL SUCCESS STORY

When business interests collide with environmental and quality of life concerns, sparks can fly. How communities deal with such competing interests can determine whether there is bitterness and enmity or peaceful resolution and cooperation. The woman who tells this story was helpful in turning this potential conflict into a community success story.

A few years ago, a small family-owned granite company wanted to expand a quarry in a rural residential area. The local residents were alarmed and demanded that state officials stop the project at all costs. Tensions on both sides were very high.

I was the official they turned to. Flush with having just completed a basic mediation course, I asked the residents if they had talked with the quarry owners. No, they had not, and they would not, as they were convinced that no one would listen. I suggested that everyone sit down together and discuss the issues.

After a rocky beginning (participants began by screaming obscenities at each other), the mediation went very well. The quarry operators listened respectfully to the concerns of the neighbors, and the neighbors slowly began to have a bit of trust in the father-and-son-run company. As tensions eased, the discussion shifted from angry accusations to collaborative problem solving:

"What can we do to make sure that trucks leaving the quarry are driven safely on neighborhood roads?"

"How can blasting be scheduled so as to minimize noise impacts on neighbors?" (The final agreement took into account the nap schedule of a two-year-old who lived nearby.)

"Where can berms be placed to absorb noise?"

At the end of the second mediation session, the participants had an agreement among themselves that made state involvement unnecessary. As I was leaving, I heard several people talking about having a picnic in a few months to get to know each other better and to work out any problems that developed.