

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Corporations and Governments Cannot Solve All the Environmental Issues: Individuals Must Participate

There is no question that the global environment is deteriorating in many ways. Carbon emissions continue to increase despite agreements like the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 or more recently the Paris Agreement in 2015. A 15 year goal of the Kyoto Protocol was to reduce carbon emissions by only 5% below 1990 levels, but instead they increased by 58% above the target. In 2018, carbon emissions increased another 3% above the previous year. Depletion of our natural resources continues to increase as we are now consuming the equivalent of 1.7 earths. The availability of fresh water continues to decrease as more major cities are being subjected to water shortages. And another issue contributing to all of these is the continued global population growth. While humans have been on this earth for thousands of years, just in my short lifetime the population has increased by 5.5 billion and continues to grow at a rate of 10 million people every six or so weeks.

Fortunately there are many companies that are doing everything possible to operate sustainably in that they are improving their profitability while protecting the environment. Companies like Dow, Unilever, Cargill, SAIC, Interface and others have been very successful in developing a competitive advantage while caring for the environment.

Fortunately there are many countries that have done something similar by establishing goals to reduce carbon emissions. Costa Rica, for example, has set a goal to become the world's first carbon-neutral country. Already, 99% of its electricity is from renewable sources. In September 2018, a group of 19 countries formed the Carbon Neutrality Coalition which is committed to publish strategies by next year as to how to become carbon neutral by 2050. Not surprising, 12 of the 19 members of the coalition are European countries. The remaining seven include Canada, Mexico, New Zealand and some smaller countries. And then there is Bhutan, a very small country which is already carbon negative. In addition, there are some very large countries that are making an effort. For example, China met its 2020 carbon reduction goal three years ahead of schedule.

Even though there is some good news relative to reducing carbon emissions and other efforts to protect the environment, we, the citizens must also take responsibility to do our share. The companies and countries cannot do it alone. The real key is to educate as many people as possible of the environmental issues that must be addressed by everyone so each takes some personal interest. For example, to combat climate change, everyone should consider their means of transportation: public vs. personal automobile; compact vs. SUV; electric vehicle vs. gasoline powered. To conserve fresh water, take shorter showers, turn off the faucet when shaving, avoid drinking bottled water, and install dual-flush toilets. To preserve our natural resources, minimize food waste, reuse rather than dispose or recycle, and look for sharing programs.

Another way that individuals can contribute to conserving our environment is to participate in some new programs like TerraCycle's "Loop" venture. This program was introduced at the UN Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2019. This program is based on the old milkman deliveries where consumers would leave their empty one gallon milk bottle by their front door for the milkman. The next day he would deliver a gallon of milk and take the empty bottle which was cleaned and refilled. Loop is working with about 300 companies like Unilever, Proctor & Gamble, PepsiCo, Danone, Nestlé and UPS which will sell their products in reusable containers. Loop is a circular shopping platform that replaces single-use disposable packaging with durable, reusable packaging. Consumers subscribe and order products that get delivered by UPS in a specially designed shipping tote instead of a box. When the customer has consumed the product, the empty container will be placed in the shipping tote and delivered back to the company. The only way Loop can be successful is for individual consumers to participate.

The younger generations are more aware of the environmental problem because they are exposed to this in elementary schools and universities. For example, Loyola University of Chicago requires every student to take an environmental course before graduation regardless of their major. But how do we educate the older people? One way is through religious organizations. An example is the Chicago Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church which has formed the Encyclical Working Group to implement the environmental recommendations of Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si" – On Care of Our Common Home. To continue such an effort with other religions, a new organization was formed recently for various Christian religions, and it is called the Chicagoland Coalition United for the Care of Creation (CCUCC). Similar organizations can be created for other religions like Jewish and Muslim or even secular organizations. We just need to get the word out.

If we don't do something about improving the environment, years from now there will be many people who will say "if I had only known". We don't want this to happen.