Roots: Environmental Impact of One American

Environmental Comm.

17 October 2017

Roots: Part One

A unique characterization of our modern society that was previously-unmatched is the instantaneousness and immediacy that shape our country’s infrastructure and life as we know it. Some prevalent elements of this claim in our society include the fact that we have to get the news as it’s happening and the thought of being the last to know is abhorring, as well as the fact that when we order something online we anticipate its arrival the next day, not to mention the fact that everything, even tragedies, becomes an entertainment spectacle to be recorded, uploaded, and shared across the internet for anyone to view anywhere at any time.

In a country wherein variables like trends and news are so transitory, wastefulness is bound to become increasingly prevalent as a direct consequence of immediacy. After all, with things going in and out of style quickly, it’s no surprise that the products of our waste continuously add up, surpassing most of the other nations around the world. In fact, if the rest of the world acted in the same way Americans do, we would need approximately four planet Earths to sustain each individual’s lifestyle in terms of resources. While it is true that generally, Americans are quite wasteful and lack resourcefulness, it is also true that as one of the most developed and industrialized nations in the world, we have the power to initiate just as much, if not more, positive change.

Americans constitute approximately five percent of the global population, yet use twenty percent of the world’s energy, eat fifteen percent of the world’s meat and produce forty percent of the world’s garbage. That being said, the first step in combatting the existing environmental crisis is awareness; by enlightening the American people as to just how wasteful they can be and how big of a negative impact this wastefulness can have, positive change may be initiated for the sake of protecting and preserving the environment for future generations to come. After all, a society grows great the day that old men plant trees whose shade they know they’ll never sit in.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans generate roughly 254 million tons of trash annually, with only 34.3% of waste being recycled. That averages out to be about 4.4 pounds of waste generated by *each* person, *every* day. When waste is improperly disposed of, it either ends up back in nature, or left to rot (slowly) in one of the 2,000+ active landfills across the United States; there are a thousand more landfills currently inactive, yet still full, thereby contributing to America’s waste pandemic. Trash left to decompose in landfills not only contaminates the soil with harmful chemicals, but emits a variety of harmful greenhouse gases that contribute to the destruction of the atmosphere, like methane and carbon dioxide.

In addition to the tangible evidence of our individual waste and the consequences thereof, there are a variety of ways that the individual in America contributes to wastefulness, therefore the destruction/depletion of the planet’s valuable resources. For example, leaving the water running to warm up before hopping in the shower generally wastes about five gallons of clean water. As a whole, Americans dump approximately sixteen tons of sewage into streams, oceans, rivers, etc. every sixty seconds. These are just issues in the hands of individuals – on a larger, corporate scale, the destruction is even more catastrophic.

While it is true that in present-day America, the average citizen is pretty wasteful in relation to other nations around the world, it is also true that American citizens are privileged enough to inhabit a place wherein we can speak our minds, have our voices heard, and initiate positive change beginning with just one person. After all, George Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mark Twain were all Americans, to name a few, and their legacies live on long after they have passed. That being said, it is time to break the stigma of “I’m just one person, there’s not much that I can do,” for small acts, when performed by millions of people, can transform the world.

The answer to America’s waste/pollution problem is education and enlightenment. If people are mindful of their actions and the consequences thereof, they will take the initiative to positively change their actions. Learning that influencing positive change is as simple as reusing and recycling things rather than wasting them doesn’t make much of a difference in an individual’s daily routine, but has a monumental, long-lasting impact. It’s time to stand up and take the issue of climate change seriously – after all, it was created by human hands, thereby is in our hands to change. Climate change is a product of multiple factors, including individual waste.

One person can change the world – for better or for worse. It only takes a spark to ignite a fire, and by initiating positive change from here on out, it will become a standard for generations to come. Beginning with communicating with other people and reminding them that we are not distinct from the planet nor the products of our waste, as well as examining the relationship between the people and the planet, we human beings (as individuals and as a whole) can instigate the positive change that the planet desperately needs to see.

*Written by Melissa E. Willhouse*

Works Cited

Breyer, Melissa. “Trash by the numbers: Startling statistics about US garbage.” TreeHugger, Treehugger, 12 Sept. 2017.

Elert, Emily. “Daily Infographic: If Everyone Lived Like An American, How Many Earths Would We Need?” Popular Science, Bonnier Corp., 19 Oct. 2012,

“Municipal Solid Waste.” EPA, Environmental Protection Agency,