

For most of my life, I—like many others—have been relatively blind to the reality of our global environmental problems. It was easy to live my life every day without thinking about what my actions were costing the environment and even other people around the world. A year and a half ago, I don't think I would have called myself an environmentalist because I wasn't passionate enough about the issue of environmental protection to adopt that label. I, quite ignorantly enough, figured that I was doing my fair share in saving the planet just by recycling, taking short showers, and turning off lights whenever I left a room. It wasn't until I came to UC that I realized just how huge our global environmental problems are and how small my efforts were in the scheme of things.

I wasn't even an Environmental Studies major originally; I thought I was going to be a cultural anthropologist. Obviously, my job prospects would have been very slim, but that wasn't the only factor that pushed me to switch majors. I had never had a real reason to get riled up about issues around the world since I grew up happily in a suburb of Columbus where I was plenty well off and essentially sheltered from the rest of the world. But when I learned about the ongoing water scarcity and quality crisis around the world in one of my anthropology classes, I knew I had to switch majors. The fact that there are tons of people out there without access to a resource that sustains all life really got to me.

I define environmentalism as something that differs slightly from the definitions we have encountered so far in our class readings. For me, environmentalism is all about improving the quality of life for people all around the world while also taking care of our planet and not carelessly depleting the resources it provides for us. It's a little bit funny to me that as humans, we pride ourselves on our civility, yet in general, we're unapologetically hands-off about the problems of other human beings if they happen to live countries away from us, no matter how desperate their situation may be. We ignore poverty and environmental problems around the globe simply because we're fortunate enough to only be watching those affected through our TV screens.

Since I was little I've been told that life isn't fair, but what really isn't fair is the amount of inequality humans have created for ourselves, especially when it comes to our environment and resources. People in developing countries and minorities in developed countries are disproportionately affected by environmental issues. Residents of an affluent Cape Cod community may be able to lobby to keep wind turbines out of the ocean, but people who live in poorer communities may have no choice as to what a nearby coal-burning power plant is spewing into the air around their neighborhood. No one should have to kill or even just fight for water when it's something we all need to stay alive. We, as the civil human beings we are, should be able to share water resources and work to protect resources for one another. But we refuse to do so. Although it has been suggested by many that the drought conditions in East Africa have been driven in part by climate change, there has been little to no response from the developed countries that have attributed the most to global warming.

This is why I wear the "environmentalist" badge proudly. I feel that the issues that we in the U.S. and around the developed world have created for our environment and for other people are dire enough that I should speak up and help combat those issues. For me though, it's definitely not as much tied to a love of nature as it is a need to help people. Don't get me wrong, I love our planet, and just being out in nature has always given me some sense of peace when my life becomes hectic, but I have this innate need to care for other people. The way I see it, nobody chooses what sort of life they're born into. I didn't play some lottery in the womb that decided I'd be born in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio instead of a village in Southern Ethiopia. I shouldn't feel endlessly guilty about my lifestyle because that's just the way the dice fell, but I feel that living in a society with such relative wealth does mean that we should take some more responsibility for our actions. As a nation, we have the money to invest in sustainability projects (though we might try to convince ourselves that we really don't), and we have the amount of influence to help developing nations improve their countries sustainably. So I don't feel that we all need to compromise the whole of our ways of life solely because of environmental issues, but we need to accept that we in the developed world have done the most wrong and thus contribute the most to solving our environmental issues.

That being said, I really do think that the main approach to environmentalism needs to be sustainable development. We have already locked ourselves into climate change due to the enormous amount of carbon dioxide we have pumped into the atmosphere. Some studies have shown that a large amount of the damage we have done may be irreversible, and there really isn't any going back on this issue. With that in mind, we can't just hopelessly wait and watch as our climate falls into disrepair and all hell breaks loose in our society. I believe that if we humans have the ingenuity to create light bulbs and computers and space shuttles, then we should be clever enough to build a sustainable world. There have already been so many plausible ideas circulating about how we can be sustainable both in our developed world lifestyle and in the development of other nations. The key seems to be in rallying support for the sustainable cause and influencing younger generations to be interested in environmental science, so they will be able to contribute to this worldwide project as well. As environmentalists, the mission has to be to educate the general public about the severity of the environmental issues but also provide sustainable fixes to some of our problems, so that—as in Kingdon's stream model—we can converge and agree on some (actually productive) public policy that will help halt those problems.

I think that many people hesitate to call themselves environmentalists because the label is associated with some degree of extremism. But that, I find, is true with a majority of labels because the extreme voices are always the ones that are the loudest and most recognized by our society. People don't want to take on so many labels because of the generalizations that will be made if they associate themselves with a certain group. I was apprehensive about calling myself a feminist because I figured people would think I was some kind of bra-burning misandrist. But when you become passionate about the recognition of an issue like women's rights, or in this case environmentalism, you can't be afraid to take on label and to accept the generalizations. If we hesitate to demonstrate how passionate we are about positively changing the world, then the issues we most want to change have a tendency to fade into the background of the public view. The general

public ceases to care so much unless there are voices that are unafraid to keep saying, "Hey, we have a serious problem here, and we need to work together to fix it."

Even though sometimes it's difficult to be optimistic about the future of our environment, I think it's up to environmentalists to formulate solutions and rally public support for environmental issues. If we don't provide hope for the public that our environmental problems can be somewhat solved, then there won't be any motivation for the public or the government to make efforts to fix those issues. There is already some developing sentiment that we are too far gone to combat climate change, which is why people who are passionate about preserving the planet and human life shouldn't be afraid to call themselves environmentalists, and join in the fight against our environmental problems.