

The Millennials' New Planetary Passion

I am 57 and right in the middle of the baby boom generation. One of the most memorable moments of my childhood took place in 1969, when we landed a man on the moon. While this was a marvelous, celebratory moment in terms of scientific advancement, the way it was cast sums up my generation's previous view of the environment. Back then, it was about conquering nature; not exploring it, or living with it. Boomers – and their parents – thought humans were at the center of the universe; and we believed that we could be in charge and in control of the world, or worlds, around us. We thought it was cool that you could make food that had an infinite shelf life, we took pride in manicured lawns that were devoid of weeds, and we reveled in the gas-guzzling RV camper road trips into the wilderness.

The current Millennials I see on college campuses have a very different relationship with nature. First of all, unlike the Baby Boomers, they actually experience nature. And secondly, this new generation is deeply concerned – and even alarmed – about the fact that nature is disappearing so rapidly. This makes sense, because students today are watching and witnessing animals become extinct, oceans rise, and ice packs melt – right before their very eyes.

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But there's another factor at work here, too. Millennials have lived virtually their entire lives in a digital world that provides immediacy – mostly in the form of information access. But this immediacy also means that Millennials understand and expect fairly instant consequences – both good and bad – as a result of the world's actions and activities. Social media has certainly helped this



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Ana Mari Cauce, Provost and Executive Vice President, joined the University of Washington faculty in 1986 as an Assistant Professor after earning degrees in English and Psychology from the University of Miami, and a Ph.D. in Psychology, with a concentration in Child Clinical and Community Psychology, from Yale University. As Provost, she is the University's Chief Academic Officer, responsible for overseeing the education, research, and service missions. She is also responsible for resource allocation. And she works closely with the President on strategic planning and long-term decision-making.

lightning fast pace to take hold as an important part of the Millennial DNA.

One of the positives here is that Millennials react much more quickly to perceived problems like environmental degradation or sustainability. They are accountable. They get on it. And they stay on it.

But, just as significant as this Always On attitude and approach, the Internet has imbued this new generation with a

sense of transparency, engagement and collaboration.

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I see this sustainability collaboration at the University of Washington, where I teach and work.

In 2010, for example, students collected 5,000 signatures in favor of levying a self-tax for sustainability. These green fees, deducted as a portion of student activity funds, help support on-campus sustainability projects that students select and administer. Our students have also set up a governance structure to make sure this green fund is always run by, and for, future generations of students.

Funding the Future

Created by students and supported by a student activities fee, the Campus Sustainability Fund distributes money to student-led sustainability projects.

The Fund’s coordinators help their fellow students turn sustainability ideas into proposals for funding, and foster relationships with campus units that can empower students in their initiatives.

The program provides a valuable leadership experience for students while funding projects that help expand the University’s sustainability efforts.

I’ve also seen students in biology classes start a farm on campus. This hands-on learning endeavor has grown into a thriving and collaborative student-run enterprise that now sells produce to our food services division.

And our students are working side by side with faculty in our laboratories, doing important research that helps us track climate change, develop smart grid technology so that we can use energy more efficiently, and develop new, more sustainable energy sources from the sun, the wind, and water.

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As university administrators, we have had to understand, adapt and embrace the Millennial activism when it comes to sustainability. And that’s why we work hard every year to enhance our environmental consciousness and ecosystem on campus. We want to make sure that the important new green behavioral changes can take root and sprout.

I am so impressed with the passion and intelligence that our Millennial students are bringing to bear on sustainability issues. It is a true demonstration of head and heart working together. It’s also a real example of learning that will have meaning, both on and off campus.

The Millennials want their children to be able to experience a natural world. They see a problem – or many problems – with the environment, and they are sincerely seeking solutions that will last. That’s an opportunity and blessing for all of us who want to replenish and preserve the planet.