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Climate Change Connections

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Abstract (Summary)

The author has come to realize that saving the planet business is colored by all shades of gray rather than the stark black and white that the well-intentioned young person in front of the Trader Joe's with the petition would have you believe. When Chuck Rice from Kansas State University visited Seattle, he actually talked to young environmentalist with the petition who told him that agriculture was destroying the planet and a cause of global warming. Chuck tried to explain to this person that actually, agriculture has the potential to be a savior for the planet via soil carbon sequestration. He also pointed out that we all do need to eat, a critical point that must factor into the equation when considering this younger person's take on the situation.

Full Text (938 words)

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[Headnote]

TRUE CONFESSIONS

I HAVE a confession to make. When I leave the supermarket here in Seattle, there are always people outside the store who want to get your attention. I always try to head straight towards the person selling the homeless community newspaper and straight away from the environmental type with the petition to save the planet. This is not because I have anything against saving the planet. To the contrary, one might say that saving the planet is a central theme of my job in a roundabout way. However, in this job, I've come to realize that this saving business is colored by all shades of gray rather than the stark black and white that the well-intentioned young person in front of the Trader Joe's with the petition would have you believe.

A colleague, Chuck Rice from Kansas State University, is a better person than I am and when he visited Seattle, he actually talked to the young environmentalist with the petition who told him that agriculture was destroying the planet and a cause of global warming. Now, Chuck is a soil carbon guy and a member of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and a patient man. And he tried to explain to this person that actually, agriculture has the potential to be a savior for the planet via soil carbon sequestration. He also pointed out that we all do need to eat, a critical point that must factor into the equation when considering this younger person's take on the situation.

I would say that this need to eat, along with the need to get from place to place, take a shower, turn on the light so you can read at night and even the heat when it gets chilly (as it has here with a vengeance this month), are all things that those who see things in black and white have not considered. Too often, what I see in my classes and with kids in general, is a tendency to classify those involved with providing these services as the modern equivalent of the bogeyman. Anyone that is involved with any of these things must, by association, be an agent of evil.

The link that is missing here is that we need these services. The people providing the services, in many if not most cases, are trying to do their job in the best way they can under the constraints that they are faced with. They are no more the bogeyman than we are, the people who depend on these services.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

I recently toured a coal-fired power plant just south of Seattle that is operated by Trans Alta. The person who led the tour, Larry Webster, told me that in fact, he considered himself an environmentalist. He had decided that the best way to be an environmentalist was from the inside, where he could make sure that the plant was operating in the cleanest way possible. In fact, the desulfurization by-products from the plant are sold for wallboard manufacture. Mercury emissions are being monitored in preparation for emissions controls. And the company has kept an inventory of its carbon footprint for close to a decade and is looking at ways to reduce that imprint.

I'm sure that this isn't the perfect company, but they aren't the ultimate evil either. Larry also told me that every year students from Evergreen, a college of environmentalists, come for a tour of the plant. Every year the students make the connection that this plant is operating in order to provide the power that they use. Every year they are amazed at the precision of such a large-scale process. And every year the students are shocked that the plant isn't staffed by bogeymen but by people who also care about the planet.

Perhaps if our environmental education programs focused more on how things nobody thinks about and everybody depends on work, and less on the pristine forest, people would have the tools to understand that they impact that forest. I know that my son spent a good part of his elementary school environmental education classes learning about salmon and the impacts that hydropower has had on their survival. He has nothing against salmon and will even eat salmon when I make it for dinner. But it has been hard for him to make the connection between that pink fish and turning on the light. For an 8 year old, it is pretty clear that there are no lights in the river where they go to see the fish. The lights are in the house where you eat the fish.

Perhaps if our municipal governments had better PR people to explain what happens when you flush the toilet or take out the trash or take the bus, we'd be more conscious about each of those things. Maybe if schools also included lessons on how we make electricity, instead of or in addition to those about the happy salmon, we'd have more environmentally minded kids inside the power plants pushing for wind power. Once our ties to these industries/operations is clear, we will be better able to understand how to reduce our impact or even how to improve these processes. We would all be better off if the young environmentalists went to work inside the system instead of outside of the Trader Joe's.

[Author Affiliation]

Sally Brown - Research Associate Professor at the University of Washington in Seattle - is a member of BioCycle's Editorial Board, and will be authoring this regular column on the connections of composting, organics recycling and renewable energy to climate change. E-mail Dr. Brown at slb@u.washington.edu.

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