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The Elephant in the Room

As is it currently stands, I am registered Republican. While this party mostly lines up with my views politically, there is one sore thumb that sticks out and it's not their green one. In the last century, we as Republicans have persistently and childishly ignored the ramifications of our actions when it comes to the environment. One notable example in recent history is when Republicans in the House of Representatives in 2011 voted "nearly two hundred separate times to block, delay, or weaken the common sense safeguards...to protect our...lands, and airs" (Dean 11). House Republicans argued that they were "standing up for jobs" (Dean 11). As noble as that may sound, they don't actually care about individuals working. Their bigger concerns are "the corporate polluters that thrive by avoiding the costs of the pollution they create." (Dean 11). This further shows that Republicans make it a priority to destroy anything that has to protect the environment when profit is involved.

If one delves into the past, putting economic and business initiative ahead of environmentalism seems quite an odd deviance for the Republican Party. In the early twenty-first century, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities. This act gave the president "discretion to 'declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic and scientific

interest... to be National Monuments.””(NPS). The fact that a bill like this could pass through Congress and the Senate is quite remarkable as it took both parties to agree on it. Since we all live on the same planet and its the only one we have, it is difficult to understand how either political party could not agree wholeheartedly with the preservation of our habitat. In the current political landscape environmental debate in an ineffectual quagmire. Consequently, the average American might just as well begin these conversations at home where a new generation of Republicans can be raised to think of the environment as something we should all pay attention to. Rather than try to persuade unbudging politicians we as citizens can research for ourselves, model environmentally sound lifestyle and lessen our carbon footprint for generations to come.

In a study conducted by Spanish scientists it is conservatively estimated that there are “between 7,000 to 35,000 tons” of plastic floating on the ocean’s surface (Cózar). Most of the debris pools are located around “the central areas of the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans” and there is also evidence that there is an accumulation in “all five subtropical ocean gyres” (Cózar). Efforts are underway to quell the problem such the recent invention dubbed the “SeaBin” which is a self contained unit that passively intakes water and filters it. Debris such as oil, wrappers and plastic bottles are then detained in the unit and get manually cleaned out the crew. Units are then created by the plastic harnessed then is used to create more SeaBins. The inventors of the SeaBin hope to “create a world where we don’t need them” and allow us to have a clean ocean the way it is supposed to be (SeaBin Project).

The top priorities in most Republican agendas include cost and jobs. Methods of waste containment such as the SeaBin are a brilliant idea as it addresses both issues since it has a low overhead cost and low maintenance. There is no need to worry if jobs will be lost since humans

will do all of the work on site and no robots are necessary. As for cost, production is cheap since each boat is made from the trash they collect and they pay for themselves over time. Starting costs for these containers can be sourced by trash collection days in a local community.

Alternatively citizens could collect rubbish from the local park to nearby neighborhoods to fund their first boat. As for the newly created SeaBins, farms of these can be deployed deep in the Pacific Ocean and harvest incoming contaminants. Energy efficient waste treatment and distribution sites can be constructed next to these farms to allow an effective way of disposing or distributing the plastic to companies who wish to repurpose it; not mention the jobs that would be created along the way.

As cool as the aforementioned idea is, there is a geographic disconnect to the average American since not many people live in the middle of the ocean where the environmental impact of such an endeavor would be witnessed. Logically, many would ask “That sounds great and all, but what can I do here at home?”. The answer is actually quite simple; do not allow that trash around you to end up in the ocean and other places it does not belong. This can be accomplished by simply choosing to pick up that stray grocery bag or attending a beach cleanup event at your local beach. Here at Cal State Fullerton there are trash cans that are constructed from reclaimed milk jugs in the community. It fulfills the same purpose as the SeaBin but in our local community. Individuals can help by sorting trash into recyclables and non recyclables when throw it away. Properly sorted trash can get to the right facility more efficiently.

Although these ideas will be productive, some may argue that melting down plastics to be reused releases chemicals into our atmosphere. This is unfortunately true as a study conducted in the mid-2000’s in Japan concluded that “[T]VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) and more

oxygenated organic compounds considered to be hazardous to human health” when melted down (Yamashita). While this is a setback proclaimed by many naysayers, there is another way to combat the growing plastic epidemic; plastic consuming bacteria. In a recent study conducted in China, a group of scientists isolated two different bacteria from the Indian meal moth gut. These specimen were able to do noticeable damage to the polyethylene films, to the effect of “pits and cavities (0.3–0.4  $\mu\text{m}$  in depth)” (Yang).

For some people, plastic consuming bacteria would be a lackluster method of dealing with our plastic crisis. Some may argue that this would do more harm than good as it would completely eliminate the plastic and cannot it be used for further use. While it does do this, the bacteria sheds light on some important components for things going forward as well as fighting the problem in the current moment. If there is some way to incorporate the biodegradable attributes of the bacteria into plastics that would be used for short term use, it could greatly affect the environment. Such use cases would include wrappers for various food products, grocery bags, and non reloadable gift cards. These products mentioned, most notably, cannot be melted down as they release toxic fumes. By having a way to construct new forms of plastics, we would not have to worry about it being a problem as it would have a built in killswitch because they are biodegradable. They could help fuel the next sapling or help a local garden.

The advantage of reusing old material is that it can be redistributed and given new life without the cost of manufacturing from scratch. For example, a use case for recycled paper is to donate or sell reclaimed paper at a much lower cost to low income areas. This paper would then be used in the local school system and lighten the load on expenditures that would normally have to be paid. It is a way we can give back to people who cannot normally afford the things that we

as middle class folk take for granite. Republicans should not be opposed to this as it is in our ideology that we give to those who are less fortunate and help those in need.

Many House Republicans do not enjoy spending copious amounts of revenue on issues that do not have an immediate impact. It is possible to allow the work to be done by the population, having them pass down the knowledge through word of mouth. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Marketing, this form of communication is the “most effective way of gaining awareness” (Doyle). Unlike government funded advertisement that might be passively dismissed, average citizens could be encouraged to have honest conversations with the people they know. Grass roots movements, created by frank conversations amongst people who know each other can have a real impact on communities.

Changing the focus of attention of this conversation, there is a bigger concern that plagues the one thing we all cannot live without which is air. Air quality is one of the most crucial aspects of our environment that we cannot escape. California remains the worst state in the nation for air quality as it has a rapidly growing population that constantly increases the number of cars on the roads. To combat this, House Republicans, particularly the ones from California, should look into renewable energy sources and in turn, zero emission vehicles. Some experts are saying that “the rise in electric vehicle (EV) use and renewable energy sources have helped to improve air quality” in Los Angeles (Angie Marco). This is promising news as the greater Los Angeles area is an unintentional case study for other major metropolitan cities to follow suit and this will hopefully trickle down into less populated areas.

Influencing the ideology of those vested in a firmly planted industry like the auto industry, will take some work to uproot. This directly reflects a de facto mindset and regulations

enacted by the government will yield lackluster results. An example can be found in the Clean Air Act of 1970 as it did not bar conglomerates from spewing pollution into the environment. Instead it was a token based system that had a loophole exploited by many large businesses. As specified by the Clean Air Act of 1970, large corporations who had facilities that were nearing their demise, could shut down a factory, and gain points they could use to allow more emissions to be produced by their remaining factories. What businesses ended up doing was slowly closing down all of their old and degraded facilities, allowing the newer ones to go on strong. The businesses were not being held accountable for their actions and that was the biggest issue. It seems that the larger conversation must include the idea that this country was created by the people for the people. Not by the people for the corporate profits of the few. We as Americans need to start doing what our country was based on; a representative democracy and voicing our opinions to those who create change in our government.

If we sit on the metaphorical sidelines and watch big businesses push a corporate agenda at the expense of the very place we all live, we allow democracy to die in darkness. What if no one cared enough to simply say no or offer a compromise? When everyday citizens shine light on the environmental needs of our nation we set the condition of our planet as an issue for everyone. All it takes is one person or group to take charge and others will follow suit. True change takes dialog and compromise. We as citizens need to get comfortable with having difficult conversations with individuals that we may not agree with so that common ground can be found that will benefit everyone.

The big take away from this discussion is not be vindictive towards policy makers as that is childish and arrogant. Hurtful and hateful statements aimed at personally attacking politicians

will not get them to listen to us. We need to spread awareness of how much we as humans have an impact on the environment and in a way that will capture people's attention. We need to have conversations about what we as citizens want for the environment around us regardless of our political party affiliation. We cannot continue on the same environmentally destructive path we are today as it is not sustainable forever. Ignoring the issue does not mean it is not there! When politicians shift the focus of debates and bills being passed to something that will be more favorable to their corporate constituents ultimately hurts citizens in the end.

There are many simple things that we as Americans can do to will greatly help our environment. Small things that will help preserve the place we call home and improve our standard of living. We will start to forget the days where we had to stay inside because it was too difficult to breathe or avoid the ocean because it looks disgusting. The Earth is a beautiful place that is very flexible, much like water. It can adapt to its situations, error correct and return to an equilibrium. Deviation from the equilibrium of our planet is brutal to the individuals who inhabit it. It all starts with throwing away trash and cleaning up after yourself. We must start in our homes, in our own lives and by molding the children we are raising. When the movement starts to gain popularity, people can then elect people who have similar ideologies to push a more environmentally friendly agenda. Sooner or later, this will be something of common sense and a bipartisan issue and not just a desperate Republican pleading for change.

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