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The Place I Love

When people talk about the inner city, the scene is often depicted as a dirty, mucky environment that lacks color, personality, and really any source of community; especially since the pandemic has hit. Within this we find greater crime rates, homeless population, and environmental distress which makes the city seem like a place that should be avoided by any costs. On the other hand, if you were to ask a city native how their life has been affected by settling here, it is very rare to hear a single negative comment. Instead, these people will begin to tell anecdotes about their experiences at their favorite places like “Color Park,” where the scene is littered in graffiti from its young aspiring artists—or maybe drug dealers! Whether they are anonymous tags or cries for world peace, the artwork changes every time you visit. This is very similar to our planet in the sense that everything we see is temporary. Since the time you have to look at the design is limited at the park, it is much easier to take the time and appreciate what you have since it will be gone soon. Our planet should be looked at with the same respect, considering there is no planet B. SUST 200 specifically has put this idea into my head after learning why we should love the earth and what it provides for us.

It is very easy to get caught up on how much is going on around you, but I have learned the importance of smaller details in relation to our experiences— since they make the most change in the long run. No two people encounter the same artwork at Color Park, which shows me how different we all are. Somehow everyone can agree that no matter how different each piece of graffiti is, there is some sort of beauty that is undeniable in every design. This reminds me that no matter who you are, most of us have at least one idea of common ground on most topics.

Climate scientist Katherine Hayhoe says it best when she explains that in order “to care about climate change, we only have to be one thing: a human being living on planet earth” (Hayhoe, 2021). Climate change is something that affects all human beings as a collective rather than on an individual level, and beautiful cities all around (specifically Pittsburgh) are at high risk for impacts due to our choices as human beings.

With around 300,000 people inhabiting the popular city including myself, it should not be surprising to hear that everyone needs to start cleaning up after themselves. When deciding what topic to choose for this project, I wanted to focus on the area that I saw the most problems in. From this, I leveled down my project options to what I saw most prevalent in society– that being plastic. Whether they were cups, straws, to-go containers, or water bottles, I found myself constantly within reach of one of these items and it made me uncomfortable. Plastic does not leave our environment for 450 years, and since this product was only invented in the 1900s– we have a long way to go. As a population, we have already surpassed the amount of plastic we should be producing– and if rates continue at the same rate, our species will soon begin to fill our oceans with plastic pollution and our bloodstreams with microplastics, which are harmful to our health.

In today's world, it is very easy to get overwhelmed with thinking of potential environmental threats to humanity like these ones. Pittsburgh is no exception to this type of discouraging news, since “In 2021, PennEnvironment reported that it found microplastics in 100% of tested Pennsylvania waterways” (Gratzinger, 2022, para. 8). With that being said, the effects of these microplastics are already being seen throughout the planet. We are the first generation to be living through new developments like this, and it should be a scary thought to us all. Our wildlife is crucial to our environment, so when they stop providing for us, we are unable

to sustain a healthy life. A recent study alarmingly points out that plastic has been found in 90 percent of the tested seabirds and 100% of the turtles (Lindwall, 2020). This is terrifying simply because as the animals we eat get filled with microplastics, we will begin to consume it and all of the toxins will transmit into our bodies. Our ecosystem needs to work together in order to provide a healthy and happy life for us all, but with our consumption issues and our lack of dedication to sustainable solutions— all of the biodiversity on the planet will cease to exist.

With recent discoveries like this, people around the world are beginning to understand that the planet is warming— and we are going to be negatively affected by it. On a brighter note, Pittsburgh happens to be a pretty sustainable city compared to most. Although the city has had little improvement since the 2000s, Pittsburgh has recently announced their ban on single use plastic bags in places like grocery stores and shopping plazas. This was supposed to go into effect April 13 of this year, however as of March 23 it has been pushed back until mid October of 2023. The city plans to implement this plan in order to “curtail litter, mitigate stormwater risk, reduce the amount of microplastics in our soil and water, improve the City’s recycling efficacy, and begin to break our dependence on fossil fuel-based products” (Lindwall, 2020). I would say that the legislators in Pittsburgh are putting in effort in order to reduce the amount of plastic being planted in our environment, but we are only at the beginning of this long road. There is a lot to be done, and not much time to turn things around— which will require the city to do much more than they are now.

To learn more about this, I interviewed the Sustainability Manager for Auxiliary and Hospitality Services at the University of Pittsburgh— Nick Goldfellow. In this role, he is in charge of different aspects of dining areas, restaurants, housing services, events in hospitality, conferences, and clubs on campus. He strives to assist the institution in reaching their

sustainability goals while implementing a few changes that are pretty similar to what we have here at Penn State. First and foremost he mentioned the reusable to-go system that's used in Pitt's dining halls, but he expressed some of the same issues that were happening in Happy Valley. These solutions are not talked about or encouraged enough to the student body, so most of the time students are extremely unaware of the sustainable options they have access to. We talked about the school's plans on eliminating plastic and discussed how different solutions could be implemented, but Nick mostly put the power to the students. He says that while his job is to oversee all of the ideas and actions being put into place, Pitt's student body is highly involved in the issue and sees it as a threat to their health and safety as well. This plays a huge role in the success that Pitt has seen in their sustainability efforts, but Nick emphasizes that "Individual change is great and that's a start, but that's not gonna get you the scale of change that's needed" (NG, personal communication). We had similar views on this idea, and interviewing someone in a position like this really made me realize how much I would love to pursue a career in sustainability of some sort.

I also interviewed my mother, Catherine Mellon. I will be honest, this interview was a lot less beneficial to me than the one with Nick, only because my mom is more of a dismissive on the issue. I know that the assignment was to interview two people highly involved in the issue, but I thought this would be an interesting approach considering the opposite ends of the spectrum that we are on. I was also able to apply the skills that I have learned throughout this class by applying conversational strategies to help these tough topics flow a little better. My mom was able to admit that she saw plastic as a problem, but since it is part of her everyday use she was very reluctant to shed any light on the effects of her use. We talked about common ground like the importance of family and keeping the people we love safe, yet when I applied this to the

topic of plastic use and climate change in our previous conversation, there was no budge. Overall I think this interview was useful to me in a multitude of ways, including the aspect of comfortability and individualism– which has inspired me to search for ways to refute these points.

Whether it's the single use plastic in shopping bags or harder plastics like storage bins or tupperware containers, there's no denying that plastic makes everything much easier– which my mom pointed out. A local Pittsburgh media source says it best when explaining that “As long as people buy these products, they'll end up in our rivers” (Zuidema, 2019, para. 7). It makes complete sense as to why we use these products, but it is most important to establish when there is overconsumption at hand. Like I've mentioned previously, when this plastic starts to get into spots like our rivers and other ecosystems– we will be the ones suffering.

An interesting proposal I've read about has been the use of bioplastics to replace the old synthetic plastic that we are currently using. These are alternatives to petroleum based plastics that instead are made out of biodegradable biological substances, like the sugar from pre-existing plants like sugar-cane or corn. These materials are able to break down into the ground, making them biodegradable and less harmful to the planet. This will reduce emissions, and since bioplastics can be swapped in for plastic, they will easily benefit the planet due to the demand of plastic (Hawken, 2019). It shocks me to see how different solutions have been offered, yet there is minimal action being taken in this direction. The city of Pittsburgh is lacking countless aspects of the nurture it needs, and plastic is effectively dulling the safe feel Pittsburgh has provided for decades.

My only advice for those who want to be part of the solution rather than the problem would be to stay conscious and speak about injustices within the environment. By speaking out,

the people are able to establish a tension between themselves and the big corporations that are putting them in danger by producing this amount of plastic. By being educated and having these conversations, individual change is much more likely to transpire into something huge that the entire population is able to be a part of that could potentially change the course of our projected future.

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