



Environment - how can you help protect it?

Our planet is in trouble! Almost every day we seem to hear of yet another problem affecting the environment - and what a list of problems! - pollution, acid rain, climate change, the destruction of rainforests and other wild habitats, the decline and extinction of thousands of species of animals and plants....and so on.

Nowadays, most of us know that these threats exist and that humans have caused them. Many of us are very worried about the future of our planet and unless we can find a way of solving the problems we have made then the environment will suffer even more.

It all sounds so depressing - but we certainly mustn't despair! Every one of us, whatever age we are can do something to help slow down and reverse some of the damage. We cannot leave the problem-solving entirely to the experts - we all have a responsibility for our environment. We must learn to live in a sustainable way i.e. learn to use our natural resources which include air, freshwater, forests, wildlife, farmland and seas without damaging them. As populations expand and lifestyles change, we must keep the world in a good condition so that future generations will have the same natural resources that we have.

Here are just a few examples of the threats to our environment and some ideas to help you to do something about them.

Waste

We humans create such a lot of rubbish! Between 1992 and 2008 household waste increased by 16% and we now produce just under half a tonne per person each year. Most of this is taken away by dustmen and buried in enormous landfill sites or burned in incinerators - both of these actions can be dangerous for the environment. Is all our rubbish really rubbish? If you think about it, much of what we throw away could be used again. It makes sense to reuse and recycle our rubbish instead of just trying to solve the problem of where to put it! Encouragingly rates of recycling have increased so that we recycle 35 % of our household rubbish, although we could recycle up to 80%. Much of our waste is made up of glass, metal, plastic and

paper. Our natural resources such as trees, oil, coal and aluminium are used up in enormous amounts to make these products and the resources will one day be completely used up. We must cut down on energy use.

Ideas to Help

* Sort out your rubbish. Organic matter e.g. potato peelings, left over food, tea leaves etc. can be transferred straight to a compost heap in the garden and used as a good, natural fertiliser for the plants. Aluminium cans, glass bottles and newspapers etc. are often collected from our doorsteps these days, but other items such as plastic bottles, juice cartons and cardboard may not be, in which case they can be taken to nearby recycling banks. Find out where they are by asking your local council or library.

* Use recycled paper to help save trees. Everyone in Britain uses about 6 trees worth of paper every year.

Chlorine bleach is usually used to make newspapers and this pollutes rivers. It's better to use unbleached, recycled paper whenever you can.

* Take your old clothes to charity shops. Some are sold, others are returned to textile mills for recycling.

* Try to avoid buying plastic. It's hard to recycle. One way to cut down on plastic is to refuse to use carrier bags offered by supermarkets and use strong, long lasting shopping bags instead, or re-use plastic bags over and over again, until they wear out and then recycle them.

* Don't buy over-packed goods. Many things we buy have unnecessary amounts of plastic and paper around them.

Rainforests



Rainforests are valuable habitats. About half of all the species of animals and plants in the world live in rainforests with a possible 50,000 species a year becoming extinct. Thousands of rainforest plants contain substances that can be used in medicines and the tribal people of the forests have great knowledge of them. Rainforests are also important because they provide us with oxygen and help to regulate the world's climate and atmosphere.

Yet despite their value, an area of rainforest the size of Britain is destroyed every year. One and a half acres are cleared every second, an area about the size of a football pitch. They are cut down to make way for 'civilised man' to provide timber, grow crops and graze cattle. Sometimes they're burnt down to make space to grow soya, an animal feed and to grow palm oil, a bio-fuel used as an alternative to petrol and diesel, as well as being used as an ingredient in many foods.

Ideas to Help

* Never buy products made up of tropical hardwoods e.g. mahogany and teak. It is better to buy only pine, oak, ash or beech because they can be replaced.

* Garden and flower shops sometimes sell rainforest orchids that have been imported, although endangered ones have been protected since 1973. If you buy an orchid, check that it has been grown in Britain.

* Some parrots and macaws are unfortunately still imported. If you want a parrot as a pet, make sure it has been hatched in Britain.

* Eating a beefburger may be helping to destroy the rainforest! Most burgers in Britain are made from European cattle. However, the cattle are often fed on soya beans and a lot of that comes from Brazil where large areas of forest have been destroyed to make soya fields. Before buying a burger, ask where the cattle came from and what they were fed on. Try a veggie burger for a change!

Pollution

The air, water and soil of habitats all over the world have been, and are still being polluted in many different ways. This pollution affects the health of living things. Air is damaged by car and lorry fumes, and power stations create acid rain which destroys entire forests and lakes. When fossil fuels i.e. oil, gas and coal are burned to provide energy for lighting, cooking etc. they form polluting gases.

Oils spills pollute sea water and kill marine life; chemical waste from factories and sewage works, and artificial fertilisers from farmland, pollute river water, killing wildlife and spreading disease.

The careless or deliberate dumping of litter in the environment is not only unsightly but dangerous for wildlife

too.

Ideas to Help

- * Don't drop litter.

- * Use less energy by switching off lights when rooms are not in use, not wasting hot water, not overheating rooms and not boiling more water than necessary when making a cup of tea!

- * Use a bicycle or walk instead of using a car for short trips.

- * If you spot pollution, such as oil on the beach, report it to the local council. If you suspect a stream is polluted, report it to the local Environmental Health Officer.

- * If you use chlorine-based bleach or detergents containing phosphates you are contributing to water pollution.

Try to buy 'environmentally-friendly' products which don't contain these.

- * Organic foods are produced without the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides, preventing these pollutants from contaminating habitats and entering the food chain.

The Ozone Layer

Fifteen to thirty miles above the Earth lies the stratosphere, a broad band of gases and one of these gases is ozone. It's only a small part of the stratosphere but very important because it prevents too many of the sun's ultra violet rays from reaching us. Too many ultra violet rays can give us skin cancer and destroy plankton, the important microscopic life in the sea. In the 1980s it was discovered that 'holes' were appearing in the ozone layer above the Antarctic and Arctic.

CFCs, chlorofluorocarbons, are gases used in the manufacture of aerosols and fridges, are believed have been responsible for destroying the ozone layer. In 1987 the Montreal Protocol was introduced and later signed up to by 120 countries who agreed to half their CFC emissions by the year 2000.

We now know that apart from destroying the ozone layer, CFCs contribute significantly to the greenhouse effect. Even though they have been banned, their long atmospheric lifetime of 20 to 100 years will continue to contribute to the greenhouse effect until they finally are broken down by the sun.

Ideas to Help

* If you know of anyone getting rid of an old fridge, tell them that the CFCs can be drained out and recycled - contact the local council and they will dispose of the fridge safely. New fridges do not contain CFCs.

The Greenhouse Effect



Certain gases in the atmosphere, mainly carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and fluorocarbons, act like the glass in a greenhouse, allowing sunlight through to heat the Earth's surface but trapping some of the heat as it radiates back into space. Without this the Earth would be frozen and lifeless. However, owing to Man's activities, 'greenhouse gases' are building up in the atmosphere, causing a greater amount of heat to be reflected back to Earth. The result is an increase in average world temperatures and is already causing more droughts, flooding and extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes.

Ideas to Help

* Don't waste electricity or heat. Electricity and heating are produced by burning coal, oil and gas and this action gives off carbon dioxide.

* Car fumes produce carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide - so try to cut down on car journeys if possible. Use a bike or walk - it's good exercise for you too!

* Recycle as much of your waste as you can. Methane, the most effective 'greenhouse gas', is released into the air as the rubbish in landfill sites rots.

*Cut down on how much meat you eat. Meat consumption has risen and farm animals, especially cattle produce methane. Not only that but they are frequently fed soya which is often grown on land where rainforests have been destroyed. We need the rainforests to absorb carbon dioxide and remove it from the air.

Endangered Habitats and their Wildlife

Wild habitats all over the world are fast disappearing. Forests are being cut down, rivers and seas polluted, heathlands built on, hedgerows pulled up, ponds filled in - the destruction seems endless. As the habitats decrease, so do their communities of animals and plants. Habitat destruction is one of the main reasons why many species face extinction. Habitats are commonly split up and animals can't get from one part to another, unless wildlife 'corridors' are provided. Other reasons for their demise include the hunting of animals and collection of plants. Now they are facing a new threat, that of climate change.

A report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) shows nearly one third of amphibians, more than one in eight birds and nearly a quarter of mammals are threatened with extinction. 869 species are already described as being extinct or extinct in the wild, i.e. disappeared from the earth forever.

Ideas to Help

* In many countries souvenirs made from rare wildlife are available - never buy shells, coral or things made from elephant ivory, rhino horn or cat skin etc.

* Try to reduce your 'carbon footprint'.

* Remember that British habitats and wildlife are under threat too. The destruction of wood land, pollution of rivers and ponds, the use of pesticides and herbicides have all contributed to the reduction in the amount of wildlife in Britain. Many animals and plants are endangered e.g. red squirrels, otters, barn owls, golden eagles, natterjack toads, many species of butterflies and dragonflies, orchids - to name just a few. If you have a garden at home, you could transform it into a mini nature reserve for wildlife. The same could be done in

your school grounds.

Here are just a few ideas to create a wildlife garden:-

1. Make a pond. Even A small pond will attract frogs and toads etc. Birds and foxes may use it for drinking.
2. Make a wildflower meadow. Wildflower plants and seeds may be bought from garden suppliers and, if planted correctly, a colourful meadow will result, attracting birds, butterflies and other insects.
3. Provide logs and stones and allow a few autumn leaves to remain lying around. These provide shelter for minibeasts and perhaps small mammals such as shrews and mice. An over-neat garden will not be attractive to wildlife.
4. Feed the birds during winter and put up nest boxes for robins and blue tits etc. to use in spring.
5. If your garden is big enough, you could plant a small wood. Always grow native trees such as oak, ash or birch - these attract more insects than foreign trees.
6. Hedgehogs are useful to have in the garden as they eat slugs. Encourage them to stay by providing them with tinned cat or dog meat, water and a safe place to hibernate in winter, such as a pile of logs, stuffed with hay and leaves.
7. Avoid using chemical sprays in the garden - some of these can be poisonous to wildlife. It's best to let the birds eat the cabbage-munching caterpillars, the hedgehogs and toads deal with the lettuce-loving slugs and the ladybirds dine on the rose-ravaging greenfly!



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