

A new generation to save the planet

The environment becomes a campus crusade for the '90s

By REKHA BALU

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Echoing the "Think Globally, Act Locally" philosophy, today's student environmental groups are scaling down national issues to a campus size.

Earth Day 1990 jolted students out of their apathy, spurring a rebirth of environmental activism on campus. Campaigns to recycle everything from newsprint to plastics are now common practices nationwide.

But students are realizing that recycling programs are only the first step. They now see the university as an opportunity to create a model society — one free of pollution and waste.

But where to begin? Should student environmentalists push for national legislation to curb pollution or should they lobby for a diverse environmental curriculum at their school? Do they concentrate on national issues or clean their own campuses? The future's wide open.

Campus Crusaders

Campus groups serve as some of the most powerful grassroots forces in the environmental movement because they harness the potent energy of student activism.

The largest national student-run organization is the Student Environmental Action Coalition, based at the U. of North Carolina. In three years the group has organized three national conferences and attracted 1,200 campuses as members.

SEAC's main function is to create a network of students and lobby as the student voice in Washington, D.C. It has organized campaigns to save America's forests, to increase accountability of corporations for their actions and to protest President Bush's national energy policy.

But some students believe such large campaigns overshadow more immediate community problems, and argue that local issues should take priority over a national agenda.

"We spend so much time looking at problems internationally, but God forbid we look in our own backyards," said Michael Young, a member of the Berkeley Environmental Justice Coalition.

But campus groups that choose to attack local issues have discovered several routes. After targeting priority issues for the community, the groups educate the campus with speakers, workshops, or even new classes. The effort can evolve into a partnership with the community to help lobby for environmental change.

"It's the issues that drive people's desire (to be a part of the environmental movement)," said Randy Viscio, national outreach coordinator for SEAC.

Other efforts to provide colleges with continuity in the environmental agenda come from national organizations.

"(National organizations) are missing the boat if they don't hit the campuses," said John Lawler, founder of the Sierra Club chapter at Humboldt State U. in California. "Students are



TYLER MALLORY, THE EAGLE, AMERICAN U.

Putting an end to apathy: Brian Robertson, right, signs up with Benson Chiles for PIRG national conference events.

the most active, interested people with time on their hands."

By creating a chapter of a well-known national organization, Lawler said he utilized interest that already existed instead of starting from scratch.

He emphasized that beginning a chapter does not restrict groups to the national agenda, but allows them to try a variety of projects using the national name as a springboard.

The National Wildlife Federation tapped into the college potential two years ago with COOL IT!, a program to address how campuses can reduce their carbon dioxide and methane production as a solution to global warming. COOL IT! has evolved into a campus outreach to help students organize anything

classes, Orr said it is the administration's and faculty's responsibility to educate the students.

He advocates that universities revamp their curriculum to ensure the "ecological literacy" of the campus, with interdisciplinary studies including sustainable agriculture, forestry, solar technologies, eco-engineering and eco-economics.

"Most college administrators see the environment as an issue on a long list of issues," he said. "But it should be the lens through which we ought to look at poverty, the new economic order, population growth and other issues."

Keniry said universities must make learning more relevant by shifting course and classroom structures to include environmental issues and practical problem-solving.

"...if we don't save the environment, we don't save ourselves."

— Randy Viscio

from recycling programs to food service analysis as well as networking of different campuses together.

"We're very campus-based, campus-focused," said Julian Keniry, environmental audit specialist for the NWF. "We try to translate regional issues to the campus level."

The Role of the University

Unfortunately, identifying with a community they belong to for only four years is difficult for most students. So faculty must care about the same issues to provide the continuity in projects and classes, said David Orr, professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College.

Although students can initiate their own

"Campuses can be blueprints for sustainable societies," Keniry said.

Often, knowledge gained in the classroom provides incentive for action.

Magdalena Ávila, a U. of California, Berkeley, graduate student and avid activist for several campus environmental groups, was inspired to help found a student environmental group after taking a Berkeley class, "Race, Poverty and the Environment." The group, Nindakin, has started its own class addressing the connection of racial poverty to the environment. Grades are based on field work with community groups.

"It's a good way for students to understand that they live in a community and aren't in an ivory tower," said Clem Clay, a class facilitator.

Political Action

Large-scale lobbying groups also have harnessed college momentum.

The Campus Green Network began 18 months ago to establish a Green political voice on college campuses. Almost 300 schools are members of this national network, a sister organization with the Green Party. The Campus Greens have asked universities to divest from companies with poor environmental records, created plans for recycling programs and initiated student-run environmental classes, said Jason Kirkpatrick, national coordinator of the Campus Greens.

The idea of political parties based on environmental issues has caught on in student governments also. Students at the U. of Michigan formed the Action party and nominated a candidate to run on an environmental platform several years ago. Today, a representative from the Environmental Commission, an umbrella organization for campus environmental groups, is a member of the UM student government.

Efforts to lobby for issues through legislation have appealed to more students because of their immediate impact. The Public Interest Research Group, the creation of consumer advocate Ralph Nader, is a 20-year-old effort to increase participation in the political process.

"The people who get involved are those who want to see the results of what they're doing," said Andy MacDonald, PIRG national campus director. Today PIRG has 90 campus chapters that allow students to focus on a narrow range of issues.

But whether students decide to get involved in their classes, in their communities or in Congress, Viscio said it is important they take action. "Student activists realize that if we don't save the environment, we don't save ourselves," Viscio said.