

## **Earth Day, Earth Year, Earth Life**

by David Weintraub

I grew up in a lush forest of lampposts, telephone poles and traffic signs. My first sign of spring was the “blossoming” of crab grass between cracks of the sidewalk. Fortunately my parents were teachers and they had the summer off. As a child we often spent a few weeks or more in the Adirondacks, a wonderland for a boy whose first notion of a mountain was Mount Trashmore a few blocks away from where we lived. In the mountains the world changed radically for me -- hiking in the woods, stalking deer, picking butternuts and wild raspberries. The hum of non-stop traffic, car pollution and cement disappeared, at least for a little while. The first Earth day arrived when I was a child. A movement to preserve and protect the earth would have meant little to me living in Brooklyn, but it suddenly made perfect sense in a paradise of unspoiled natural habitats.

As the new Executive Director at ECO, Western North Carolina’s Environmental and Conservation Organization, I dedicate my first column to Earth Day and what it stands for, whether we consider ourselves environmentalists, or just adhere to the common sense notion that what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves.

The consequences of forgetting mankind’s mark on our environment are all around us. According to the EPA, the garbage we create each year produces over 229 million tons of wastes, or approximately 4.4 pounds per person per day. That's a 260 percent increase in tonnage from the 88 million tons of waste produced in 1960. Chemical fertilizers that make our grass greener and our flowers brighter get into our streams and rivers and adversely effect our drinking water and the ecosystem that depends on it.

ECO’s credo has always been “take care of your own backyard.” Starting with our backyard, how do we bring Earth Day into our daily lives, one small step at a time?

1. Stormwater runoff causes serious damage to our clear mountain streams and our drinking water. As fields and woodlands are replaced by impermeable surfaces like roofs and driveways, parking lots and roads, water that used to absorb into the ground now flows into the nearest waterway, carrying with it toxic fertilizers, pesticides, household chemicals and more, damaging our most precious resource, our waterways. **WHAT CAN YOU DO?** Minimize the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides (there are non-toxic substitutes readily available. Contact Cooperative Extension for more information.) Dispose of pet wastes in the trash. Inspect your septic system and drain regularly. Wash your car at a commercial carwash where water is treated and recycled. For more information visit [www.wncstormwater.org](http://www.wncstormwater.org).

2. Household Hazardous Waste can cause serious injury to family members and the local ecosystem and if disposed of improperly, to sanitation workers, streams and more. The best option is to look for non-toxic alternatives when possible. Second best choice is to use up the material or give it away to people who can use it. A special Electronics and Household Hazard Waste Recycling Day is planned for Henderson County residents on Saturday, May 19 from 9-2

at the Old Public Health Building, 1347 Spartanburg Highway. Materials that may be disposed of at this time include computer equipment, lawn, garden and crop products, paints and more. For a complete list of accepted items, contact the ECO office (692-0385) or look for upcoming public service ads in this newspaper.

3. Pressure Treated Wood can cause problems to people and the environment. Pressure-treated lumber contains a form of cyanide to keep pests away. Kids who play on backyard jungle gyms and decks made of such material can develop rashes and skin infections. Cedar wood is a naturally pest-resistant alternative that, while more expensive, is a kinder-gentler option that will stand the test of time.

### Inside Your Home

3. Lower Your Contributions to Your Landfill: Nearly 100 billion plastic, paper and Styrofoam cups end up in American landfills and incinerators every year. Human health is the real loser when it comes to our consumption of such products, which are typically made from petroleum-based plastics, hazardous foam or chlorine-bleached virgin paper. By using washable dishes and utensils or compostable disposable dishware if necessary, you insure that more of our land can be preserved, rather than become a dumping ground. Remember, there is no tax-deduction for donating to your local landfill, but a huge environmental benefit by cutting back!

4. Replace old incandescent bulbs for high-efficiency bulbs. The economic and environmental benefits of energy-efficient lighting to the individual consumer and to society are substantial. If adopted across the United States, energy-efficient lighting would save consumers and businesses approximately \$18 billion annually on electricity bills. Annual energy demand for lighting would be reduced by the equivalent of what is generated by thirty nuclear power plants or up to 80 coal burning power plants. Over 158 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions and 5,700 pounds of airborne mercury emissions would be eliminated. Bottomline, you can save money and protect the environment if you switch. Bulbs are available at ECO and at local hardware suppliers.

5. Eating Locally. Farmers who sell directly to local consumers need not give priority to packing, shipping and shelf life issues and can instead select, grow and harvest crops to ensure peak qualities of freshness, nutrition and taste. Eating local also means eating seasonally, a practice much in tune with Mother Nature. Local food is often safer, since it requires less chemical pesticides and it helps in the fight against global warming. The average fresh food item on our dinner table travels 1,500 miles to get there. Buying locally-produced food eliminates the need for all that fuel-guzzling transportation. And of course, eating locally is helping the local economy. Local farmers have been devastated by recent weather patterns. I'm sure they can use your support for the produce that wasn't damaged by our Easter cold snap.

*[Editor's Note: ECO Notes is provided by the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a nonprofit organization dedicated to clean air, clean water, recreation, and the conservation and preservation of the natural heritage and resources of the mountain region. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or on-line at [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org)]*