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The War on Plastic:

How Student Environmentalists Are Combatting the Human Footprint

Mimi Levine's morning routine isn't too different from other college students', but it comes with a twist. When she wakes up, she brushes her teeth with her homemade toothpaste, puts on the deodorant she creates using online recipes, and, if she doesn't have time for a shower, pats her hair down with a concoction of cornstarch and cocoa powder — and that's before she starts her day. She has a slew of unusual practices, such as upcycling old chopsticks to use as stirrers, collecting wasted straws from restaurants and creating art out of litter. Levine has been called "quirky," but everything she does has a purpose: to reduce the amount of waste she produces.

Levine, who is from Colorado, isn't alone, but people like her are few and far between. Only about [34.5 percent of waste in the U.S. is recycled](#), and the average American generates about 4.35 pounds of waste per day — over 1,500 pounds per person each year. This statistic worries Levine, who calls plastic her "worst enemy."

But Levine wasn't always conscious of how her actions impacted the environment. It wasn't until she studied abroad in Copenhagen that she realized just how far behind the U.S. was ecologically. "[My roommates in Denmark] were so surprised that I didn't compost and that it wasn't a normal thing for families in the U.S. to do, and they were surprised about just little things I'd do that I didn't even realize were wasteful," Levine says.

Levine began researching how the human footprint affects the planet. What she found were harrowing statistics, such as the fact that [one hamburger patty uses as much water as two months of showering](#) and that Americans use enough straws in one day to fill

up 125 school busses, according to [NPS](#). “I can’t even imagine one bus full of straws,” Levine says. “How is this possible and how is this OK? It’s crazy to think that there’s an island out in ocean that’s twice size of Texas made completely out of plastic, and I just don’t understand how people are OK with it.”

Levine knew she needed to make a change, and she found her answer in the form of a blog. [Trash is for Tossers](#), run by New York City local Lauren Singer, taught Levine about zero-waste lifestyles, where the goal is to recycle or upcycle everything a person uses so that they won’t have to throw anything away. The blog inspired Levine and Singer’s thousands of other followers to try new recipes and find alternatives to everyday products such as shampoo and conditioner, toothbrushes, laundry detergent and even makeup.

Singer’s blog also inspired KU freshman Jacqueline Ball to make the switch to a less wasteful lifestyle. Like Levine, Ball makes many of her own products. Though Ball says she prefers using natural recipes because she likes knowing what’s in the products she uses, she liked knowing she was making a difference. “I personally feel like it is our responsibility as humans to take care of the earth we have been given, because once we ruin it, there’s no going back,” Ball says.

It’s this sense of responsibility that keeps student environmentalists looking for new ways to reduce their human footprint. It’s not always easy, and the results aren’t always great. Levine struggled with her shampoo recipe for months before finally giving up and buying regular bottles from the store when she was no longer able to run a brush through her hair. She’s also had her fair share of trouble with her deodorant recipe, which sometimes gives her a painful rash. She even opted for becoming a vegetarian for

environmental reasons, though her gluten allergy already severely restricts her diet. But Levine sees the bigger picture, and she knows it's worth it.

Ball, on the other hand, says the difficulty of maintaining her lifestyle while in college has more to do with economic and structural reasons. Not only does she not have the money to pay for more expensive ecofriendly options, but as a student in a scholarship hall she also relies on KU Housing for many of her needs, and she knows that they do not have the same environmental standards that she does. For instance, she has little control on how much energy her Scholarship Hall uses and doesn't get a say in what happens to food waste at the end of the day. While restricted to a university setting, she's resigned to put up with a lifestyle that she knows isn't great for the environment.

This is a problem many college students face when they try to switch to sustainable practices — they aren't always equipped for the task at hand and it may seem impractical or impossible. “There are different levels in which we can act but we are simultaneously constrained by the infrastructure in which we live,” says Peggy Schultz, an associate specialist in KU's Environmental Studies Program. “It is easy to turn off the lights when you leave a room. It is not so easy to reduce your use of energy if the apartment or house you are living in is not well insulated.”

And then there's the issue about how products are packaged and shipped. Most of our food comes wrapped in plastic and is transported to stores in cardboard boxes that are wrapped in more plastic. Not to mention a lot of our hygienic and medical products come in bottles and tubes that aren't easily disposed of. In fact, only [5 percent of the plastics we produce can be recycled](#). The rest ends up in landfills or, worse, in natural environments such as the ocean. These are the things that keep people like Levine scrambling to find

alternatives to the everyday American lifestyle, some of which simply aren't feasible. Byron Caminero-Santangelo, an environmental humanities professor at KU, says this is why it's also important to remember that while individual actions matter, environmentalism on a political level is still important. "Even if you cut down on the amount you drive, the way is that the oil industries works in ways that oil works around the world, that's not going to have that much of an effect," Caminero-Santangelo says. "What will have an effect are environmental regulations on the industry."

So what can students do about the bigger problems? Caminero-Santangelo lists voting and staying active in one's community as two big ways to help resolve larger structural problems. Senior Emily Hornbeck says that another way to prove a point is voicing concerns to companies you buy things from. "If more people are complaining to companies and telling them they don't want to buy these products because they come in plastic bottles, then I think they'd be more inclined to find different ways of doing it," Hornbeck said. The same could be said for products shipped in plastic or how companies dispose of waste.

In a world full of environmental issues, Hornbeck says that every act matters, pointing out that if people didn't individually do things that were bad for the environment, then the environment would be much better off. What matters is that people know the impact they have and actively work toward creating a cleaner environment. Levine couldn't agree more and says that even simple changes in habit can make a big difference, such as eliminating shopping with plastic bags. "Even when you throw them away, they don't go away," Levine said. "Those plastic bags are still on this earth today, floating around in the ocean or in the stomach of a bird. It's the things are so easily avoidable that won't go away."

While most students don't go out of their way to create their own products or cut down drastically on their plastic consumption, it doesn't mean they don't care. Caminero-Santangelo says Millennials are more aware of environmental issues than any generation before them. Enrollment in the environmental studies program is higher than ever and students are finding new ways to reach out through programs or on their own. "I am always inspired by what students are willing to do, whether that means they are teaching kindergartners about insects or fifth graders about snakes, working on prairie restorations or helping grow food for the hungry," Schultz says. It may not be making your own shampoo, but hey — it's still making a difference.