

How does your love and appreciation for Earth show up in your daily life?

By Grace Gonzalez

I remember a time when I used to race through the short, buttercup-strewn undergrowth of these very woods, tripping over my tiny legs in a rush to find the perfect tree stump to climb on so that I could lay claim to all the land. Now, instead of a welding twig scepter, my hands are encased in thick gardening gloves, and instead of looking for pretty flowers or curiously shaped nuts, I'm on a search for any and all forms of litter.

It was funny; in my youth, I'd never noticed any trash, but now we were finding more crushed soda cans and tangled grocery bags than we could count. I quickly find myself balancing atop a water-slicked log and ducking under thorny bushes to snag even the smallest piece of plastic, as if every contribution to the black garbage bag would be paid for in gold. This puzzled me, because nothing about this process was particularly rewarding (besides the occasional runner stopping to thank us for our service), and what's more was when the team leader gave a thirty minute warning, I realized that I didn't want to go. Then was the moment that it hit me. I'd known all along that what I'd been doing, picking up trash at a local stream, wasn't going to change the course of my life, or the life of anyone that I know. But someday, perhaps years from now, a fish might be spared from suffocating after swimming into this plastic bag. Maybe, I just saved a deer from cutting its hoof on a piece of shattered glass. What if a squirrel won't choke because of the candy wrapper I picked up? I'll never truly know, but I can hold on to the hope that many wildlife were saved because of my actions.

Unfortunately, the tranquil little creek where we hosted the clean-up doesn't account for even a fraction of the land waste in our community, not to mention the millions of people and animals around the globe who are affected by pollution. It's true; we live in such a sheltered society, and it's hard to share the perspectives of people who don't have access to the things we take for granted, like fresh water, air, and soil. But there are things we can do. As a member of Students for Environmental Action, I've been part of campaigns that encourage composting, recycling, and buying sustainably sourced products within our school and town. The passion that my peers have for the environment, along with their drive to find solutions to the growing litter problem, is what gives me hope as I turn in my gloves and take one last glance at the serene stream. I know that there is still more trash to be picked up in that forest, in Virginia, and in the world. For now, at least, we have made a difference, and we'll continue advocating for change and setting initiatives until we reach our goal of a clean, unpolluted Earth.