

Chapter Chair Chat, September 2022

On Being an Environmentalist

By Carole Mintzer, Chapter Chair

There's nothing like a summertime visit with family in the Midwest to snap me out of my Central Coast bubble and connect with the rest of the world. In my bubble, people are protective of the environment, concerned about resource consumption, and seek environmental justice. I know, my bubble may be different from your bubble, but if you live here, you surely encounter many of these sentiments in the people you know.

Alex and I try to live a life that is gentle on our Earth. Since forever, we have combined car trips for shopping so we don't do a lot of one-off driving trips. We started taking our own bags to the grocery store in the mid 1990s. We set up a compost bin at our house in the late 1990s. Sometime in the 2000s, we started buying 100% recycled toilet paper and paper towels. The list goes on, and we are not perfect by any means – for example, we take airplanes to visit parts of the world that are not easily accessible any other way. But for the most part, it seems that doing things to lighten our impact on the environment is just part of our DNA.

So, every summer when my family gathers at cabins along a lake in northern Michigan for “fish camp,” I am reminded that we, as a society, have a long way to go. Things that seem natural and easy to us are still a struggle for others. Here's one example. For several years, I have gently suggested that everyone staying in a cabin use the plates, glasses, and silverware found in their cabin rather than paper plates and plastic utensils. We model this behavior in camp to little avail. Out come the paper and plastic products, used once and thrown away. I shouldn't even mention the presence of foam plates and bowls this summer. Double sigh... I know, I know, washing dishes is something you might want to avoid during vacation, and the cabins don't have dishwashers, but it's really not that difficult.

It's not as though my family isn't aware of climate change and things that people can do to be kind to the environment. My brother has solar panels at his house and several of my relatives drive fuel-efficient cars. There just seems to be an unwillingness to make lifestyle changes if they are perceived as burdensome. My sister just replaced her old gas furnace with a new gas furnace because that's what she knows and it made for a quick and easy decision. Researching



electric heat pumps wasn't in the cards. My nephew apologetically told me he bought a hot red gas-guzzling pickup truck because he got a great deal on it.

After fish camp, we helped my sister move out of the house she and her husband lived in for 44 years. I'll just start by saying there were no constraints on consumerism in their household so it was a big house full of stuff. One kitchen drawer had over 30 small screwdrivers and multiple box cutters and wrenches. Another drawer had at least a dozen Maglites. My brother-in-law had a barn where he built and rebuilt cars. He was really good for the economy. We counted nine fans in one room, along with multiple TV sets, battery packs for electric tools, and every tool imaginable – often more than one of each. It was all nicely organized, but so, so much stuff.

I'm not sure what the thought processes were that led to such an accumulation of stuff. Clearly there was no checking to see if a tool was already in the barn before buying another. Perhaps the shiny new item in the store was irresistible. Maybe it was a great bargain so why not get one more. I doubt any thought was given to where the product was made, under what circumstances, or how many resources were consumed to make and ship the product. Again, we're not perfect, but as environmentalists, we think about these things and make our purchases accordingly. We rehabilitate what we can before throwing things out and if we have a functional item, no matter how old, we continue to use it. It can be difficult at times – the lure of new items is strong – but we usually manage to rein in the impulse and move on.

Just like every summer before, this summer brought another reminder of how far we have to go to get to a carbon emissions-free world and concern that we will not get there in time to avoid the worst of climate change. It will take continued education, conversation, and government support to get us there. I love my family. I know there are siblings and nibblings who share my concerns and I think eventually, more will come on board.

In the meantime, let's all commit to doing what we can. Make lifestyle changes, reduce consumption of resources, cherish the outdoors, and ask our legislators to support bills that will improve our environment.

Until next time, stay safe, get outdoors, and be a proud environmentalist,

Carole