

Reflective Essay: Leadership in Environmental Sustainability

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Though I've always felt a strong connection to our natural landscapes, I felt that until my teenage years, I didn't have an action-oriented approach to my environmentally conscious mentality. For example, I would hear about environmental issues in the media, at school, or even witness them first-hand, and I would discuss and reflect upon this within my inner circle; however, I felt my influence could never extend beyond this.

My social organization, the Next Generation Naturalist Program (Next Gen), was my first shifting point in my approach to becoming an environmental leader. It helped me learn how to put knowledge into practice; I observed role models inspiring me in the way that I wanted to inspire others. Many of the individuals involved in this group pursued behaviours in their day-to-day life that demonstrated what they stood for, such as eating vegan and purchasing environmentally friendly products. Witnessing this inspired me to learn more about veganism and fast fashion and later make changes to my dietary and purchasing decisions. These leaders focused on their passions in a hopeful and change-driven way, rather than complaining about the issues at hand. During the time I spent around them over the past few years, I enjoyed observing their body language, tones of voice, phrasing, creativity, open-mindedness, and knowledge. The instructors and mentors allowed me to realize that leading by example can be just as beneficial as being delegated to a leadership position and can give us the confidence to find an action-oriented approach.

After I better understood how environmental leadership is formed and executed, I saw how this impacted my hands-on work within employment and volunteering. In the summer of 2022, I worked for Rider Ventures, a contracting company based in Coldstream, BC, which focused on fuel management and first response. I then became an initial attack

firefighter for the BC Wildfire Service in the summer of 2023. Managing wildfires and floods gave me the capacity to understand how communities and environments can be helpless to natural disasters and climate change if they are not able to be proactive. An inability to be proactive generally stems from either a lack of knowledge or a lack of resources.

Structural protection is a primary technique for wildfire proactivity. It is the act of deploying sprinklers, pumps, and bladders, and performing fuel removal to protect structures. When first arriving at an endangered property, the first responders will initially conduct a triage on the property which determines its priority of attention by assessing how difficult it is to save. If the property has too much fuel in its surrounding zones, such as hedges, firewood, uncleaned gutters, or trees with heavy ladder fuels, then it will be labelled 'Black' which indicates it's 'too difficult to save'. Instances like these have taught me the importance of knowledge and resource sharing. Rider Ventures teaches the S100 Basic Fire Suppression and Safety course to neighbourhoods, and when emergency procedures and preventative measures such as those taught in this course are given ahead of time, the likelihood of disaster dramatically decreases.

Another memorable experience I had was volunteering to teach elementary school children about storm drain pollution. Children's brains are mouldable; if they can be taught how to see the world through a sustainability lens from a young age, then they are more likely to carry these behaviours through their lives. A Next Gen member and I taught the eight-year-olds that pollutants such as grass fertilizer can enter our natural water sources through storm drains and affect our ecosystems and food chains. We were amazed by their intuitive questions, focus, and surprise during our presentation. Some of them even

mentioned they were going to tell their parents because they didn't think they knew that their lawns could be harmful. We felt that the children took away impactful knowledge from us, and we left feeling equally inspired by their pure intents and enthusiasm.

Taking all these environmental leadership experiences into account, I am a firm believer in practice. I played soccer when I was younger and wanted to play for Team Canada. As I got older and investigated opportunities such as playing for varsity teams and the Okanagan team, I came to understand the immense time commitment in the everyday lives of people who pursue these things. One would think they've practiced so much that they must not need to practice anymore, but there is always room for improvement. To translate, my environmental leadership skills grew with practice. After these experiences I feel more confident in my ability to take an action-oriented approach to sustainability and motivating individuals in my community. I make a conscious effort to incorporate sustainable practices and knowledge development into my everyday life as I recognize that I can always improve. For example, when I took the Introduction to Environmental Studies and Sustainability (GEOG 1100) course at TRU, I assumed I would know most of the course content already; however, I was thankfully humbled by the expansive community history discussed in relation to sustainability and the national and global scale statistics, goals, and challenges.

Looking forward, I will more confidently incorporate sustainability into my career in business and entrepreneurship. I see areas where I can take action to contribute to a more enjoyable and healthier planet for myself and future generations through business means. For example, I would use biodegradable or reusable packaging if I were to use online sales

and take measures to be carbon neutral. I hope to set standards at my workplaces such as recycling and composting, as well as creating garden boxes green spaces. I hope my leadership can shine through in non-judgemental ways as I share practices and knowledge with others on the positive, tangible impacts they can have on the world around them and on future generations.