

The Influence of the Individual

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The ocean, humanity's most precious and indispensable resource, is under threat due to the worsening effects of climate change. Providing us with the air we breathe, climate regulation, transportation, medicine, and food, the ocean is crucial to supporting life on Earth (NOAA). Human industrial activity has led to an exponential increase in carbon dioxide levels in Earth's atmosphere, which is absorbed into the sea. Though the ocean has been able to self-stabilize for centuries with its methodical buffering system, the relentless production of excess CO₂ has left it vulnerable to disaster. Ocean warming, ocean acidification, and material pollution, three phenomena directly caused by human industry, have wreaked havoc on this essential ecosystem. In the past thirty years, over fifty percent of coral reefs around the globe have been bleached and subsequently abandoned by marine life (SECORE). Over thirty percent of marine habitats have been destroyed, leaving juvenile marine life, as well as entire aquatic communities, unprotected and forced to relocate (UNESCO). Over 15 marine species, including the Caribbean monk seal and the Christmas sandpiper, have been extinguished from Earth permanently (Harrington). If these rates of destruction persist, by 2100 over half of existing marine life may be lost due to the consequences of human activity (World Wildlife). At the rate in which litter and other pollutants are entering the ocean, it is predicted that by 2050 there will be more plastic materials than fish in the sea (Harrington). Fortunately, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs plans to attack the causes of these increasing statistics as part of their sustainable development goals program. Goal number fourteen, "Life Below Water", strives to develop more sustainable ways to conserve and protect the marine ecosystem (United Nations). Globally, significant strides have been made to better preserve our seas and

prevent unnecessary pollution. In America, multiple states have begun issuing bans on certain plastic materials and products containing particular chemicals deemed harmful to aquatic life. However, there is still an immense amount of work needed to be done to further protect our ocean. Fortunately, there are numerous ways we, as individuals, can do our part in supporting this vital goal.

Education is both the simplest and most important step to take in becoming environmentally conscious. It is crucial that people take the time to research how marine life is essential to humankind and familiarize themselves with the devastating results that can occur if our oceans continue to decline. Developing an understanding and respect for the ocean and its incredible properties will only motivate people to take action. Recycling is a straightforward yet extremely productive way to do this. The most common items found in the oceans are paper goods, plastic, aluminum, and glass (Jabril). Fortunately, the majority of these items can be recycled. A simple search for local recycling laws will reveal exactly how to dispose of these items. While it may be as simple as tossing these used items in a large blue bin, it's important to understand the required conditions these products must be in. Any food or beverage residue still remaining on any of these materials will contaminate the whole batch of recyclables and deem them unsalvageable. However, once the requirements are understood and respected, proper recycling can save numerous resources, from energy conservation to avoiding the use of raw materials. Spreading this awareness to friends and family will increase recycling rates across households, forming a favorable chain reaction.

Mindful consumerism is another essential element in transitioning to environmentally friendly habits. Investing in reusable items, such as metal water bottles,

wooden cutlery, and fabric shopping bags, will prevent the unnecessary purchasing of single use plastics, which will keep these products out of the oceans and landfills, and will save the consumer money. Switching to items made from sustainable brands, like clothing or food companies, is an easy and productive way to support sustainable corporations. These lifestyle changes can make a significant difference in preventing pollution from ending up in our oceans.

Converting to environmentally conscious behaviors is simpler than one may assume. Though changing human behavior on a global scale is an intimidating endeavor, and one that will most likely take decades, beginning with the individual and spreading knowledge to others will begin this essential process. Simple actions, like choosing to walk instead of drive, and remembering to turn off the lights when you leave a room, are all proactive ways to preserve our planet and its natural resources. The ocean and the fascinating life it holds are all in danger, and must be defended before it becomes too late. While the phrase is cliché, it holds immense truth: even as one person, you can create a world of difference.

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