

The Earth Steward

I was eight, covered in sand, with seawater in my hair, when I first felt a sense of responsibility to protect the glorious planet we inhabit. I had learned about recycling in school and my parents had drilled the evils of littering into my pigtailed head, but until I visited South Padre Island, I had not fully grasped how my actions could impact the Earth.

My family and I visited Turtle Inc., a sea turtle rehabilitation center on the island, and I was shocked that the trash of beach-goers was the cause of suffering for nearly all the creatures. I read the plaques on the tanks, horrified that bottles, flip-flops and even the plastic rings in soda packs, had been their enemies. The guides told me about turtles that had swallowed plastic bags, nearly choking to death, and of others that had been caught and left vulnerable to attack by discarded fishing nets. As I watched Allison, a turtle with only one flipper, maneuvering in circles around her small tank, I realized that I had to do something. When my family returned to the beach later that afternoon I scooped up all the garbage I could find, spending hours walking along the beach and depositing my finds in rusty trash cans. I continued this practice for my remaining days at South Padre, but did not stop my environmentally friendly habits when I got back to Austin. I made sure that the plastic from the soda packs were cut into little pieces; I became an avid recycler; I scolded my friends when they dropped candy wrappers on the grass and picked up the trash of misguided strangers, everywhere I went. Now, ten years later, my habits have not changed - I have glimpsed what happens when people do not protect the earth, and I want to prevent any further destruction.

The sea turtles opened my eyes to the fragility of the planet, but I know that not everyone is so enlightened. This means that I do not only my part to preserve the Earth, but I feel responsibility for the parts of others too; whether it means educating the kids I babysit about eco-friendly habits or picking up trash in the school parking lot. With the understanding that the earth's resources are dwindling, I take pride in coming up with creative ways to conserve Earth's precious gifts to us. Last summer, for instance, I cut strips of aluminum from old soda cans and made the colorful metal into a variety of earrings that I gave to friends and family members. I have repurposed bottle caps too, making necklaces and bracelets with what others deem as "trash." This summer I plan to extend my designs further, motivating others to be eco-conscious.

Three weeks ago, I visited South Padre again. Desperate to see the turtles that had so affected me, I visited Turtle Inc. on my very first day. I saw Allison, and was glad to see that she now, ten years later, swims alongside other resident turtles with the help of a prosthetic rudder, the first successful one of its kind. Though Allison is a victim of a predator attack, the majority of the sea turtles at Turtle Inc. are there because of human negligence.

Hours later I saw beer bottles and food wrappers littering the beach – the aftermath of the prior week's Spring Breakers. I picked up all the trash I saw, feeling a responsibility to the turtles, just as I had when I was eight. Back on the mainland, I watch the "turtle cam" on the organization's website occasionally, and I look forward to seeing the gentle creatures again this summer. Being an Earth steward is something I plan to continue for the rest of my life, as is my involvement with sea turtles. When studying business in the McCombs Business School at the University of Texas at Austin, I hope to spend a

semester or two abroad, being a part of an environmental research initiative, or even a sea turtle protection agency. Later on, in my business career, I plan to make whatever company I work for eco-friendly, by advocating earth stewardship as an integral part of the company. I will promote recycling, alternate energy sources and environmentally conscious suppliers, to make this viable. I have seen how my actions, and those of others, can affect the environment, and I am determined to preserve the planet for future generations in any way I can.
