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Hitched to the Universe
The Connection Between a Clean Environment and World Peace
By Devin Finzer

Never before had a seemingly well-crafted plan failed so miserably. Clutched in my hands, I held the outline of my speech, drafted in my best Spanish and rehearsed to near perfection. The night before, I had carefully designed the poster that stood behind me, intended to convey the importance of trash pick-up through colorful illustrations and diagrams. Now, however, the scene before me erupted into chaos. Standing before a roomful of rambunctious Honduran students, I couldn't have felt less prepared.

The summer after my sophomore year, I lived in the small, rural Honduran community of Chaguite as a volunteer for the non-profit Amigos de las Américas. For six weeks, I taught classes in health and the environment to elementary school kids. Having noticed the litter on the dirt roads when I first arrived in Chaguite, I hoped to boost my students' awareness about the importance of proper trash disposal during my classes.

By the end of the first week, however, I began to understand that my approach to teaching about trash was flawed; students greeted me with blank stares, yawns, and spit balls. I had arrived in my community with a desire to improve the community's "natural environment," but I hadn't yet taken the time to fully understand the issue of trash in Chaguite. After talking with community leaders, however, I was amazed at what I found: I learned that after a long rain, trash floated into the gutters and polluted Chaguite's water supply; burning one's trash created pollution, which in turn could lead to health problems; and trash damaged crops by spreading harmful chemicals in the soil. These connections brought light to the interplay between environmental and community health issues in Chaguite, and helped me connect with my students to communicate the importance and relevance of picking up trash.

My struggle to understand the issue of trash in Chaguite highlights an important point: when tackling any specific issue, one must always consider how it connects to the bigger picture. In the same way that trash in Chaguite broadly impacted health, pollution, and agriculture in Chaguite, global environmental issues are deeply intertwined with a sustainable economy, the gap between the rich and the poor, and world peace. As naturalist John Muir once said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Understanding these connections and promoting a safe, clean environment will lead to a peaceful, healthy world.

Examining the effects of climate change on different regions of the world demonstrates the important relationship between detrimental environmental change and global poverty. According to a study by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), climate change is predicted to most drastically affect the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and the coastlines of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Ironically, third-world nations, which emit the smallest amount of greenhouse gasses and contribute the least to global warming, will be most severely affected by climate change. This environmental turmoil is going to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Again, the issue of

environmental change is key to understanding poverty and promoting world peace in the future.

Similar connections are apparent in the wars over natural resources stemming from today's energy crisis. Over-reliance on dirty fossil fuels is not only causing global climate change, but it is sparking conflicts over limited resources: countries are willing to go to war for oil. By consuming these planet-warming fuels and pouring money into oil-producing dictatorships, our addiction is promoting warfare and violence. We can easily reduce conflict by investing in renewable energy sources that don't harm the environment or require the deployment of troops to secure them.

With a broad outlook, we also see how tackling climate change by investing in renewable energy will have a positive global effect. By investing in clean, renewable energy and making these new forms of energy accessible to developing nations, we have the potential to bring many of the poorest nations out of "energy poverty." Currently, with over-reliance on scarce, dirty natural resources for energy, only the richest nations (or those with specific natural resources) can afford to bring energy to their people. By investing in renewable sources like solar and wind, we have the potential to level the playing field and bring many out of poverty.

We need to look at solving environmental issues like climate change not as obstacles, but as opportunities to address conflict and promote world peace. Rather than fight over limited resources, we should unite in order to solve the climate crisis, by investing in renewable resources that don't contribute to climate change or promote energy warfare. Most importantly, we need to foster a view of climate change that includes the whole picture: the relationships between environment, energy, and world peace. Climate change is a scary topic for many, but solving it with an open mind and a willingness to collaborate is a chance for positive global change. Let's tackle our changing climate with an open mind. Let's seek out a broad view of our world that nurtures both a cleaner, safer natural environment and a more peaceful planet.