



THE ENVIRONMENT

by *Cristina Mittermeier*

We are all living in a house with a burning roof. Our planet is suffering the consequences of increased carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere, decreased oxygen in its oceans, the disappearance or decline of many species, the wholesale destruction of entire ecosystems. All these problems are linked to human activity, as science has unequivocally shown.

What's our plan to put out the fire? It's as if we sit stunned, watching the flames and naively waiting to be saved by Superman. Shall we wait for government to formulate a plan or for industry to find some profit motivation to save Earth? How can we ensure that our planet remains livable 100 years from now?

To consider the future, let's first take a look at the present. Our oceans, for example—the planet's largest habitat—are choked with plastics. Coral reefs are threatened and dying. Ice caps and polar habitats are shrinking at an alarming rate. It's a troubling picture. Government and industry will need to step up and take bold action to protect our environment. But the truth is, we cannot wait to be saved. Each one of us, individually, must become the superheroes of our own story. And we need to begin now.

The good news? This is doable. We can all become advocates for a sustainable environment. There are concrete steps we can take—easy things. Stop using single-use plastics (such as drinking straws, water bottles and ear swabs). Buy wild-caught fish and fish from sustainable fisheries only, instead of farmed product. Commute via bicycle or public transportation when-ever possible.

Changing our behavior to help save the planet will require a cultural shift, but we have achieved this before. Remember the ozone layer? Back in the mid-1980s it became an unavoidable topic at dinner parties and the water cooler. Scientists, alarmed by data showing a growing hole in that segment of the atmosphere, were the first to raise the red flag; soon the story made the six o'clock news and the daily papers. A ban on ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbons, found in many consumer products at the time, was denounced by big industry. But the public heard the warnings and quit buying products containing CFCs. Industry noticed and eventually removed the chemical compounds from their wares. Today the ozone hole is healing.

Thanks in part to social media and other advances in communication technology, today cultural shifts can take place with remarkable speed. Meanwhile, reconnecting with nature helps motivate us to protect it. Taking friends snorkeling in a river can open their eyes to a world of conservation. Beachcombing with a child can instill a lifelong love for nature. Sharing photos and stories about the environmental issues close to your heart on social media can generate interest and change minds. Posting about the Earth you love on Instagram or Facebook is not slacktivism; it's engaging with your community. It matters. So pull on your imaginary superhero spandex. We can save our home.

Cristina Mittermeier is a contributor to National Geographic, the executive director and vision lead of SeaLegacy, and the founder of the International League of Conservation Photographers.