



Amy Domini

A planet is a terrible thing to waste



Why caring *about* the ecosystem means caring *for* the ecosystem.

A RECENT CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND GOT ME thinking. This friend had just returned from a conference on species survival and habitat preservation. While there, he learned, to his great surprise, that among a small subset of scientists, he was considered a superstar: the discoverer of a “trigger species.” Trigger species are gravely endangered, and their survival requires ecological solutions.

As an undergraduate at Berkeley, my friend had studied amphibians, such as frogs and salamanders. His life eventually led him to a different profession, but he’d maintained some interest in his first love, the ecological implications of species survival. It turns out that an entire global initiative had arisen from his early discovery, and he’s considered the father of it. Needless to say, my friend was quite astonished, and so am I.

It got me thinking about the many actions a person undertakes and their potential impact, which can sometimes be world-defining. But it also got me thinking about ecologies. The study of the rainforest or the deciduous forests allows us to achieve balance and protect those areas, but what about the planet itself? Isn’t the planet an ecosystem too? And what can I do about it?

Cape Cod in Massachusetts is busy during the summer months, but it’s easy to be alone on the shore if you want to be. One day, my son and his friends went out walking and came across a rocky section that wasn’t easy to traverse. It was covered with trash, mostly plastic items. They decided to collect it. Several bags later came the conundrum. What do you do with bags of trash when you’re staying in a delicate environment where there’s no place to dump it? Unfortunately, the answer is: Please, don’t create trash.

Are we another precious species, dependent on a unique ecosystem? Are we unwittingly destroying our own ecosystem? I am reminded of Julia Butterfly Hill’s question, “Where is away?” Hill is best known for living in a 1,500-year-old California Redwood tree for two years in an effort to prevent it from being cut down for the Pacific Lumber Company. Living among the branches, through the seasons, she became remarkably at one with not only the tree but the universe. One night as she stared at the stars, the

phrase “throw it away” popped into her mind. It seemed such an awful sentiment. Where is “away”? The world is an island, but a part of a universe. There is no “away.”

Here’s what my friend and business partner, Steve Lydenberg, does. He sees how many days he can go without throwing away plastic. Even with cities recycling many types of plastic, it’s a difficult challenge. For instance, he can’t purchase any food to go, except from a couple of conscientious shops. He must carry his own shopping bags. He tries to avoid purchasing plastic pens and chooses products that don’t have wrappers. He knows the planet is at stake and he can do less damage, so he takes action.

Then there’s my mother. She wraps her sandwiches in wax paper as she sets off to volunteer at the library. Any plastic bags she accumulates get used as trash bags. She cuts the front off any pretty card she receives and uses it as a gift card or postcard. She mends clothing that tears, never buys processed food other than pasta, purchases jigsaw puzzles at secondhand shops and gives them back when she has finished with them. She’s 84 and a product of both old Yankee values and World War II, when waste was unpatriotic; the nation needed every ounce of production to be dedicated to the war effort.

Yes, responsible investors can and do raise issues of waste with corporations. We’ve been important in encouraging sound timbering practices and have been proponents of the “reduce, reuse, recycle” adage. My company’s stationery is carefully selected and thanks to work we did with our peers, so is the paper at McDonald’s and other large companies. Joining together with others to create an outcome is a goal of responsible investing, and it works.

But today, I keep thinking about what one person can do without ever knowing that what she or he did mattered. Responsibility is also personal and should be embraced by each of us. Caring *about* the planet means being willing to care *for* the planet. What the world needs is a few more people who show they care. ■

AMY DOMINI is the founder and CEO of Domini Social Investments, and author of several books on ethical investing.