



Doing Our Part for the Environment

Immersion Team: The Environment 2023

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Introduction

The Environmental Group aims to offer innovative solutions to sustainable environmental practices by focusing on reducing and reusing, in addition to recycling. Throughout this process, our group learned from both our classmates and government officials, who noted that recycling is often looked at as the main way to contribute to being environmentally friendly. When we asked our class to do a word association exercise for “environment,” recycling was a top four selection.

However, we concluded an emphasis should be placed on the concepts of reduce and reuse. This is more of a preventative approach before we get to the point where recycling is necessary.

Our group first considered working with employers to encourage environmental changes within their companies and organizations with the idea that this would create a greater impact. We interviewed David Donaldson at the University of Richmond, who piloted a program called Rethink Workspace Waste; Alicia Zatcoff, City of Richmond Director of Sustainability; and Jeff Howard, Chesterfield County Environmental Manager. We learned that while there are many sustainability efforts in the Richmond area, many fall short of real impact.

For example, the Central Virginia Waste Management Authority has the highest recycling rate in the Commonwealth at 59%, leaving 41% of households in this region that can’t or don’t recycle. The number is higher throughout the rest of Virginia. Parts of our region are currently reducing recycling efforts because they are ineffective and costly. Nationwide, only 5-6% of the 26 million tons of plastic waste generated annually is recycled. With these findings, we decided to pivot our focus to the individual and specifically on the concept of “reduce and reuse.”

This all comes at a time where we are experiencing the impacts of climate change first-hand in the Greater Richmond region. Richmond is known as the “wheeziest” city with high rates of asthma and allergies. Our neighborhoods are heating up as trees continue



to be removed and streets are widened. Our drainage systems can't keep up with the increase in frequency and severity of rain storms we're experiencing.

Findings & Recommendations

The most effective way to reduce waste is to not create it in the first place. Making a new product emits greenhouse gases, which contribute to climate change, and requires a lot of materials and energy -- raw materials must be extracted from the earth, and the product must be fabricated then transported to wherever it will be sold and used. As a result, reducing and reusing are the most effective ways to save natural resources, protect the environment, and save money.

We tested this theory with LMR. Each Seminar Day, we'd get a reminder to bring our reusable water bottles, but LMR continued to provide plastic water bottles. In our evaluations, we asked the staff to remove plastic water bottles from the beverage tables and instead offer a water cooler. They listened and encouraged the Class of 2023 (the best class ever!) to bring and use our own bottles exclusively, which reduced plastic waste at each session.



Call to Action

The team identified additional ways to reduce your carbon footprint: Reduce consumption, reuse what we have, find alternatives to plastic, aluminum, glass and/or items that can't be recycled. Drive less, compost food waste, use reusable bags, shop secondhand, bring reusable cups/utensils to work or when you travel, use bar soap instead of liquid, and use compostable containers.

We decided to challenge our LMR classmates to choose one way to reduce their carbon footprint and make a pledge using an online system during our presentation. On the day of the presentation, we had 32 commitments from classmates. The top 3 commitments were: to eat what's in the fridge to curb food waste, use high efficiency lightbulbs, and cut red meat consumption. We will email our classmates regular reminders to ensure their commitment to their pledge.



Interviews & Resources

David Donaldson, University of Richmond Manager of Rethink Waste
Alicia Zatcoff, City of Richmond Director of Sustainability
Jeff Howard, Chesterfield County Environmental Manager

https://www.princegeorgecountyva.gov/news_detail_T6_R2624.php
<https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/chesterfields-decision-to-end-curbside-recycling-will-increase-costs-in-henrico-september-22-2022>

<https://phys.org/news/2022-05-plastic-recycled.html>

<https://www.theenvironmentexcuse.org/>

<http://www.landscape.org/virginia/threats/>

<https://www.epa.gov/va/environmental-information-virginia>

<https://planrva.org/environment/>

<https://www.bioexplorer.net/current-environmental-issues-usa.html/>