Death of a sea turtle

We’re working to protect wildlife by reducing the plastic pollution that harms them. On a family vacation earlier this year, Johanna Neumann, one of our senior advocates, was reminded of why this work matters to her.

Recently my family watched the Pixar movie “Inside Out.” We all appreciated the vivid image of core memories as islands in our minds, forming the foundational values that make up a person.

Anyone who’s seen “Inside Out” (and you really should see it if you haven’t) knows that core memories can get rattled, shaking up islands. Not too long ago, my nature island suffered a pretty major earthquake.

My husband and I recently traveled to the Adriatic Sea with our sons. It was a cold and foggy afternoon. When the boys scooted back to the sand ridges for more digging and jumping, Nick and I strolled arm in arm along the water’s edge.

Then I saw a rounded mound ahead of us—and felt dread.

It was a dead sea turtle.

Sea turtles have an almost mythical place in our family. When Nick and I got engaged nearly 15 years ago, we gave each other the gift of swimming sea turtles on a batik wall hanging. For more than a decade, that hanging has decorated our bedroom wall.

When I was pregnant with our first child, I snorkeled near green sea turtles. The nursery was adorned with black and white sea turtle stencils.

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A beach discovery turned a vacation into a reminder of our Wildlife Over Waste campaign.

And now a dead sea turtle lay at our feet.

An unknown fate, or is it?

Adult loggerhead sea turtles, of which this was a gorgeous specimen, are the most common species in the Adriatic and can live to be as old as most people.

After the shock, my first reaction was that of a scientist. I desperately wanted to know what had killed it. My gut told me that this turtle hadn’t died of natural causes, and further research strengthened that suspicion. A 2010 paper looked at nearly 6,000 records of dead loggerheads found in the waters around nearby Italy between 1980 and 2008. The researchers concluded that the majority of those deaths were related to human activity.
Bruce Speight’s legacy honored with memorial award

The NW Energy Coalition has recognized the late Bruce Speight for his action and advocacy.

On Dec. 2, Bruce’s wife, Heidi, accepted the Headwaters Award on his behalf at the coalition’s annual Clean Energy Awards reception. As Environment Washington’s state director, Bruce worked with the coalition to achieve several clean energy milestones, including the passage of Washington’s 100 percent clean electricity law, which committed the state’s utilities to obtain 100 percent of their electricity from carbon-free sources by 2045.

“The members of the NW Energy Coalition have given our Headwaters Award to Bruce for his commitment to always go above and beyond the call in advancing clean energy solutions and addressing head-on the impacts of climate change on Washington communities and the environment,” said NW Energy Coalition’s Kat Plimpton.

Bruce passed away in September 2019 and is deeply missed by his family and many friends and colleagues.

New research underscores need to save the bees

New research has shed further light on the threat bees face.

A study published March 3 found that not only do neonicotinoid pesticides, also known as neonicos, harm or kill adult bees, they also affect the developing brains of baby bees, causing “permanent and irreversible” damage that impairs their ability to function when fully grown.

“There are three things we need to do right now to save the bees,” said Steve Blackledge, senior director of our national network’s Conservation program. “We need to expand their habitat by growing pollinator-friendly plants on public lands, we need to stop using neonicos on lawns and landscaping, and we need to move toward more sustainable agricultural practices that reduce our overall need for pesticides.”

This past Earth Day, Environment Washington and our national network called for action to protect the bees and more than 17,000 supporters urged the Environmental Protection Agency to ban the most dangerous uses of these pesticides.

With a chance for full funding, Conservation team rallies support for LWCF

Congress is considering a bill that would fully fund our nation’s best recreation and conservation program—and our conservation team is working to get it over the finish line.

While COVID-19 kept our advocates from traveling to Washington, D.C., they spent the week of March 13 holding more than 55 phone meetings with congressional staff to rally support for the Great American Outdoors Act. This bipartisan bill would achieve our longstanding goal of full, permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)—a program that helps conserve everything from hiking trails to national parks. We also ran a social media campaign highlighting the wonderful places made possible by LWCF funds.

“Leaders on both sides of the aisle know the value of protecting our public lands,” said Steve Blackledge, senior director of our national network’s Conservation program. “Too many times over the years, Congress has diverted LWCF funding to other projects. It’s time to fund it fully and permanently.”
Interaction with the fishing industry was by far the most frequent cause of death, but abandoned fishing gear and other human debris killed lots of turtles too.

Last year, when scientists dissected a stranded loggerhead turtle in Italy, they found a shocking array of plastic inside the turtle’s stomach. Sea turtles often mistake plastic bags in water for one of their favorite food sources—jellyfish—and then swallow them. The beach we were walking on was littered with plastic. Why would we expect this turtle’s gut to look any different?

Most of the time, I’m a glass-half-full kind of person, but the turtle’s death rattled me. I was angry at humanity’s short-sightedness, at how our lack of awareness for our own place in nature allows us to crush the lives of other organisms without regard.

I debated through the night whether to show the kids the turtle. Like most parents, I try to protect my kids from the horrors of the world. When they do see something horrible—images of war or ecological destruction—I try to help interpret their sadness and anger so it doesn’t lead to long-term fear or despair.

My boys need to understand that the world is in trouble, but that it doesn’t have to be. The environmental problems we face—plastic pollution, climate change, habitat destruction and more—are problems that humans invented, which we can also solve. The battle to protect the creatures who live here with us—and preserve a robust and vibrant ecology for my children and their children to grow up in—is a battle worth fighting. It is the reason why their mom works a lot, and cares about her work, and sometimes misses dinner or bedtime or baseball games. And, that understanding begins with the beauty and tragedy of this dead turtle.

The next morning, we went back to the beach. I brought the boys to the dead turtle, so sad and yet so beautiful. They stared. Oscar started to cry.

I keep the photos of the turtle from this trip as a reminder of what I work for: to protect our air, water and open spaces, and to make this planet more livable not only for humans, but for all life. And for an ocean that is once again safe for all the creatures that depend on it, including the quiet, wonderful and majestic loggerhead sea turtle.

My internal nature island was rocked in February, but it is still standing. I sure hope that my kids’ memory islands are too.

By Johanna Neumann, Senior Director, Campaign for 100% Renewable Energy

Originally published at https://environmentamerica.org

Campaign for 100% Renewable Energy
Senior Director Johanna Neumann in her work-from-home office.

Our work to defend the environment never stops, even during a global pandemic. We’re still advocating on your behalf (at a safe social distance) for clean air, clean water, clean energy, wildlife and open spaces. Looking at what we’re accomplishing together, despite all the challenges we face, gives me hope for the future of our movement.

Thank you for making it all possible with your action and support,

Pam Clough
Acting Director
As schools shut down, we came up with 50 environmental activities kids can do at home

With schools closing across the country this March, many parents wondered how their kids would fill their days. Megan Severson was ready to help.

Megan, director of our partner group in Wisconsin, came up with a list of 50 environmental activities kids can do at home, released by our national network on March 16. On Megan’s list: becoming an energy waste detective by using our citizen’s guide to reducing energy waste, creating an outdoor or indoor garden, hiking a local park or taking a virtual tour of Yellowstone or the Florida Keys, making art out of foraged materials, and much more.

“From gardening projects to virtual tours of national parks, there are dozens of things kids can do to stay busy, keep learning, and make a difference for the environment,” said Megan. “Like me, I’m sure plenty of parents would love to help their kids fill this time by learning about the planet and how to protect it.”

Our Greener Together project aims to provide opportunities for those who are practicing social distancing to connect with the natural world and other like-minded people.