

Promoting Environmental Protection

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Only a decade has passed since the 21st century began, but our world has already suffered a full gamut of extreme weather conditions, including severe droughts, floods, cyclones, and heat waves. Taiwan has had its share of these weather aberrations, with many of its residents now counted among the world's "weather victims." Environmental protection has become an urgent imperative that must be translated into action for the continued survival of humanity.

Over the past 20 years, a group of tens of thousands of people in Taiwan has been continuously promoting a green campaign. They lead by example, using reusable eating utensils and grocery bags instead of disposable ones, choosing a vegetarian lifestyle, and cherishing and saving resources. Not only do they keep their carbon footprint small, they have also joined the ranks of recycling volunteers—in addition to picking up recyclables along the roads, they help sort them out at Tzu Chi recycling stations.

Environmental protection is more than just recycling. It is a mindset that promotes high-quality green living as well. By cutting down on consumption and reducing waste, we can all help foster a healthier world. Only when everyone makes a conscious effort to care for the environment will humankind be truly able to live in harmony with Mother Nature.

See the world we come from. There's no green there. They've killed their mother and now they're gonna do the same here...." These thought-provoking lines from *Avatar*, the 2009 blockbuster, deeply touch the human conscience.

In the movie, the "sky people" (humans from Earth) have come to Pandora, a lush Earth-like moon, to mine a valuable mineral. Pandora is inhabited by an indigenous people, called the Na'vi. Earthling Jake Sully takes on the form of a Na'vi in an attempt to drive the tribe off their land and allow for mineral excavation. However, he soon experiences a change in heart and vows before the tribe's sacred "Tree of Souls" to help the Na'vi defend their homeland against the humans. With their advanced artillery and machinery, the "sky people" initially gain an upper hand in combat, destroying the natives' home and killing many of them. However, Mother Nature on Pandora soon retaliates with all her might and helps the Na'vi win the war against the intruders. In the end, the Earthlings are driven back to their dying world.



The movie's fictional blue aliens and beautiful nature scenes captured the hearts of moviegoers, inspiring in them a longing for a harmonious coexistence with nature. Such lofty desires, however, were short-lived. The members of the audience revealed their true nature once the movie ended—as evidenced by the half-empty boxes of popcorn and beverage containers littering the theater floor and the overflowing trash bins.

With every passing moment, the Earth's natural resources are being depleted and the

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environment is being damaged. The vehicles that clog the roads continuously emit exhaust pollutants, and industries and commercial enterprises consume incomprehensible amounts of resources each day. Just as bad, environmental disasters threaten the health and stability of ecosystems around the world, further disrupting nature's balance and causing more harm to the ailing Earth.

In August 2009, Taiwan was devastated by Typhoon Morakot. This year, heat waves have spread across much of the world since the beginning of July. The on-going disasters that plague the Earth serve as warning signals, telling us that time is running out fast and that immediate actions must be taken to save the planet from further damage. Without such actions, dire consequences are sure to ensue.

In recent years people have grown more eco-conscious. Many are urgently calling for attention to environmental woes and to actions that would help mitigate them.

In August 1990, while delivering a speech in Taichung, central Taiwan, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, made a public appeal for environmental protection by calling on the audience to engage in recycling. This call led to the establishment of more than 4,500 Tzu Chi recycling stations across Taiwan over the last 20 years, from bustling metropolitan Taipei to remote offshore islets in the south.

Tzu Chi recycling volunteers in Taiwan, now numbering over 67,000, have been working tirelessly to protect Mother Earth through a dedicated recycling program. Based on Tzu Chi records, volunteers collected enough paper recyclables between 1995 and 2009 to save 18.3 million trees—equivalent to saving a forest as large as Yangmingshan National Park (over 11,000 hectares, or 27,000 acres) in Taipei. They've also salvaged and recycled countless millions of steel, aluminum, and plastic containers. At a time when the global demand for green energy is hitting new highs, such an achievement is indeed noteworthy.

The more established Tzu Chi recycling stations are very organized, with recyclables of all sorts neatly stacked and arranged. The thrift stores at the stations, which resemble miniature flea markets, are also very attractive. Clothes that are almost brand-new, gleaming pots and crockery, books yellow with age—almost anything secondhand can be found in such stores.

Among the volunteers at the recycling stations are people advanced in age or those with medical conditions or disabilities. Such dedicated volunteers help out regularly at the recycling stations, undeterred by their health or physical limitations, contributing as much as they can with their hands. They find great joy in doing work that helps protect the environment, and they often become healthier, both mentally and physically, as a result.



The environmental conservation efforts are not limited to Taiwan. Thousands of volunteers around the world are also engaged in recycling. Chen Hui-xin (陳慧欣), leader of the Tzu Chi

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recycling team in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, used to be a spendthrift who would indulge in shopping sprees every weekend. “After getting involved in Tzu Chi recycling work, I began buying less,” said Chen. “I’ve been able to save more money to aid the needy while at the same time helping reduce the wastage of the Earth’s resources.”

Taiwanese entrepreneurs in Newcastle, South Africa, organized a team of local recycling volunteers. The volunteers even rummage through waste containers in search of recyclables. Because no recycling company wants to come pick up the metal cans the volunteers have collected, they transport the cans themselves to the companies. “We do it not for the money, but for the Earth,” asserted volunteer Jian Hui-fang (簡慧芳).

In the Philippines, Tzu Chi volunteers keep used clothes that they have collected in storage. In times of disaster, the used clothing is distributed to survivors who have lost their belongings. The clothing, previously unwanted, becomes highly desirable. “We can supply enough clothing to a thousand families at one time without a problem,” said volunteer Cai Qing-shan (蔡清善).

Starting from the appeal Master Cheng Yen made 20 years ago, the Tzu Chi [mission of environmental protection](#) has spread from Taiwan to 17 countries worldwide, including developed countries such as the United States, and newly industrialized countries such as China and South Africa. Though Tzu Chi recycling volunteers come from a multitude of cultural and religious backgrounds, they share the Master’s ideal of “coexisting with the Earth”; they work diligently to safeguard the planet, thereby inspiring more people to join their ranks.



Environmental protection should start at the individual level.

The prolific use of polystyrene and plastic packaging products increases pollution and harms delicate ecosystems. No matter how many recyclables are reclaimed, the most effective strategy is to reduce the consumption of such products. “Actually, recycling is the last resort,” said volunteer Lin Xiu-chou (林秀秋), who lives in Taipei. “Reducing the amount of waste that we produce should be the first priority in environmental protection.”

In June this year, Master Cheng Yen especially highlighted the need for everyone to improve their environmental efforts by living simply and reducing their desires. She urged people to cut down on purchases, buy only what was needed, and cook meals at home instead of eating take-out. Doing so reduces the use of disposable packaging, which in turn decreases the volume and cost of waste disposal. If it is really necessary to buy packaged products, consumers should empty and clean the packages before recycling them, thinking of them not as trash but as “resources.”

Lin Xiu-chou has been involved in recycling work for 15 years. She prepares breakfast and box lunches for her daughters every morning, hand-washes all her family’s clothes, and uses the laundry water to mop the floor. When collecting used PET bottles at home for recycling, she washes them clean with recycled water, dries them in the sun and then removes their rings and

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caps before flattening them. This way, the bottles stay clean and odorless no matter how long they are kept.

Lin goes further by promoting her green practices to her neighbors in the apartment block where she lives. All her neighbors know that they need to clean their recyclables before disposing of them. At the recycling area in the building, materials are neatly sorted into 20 categories; plastics alone are grouped into several different types.

Environmental conservation is a worldwide concern and the responsibility of every global citizen. The Tzu Chi mission of environmental protection helps to promote the traditional Taiwanese virtue of thrift and answers the global call for energy conservation and carbon reduction. The mission has now entered its twentieth year. Master Cheng Yen once again reminds everyone: Mankind relies on the Earth for survival, so we should do our best to conserve all natural resources.

Zhou Yu-gui (周玉圭), another volunteer in Taipei, takes Master Cheng Yen's advice to heart. She remarked that she seldom uses her gas stove, but instead cooks most of her meals in an electric pot. "In the past, Grandma kept reminding us to conserve water and save resources for the sake of our future generations. I've found that cutting down on the use of water, electricity, and gas does not cause us any inconvenience—we can still live quite comfortably."

The work of protecting the Earth is akin to that of a farmer cultivating his field—it requires long-term effort. By focusing on our needs instead of our wants and living a frugal life, we'll be able to help decrease pollution. This way, everyone can play a role in safeguarding the blue planet—the Earth, our only home.

Source: [Tzu Chi Quarterly](#) Fall 2010
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