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Community Enviro-Line
(Environmental) Quality of Life
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A healthy environment is a quality-of-life issue. That's what they tell me. But can anyone tell me what "quality of life" even means? Can you quantify the quality of your own life? Can you cull from the ether an indicator of the awesomeness of your current existence?

Maybe I'm a tad cranky these days. Loyal eco-geeky-readers might remember my sister Laurie, whom I often mentioned in these pages as an adorably clueless foil to my ecological expertise. While I do enjoy teasing her, she might just be my favorite person on this planet and in recent weeks, she has moved three hours away in an attempt to dive into graduate academia. To say that I miss her is an almost comical understatement. And now, with evenings free and no sororal relief in sight, I find myself shopping. All of the time. I'm acquiring clothes as though there's no tomorrow.

This conspicuous consumption has got me thinking about the quality of my life, especially after an amazing meeting I was asked to attend. I orated on consumerism and disposal methods to a group of lovely older folks who have trouble letting go of superfluous junk. They were smart. They were funny. They were packrats. They told us that hoarding a houseful of junk was, for them, a quality of life issue. Getting more stuff and hoarding it is a way to feel secure and happy.

I understand that.

See, for me and the members of the packrat posse, consuming more objects meant feeling better. But I've discovered that it does not mean living better. It does not mean a better quality of life. I still miss my sister. And now I have an overflowing closet full of garments that make me feel guilty about my bank account.

I can see readers scratching their heads all over our wonderful County. Isn't this supposed to be the environmental column? What's with all the maudlin emotions?

I recount these events because so often, I find that the people in my life - even me myself - mistake quality of life with quantity of junk one owns. And yet we know that more shopping, more consuming, and more stuff does not make for a full, contented life.

I didn't feel a real improvement in the quality of my life until I went for a long walk in a beautiful park. Moving and meditation meant more to my mood than any amount of credit card crunching. Talking to our audience of packrats, we found that they felt truly good when they were able to donate their excess stuff to those in need. Giving their overflowing goods to the homeless, they told us, made them happier than having mountains of clutter.

So while it's pretty obvious that a healthy environment means an improved quality of life, it's even more rewarding to find that pitching in to help this environment of ours - consuming less, connecting with nature, and reusing unneeded items - can also better our being.

Now, I hope you'll excuse me. Laurie's on the phone and I'd like to make plans to go hiking next time she's in town.

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