Reflection Essay

All my life, I have been raised to be conscientious of the environment and be mindful of my environmental impact. This began at a young age, learning to “reduce, reuse, recycle” and starting a pop can recycling program in elementary school. During this same time, my friends and I started a compost program where we provided and collected compost bins from each classroom. This passion further bled into my childhood through the participation in environmentally friendly campaigns and events, such as Earth Hour and Earth Day.

While fervent, my childhood definition of environmental sustainability was underdeveloped and largely focused on reducing consumption, reusing products, and recycling goods. I understood that composting and reusing products helped reduced waste, and that turning off all the lights in the house for Earth Hour reduced energy consumption, but I didn’t fully understand my role in protecting the environment.

Flash forward to my life now; I spend all my free time hiking in the mountains and exploring the depth of forests. I enjoy camping, hiking, and mountain climbing. I am passionate about discovering new trails to explore and mountain tops to conquer. I simply love being outdoors, taking in the beauty of nature, and disconnecting from the world around me. Being in the outdoors has grown to be an essential form of self-care, benefiting my body and my mind. My respect for the environment has continued to grow and I hold a deep admiration for Earth’s beauty.

As my passion for being in the environment and my passion for caring for the environment intersect, I have developed personal practices that enable me to flourish in both areas. During hiking trips, my fiancé and I spend time cleaning up refuse and picking trash along the trails. We also invest in environmentally conscious brands and materials for all of our gear. When hiking, biking, or snowshoeing, we are adamant about remaining on the designated trail to help protect the undergrowth. We also make a conscious effort to share this knowledge with our son, so that he too can grow up practicing environmental sustainability. We have taught him how to grow fruit and vegetables in the garden, the importance of planting trees, and how to preserve ecosystems within our community.

Over the last five years of my undergraduate degree, I have attended several nursing conferences. Many of these have focused on environmental sustainability within healthcare and the intersection of environmental health and population health. Contrastingly, in the classroom setting we have learned in depth about the impact of environmental factors, toxins and the risks of environmental exposures to our patients, however, we have yet to discuss the impact that our healthcare practices have on the environment. One of the conferences that I attended in Regina, called the Canadian Nursing Students’ Association Regional conference, had several presentations on environmental sustainability within healthcare. During one of the seminars, the presenter discussed at length the implications that our healthcare system has on the environment. This presentation opened my eyes to the amount of waste that the healthcare system produces – from single-use items such as Ambu-Bags to toxic wastes such as incorrect medication disposal. I truly was appalled by our carbon footprint.

Returning from this conference I felt disdain towards our healthcare system. I was frustrated with our lack of consideration and carelessness regarding the environment. With this new enlightenment, I decided to explore ways that the School of Nursing could reduce our carbon footprint and incorporate more sustainable practices into the program. I inquired about reducing the amount of products used during labs and simulations and advocated for reusing materials as much as possible to reduce waste and cut down costs. While the changes made were not solely achieved by my own doing, I feel proud knowing that my voice played a part in this transition. We now reuse almost every single item in labs and simulations and have placed more emphasis on the smaller environmental practices, such as utilizing our compost and recyclable receptacles.

As I continue with my nursing career, I will transfer my knowledge of environmental sustainability into my practices. My once underdeveloped understanding has grown more robust, and now I can consider the various avenues that healthcare and the environment collide. My appreciation for the environment has grown throughout my life and continues to mature well into my young adult life. I now not only understand environmentally friendly practices, but I incorporate them into my health and wellbeing, as demonstrated in my self-care practices. I can continue to bring this value into my nursing career, by practicing through an environmentally focused lens and make conscious decisions about the products that I use. While I may not be the one deciding on which products we use in healthcare, I am someone who has to use them, therefore, I am also someone who can advocate against wasteful products.

Similarly, I appreciate the relationship between the environment and our health.

The global, community, and societal health courses that I have taken offer profound knowledge on health through an environmental lens. I have learned the ways in which diseases process, social determinants of health, environmental toxins and wastes, and natural disasters influence health. Moreover, I have learned how the healthcare system has adverse impacts on the environment. Because of this knowledge, my interpretation of environmental sustainability is no longer limited to “reduce, reuse, recycle” but instead considers the various ways that health and the environment converge. Environmental sustainability is an incredibly important practice, and I hope that I can influence the healthcare system to be more environmentally conscious as I continue with my nursing career.