

Down to Earth: Challenging UW Students to Tread Lightly

It's a busy life on campus. Get to class on time, study, work, and party. That's a lot to balance. And this year, nearly 300 UW-Madison students are also living life while trying to tread softly.

Biology and wildlife ecology major Jessica Bartlett already knows riding a bike helps reduce automobile emissions. Then she signed up for Dr. Christopher Vaughan's "Extinction of Species" class and found out that living environmentally friendly can be tougher than she thought.

As part of the course, Vaughan gave all of his students a semester-long environmental challenge. He said the point is to "excite them, at least make them aware of what's going on in the world."



All of his students have to follow the guidelines of a program you can find online. It's called EnAct, for "environmental action." Created by the Madison Environmental Group, it's a hundred-page pamphlet on how to measure the amount of garbage, emissions, energy and water we use, and then how to reduce that impact. "It's tracking your ecological footprint, it's tracking your consumption, your use of resources," said Vaughan.

The students divided into seven-person groups. They're using the guidelines to try and reduce their consumption as much as possible. "If we're the group that has the greatest improvement, we'll get some prize in the end," said Bartlett. She's in one group. Genetics major Brian Fork is competing in another. "It seems like it's daunting, but after you get into it, I imagine it won't be as hard as it seems looking at it," said Fork.

The challenge has been on for more than a month now.

In that time, Fork installed a low-flow shower head. Bartlett now makes a point to always bring a travel mug to fast food restaurants to avoid using styrofoam or paper cups on the fly.

Fork is separating all his trash to limit what goes in the landfill. Bartlett is watching what she snacks on. "I used to buy these fruit snacks that were individually packaged," she said. "Now I buy things that don't have so much packaging."

They both had the same idea when it came to replacing their lightbulbs with compact fluorescent lights.

His computer shuts off automatically when it's not in use for more than two minutes. She doesn't bother with an air conditioner. She even shoved her bed against it and just uses a fan on hot days at the start of the semester.

All were seemingly simple steps that we all can do. It's up in the air whether they and their classmates will continue doing them, or choose to live more comfortably after the semester ends.

"I'm not really optimistic, I might say about 50 (of the 300)," said Fork.

"I'm an ecology and biology major, so I feel it's pretty important for me to at least set an example for the environment," said Bartlett, who said she'll try to keep doing her resource-saving methods after finals.

Dr. Vaughan said even if students stop, they'll have knowledge they can tap in the future. "At least it's there, it's in their hard drive, and so they can come back to it anytime," said Vaughan.

The manager of the EnAct program, Kevin Coleman, said since it began in 2003, more than 600 people in our area have taken the challenge. That doesn't include the students at UW this semester.

Coleman said the program is designed to last twelve weeks, and it's best if done in teams. For instance, with people on your street or at a church. He said that way, teammates can bounce ideas off each other, and help motivate others in the group.