IT'S NOT THAT EASY BEING GREEN

BY LISA HAZIRJIAN

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS:
FROM BICYCLING TO RECYCLING

With cars competing for spaces and trash bins overflowing, the campus can look like an ecological disaster. But a new consciousness may be taking hold.

From the outside it seemed like every other off-campus student house: a few undergraduates sitting out on the porch enjoying an unusually cool August evening, swapping summertime stories while their housemates moved boxes and hooked up stereo equipment in preparation for the coming year. Yet inside, things were unmistakably different.

Carrying their wares from the front door to their bedrooms, residents had to be careful not to trip over the insulation wrappers that cluttered the living room floor. Rather than throw away their empty cardboard boxes or relegate them to the recycling heap, they set them aside for future use. As one woman emerged from her bedroom with books about global warming and deforestation to add to the house library, others sat in the university-furnished living room and discussed semester-long plans and last-minute concerns. Some talked about what vegetables to grow in their new garden and how to organize bulk shopping, while others debated which route would provide the quickest, safest way to bike to a nine o'clock class on West.

Meanwhile, out on the porch of the Green House, the new off-campus residence with an ecological accent, residents talked about the state of the environment at Duke. "When I came to Duke, I was just getting interested in the environment," says Trinity junior Joey Jann, "and I was appalled by Duke life." Living in Trent dormitory during her first year, Jann saw aluminum cans and unused paper thrown into garbage bins and windows kept open in mid-January to combat the blasting heat of outdated radiators. The level of waste was astonishing, and to environmentally-committed students like Jann, so were most people's attitudes. "People just weren't thinking about the way they were living."

Jann's frustrations fueled her initial interest in learning more about ecological issues and inspired her to become involved with campus environmental groups. While taking a house course on the environment during the spring of 1989, Jann and Green Housemate Jessica Barnhill began to work with course instructor Lee Altenberg and others to establish an alternative to traditional campus housing. Based on the model of the cooperative living groups at Berkeley and Stanford, where Altenberg had been a stu-
Duke Recycles collected nearly 400 tons of paper, aluminum, and glass, up from 84 tons the year before.

says Evelyn Hicks, the university’s buyer responsible for all centralized janitorial and office supply purchasing. Often working in consultation with Duke Recycles, Hicks has introduced recycled products throughout the Duke inventory. “As the cost has come down, we find that more people are using it,” she says. Many people were hesitant about switching to recycled paper, she says, until they saw that today’s recycled products are virtually indistinguishable from virgin paper. Hicks’ initiative is beginning to make its mark throughout Duke: The entire campus now uses recycled paper towels, Academic Computing re-inks its laser jet cartridges eight or nine times before disposing of them, and Reprographic Services is considering converting to all recycled copy paper.

Similar efforts are under way at university dining services, which has stopped purchasing Styrofoam cups, has switched to biodegradable paper products, and has begun to replace the paper napkins and tablecloths in the Oak Room and the Faculty Commons with cloth. Food Salvaging Program volunteers like Jessica Barnhill bring leftovers to the Durham Community Kitchen. Options for vegetarians are available in dining halls and through Plan V, the student cooperative vegetarian eating club.

Dining Services still uses disposable plates, cups, and utensils in many eating locations, despite a desire to cut back on them. “We see the incredible waste of paper cups and paper goods. Every single food service person would be delighted to go back to china, silverware, and glassware,” says Dining Services’ general manager Glenn Gossett. But every year his department incurs approximately $65,000 in losses related to broken, lost, and stolen permanent ware; a small fraction of this is recouped in May when the housekeeping staff returns two to three truckloads of dishes and utensils from dormitories and campus apartments. When Dining Services tried to comply with a Bryan Center guideline mandating use of permanent ware in the Rathskeller, they lost more than 300 espresso cups and 500 stainless steel forks in just one week. Thousands of plastic sandwich baskets wound up in the trash, presumably because students did not realize they were meant to be re-used.

Although he would prefer to phase out the use of disposables, Gossett knows that it is not economically feasible unless behavior changes first. “With current community attitudes, we cannot manage to provide permanent ware.”

People’s attitudes also lie at the heart of Duke’s perpetual parking problems. In an attempt to keep up with constantly rising demand for more on-campus parking, the university built a new 228-space parking lot this summer at a cost of about $1,800 per space; in mid-September, the Medical Center broke ground for a 1,700-space parking garage, scheduled to be completed in late 1992 at a projected cost of $12 million.

In the heart of the campus, where more than 7,400 cars were registered last year, neither environmental nor financial concerns seem to dissuade people from using their cars. “Convenience is rated far more important than costs in our surveys,” parking administration manager Chuck Landis says. Indeed, seventy-five drivers have placed their names on the waiting list for spaces in two premium lots on West Campus, where decals cost $225 annually. Parking is a break-even operation, Landis says, but attitudes are so strong that turning it into a for-profit venture probably wouldn’t deter people from bringing their cars to campus.

“It’s just hard in this area to get people to give up their cars,” says Harry Gentry, manager of transportation, parking, and facilities at Duke Medical Center. “It’s like their pacifier.” Eight years ago his department bought four vans and hired a full-time ride-sharing coordinator in order to promote group commuting. It even created a special premium parking area specifically for car pools, but only one group used it. The van pools, Gentry says, were equally unsuccessful.

Part of the transportation problem is a lack of attractive options, according to Internal Audit director Richard Siemer, who has worked for the past five years as an adviser with both Duke’s Bicycling Task Force and the Energy Conservation Advisory Committee. “A switch to bicycling won’t come until you put in the infrastructure,” he says. “Some people will use bikes no matter

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what, but many will not until there is ade-
quate parking, pathways, and security.”

The students, faculty, staff, and admin-
istrators on the Bicycling Task Force have
developed plans for just such an infra-
structure: a designated bikeway connecting East
and West campuses (with eventual exten-
sions reaching to Science Drive and nearby
Durham communities heavily populated by
Duke employees and students) and adequate
bicycle storage at each end of campus.
The plan also calls for a bicycle registra-
tion program aimed at increasing awareness of bike
regulations, decreasing bike
theft, and measuring the
level of bike use. Registration
fees will be nominal, and registrants will receive
waterproof cycle covers featuring the Duke logo.

“We are going to have a Duke bikeway,” Siemer
says. “There’s no question about that. It’s just a ques-
tion of how.” Questions
about the placement of the
pathway and funding for the project—estimated
at $100,000 for a thousand
new racks and just under
$250,000 for the East-
West path—remain unre-
solved, but $50,000 appro-
priated last summer is al-
ready being used to install
the first batch of new bike
racks.

As members of the Bicycling Task Force
were cranking out their final proposal this
fall, Siemer was working with the Energy
Conservation Advisory Committee to exam-
ine broader questions about campus energy
consumption. Launching a five-year energy
audit of all Duke buildings, the committee
wants to measure Duke’s efficiency and
determine how improvements can be made
to increase energy conservation, as well as to
decrease the university’s annual $12-mil-
lion power, $5.5-million steam, and $1.8-
million water bills.

Despite his belief in institutionalized
change, Siemer concedes that goals like
energy conservation cannot be achieved
through infrastructure alone. “It has to be
a cultural change, a mindset. At the same
time you’re making infrastructure changes,
you have to be making the change of
attitude.”

Siemer says that there should be a perma-
nent place at Duke for something like the
Energy Conservation Advisory Committee,
and someone who acts as a sort of “Energy
Czar.” “We need someplace and someone
to constantly churn out dialogue,” Siemer
says, “someone like Norm Christensen.”

Christensen is a fitting spokesperson
for the environment. He is the first dean
of the School of the Environment; and the
new school he oversees is a natural habitat
for campus environmental activities. The
School of the Environment has combined
the former school of Forestry and Environ-
mental Studies and the Duke Marine Lab. It
has developed an interdisciplinary structure
to draw upon the talents of not just natural
scientists, but also social scientists, engi-
neers, and what Christensen calls “cli-
nicians”—the forest and environmental man-
gers who do hands-on work outside the

It’s that fact that is likely to sustain aware-
ness at the university and is likely to bring
about a strong base of students and faculty
to make changes in years to come.”

Duke is particularly well-suited to foster-
ing that growth. With an increase in under-
graduate course offerings on environmen-
tal topics in fields ranging from geology to
history, a new environmental policy in-
ternship track at the Institute for Policy
Sciences and Public Affairs, research cen-
ters like the Center for Tropical Conserva-
tion and the Center for Resource and Envi-
ronmental Policy Research, and the vast
resources of the School of the Environment,
an environmentally-aware observer like Trin-
ity junior Rob Alexander says, “Academically,
we’re lucky.”

Co-founder of the
Green Earth Gang, an
environmental-educa-
tion program in Durham
elementary schools, Alex-
ander has worked with
a host of student envi-
ronmental groups to
deepen campus aware-
ness of ecological prob-
lems. He has partici-
ated in the annual Beach
Sweep at Beaufort,
North Carolina, and in
one-time events like
Oil-aholics Anonymous
Day through ECOS. Last
summer he volunteered
at the national office of
the Student Environmental Action
Coalition, which sponsors national and regional
conferences and serves as a resource for stu-
dents with ecological concerns. With more
than 150 people expressing an interest this
year in the new Environmental Alliance,
an umbrella organization encompassing a
dozen campus environmental groups, Alex-
ander says he’s confident that environmen-
talism is flourishing at Duke.

Back at the Green House, residents work
to change campus and community attitudes
through consciousness-raising. By leading
dorm talks and teaching a spring house
course, acting as a resource for environ-
mental information, and hosting weekly
vegetarian dinners for members of the Duke
community, they will try to show people
that their decisions about how to live can
either destroy or preserve the environment.
“We need to do more than just recycle,”
Jessica Barnhill says. “We need to think
about our entire lifestyles.”

Hazirjian ’90 is a free-lance writer living in
Durham. She will begin graduate school in history
next fall.