

## **Closing Remarks to The Rotary Foundation's Environmental Issues Task Force**

Evanston, IL

Feb. 3, 2020

Australian interest is buzzing with Rotarians for bees. thanks to Pat Armstrong's efforts (ESRAG's membership director), champions of bees are joining local Rotary Clubs to pursue their passion. Monarch butterfly gardens provide nature education opportunities in the US. There is an unmet need for Environmental Awareness education in Mexico. 'Lunch out of Landfills, a program to reduce food waste in schools is energizing youth to act wherever it is introduced. These are examples of worthy projects that support ecosystem services. Yet their chances of getting grant funding under the current system are iffy at best even with the Areas of Focus policy statement of July 1, 2019. Projects that support struggling ecosystem services are investments in a long game to sustainability, that are currently difficult to fund without an Area of Focus flexible enough to accommodate them. It's time to get past having to sneak a biogas project into an education grant, because 'cooking their food faster, gets kids back to class sooner.' Making the Environment an AOF will allow Rotarian's proposing projects to be more forthright and not force them to engage in a tap dance around their primary goal.

There will be a trickle-down benefit from highlighting the environment as an Area of Focus well. Section 8 of the Rotary Code of Policies\* still gives a meager nod to environmental awareness as a worthy Community service project. Notwithstanding that, without a visible AOF, a district governor feels free to declare any environmental stewardship efforts-except planting trees-as "too controversial and unsupportable" during his term.

There is unfortunately a sense of confusion about the meaning of the Trustees' recent vote before International Assembly. A fellow ESRAG board member, Rotaractor Ludovic Grosjean, was awakened in the middle of the night - his phone blowing up with social media posts celebrating that the "Environment is an Area of Focus". Only later did the details underscore that the question is still in play. Colleagues were discouraged from taking the recent Environmental issues survey developed by RI staff, because they were told that the July 1, 2019 Policy paper was the final word and no farther action was needed. Even Rotarians keen to engage do not understand the implications of whether the Environment has a unique area focus, and the impact of the work this Taskforce is doing.

We at ESRAG needed to do a deep reading through the RI Code of Policies to understand the benefits that are confined to each circumscribed areas of focus. Without a distinct unique Area of Focus, there is no seat for the Environment at the Rotary table. It's because of the way Rotary allocates resources that ESRAG believes the Environment needs its own Area of Focus, to best help Rotary maximize its potential to serve humanity, as well as attract the next generation of membership and funding.

Someday, the Trustees might revisit the Areas of Focus structure and elevate the environment to be an overarching concern from which all of other Rotary's causes flow. But that is not on the horizon. Neither Rotary nor civilization can wait for another hypothetical future

restructuring, when the need for environmental action is so pressing - so urgent. Given the past history of PPE, it's clear that the environment within Rotary has been more than just another cause. It is time to restore the goals of the PPE. Making the environment an AOF is an excellent way to begin their implementation.

When our Causes are matched against the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the gap that leaves the six environmentally themed SDGs as unaligned orphans is obvious. We urge you to fill that gap. Give all who are passionate to do their environmental service **through** Rotary a seat at the Rotary table, and we will use that to make a difference, to inspire, to connect the world and to open opportunities.

I have seen Rotarians set aside the Four Way Test and threaten to curtail their generous funding of Rotary currently. I believe this small, vocal group has been effective at wrongly politicizing the humanitarian crisis we all, but especially the most vulnerable, are facing from environmental degradation and climate disruptions. The world's poor often did not participate in the consumption that created this crisis; and they have not benefitted from it, but they will suffer disproportionately.

There are likely many more of us in Rotary who believe, as does UN Secretary General Guterres, that the state of the environment is the defining crisis for civilization. The small vocal group of politicizers have created the perception that Rotary can't afford to, that it's too controversial to act. If climate chaos is the greatest crisis human civilization has ever faced, shouldn't one of the world's foremost humanitarian organizations play a visible leading role in providing solutions?

I would encourage this Taskforce to consider seriously the opportunity costs to Rotary's perceptions by not acting. The politicizers have urged that 'Rotary can't afford to'. We at ESRAG firmly believe that, for the sake of both our planet and Rotary's future, we **can't** afford **not to**.

While you were meeting in San Diego at International Assembly, I was nearby at the memorial service of Marshall Saunders. Marshall, who was profiled in the April 2019 Rotarian magazine\*\* was a long time Rotarian, who worked with the Grameen bank and Rotary International to extend microcredit to thousands, mostly women, changing their lives and lifting them out of poverty. He realized that the global impacts of human-caused, rising temperatures would undo all the good in the world he had done. To protect the legacy of his focused philanthropy, he needed to act. Those of us who are very clear about the scope of the potential devastation believe that Rotary has a crucial role to fill that is natural fit with the ultimate perception of its mission around the world.

Rotary's leadership is needed. There's a thirst for Rotary's moral authority. Embracing the environment (or planetary health) as a cause, we believe, will open many opportunities for Rotary's future and for the world.

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\* “Preserve Planet Earth” encourages Rotary clubs to promote awareness among Rotarians and increase the number of environmental service projects. These activities are part [of] the third avenue of service, Community Service.” RI Code of Policies, Section 8.040.4.]

\*\* <https://www.rotary.org/en/climate-change-rotary-member-gains-ground-citizens-climate-lobby>