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Environmental Studies

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My project was “comparing and contrasting the environmental practices between American and French high school students”. I have always been interested in the environment and sustainability in general, and it’s something that I would like to continue to study. I plan to take AP Environmental Science next year, and I hope to be an environmental science and policy major in college. I actually got the idea for my project while reading about COP21, an United Nations conference about climate change that was held in Paris through November and December. After reading about it, thinking a lot more, and talking with my French teacher, I selected my topic. What I really wanted to know was what are they doing that we aren’t? Why are we so behind some of the world when it comes to sustainable living habits? So I started with a basic questionnaire, and then moved onto an in-depth interview. I learned about a lot of different things and about a different way of life during my trip to France. This project gave me the perfect opportunity to broaden my knowledge outside of the US. It was a project where the answers can’t be googled or talked about over text. I had to find these answers about recycling and environmental awareness and concern by observing, and asking tons and tons of questions, sometimes in very questionable French.

I’m going to start with the easiest part of my project, my observations and knowledge of American high-schoolers’ environmental practices and their levels of awareness. From what I’ve found, we are not even all aware of what’s going on with our environment, nor do we all care to learn about it. All you have to do is look at a school’s trash cans at the end of lunch to see that we don’t recycle, we waste. Every time a plastic water bottle is finished it’s not filled back up, but thrown away and another one is bought in about 5 seconds. While we are very hydrated, our landfills are very angry at us! We also drive a lot. And, our cars are not necessarily energy efficient at all- at least the 2 Hummers I passed by on the way here are not. The environment is

not something that is generally taught in schools either, you hear about it some on Earth Day in your middle school science class, and in AP Environmental Science if you choose to take that. As a population, we are doing not a single part of the “reduce-reuse-recycle” slogan we all learned in 3rd grade.

The first thing that I noticed in France was that everything is smaller, except for the meal portions. While the bottles of water they have at dinner are huge, all of the families had many different recycling bins for what little plastic, paper, glass, and aluminum cans they used. So not only did they use less, but they recycled all that they could. The most surprising thing was how little water they used. During showers the water is turned off after shampooing and washing your face, and then quickly turned on and off again. Water is much more expensive in France, and they definitely are not wanting to waste much of it. Also, the houses were kind of cold. Instead of cranking the thermostat up to 80 degrees when it's freezing outside, they just bundle up in robes, socks, and slippers to walk around the house. It's much less expensive to be covered in 3 layers of clothes! Every school morning, Lina, my French host, and I would walk to the bus stop and wait for the bus to come and pick up us and the other high school kids. Because the driving age in France is 18, very few high schoolers can drive or have cars, so busing to school is a requirement. The public buses were rented out by the schools to take the kids to school, and I can't even imagine how much less gas they use by basically no one driving to school. Even on the weekends in Paris or just around the village, we rarely rode in the car. We took buses or subways, but only when it was absolutely too far to walk somewhere. Instead of being packed in a tight car, we had public transportation road trips, and they were *much* more interesting. Even the schools were much more eco-friendly. In school, starting in what would be our last year of middle school, they start learning about sustainability and the environment in their science classes. My mentor, Monsieur Gauguin said that in at least one chapter of their “Science of life and the Earth” textbooks, they learn a lot about the environmental- even if they are specializing in literature. The printer in the library was also something kind of sacred. Not just anybody could print off of it, and color copies were nonexistent. You had to have a teacher

print it for you, or a password. Also, printing a 100 copies was not an option—double-sided sheets became my best friends. At the cafeteria which served actual good school food, there was practically no waste. The plates, silverware, and water glasses were all reusable. The only thing not reusable were the yogurt containers, and there was a special recycling bag for those too. No trash was left behind at the end of lunch hour, in fact, there was only one trash can in the whole room. If you were thirsty, buying a plastic water bottle was not an option, you had to have brought your own, or find a water fountain. I learned a lot from just standing back, observing and listening. Less is more in France when it comes to waste, and I think they have figured out how to live sustainable lifestyles.

I learned much more than I ever imagined on my questionnaires and interviews that I gave to all ages and types of highschool kids. From my questionnaire, I learned that there isn't much recycling at school, they don't do more than recycling paper and plastic. However, they do recycle a lot at home, and they are very careful about using a minimum amount of things that need to be recycled at home as well as school. My interview is where I really feel I learned a lot about my project. I learned that not only are they more aware of the environment, but they are actively worried and concerned about its present state, and what will become of it. On the questionnaires I got a lot of I don't know, IDKs, and even I don't care, but the interviews were very helpful. When I asked questions to them about what they know, I found that they really did know a lot about sustainable living, farming, harmful chemicals and pesticides, and even what is going on in the world concerning climate change and waste in our oceans. The most interesting thing I found is something that my French teacher had told me about before I left. Here, in America, if you bring a reusable bag or cup, you get a small discount- you're rewarded for caring. However, in France, the government is much more involved when it comes to everyday things involving the environment. You have to buy a plastic bag at the store if you forgot a reusable one, same thing with cups and reusable water bottles. You are punished for bad practices, not rewarded for good ones. I believe that their culture and government promotes

better environmental practices in everyday life and at home- even if they don't realize that.

Afterall, it's the little things that count.

A big part of my project was figuring out which environmental practices I thought were so awesome and worth the time, that we need to implement them in our own schools and homes. There are some really simple ones that are too easy not to make them a habits! Turning off the lights every time you leave a room and taking shorter showers saves money and resources at the same time. This one's a bit harder to do, but turning the heat down in the winter and the AC down in the summer saves so much energy from being used, and think about it, you aren't even in the house all that much. The biggest changes I think need to be made are ones at school. Instead of buying 4 water bottles a day, bring your own water bottle, or use the water fountains! Recycling at schools needs to be more accessible and realistic, there is no need to have this much trash. The thing I was most impressed by at the school in France was the cafeteria. Although buying reusable silverware and plates at schools would be expensive, eventually it would pay off because there would not be a need to keep buying plastic utensils. Also, the amount of plastic and paper being thrown away after lunch would be significant. There is no reason for there not to be a recycling bin for the plastic utensils and bottles in the middle of the cafeteria. I think we should also walk much more than we do now, after all, your own energy is renewable energy! However, the most important thing I think we need to work on is educating students about sustainability and the effects humans have on the planet. Because like everything else, education is the best way to change the current circumstances.

I really believe that my generation is the generation that needs to change the way we live, because the Earth can't take much more. I believe that my experience in France took me a step closer to finding a better way to live, and it was so much fun. I made new friends from America and France, learned much more about French culture and the language, and I ate some really awesome food. It was truly amazing to meet and get to know the people I did, from home and France - and the Germans too! This program has given me such an amazing

experience and has helped me understand the French culture and language on such a deep level. I am sure that I will take this experience with me wherever I go.