

## Chapter 31

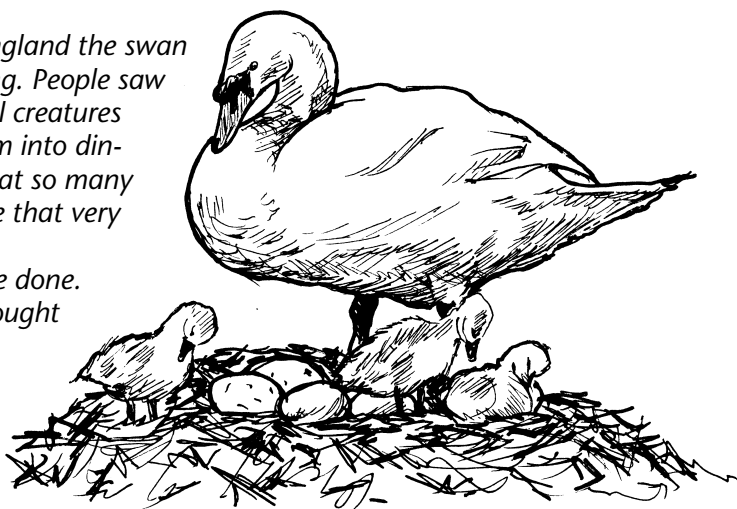
# Taking Care of the World Around You

*Some time ago in England the swan population was dwindling. People saw these large and beautiful creatures and decided to turn them into dinner. The problem was that so many swan dinners were made that very few swans were left.*

*Something had to be done. How could people be brought to understand that they should leave the swans alone or there wouldn't be any left in the near future? Someone had an idea. It was decided to make all of the*

*swans the property of the king and queen. That is, each and every swan in England came to be owned by the king and queen. Of course, they didn't actually see many of their swans, only the ones near the palace. The people were informed that if they killed a swan, they were committing a crime against the king and queen.*

*Once people felt that the swans actually belonged to someone, they respected the fact that they shouldn't be killing them off. Swan dinners stopped. The swan population grew. If you visit England today, you will see swans going about their business as usual. They may even nudge you for a piece of bread. The swans in England are no longer in danger.*



## What Do the Swans Have to Do with You?

So what? What is the connection between the queen's swans in England and you? You see, when people realized that the swans belonged to someone, they were more respectful of those creatures (not to mention they didn't want to be dragged into the police station.) Imagine if we all considered the Earth to belong to one another.

You walk outside and you are gagged by car fumes. What if each one of us thought of the air as belonging to our friends, our neighbors, and our family? Maybe we would take the extra steps necessary to reduce the amount of pollution that cars emit. The same rule would apply to the ocean or the beach. It would be natural not to leave glass and other trash on the sand. People would think twice before spray-painting the train tracks and other public places. Those places would no longer seem as if they belong to some distant institution but rather they belong to you—and to others.

In a way, this is the beginning of respect for the Earth. It begins by noticing small things. It may begin at home as well.

## Your Belongings

The way you take care of your personal belongings may be a way of seeing how you feel about the Earth. Being careful with things that you own and taking good care of them is one way of learning how to care for bigger things—like the beach or the air.

Perhaps you never thought about it before. It's a leap in thinking. Your room—the ocean. And we are not saying that you are a bad person if your room isn't in perfect condition. This is just a beginning point. As you learn to take care of your own things, you will naturally be more likely to notice and care for other things.

Imagine that your parents gave you the car of your dreams on your sixteenth birthday. The car is brand new. You are crazy about it. It is your prized possession. One day your older sister borrows it without asking you. She decides to take the car on a wild ride in the muddy back woods with four of her messiest friends. When she returns, you are waiting for her in the driveway.

*What did you do to my precious car?* you scream. *I just put it to some good use,* she answers, coldly. The bottom half of the car is caked with mud. One of the tires is losing air. There is even a dent near the front left headlight. You are so mad you can barely see

straight. You look inside the car. Chewed bubble gum is stuck on the edges of the passenger seat. The whole interior is full of mud—including the dashboard. Plastic wrap and paper bags covered with ketchup and mustard litter the backseat. *You had no right to take my car without asking! Look at what you have done to it!* You are so mad you are nearly crying with frustration. Your sister and her friends just snicker at you. As they walk away, you hear a chorus of, *What's his problem? Why is he so uptight? We just had a little fun.*

What's the point? The point is that you would be furious if someone treated your car that way. You value your car. You definitely couldn't afford to replace it. You may never have another one like it. You want to keep it in the best condition possible for as long as possible. When you feel this way about something that is yours, something you own and love, it is a great step toward feeling that way about your environment. The Earth is like a valued possession. And if you want to live in a beautiful world, you will need to be aware of how you treat it.

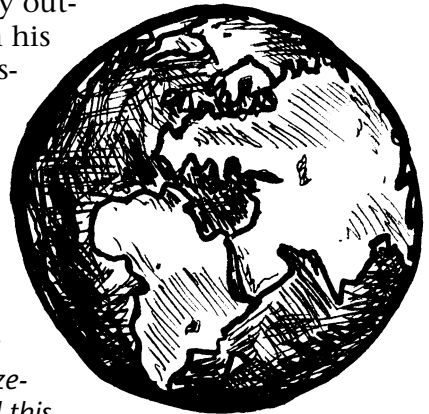
Now you may see that the Earth does belong to you and to others, as a matter of speaking. Let's take a closer look at what the Earth needs from us all.

## A Message from the Moon

Imagine that you live in the year 2100 AD, and you have just received an e-mail (e-mail is probably totally out-dated, though!). Your best friend, who is on his summer vacation, is writing to you. His message reads:

*Dear (your name here),      July 3, 2100*

*Here I am on the Moon. It's just not the same as going to the beach or the mountains for the summer but Mom said I'll get used to it. It's awfully chilly here and my space suit has a hole in it so I can't go out and play today. What a drag, and the only dessert we have is the freeze-dried ice cream. Dad said we could barely afford this getaway to the Moon, and I'll just have to wait for chocolate cake until we get home! Too bad the Earth is in such bad shape—all the beaches full of chemicals, no rain forests left, and all those cool animals extinct. It makes me kinda mad at the people who lived before us. What was the big deal? If everyone chipped in it would still be beautiful!*



*Oh well. Sorry to be so down. I miss things the way they were when we were little! We're starting back in a few days. See you soon.*

*Yours,  
Brad*

It's hard to imagine that the Earth's beauty could be completely ruined one day. If we continue to pollute the Earth at this pace, however, our great-great-grandchildren may have to spend their vacation on another planet. How would you feel if every stream you dipped your toes in was bubbling over with toxic chemicals and bits of garbage? What if the mountains were totally bald—without any tall trees gently covering the horizon? How about if you couldn't go to the beach at all because of the holes in the ozone layer?

Although it seems like a bad dream, it could become reality. The future of the Earth is in our hands. The decisions you make today will determine how the Earth will look tomorrow.

## **A Natural Escape**

Nature is a refuge for many people, a special place to escape and relax. Have you ever swam in a swimming hole on a chilly fall day? Or watched the sun rise over a serene beach? Have you ever walked through the clean crisp snow on a wooded path? Have you ever been astounded by the beauty of the world?

What is it about nature that brings peace and calm to so many of us? Ralph Waldo Emerson, a writer from the nineteenth century, longed for a connection to nature so much that he dedicated many years to seeking solitude in the woods. He saw life in the city as a life full of small and unimportant tasks. He was an extremist when it came to loving nature. Of nature he said: *The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic... the ...trees begin to persuade us to live with them...*

In the natural world, he found he could think clearly and find inner comfort. Many traditions take people back to nature. In some cultures a young man goes on a journey into the woods alone for a week before he is accepted into his community as a man. In some countries nature is greatly valued. In Russia, when people are ill, they are often sent by their doctor to a beautiful seaside town to rest and receive natural medical treatments. In Poland, people with breathing problems are sometimes sent to a salt mine near Krakow, where they are almost always healed after

several weeks of breathing in the rich air of the salt mine.

If nature is so vital to our health and happiness, then it seems only reasonable that we would go to great trouble to protect it. Let's look at some of the ways that the natural world is damaged, and how you can help preserve the beauty that still exists.

## How is the Earth Polluted and Harmed by People?

- ☉ *By throwing trash on the ground.*
- ☉ *By large amounts of waste from factory or store chimneys.*
- ☉ *By disposing of dangerous chemicals improperly.*
- ☉ *By cutting down trees.*
- ☉ *By fertilizers and insecticides that are used for food production.*
- ☉ *By polluting the air with car fumes.*
- ☉ *By dumping waste into the ocean and lakes.*

Can you add to the list of ways in which people damage the natural world?

## Are You Responsible?

Even though you may not think about it very often, you are a member of the Earth's family. In the same way you would want to take care of your car and you wouldn't want anyone to misuse it, you would want to care for the natural world.

In a way, the Earth is your home, on a much larger scale than a house or city. How you act influences the Earth. You are only one person, but if you add up the actions of you and all of your friends and family members, you already have made an impact on the environment. How careful are you? What do you think that Earth would be like if everyone acted the way you act? Why are you responsible for the Earth's future?

- ☉ *You are living on the planet and using natural resources every day.*
- ☉ *The way you treat the natural world now will determine how beautiful it will be in the future.*
- ☉ *If everyone ignores taking care of the natural world, it will be like a giant garbage dump soon.*
- ☉ *If every person, like yourself, took care to protect the natural world it would be healthy for many generations to come.*

## How Can You Protect the Natural World?

You can help to protect the natural world by first becoming aware of your own habits. Surprisingly, you do not have to make a huge effort to do your part. The little things you do on a daily basis make the difference. You do not have to become a radical environmentalist. You simply have to pay attention to how you act day-to-day. Once you are more aware of the importance of your actions, being more careful toward the Earth will become a second nature to you. Here are some points to think over:

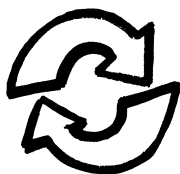
- ☉ *When you are in the woods or on a street and you have a wrapper, do you throw it on the ground or stick it in your pocket and throw it out later?*
- ☉ *Do you recycle at school and at home?*
- ☉ *Are you wasteful? Do you use things and throw them away when you are tired of them or don't need them anymore? Or do you donate them or recycle them in some other way?*
- ☉ *Do you leave the water running when you don't need to? Do you turn the lights, TV and radio off when you are not using them?*



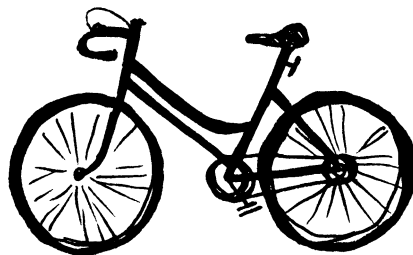
How do you rate on these points? If you are thinking to yourself, *I don't do much to help the Earth out*, that's okay. This can be a starting point for you. If you are one of the many people who never really gave it much thought, now is a good time to start thinking about how your actions will help or hurt planet Earth—your home! Remember, it is the small changes that make a big difference.

Here are some suggestions for keeping the Earth at its best:

- ☉ *Recycle your waste. Most towns and cities have a recycling center. Some make it easy for you. They pick up recycling from the curb at your house.*
- ☉ *Use resources more carefully. Try to use bags and other objects to their fullest use. If you have clothing that you no longer want or need, donate it to a collection center or a secondhand shop (every town has one). Try to overcome the temptation to buy things that you don't think you will put to good use over the long run.*
- ☉ *Ride your bike and walk! It's great exercise and it greatly reduces all of the chemicals going into the Earth's atmosphere. Also, you can carpool with friends.*



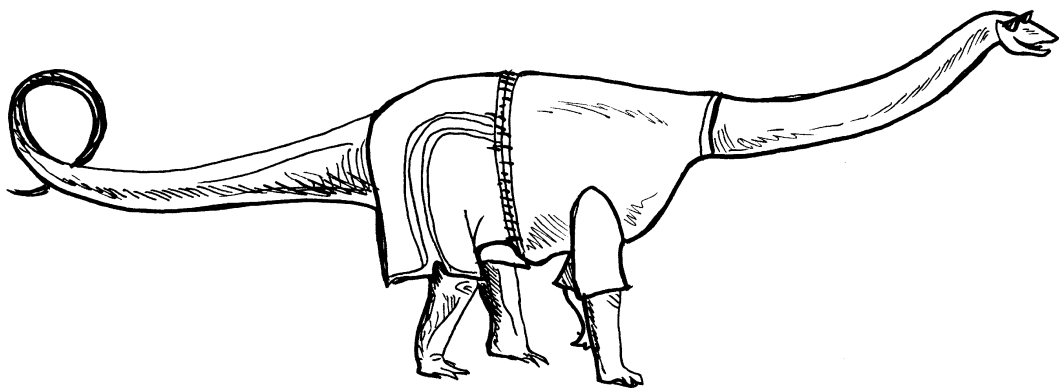
- ☞ *Be careful when you use toxic chemicals—like paint and bleach. Make sure to find out the best way to dispose of these items (ask your parents for help).*



## The Future of the Planet

Our universe was formed about 20,000 million years ago. If that were midnight on a 24-hour clock, our planet would have been born around half past six the following evening. The earliest forms of life appeared at quarter past seven. On this time scale, people have been around no longer than a few seconds—a mere blink in the history of the universe.

The damage we have done to the Earth in such a short period of time is hard to imagine because it is so huge. The world's rain forests have been greatly reduced; long lists of animals and plants have been made extinct because of us. Nature cannot easily or always repair all the damage that has been done. The dangers of using our natural resources wastefully and selfishly, instead of carefully and sensibly, are obvious.



## Journal

Do you have a favorite place to go in the natural world? If so, where do you like to go? What is it about that place that you like?





## To Do

1. Either people will have to start living more carefully, picking up their trash, and caring for the environment, or the Earth as we know it now will be gone. Make a list with a classmate of ways that you can help take care of the natural world.
2. In a group, research one of the following, and bring your findings back to share with the whole class:
  - *The effect of nuclear waste on the environment*
  - *Acid rain: what is it, where does it come from and how does it hurt people and the environment?*
  - *What are pesticides? Why are they so dangerous and what can we do to protect ourselves against them?*
  - *Chemical waste: what is it, where does it come from and what happens when it is dumped?*



## Key Ideas

- ⌚ The way each person lives influences the future of the Earth.
- ⌚ The natural world is in danger if people do not take responsibility for cleaning up and taking care of it.
- ⌚ Nature provides a peaceful retreat for many people.

**Life is extinct on other planets because their scientists were more advanced than ours.**

**Anonymous**