

Presidential message



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President 2017-18

April 2018

At the 1990 Rotary International Convention in Portland, Oregon, President-elect Paulo Costa told gathered Rotarians, "The hour has come for Rotary to raise its voice, claim its leadership, and to rouse Rotarians to an honorable crusade to protect our natural resources." He declared a Rotary initiative to "Preserve Planet Earth," asking Rotarians to make environmental issues part of their service agenda: plant trees, to work to keep our air and water clean, and to protect the

planet for future generations.

President Costa asked that one tree be planted for each of the 1.1 million members that Rotary had at the time. We Rotarians, as is our wont, did better, planting nearly 35 million trees by the end of the Rotary year. Many of those trees are likely still flourishing today, absorbing carbon from the environment, releasing oxygen, cooling the air, improving soil quality, providing habitat and food for birds, animals, and insects, and yielding a host of other benefits. Unfortunately, while the trees have kept on doing good for the environment, Rotary as a whole has not carried its environmental commitment forward.

That is why, at the start of this year, I followed Paulo Costa's example and asked Rotary to plant at least one tree for every Rotary member. My goal was to achieve a good beyond the considerable benefits that those 1.2 million (or more!) trees would themselves bring. It is my hope that by planting trees, Rotarians will renew their interest in, and attention to, an issue that we must put back on the Rotary agenda: the state of our planet.

Environmental issues are deeply entwined in every one of our areas of focus and cannot be dismissed as not Rotary's concern. Pollution is affecting health across the globe: More than 80 percent of people in urban areas breathe unsafe air, a number that rises to 98 percent in low- and middle-income countries. If current trends continue, by 2050 the oceans are expected to contain more plastics by weight than fish. And rising temperatures are well-documented: Global annual average temperatures increased by about 2 degrees F (1.1 degrees C) from 1880 through 2015. That this change was caused by humans is not a subject of scientific debate, nor is the likelihood of vast economic and human disruption if that trend continues unchecked. The need for action is greater than ever – and so is our ability to have a real impact.

As past UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon put it, "There can be no Plan B, because there is no Planet B." Our planet belongs to all of us, and to our children, and to their children. It is for all of us to protect, and for all of us in Rotary to make a difference.