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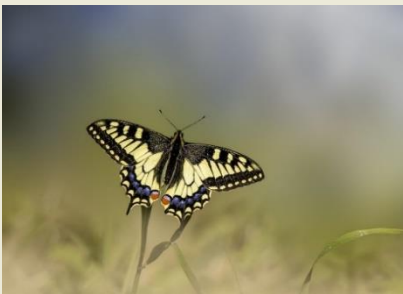
Leave The Leaves

Do you enjoy hiking and visiting parks? You can have nature in your own yard, too. 'Leave the leaves' is a simple change you can use to support wildlife. Many insects spend all or part of their life cycle in fallen leaves. Leaves provide homes for insects which most birds such as wrens, robins, and chickadees must have to support their offspring. Swallowtail butterfly and bioluminescent fireflies must have leaves for their survival.

When possible, choose to leave the leaves right under the donor tree. This is called "a soft landing." It provides a space for pupae and larvae to overwinter while the decaying leaves return nutrients back to the tree. Free mulch!

Or, you can find other areas in your yard where you can stockpile some leaves. Use a rake, shovel, or electric blower to place piles around the perimeter of your yard. Another idea is to pile leaves in your garden beds until late spring. More free mulch!

These are simple strategies you can use in your own yard. If you like nature and want it to thrive, avoid blowing every single leaf away. It is an unnecessary task and very detrimental to our local ecosystem. Think how good you will feel by creating a biodiverse ecosystem in your yard when you choose to leave the leaves!



VEC JUNIOR COMMISSIONER PROGRAM

This is the first year that the VEC has introduced a Junior Commissioner Program. The Verona Environmental Commission Junior Commissioner program grew out of the VEC's commitment to promoting the next generation of environmental stewards. Each year, the VEC invites high school students with passion for and dedication to environmental action to join the commission. To foster their interests in science and lay a strong foundation for their future endeavors, VEC juniors work on wide reaching environmental research projects. The year-long program requires attendance at all of the VEC's meetings and events and provides students with Commission mentors throughout the year.

This first year, the Commission received a banner fourteen applications, all of which offered excellent credentials and expressed profound interest in environmental science and policies that impact Verona and the world beyond. As a result, the VEC welcomed not only one, but two impressive environmental champions into the fold: VHS Sophomore Cece Manis and VHS Junior Nia Pilauri. Below, learn what sparked Cece and Nia's interest in environmental concerns, why they applied for the VEC Jr Commissioner program and details about their projects, which they will present later this year (date and location TBD).

Cece Manis is a rising VHS 10th grader with a passion for cheerleading and swimming who's diving headfirst into environmental advocacy. While in grade school, reading Scholastic Kids articles about global warming inspired her to learn about and try to help the environment by picking up trash during her walks home from school and more. She applied for the Jr. Commissioner Program for the chance to learn what Verona is doing to help the environment today and to help brainstorm new ideas that will help the town out tomorrow.



Cece Manis

For her project, she's drawing on her experience as a swimmer and award-winning essayist to solve the mystery of what's really lurking in Verona's lake. By collecting and testing water samples, she hopes to find whether the waters contain contaminants that could threaten the lake's ecosystem.

What inspired the project?

Cece: When I was in 8th grade, I participated in an essay competition for National History Day where I wrote about the Clean Water Act of 1972. I made it through the regional and state competitions, ultimately placing seventh in the country for my category. With these competitions came a ton of research on my topic.

Through many months of research, I realized how great America's water quality problems truly are. I hope that when people see what I was able to find in the water as a high school student with accessible training, they will understand how serious our water and its quality is.

What does 'doing better' mean for you?

Cece: I've enjoyed doing park cleanups with my friends these past few years. I trained with the

Great Swamp Watershed Association to test New Jersey's water quality, and I'm always ready to grab gloves and garbage bags to pick up trash on my way home from school. I hope to bring awareness to the quality of our water--not to scare people but to encourage them to do better. And "doing better" can look different for different people. It might mean no longer throwing trash directly into the water. Or it could be a matter of being aware of the chemicals they use that contribute to point-source runoff.

Nia Pilauri applied for the VEC junior commissioner program to pursue her long term goal of an environmental science career by learning local and state environmental ordinances and becoming part of the "official" conversation about the environment.

Nia's interest in the environment stems from her belief that all life needs healthy environments to prosper. That belief is evident in her project. Nia is investigating how the microscopic world may be able to tackle an oversized problem: invasive species. By showing how invasive species take advantage of microbiomes when left unchecked and how genetically engineered microorganisms could be used to protect native species, she hopes to find if microorganisms could help maintain or restore ecological balance.

What inspired the project?

Nia: I've always been fascinated by the micro world. The environment is filled with so much life and there's a vast unseen world that's both figuratively and literally overlooked.

I wanted to show the importance of microorganisms and how they help the environment. They are microscopic which means you can't see them and they're hard to study. But they maintain the balance in life and sustain environments of species.

The public rarely hears about microorganisms. Mostly, the only time they receive much media buzz is when they do harm. I want to show how they can be used for health instead.

When you introduce a new species, it overtakes the existing broth there and takes advantage of all the microorganisms present in the soil: the nutrients, the nitrogen, the carbon and other supplements. Microorganisms have great potential to help sustain native species, assist with the environment and help it flourish when used as bio controllers. That can help with eradicating invasive species that have been plaguing Eastern North America.

If we get more attention to microorganisms, it might help fund research or educate people on how they can help rehabilitate native species and eradicate invasive species.

What do your friends and family think of your interest in microorganisms?

Nia: My parents introduced me to this field. My father's a geneticist. He's a biochemist, and so is my mom. They were very influential and encouraging me every day. They're very excited that I'm doing this.



Nia Pilauri

Plastic Recycling Reality Check Quiz

Discover the truth behind recycling and its impact on our planet with this quiz. Sure, you know which night cardboard should be put out on the curb and when the town collects bottles and cans. But how well do you really know recycling? Take our quiz below—but be warned: the answers may surprise you.

Question 1. Recycling is seen as a way for individuals to combat climate change due to:

- A) Strict laws requiring it
- B) Decades of public environmental campaigns and education
- C) The high profitability of recycling
- D) The ease of the recycling process

Question 2. What percentage of U.S. plastic is recycled?

- A) 50-60%
- B) 5-6%
- C) 25-30%
- D) 80-90%

Question 3. What is the plastic industry's biggest environment-related investment?

- A) Biodegradable technologies
- B) Public environmental campaigns
- C) Recycling facilities
- D) Tens of millions of dollars in advertisements

Question 4. Over the decades, what percentage of plastic has been recycled?

- A) Less than 10%
- B) About 50%
- C) More than 75%
- D) Almost 100%

Question 5. Why is new plastic often favored over recycled plastic?

- A) It is more environmentally friendly
- B) It is more expensive and of lower quality
- C) It is cheaper and of higher quality
- D) Recycled plastic is not available

Question 6. Plastic recycling is considered a low level of sustainability because:

- A. It requires a lot of energy to collect
- B. It requires a lot of energy to sort and clean
- C. Recycling plastic produces more problematic microplastics
- D. All of the above

Question 7. Artificial Turf presents an environmental challenge because:

- A. It can't be recycled
- B. It contributes to microplastic pollution
- C. It generates more PFAS, a forever chemical linked to harmful health effects in humans and other animals.
- D. All of the above

Question 8. What are small ways to reduce plastic use in everyday life?

- A. Buy cases of water bottles wrapped in plastic
- B. Ask for single use plasticware when you order pick up meals.
- C. Use a stainless steel lunch box and reuseable water bottle
- D. Pack your snacks in disposable snack size Ziplock baggies.

Answers on the following page.



THE VEC IS SEEKING NEW MEMBERS!



The Verona Environmental Commission (VEC), founded in 1992, has openings for new members. You must be a resident of Verona, and all members serve without compensation.

The VEC seeks members of our community that are passionate about the environment. Are you a backyard gardener or birder? Are you interested in policy that could help with tree preservation, clean water, or conservation? Do you enjoy doing research? Are you concerned with any aspect of our environment? And do you have the little time it takes to help with our cleanup events, our projects, land use reviews and attend our monthly virtual meetings?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, you're a perfect candidate!
All Applications may be made [HERE](#).

You can contact us at VEC@VeronaNJ.com. We welcome your questions.

Quiz Answer Key:

Question 1: A) Decades of public environmental campaigns and education

Question 2: B) 5-6%, according to a [2022 Greenpeace report](#) highlighting the low rate of U.S. plastic recycling

Question 3: D) Tens of millions of dollars in advertisements. The plastic industry has spent substantial money to promote the benefits of plastic.

Question 4: A) Less than 10%.

Question 5: C) It is cheaper and of higher quality. New plastic is often less expensive and higher quality than recycled plastic.

Question 6: D) All of the above

Question 7: D) All of the above

Question 8: C) Use a stainless steel lunch box and water bottle

