



Caring for the Circle of Life

Lilly Platt
Netherlands

Twelve-year-old Lilly Platt has a special gift. “I can tell if any animal is sad, angry, or if it wants food,” she says. She loves all animals, big or small. Her favorites are snow leopards, blobfishes, and her pug puppy Mochi.

Lilly feels sad when she hears about whales dying. “When a whale eats plastic, it makes them feel full,” she explains. “So then they don’t want to eat food. And they die.” She adds, “Whales are similar to humans, they’re intelligent and they have a connection with nature. They have every single right to live on this planet.”

Lilly's journey into environmental activism began with a walk she took with her grandfather one day. When she was six years old, she moved with her family from London to the Netherlands, to live on the edge of a beautiful green forest in the city of Zeist. During that 20-minute walk, Lilly was shocked to see trash everywhere: on the road, in the fields, and thrown over the fence. “It was everywhere!” she says. “At the time, I couldn't really count in Dutch, so I practiced my Dutch by counting all of these cans, bottles, and pieces of plastic. I counted 91 pieces! It opened my mind. I realized there is just so much plastic in the world.”

And she decided then and there that she needed to do something about it.

A curious child, Lilly began by studying. She watched David Attenborough's documentaries and listened to Jane Goodall's speeches. She discovered that only recently did plastics become popular, and now we are using 5 trillion plastic bags a year. Since plastics are made out of fossil fuels, they are made to last. This means that they are not biodegradable: the plastic just breaks down into smaller pieces of plastic.

Lilly was disturbed to learn from her grandfather that any piece of plastic that falls on the ground eventually makes its way into the ocean, through rivers or other waterways. And from there it makes its way into a kind of plastic soup in the ocean. In the Netherlands, rising sea levels threaten the nation's very existence. And with the Arctic ice melting, all of the plastic pieces from the earth are ending up at the bottom of the sea.

The circle of life begins with plankton, the lowest form of life on the food chain. The plankton eat microplastics, then smaller fish eat the plankton, then larger fish eat the smaller fish, all the way up to the whales. When people eat fish with plastic in their stomachs, the plastic gets inside of them too. “Once you know this, you can never un-see that piece of plastic,” Lilly says. “When you pick up one piece of plastic, you might actually be saving the life of an animal.”

To raise awareness, Lilly started picking up litter, and posting pictures of the trash she had collected on her Facebook page. She organized cleanups in her community, and recruited her friends to help. Together they picked up about 500 pieces of plastic a week. Since she began, they've picked up nearly 200,000 pieces. Each time Lilly takes a photo of the colored bottles, paper, and plastic, and posts it before taking it to the recycling center. Lilly's family then takes the broken electric items to be mended at the repair cafes. The move to having a circular economy is very big there!

Lilly is also campaigning to stop litter at its source. She helped get her municipality to join the Deposit Scheme Alliance for small bottles and cans. And she is now raising awareness about the harmful effects of balloons. She hopes they can be banned. “Have you ever seen the way animals suffer when they eat plastic?” she asks, and adds, “One time we saw a picture of a baby puffin wrapped in balloons, and it made me very cross.” So she and her mother spoke to the local

car dealer and convinced them to stop releasing balloons. And, as a youth ambassador for the Plastic Pollution Coalition she speaks about the five Rs: recycle, renew, reuse, refuse, and refill. “The refuse part inspired me to create a set of bamboo straws,” she says.

After watching Greta Thunberg's videos, Lilly was inspired to organize school strikes to increase awareness of climate change. “At first lots of people didn't really know why I was doing it,” she says. “Then more people started to get the message, and they started striking too.”

Lilly firmly believes that environmental issues must be taught in schools. “If children learned about climate change, or about plastic pollution, and what they can do to stop it, you could build a whole generation who actually care for the environment instead of destroying it.”

When indigenous people from the Amazon visited one of her school strikes, they told her about the crisis in the rainforest. She was horrified to learn that Brazil's president was spreading fake news, saying that indigenous people were the number-one enemy. She has proudly served on the Amazon Watch panel, to support indigenous people's rights.

A frequent speaker at schools and at TEDx talks, Lilly shares her four-point plan: spot it; pick it up; put it in the bin; work to stop trash at the source by making less of it yourself. “Leave five extra minutes every day to pick up trash,” she urges. “Get a bag. Get a grabber. Let's clean up the world! Who's with me?”

In 2018, Lily was voted by Analytica as number 28 on their prestigious top 100 environmental list, alongside fellow activists like Leonardo DiCaprio, Mark Ruffalo, Dianna Cohen, and the Mayor of London. She also won the Green Feather from the Netherlands' Green Party, and she has been featured in *National Geographic Kids*. She is also a global youth ambassador for Youth Mundus, a youth-driven festival inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and a youth ambassador for Earth.org. In 2020 she was selected, out of hundreds of contenders, to speak at the first-ever virtual UN World Oceans day, along with Secretary General Antonio Guterres and other dignitaries, and she served on the youth panel there too.

Lilly travels around the world, and she cleans up plastic wherever she goes. She's been to Norway, Canada, Scotland, England, Egypt, and the Caribbean island of Curacao, where Prime Minister Rhuggenath invited her to speak, and translated her speech into Papiamentu so local students could understand. She was especially happy to hear that the parliament is now planning to ban all plastic straws in Curaçao.

Even when she's speaking to world leaders, Lilly doesn't get too nervous. “I usually think about how many people are actually *doing* something,” she says. “I focus on what I need to fight for.”

In November 2019, Lilly had a harsh learning experience. The European Parliament had convened a climate debate in Strasbourg, France to discuss the climate crisis. There were 751 seats, and only 28 politicians showed up. Only three of the politicians actually listened to Lilly and the other school strikers. “It showed me just how lazy some politicians can be, and how they treat climate change,” Lilly says angrily. “We really have to wake them up and get them to see that our planet is in trouble.”

When you ask Lilly about her hopes and dreams, she says, “I want all world leaders to keep to 1.5 of global warming temperatures.” She adds, “My hope is that people will finally realize that we should never take our planet for granted. Our planet is not a credit card, with no spending limit. Our planet is one in a billion, billion trillion. That's a one followed by 33 zeros! People really need to know that our planet is sacred, and we need to take care of it.”

When asked about her message to adults Lilly says, “You have seen so many natural wonders on our planet. Now they are being destroyed. Don't you want the next generation to see the wonders you experienced? Nature is the place houses are built, and trees are grown. It has been used for thousands, if not millions of years, to give life to so many creatures on this planet.”

Lilly is especially committed to giving the right to vote to the younger generation. Last year, she and her grandfather started a new tradition: he is “gifting” his vote to Lilly. When he voted in the European elections, they went together to the polling station. “I made the cross on the paper, but it was Lilly's choice that I recorded,” he says. He adds, “Too

much of the world is controlled by older people, whose ideas are rooted in the past and are reluctant to make any change. The future belongs to the young. They're the ones who are going to have to live it. We have to do everything we can to ensure that the voices of the young are heard, that it counts. The gift of a vote from an older person to a younger person sends a powerful message.”

When Lilly attended the Ocean Heroes Boot Camp in Vancouver, she met a kindred spirit in Jamie Margolin. They had been following each other on social media for some time, and were thrilled to be able to meet in person to talk more about their mutual environmental mission.

One day she hopes to become a paleontologist, and study dinosaurs. She wants to be like her mentor and friend, Jane Goodall, to give inspirational speeches, and one day to become a famous environmentalist.

As a child ambassador for Charity Water's Project Beehives, Lilly shares a story that combines her love for animals with her passion for the environment. “Elephants were being killed by villagers for eating their crops,” she explains. “So, to protect the crops—and the elephants—the people built beehives around their fruits and vegetables. Bees seek moisture, and there is lots of moisture in the trunk of an elephant! And the elephants do not want any bees in their trunks, trust me! So, they stay away.”

Every individual matters.

Every individual has a role to play.

Every individual makes a difference.

Dr. Jane Goodall

Call to Action: Join with Lilly to Recycle, Renew, Reuse, Refuse, and Refill. Refuse to use plastic. Pick up trash. Follow Lilly: [Lillys Plastic Pickup](#) [@lillysplasticpickup](#)

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