

MARBLEHEAD REPORTER

Sustainable Marblehead: None of us acts alone

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“Hey, bug off. It’s cold, and I’ll be gone in 10 minutes.”

Have you ever asked someone to please turn off their engine and stop idling? It is very hard to do this without the driver feeling targeted, shamed or judged. How then can we create a culture where idling is not the norm?

Vehicular idling is a public safety issue, especially where the health of our children is concerned. Car exhaust can create ground-level ozone that causes and aggravates asthma, allergies, and cardiovascular and respiratory disease, which in turn increase school absences and hospital visits. Children breathe at twice the rate of adults, and their respiratory system is closer to tail pipes than those of adults.

There are also significant environmental reasons for turning off your vehicle every time you stop — even if it is only for 15 seconds. Vehicle emissions are the No. 1 source of air pollution in many areas. Idling wastes money and natural resources. Every gallon of gas burned produces more than 20 pounds of greenhouse gases. For every 10 minutes your engine is off, you will prevent 1 pound of carbon dioxide from being released.

In Massachusetts, idling for more than five minutes is against the law! If you want to warm up your car, please do so while driving.

Despite these truths, we still see idling cars and trucks everywhere. So, we ask again: How can we create a culture where idling is not the norm?

Consider this story from West Africa:

When the good chief called all the inhabitants to the grove, Spider obediently went, but in his head he already had a story: “Rules rules rules. This chief does nothing but make rules. Rules for how much we can hunt or fish. Rules for how to use the water from the river. I am a free spirit with eight legs, and I hate all his rules.”

Meanwhile the chief had already begun to address his people, “My friends, do we love the palm nut tree?”

People began to call out that they used its fronds to stay cool and put roofs on their huts. Others noted that the fibers on its bark were very good for weaving strong ropes. Many agreed that the oil from the palm nuts was essential in their cooking, and all the children loved to nibble away at the palms nuts.

The chief continued, “My friends, sometimes we must give up what we want for the good of the community. Do you enjoy the sap from this tree?”

Now everyone burst into cheers and noted the last time they had enjoyed it, and Spider started singing his favorite song over and over: “Sap in the morning / Sap in the evening / Sap at supper time / I like to drink sap, and I drink it all the time.”

He was singing with such gusto that he almost missed the next thing.

“My people, to get the sap we must tap the trees with a pointed bamboo stick. When this stick is finally pulled out, it leaves a hole in the tree. Insects are getting into those holes and eating our beloved palm nut trees from the inside out. They are dying. To protect these trees and all they give us, we must not tap them for sap for three full years.”

“I like to drink sap... What? What did he say? No more palm sap! That can't be. I love the palm nut sap. I am just a lone, little spider. As much as I drink could not possibly make a difference. He doesn't mean me.”

The villagers all agreed with their chief, but early the next morning, Spider made his way into the woods.

“I will mark just three trees that look ready. Then tomorrow I will return with all that is needed and quietly take my little bit. It couldn't possibly hurt anything. I am so small!”

Spider did this and erased his legs marks by dragging a palm frond behind him. That day he prepared, getting a half calabash to hold the sap, weaving a thick rope from fibers of the palm nut bark to tie the calabash, and he whittled a bamboo stick until it was very sharp at one end and he could hang the calabash from the rope at its other end. Throughout this process he sang his endless song about sap. And when he grew tired of singing he kept reminding himself of how small he was and how little he would take, and thus damage nothing.

The next morning, he made his way with his tools to the first tree he had marked and began to climb. When he was about 20 feet off the ground, he saw them. Unaware of each other, they were coming from all directions. His large spider family all progressed toward the woods, and each was carrying a calabash, rope and pointed bamboo stick.

Now, Spider might be small, selfish and self-absorbed, but he was not stupid. And in that moment he saw the future of the rainforest and palm nut trees. If every one of his relatives were to tap three trees... He took a deep breath and in his loudest voice he called his sizable extended family to him.

Spider cried out, “I am the new chief of the spiders!”

One of the nephews called out, “Who made you the boss over all of us?”

And balancing on two legs, for the sake of both stability and dignity, spider pointed at various palm nut trees and answered, “They did! The trees. They are sick and tired of spiders thinking the rules don't apply to them. These trees give us so much.”

Each protested, “We don't use their leaves or bark or nuts. And we are so little. Anyway, I thought it was just me doing this.”

Using his available legs, Spider pointed. “Then why are you covering your tracks? These trees give us so much. Now we must honor their needs.”

Then he looked into the eyes of every spider there and said, “Sometimes we must give up what we want for the good of the community. No tapping for sap for three years.”

He noticed a nephew spider mumbling to himself in the language only spiders understand, “Rules rules rules... stupid rules. I like sap. I don't like rules...”

As we said, Spider was not stupid. So, he pointed a long arm at his nephew and said, “Nephew, we all like sap, but there will be none if we continue to tap the trees. I am making you my No. 1 lieutenant.”

The nephew's chest expanded with pride.

“You will guard this rainforest and make sure the trees are treated with full dignity and no tapping. For this, though there will be no sap for a long while, I will make sure that you receive five fine fat flies every day for your work.”

And so, it was that the spiders gave long life to the trees, because sometimes you must give up what you want for the good of the community.

Please stop idling.