

HOW TO STOP LITTERING IN PUBLIC SPACES?

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Abstract

City of Helsinki has an increasing problem of littering, especially during spring and summer when people like to spend time outside. People eat and drink in parks and the amount of package material seems to increase every year. The volume of litterbins has been increased, environmental education and several campaigns have been done, but the littering goes on. Funds and co-operation with schools, kindergartens, media and packing industry are needed, but how to accomplish that, that is the question not yet quite solved.

Key Words: littering, litter campaigns, talking trash bins, trash video, environmental education, voluntary work

Introduction

Littering in public spaces is definitely one big global challenge. In some countries the problem is bigger than in others, but it exists. Cleaning rubbish from the ground takes active work time away from creating beauty in parks. It is also a waste of public funds. That could be avoided with the change of attitude from indifference to caring and appreciation. Who's job is that? Public Works cleans after, should they also be responsible for the campaigning? Or- would the change of attitude be more affective if the whole society takes part in it?

In an internet survey at 2008 about Why Do People Litter, negligence was one of the main reasons for littering, people don't care about other people. Teenagers thought that littering is part of lifestyle in a city!

City of Helsinki has tried several ways, but still there is a lot to be done.

Environmental education

Auntie Green in a Tree costume started to visit kindergartens 1995 and planted trees with children and taught about the meaning of parks. One person can do very little in a city with 425 kindergartens. That is why we did two environmental education programs for adults who work with children, to run. Little School for Park Pals is for children at the age of 5 to 8. It is also translated in English.

Allowed City is for 12-15 year old schoolchildren. In that material the concept of Common Good is in focus. Materials have been well appreciated and they have been created with the help of teachers.

Problems have occurred, though, in adapting the material to the study programs. Teachers

think that they have already so much things to teach that 'how to be a good citizens' does not fit in.

Campaigns

Helsinki started campaigning against littering in 1998 since we were to be one of the European Cultural Capitals in the year 2000. That was also the year for Helsinki's 450th birthday.

It has been rather difficult to get the city officials to understand that the campaigns cost money. Media space is very costly and so is the planning for a good campaign. It is almost a waste of money to do small poster campaigns that last a month or two. If you want to change the way of behaviour the message has to be all over.

It has also been difficult to get other city departments to participate in this problem. Everyone acknowledges the problem but they are indifferent or lazy to do something about it.

Inside the Public Works Department the engineers don't like that campaign money is taken away from the actual maintenance funds.

This year we have made a plea to the City Council that campaign money for littering should come from a separate budget, it should be at least 350 000 per year for minimum of three years and all the city's departments should take part in solving the problem.

In the year 2009 we have two small campaigns, the Talking Trashbins www.puhuvaroskis.fi . Eigh trashbins in the City center greet you with humourousgreetings.

For the young people we have created a website called Trashvideo, www.roskavideo.fi. In the site there is a video school about How to Shoot a Good Short Video and a chance to rate each others videos. There are also examples of foreign litter videos.

Guided park walks

Helsinki started to do guided park walks in 2003 in order to increase appreciation of parks. We searched models for this from England. The walks became very popular from the very beginning and now they are part of our adult awareness raising. We do 14-16 walks every summer at evening time and 40 -120 people participate per walk. 2008 there were 1780 participants all together. When people understand the stories of the parks and learn about plants and how parks promote health, they spread the word further.

Our aim is to school some of the volunteers to do park walks as well, in order to increase the amount of park walks. This model we picked from New York City. There seems to be a boom for all kinds of guided walks.

Voluntary work

Helsinki has had annual cleaning month already 25 years when all kinds of groups clean the surroundings of schools and neighbourhoods. 2009 there were 23 000 participants.

2005 we started creating a model for how to be a volunteer on somewhat regular bases. There is an increasing amount of retired people in good health and also unemployed people who want to do something. Also people with dogs are eager to help.

Being a volunteer outdoors gives you a reason to go out, meet other people and do something good. Also for this we studied the model they have in Central Park, New York and are at the moment adapting their methods to Helsinki.

This requires schooling of our gardening staff about how to work with volunteers. Volunteer coordinator is also needed. At the moment we have around 300 volunteers and we have not done very much advertising about it yet, since the guidelines are still in process.

The work the volunteers do is mainly litter picking. Volunteers make the ones who litter think about their own behaviour.

Working with media

Media likes to write about littering and also people write newspapers how irritating littering is.

Finland's biggest newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, has already five years participated in concrete action in First of May picnic in Kaivopuisto Park. First of May is a huge celebration in our country. Everyone goes out to picnic and drinks a lot of champagne. Some 45 000 people go to this historical Kaivopuisto Park.

In Finland you get a refund, 10-50 cents, if you return bottles to a store. We have a lot of bottle collectors, but nobody wanted to collect the heavy champagne bottles. They were lying in the ground and made cleaning very difficult.

Together with the main newspaper we started an event in the park. If you return 20 champagne bottles to special containers, you'll get a movie ticket, worth 10 euros. Last First of May we collected 30 000 bottles that way. The newspaper organizes the event, advertises it and pays for the movie tickets.

Package industry

The biggest litter in our parks are the cardboard wrappings of beer cans. We have tried to start a discussion with breweries about this, but so far with no success. Also all kinds of coffee cups and food containers increase the amount of litter.

Giving out samples in the parks and events has been restricted strongly in park events in Helsinki

Conclusion

There is no one answer for how to stop littering. The main motive for a person to change his or hers behaviour is "What do others think about me?"

If we can increase the understanding, love and appreciation, we will succeed. If we engage the people in planting, maintenance and events in parks, we will succeed.

If we can work together as a City, public and private sectors alike, we will succeed. If we work together as countries, we will succeed. When everybody understands that parks are made for all of us, to experience beauty, to feel better, to be with others in a neutral, free and refreshing space. When everyone realises that it is everyone's responsibility to

keep the parks beautiful, we won't have littering or vandalism any more.

Author Biography

Ms Elina Nummi, educated as a park designer, works as a Project Manager in the City of Helsinki, Finland, Public Works Department, Parks and Streets Division. She is responsible for environmental education, voluntary work, guided park walks and sponsorship. She is a national expert in campaigning for parks.

She is also known as Auntie Green, a fairytale character in Tree costume. She has written a fairytale book about parks and been in TV as Auntie Green. She got a National Prize for Public Awareness Raising in 1998 and the campaign Take care of Helsinki won the Best Public Campaign Prize in year 2000. She has just left a manuscript to a publisher for a book about Helsinki's parks. She is also an authorized Helsinki Guide.

Elina lives in Northern Helsinki, next to a Central Park recreational forest. She also runs a Bed and Breakfast in her three story house.

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