

MiSustainable Holland

About this series

The MiSustainable Holland column is a collection of community voices sharing updates about local sustainability initiatives.

This Week's Sustainability Framework Theme:

Environmental Awareness/Action: Environmental education and integrating environmental practices into our planning will change negative outcomes of the past and improve our future.

Hope College students turn plastic pollution into art

By Devin White
Hope Advocates for Sustainability

Envision walking along the beach at Holland State Park, winding through the beach path and around the dunes. You look down, what do you see? Small pieces of plastic.

Beaches all around the globe are rife with plastic pollution, and West Michigan is no exception.

Students at Hope College have decided to do something about it. Every year, Hope Advocates for Sustainability, a student-led team that works to promote and practice sustainable actions on campus and in the Holland community, organizes beach cleanups as a part of the Lakeshore Cleanup Coalition.

These beach cleanups call students from across campus to take ownership of our community's natural resources. Hope Advocates for Sustainability hosts two cleanups each semester, and they're always among the group's most popular events, even when the weather doesn't cooperate.

Most recently, on Saturday, Oct. 21, during what turned out to be a rainy morning, Hope students visited Holland State Park to clean and remove as much trash as possible. In less than an hour, the team collected more than 12 pounds of trash, mostly snack wrappers and small broken pieces of plastic. Plastic is especially a problem, because unlike many materials, it really never decomposes.

Cleanups like this help to remove pollution from the beach, but also help to show that all things end up somewhere, whether it is in a landfill or the environment.

This year, the cleanup took on a special meaning as the trash became part of an art project. Hope Advocates for Sustainability, together with the college's Kruizenga Art Museum, hosted a found-art collaborative art event as an additional way of showing that the plastic and trash we throw away or litter can end up on our beautiful West Michigan beaches.

Found-object art focuses on using upcycled materials, meaning re-used materials instead of recycled, to create an art piece with meaning. Gathered at the museum, Hope students had the chance to decorate a tile with pieces of recovered trash from the beach cleanup. They were encouraged to get their creative juices flowing and decorate the tiles in any way they saw fit.

Throughout the day, more than 50 students participated in the collaboration. The tiles were then put together to create a large-scale abstract art piece.

The piece will be on display in the Jim and Martie Bultman Student Center in the center of campus to remind students, staff, and faculty that the waste we put in our landfills and environment lives on long after we throw it away.

It is time we start thinking about the waste we produce and where it ends up because some of it might just end up in a sand dune at Holland State Park.

- *Devin White is a senior at Hope College studying biology and is a co-president of Hope Advocates for Sustainability.*