



What Would Johnny Do?



In the last couple of years, I've had the privilege of working with many kids, ranging in ages from one to ninety-nine. One of the more enjoyable programs, both for the audience and myself, is my portrayal of John Chapman. To see a historic icon in "person" (Johnny Appleseed or otherwise) assists in realizing "Yes, he, or she, was a real person", which is a goal of historic interpretation. However, to fully understand their impact on history takes the words of an adolescent: What would Johnny Appleseed do about our current environmental situations? I was asked this question recently and gave an answer as best I could, because WOW! What a question! I've thought lots more about what I should have said and here is what I came up with.

Johnny Appleseed was a philanthropist. He gave freely of his time and talents to many folks, ranging from the hills of Pennsylvania to the portages around Fort Wayne and from the shores of Lake Erie to the bends of the Ohio River. Whether he was helping build a cabin or barn, clearing land for agriculture, or giving away his precious apple tree seedlings, he was there when people called on him. Knowing that the environment has changed drastically due to the impact of humans, Johnny would have made every effort to ensure threatened and endangered plants and animals would have appropriate habitats in which to thrive. He would have built bird boxes and distributed them, helping provide valuable nest sites for cavity nesters. Along with apples, he would have grown native plants for folks to use when landscaping their property, whether it be the common Black-eyed Susan's or the not-so-common Royal Catchfly. Because of his generosity, Johnny would have given to nature just the same as he would have to people.

Johnny Appleseed was a land steward. Through all of his ramblings, he would have seen the intricacies of nature and knew that in order for man to survive, he has to live in harmony with the land. The development of land is inevitable, but not without regard to the wild inhabitants thereof. Johnny would make sure wetlands were utilized as filters for our pollutants, whether for a large parking lot or a buffer for a suburban area. Filter strips would be mandatory along all water courses to hold back non-point source pollutants, including our most precious resource and largest polluter, soil. A tree would be replaced when one was removed. Everywhere Johnny went, his course would be marked by its lack of litter; instead of walking by it, he would do his part and pick it up, even though no one was watching. Johnny knew that we need to use the land, but not at the cost of making the land useless.

Whether it would have been giving to the land or guarding the land, Johnny Appleseed would have done what was necessary for struggling environments to succeed. Would he have stopped all of the habitat destruction, pollution of the land, or loss of natural resources? Would he have stopped the impending change of the global climate? It is very doubtful; no single person could pull off such a feat. However, Johnny would have felt good knowing in his heart and mind that he had done all he could do to help our fragile planet.

Recently, the Park District acquired and planted a tree at Lowe-Volk Park. Not really that unusual for a park, right? Well, this sapling was a graft from an apple tree in Ashland County that was planted by none other than the apple man himself, John Chapman. The sapling was planted partly in recognition of the historic traditions that Johnny Appleseed has with this area, and partly because of his benevolent attitude, both towards man and nature. In appearance, it is not much of a tree now, but the message it conveys, one of giving, and of guardianship, will bear fruit for many years. Stop by and see it!



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