



A white-tailed deer stands in a field at the edge of a forest. Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Seeing the environment's beauty and problems, with help from a deer and a lizard

By Dominic Moore



Dominic Moore, one of six winners of Connecticut Sea Grant's diverse youth scholarship. Photo: Judy Benson.

Dominic Moore is a senior at the High School in the Community, a charter school in New Haven. While the school is in the inner city, New Haven does have many tree-lined streets he enjoyed walking as a kid or seeing while helping his dad fix a house that his uncle bought. The towering trees felt like a true forest when he was a boy. Unfortunately, there is also a lot of garbage on the streets, so he tries to do his share of picking it up.

To me, the outdoors has always been the pinnacle of beauty. When I was younger, it felt like my second home.

My family's backyard in New Haven was my playground. We had a pool, trampoline and bikes. My siblings and I spent hours a day soaking up the sun and enjoying the outdoors. Though I don't spend as much time outside now, I still find moments to relax and look up at the sky, appreciating the clouds and sun.



Two encounters with wildlife during my childhood stand out as significant experiences in shaping my connection to nature. Both happened during a family trip to visit relatives in Houston, a city that is seeing increases in flooding and extreme heat being fueled by climate change. The juxtaposition of positive memorable interactions with wildlife alongside increased awareness of climate change impacts sharpens both my love for nature and a sense that making a major shift towards renewable energy must become our priority to preserve what we can.

My family loves traveling, always enjoying a good road trip. On one of these journeys, when I was about 11 years old, we were driving from Connecticut to Texas to visit my cousins, aunt and uncle. After about eight hours on the road, nature called with urgency. No rest stops were in sight. I told my parents, and we pulled off the highway and stopped by a patch of bushes.

I got out of the car and searched for as much privacy as I could find. Just as I was finishing, a deer crept out from the bushes. Though confused, I was also interested, as I had always thought deer were too shy to approach humans. But this one had a reason—it had a plastic bag caught around its neck. My parents got out of the car to help. The deer was taller than I was (not like I was very tall to begin with), so it took their combined effort to remove the bag. Once freed, the deer darted back into the darkness. It's a story that I often talk about with my siblings. I was grateful we were able to help the deer,

but also sad that someone's carelessness about their trash had almost caused it to choke.

Eventually, we reached Texas, a place known for its size and heat. The intense temperatures made outdoor activities more challenging than fun. Staying in Houston with our extended family, the air conditioning was like the lifeblood, keeping all the residents comfortable. Even in the heat, Texans are active, participating in road races and bike rides. My cousins were gearing up for a road race with one of their friends, and even though it was very hot, my mom decided to join in. I tagged along, not wanting her to struggle alone.

About a mile in, the combination of heat and bugs took its toll on me. I found shade under a tree and took a break, while my mom and the rest of the runners continued. The day was clear and calm, with clouds scattered across a blue sky. As I rested, I felt tiny legs crawling on my feet. Looking down, I saw a small lizard with sharp scales and a brownish-red hue. I wasn't frightened by lizards, so when I saw this one, I wasn't scared.

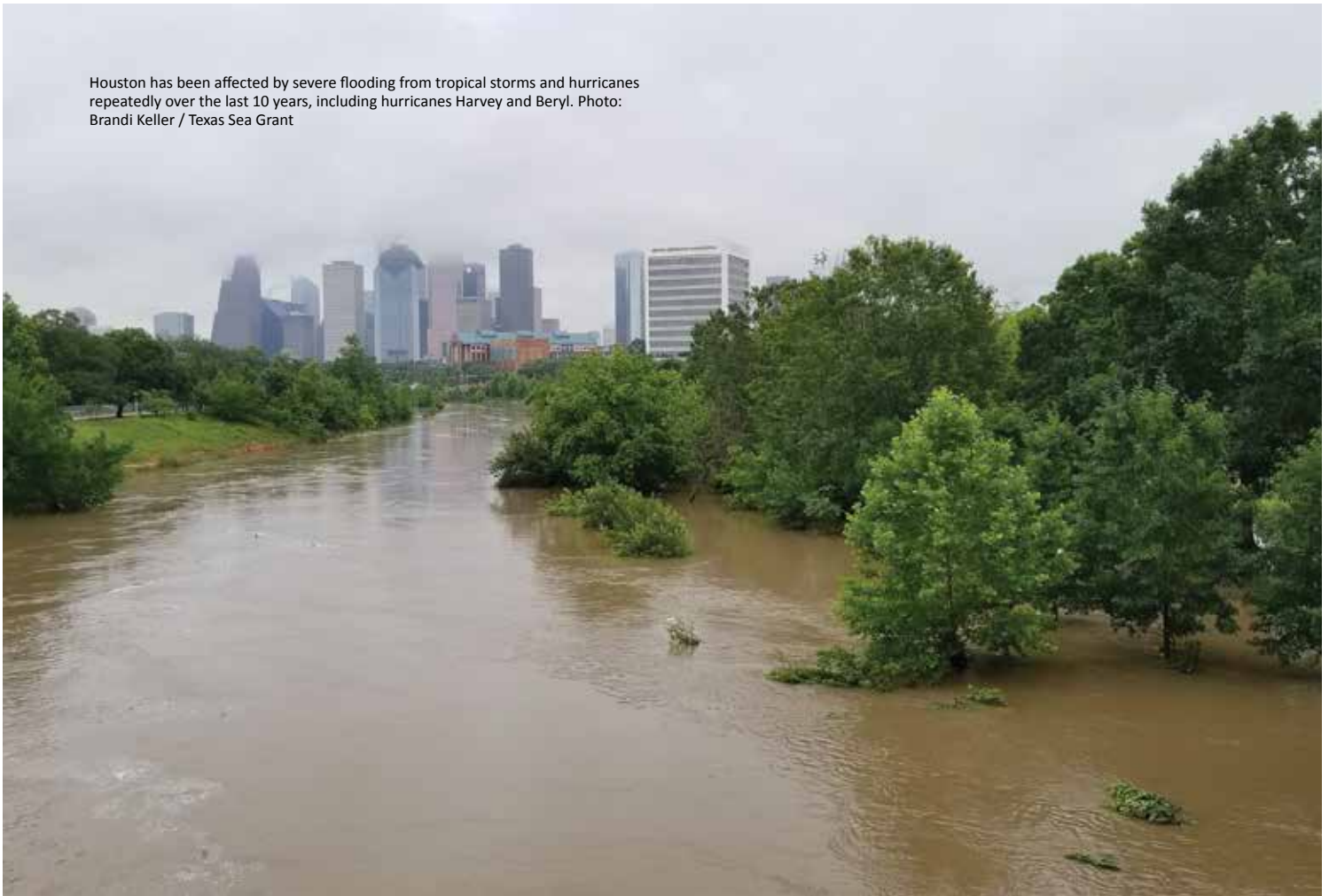
I decided to name him Birt. He seemed to enjoy my company, sitting beside me as if engaged in conversation. When I extended my hand, Birt climbed aboard and rested gently in my grasp. I hurried to catch up with my dad and sisters, Birt in hand.

When I finally reached them, I introduced them to my new friend. My older sister wasn't thrilled about Birt's presence, and

A recent severe drought left a lake in the city of Sugar Land, Texas, 20 miles from Houston, completely dry. Photo: Brandi Keller / Texas Sea Grant



Houston has been affected by severe flooding from tropical storms and hurricanes repeatedly over the last 10 years, including hurricanes Harvey and Beryl. Photo: Brandi Keller / Texas Sea Grant



sadly, I had to let him go. I remember crying real tears that day. I hoped my dad would let me keep Birt, but caring for a lizard would have been too much for me at the time.

Though most of my nature experiences are from my younger years, nature continues to evolve, and so does my perspective. At age 10, a walk around town seemed like a boring chore, but as I've grown older, I've come to appreciate nature's wonders. After reflecting on these two experiences from my boyhood, I took a walk around my neighborhood. My mom has always said we are fortunate to live in a safe area where we can enjoy the beauty of nature.

During my walk, I passed by the track field near Hillhouse High School. A bit farther was a lake where I'd heard rumors that alligators and even piranha have been seen there. While on my walk I encountered a gray squirrel with a very skinny tail. As I slowly followed this squirrel, I discovered a part of the lake I had never seen before. It was like a scene from a movie, with a plethora of bees, butterflies and colorful flowers. However, the human touch of litter along the shore was a sad reminder of our impact on nature.

I picked up some of the trash before heading back home. Despite nature's beauty, we often take it for granted. From littering to overhunting, we are damaging our planet. We can

help by planting trees to clean the air and being mindful of our waste. Educating others about recycling and advocating for environmental awareness are additional steps we can take. At school I promoted a plan for recycling bins in classrooms that didn't succeed, but I remain committed to doing what I can to help educate other youth about the environment.

While social media had once been a frequent outlet for highlighting environmental issues, that seems to have been overshadowed by other concerns. But we must realize that a healthy planet is vital to our future, and without it, we won't have the luxury of worrying about freedom.

People should be more mindful of their waste, because trash that litters our streets and parks ends up polluting lakes and rivers, harming wildlife. Reducing fossil fuel use and using alternatives such as solar power and wind energy are essential for protecting our atmosphere from the continued buildup of carbon dioxide from fossil fuel emissions.

I can't solve all the world's environmental problems alone, but I believe that many hands can make a change. With help, we can save the beauty of nature for future generations. If everyone contributes, we can make a difference and help guarantee nature remains a source of life and growth.

