Hello everyone! We five participants represent the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, which is usually called YSEALI. The program is funded by the U.S. Department of State and hosted by the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana. It is an undergraduate program for student leaders from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, held over five weeks in Montana, Louisiana, and Washington, D.C. We are studying the role of environmental policies through workshops, lectures and field trips, sharing about environmental issues of each South East Asian country, and experiencing the diverse cultures of one another as well as the United States. Our goals in this program are to study environmental issues, to develop our leadership and communication skills, and to gain a deeper understanding of United States society and culture. Through this program, students discuss global environmental concerns focusing on the United States and South East Asian countries.

Having the chance to experience American life in the last three weeks, we are really impressed by the diversity of this society, which we can easily see in many aspects from culture, race, religion and cuisine. We very much enjoyed the amazing Salish Powwow, the interesting conversations with many friends, and good time for dinner with Vietnamese people who live in Missoula. All these experiences have given us the idea that people from all around the world, together with Native Americans, gather here in the United States, appreciate the differences, contribute their own uniqueness, and ultimately create such an extraordinary diversity. We can see that people here are free to express their ideas and
characteristics, because people treat each other with respect no matter who you are or where you’re from.

The people’s hospitality and sense of environmental responsibility are among our primary impressions. A greeting with a friendly smile is the American cultural uniqueness. Everybody says hi and smiles everywhere. It makes me realize that even though American people are independent, interdependence is still on their minds, and people always communicate and help each other. We stayed with local host families for 2 days during the course of our stay in Missoula. We all found our host families to be very warm-hearted and hospitable. During our time living in their homes, our host families took care of us very well. They treated us as if we were part of their family. It made us really impressed and gratefully delighted. We have noticed that people in Missoula love nature; people love their rivers, forest and wildlife. Families spend time together at the mountains, waterfalls, parks and so forth. People take responsibility for protecting what they love; parents teach their children not to harm nature. People learn how to live with nature properly. This is the great contribution to environmental protection.

Additionally, we really admire eco-friendly technology in Montana. The more we learn about such technology, the more inspiration we obtain. We have seen good examples of highly efficient urban design. There are bike lanes around the city of Missoula, a natural gas fired plant in Butte, holistic asbestos remediation in Libby, and so forth. We, too, are astonishingly impressed by self-sustaining technologies such as the Missoula Hybrid Poplar Water Reclamation Project and the University of Montana’s FLAT house for sustainable living, to name but two examples. Furthermore, apart from such specific examples of green technologies, you can also see eco-friendly methods in the way people in
Montana live. The Garber Family’s Homestead Organics Farm in Hamilton, for instance, has been providing youth education programs in the region. We can see technology go hand-in-hand with eco-livelihoods, which very much inspires us.

As we are a new generation, who have received a great opportunity to participate in this program and gain knowledge about global environmental issues and leadership skills in the United States, we have a specific future goal to raise awareness in the next generation about harmful matters such as climate change and pollution. We can also challenge them to compare these issues in the United States with shared concerns in our countries and find effective solutions by utilizing technological and scientific innovations. Moreover, leadership skills have played an important role in our quotidian life. It is not only how to lead people as a group or an organization, but also the way we lead our own selves in daily activities. Last but not least, we would like to say “thank you so much” to the people of Montana for your great hospitality. You have made us feel at home while we are far away from our countries. Everyone that we have met here is really meaningful for us and surely we will keep you in our minds forever.

On behalf of YSEALI Students Lily, Katrina, Daniel, Colors, Tian, and our 15 other colleagues, thank you for listening.