



Six ways to reduce your environmental impact



Grassroots Stewardship: Sustainability Within Our Reach

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JUNE 11TH 2020

Over the last 50 years, human population has doubled, and global trade has increased ten-fold, drawing more deeply on Earth's natural resources, warming the climate, and polluting the global environment. If current climate trends continue, a third of the global population will live in places warmer than the heart of the Sahara Desert 50 years from now. Given the likely migration response to these and other changes, today's youth will likely experience massive environmental and societal shocks during their lifetimes that were previously viewed as only distant risks to future generations. If we care about our children's future, now is the time to fix this problem.

It is ironic that, as patterns of global degradation become more conspicuous, humanity has become less successful in curtailing planetary degradation. People don't deliberately degrade Earth—our only home—but rather degrade it as a byproduct of efforts to improve people's material lives in the short term. I used to think it was government's job to tackle large-scale, long-term problems like these, but government often does a poor job of it for many reasons, including short time horizons (two to four-year election cycles, daily stock market fluctuations), vested interests that finance election campaigns, and limited spatial scale of concern (a politician's district or, at most, his nation).

Solutions begin at home and actions by individual citizens—especially in developed nations—can reverse these trends and contribute to a more sustainable future. On average, those of us living in developed nations consume 32 times more energy and other resources than does the average person in the developing world. We can be very effective in reducing individual impacts on the global environment.

In 2019, 68% of people surveyed in developed nations viewed climate change as a major threat. Nonetheless, many people do not take actions that would reverse this trend because they think it would impoverish their lives. But citizens can reverse the trend of global environmental degradation, while improving their daily lives. It's not that hard. Here's a starting point:

1. Enjoy and celebrate nature and community with your friends and family. Time spent in nature as a child is one of the best predictors of environmental concerns of adults. Even people who pay no attention to nature benefit from it. For example, street trees cool their environment and reduced heat-wave fatalities by nearly 30% in elderly Chinese urban residents. Time spent in nature, whether it be wilderness, backyard gardens, or city parks, builds an ethic of stewardship for nature for today and the future.
2. Be informed. Nature provides many critical benefits to society, including the food, fiber, and water we harvest; protection from changes in climate, severe storms, and wildfire; and the aesthetic and spiritual amenities that enrich people's lives. Learn how changes in human activities degrade nature's benefits and what you can do to sustain them.
3. Support honorable consumption. Buy what you need and choose options that draw lightly on Earth's resources. Among the 85% of Americans who do not live in poverty, increases in hours worked, income, and consumption do not increase happiness. Instead, time spent with friends and family, providing learning opportunities for our kids, and contributing to nature or community give greater satisfaction. Besides, unnecessary consumption increases household debt, which reduces happiness through financial insecurity.
4. Show that you care. Habits and social norms that are highly visible are susceptible to change. These include both icons of conspicuous consumption, such as expensive cars and clothes, and environmentally friendly habits, such as bicycling to work and recycling. Be a role model for values you believe in rather than buying things just to keep up with your neighbors.
5. Talk respectfully with others about choices that give you personal satisfaction. Seventy-five percent of Americans never talk with anyone over the course of a year about changes in climate or the environment. Tell people what you care about and why.
6. Tell your leaders what you think is important and why. Vote, thank your leaders for good things they have done, and inform them of other actions that you advocate. If necessary, protest and shame those who operate outside of democratic processes. If everyone voted in ways that reflected their professed environmental concerns, there would be much stronger political support for climate action.

If people who are concerned about the future act responsibly on its behalf, we can transform the world.

Featured image by Dan Meyers via [Unsplash \(https://unsplash.com/photos/vouoK_daWL8\)](https://unsplash.com/photos/vouoK_daWL8).

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