

Shrink Your Ecological Footprint

By Portia Sinnott, LITE Initiatives, www.liteinit.org, copyright 2004-2009

The Ecological Footprint Quiz is a tool for calculating your impact on the Earth. It asks 27 questions about you and your lifestyle – where you live, what you eat, what you buy, how much you waste, your energy use and how you get about. At the end it calculates how many acres of food and goods you need per year to maintain your lifestyle.

I take the quiz every few years, at www.myfootprint.org, (the link is at the bottom of the page). In 2004 my Ecological Footprint was 9 acres, and if everyone lived like I did we would need 1.9 earths. The quiz, updated in 2007, is now much more sophisticated. The US average is 6.35 earths, while the global average is 1.5. Given we only have one earth, none of these lifestyles are sustainable – mine, the US average nor the global average (which is distorted by the US).

What can we do? The answer is to start integrating sustainable practices into our lifestyles and that of the average American.

Start simple. Using the list at right, check off the techniques you already practice, draw a line through impossible ones and circle a few you would like to take on. Once you integrate the new ones, check them off and select a new one when you feel ready. It is okay if you occasionally get sidetracked - like driving to the movies when you could walk or buying some expensive imported item. What is important is that you get in the sustainability habit - not that you are 100% on everything all of the time.

These prescriptions may sound simple but they are not easy - especially for those of us with busy active lives. The secret is setting a clear intention, coming up with a good plan and sticking with it for 14 days. Here are a few examples that hung me up for years - salad dressings and bag reuse. I prefer homemade salad dressing but found the idea of making them a bit daunting. When I finally blocked out some time, I found them easy to make and well worth the effort. The same thing was true with eliminating that irritating pile of bags next to the refrigerator. I set my intention, came up with a simple plan, and stuck with it: Right after unpacking the groceries, I hang my canvas bags on a doorknob. The next time I go out I put them in the car or bike bag so that they are always there when I need them. This habit has become second nature and I don't even think about it except when I occasionally rush out and end up at the store without them.

Every dollar is a vote. Why am I talking about dressings and paper bags when we are confronted daily with much bigger problems? Everybody has to start somewhere, and simple, straightforward practices - like preparing our own food, reusing bags and driving less, help us address complicated challenges like unwanted food additives, resource shortages, landfill closures and air pollution. The choices individuals make day-to-day really matter, and the sooner we shrink our individual footprints the better it will be for the earth and us.

How To Shrink Your Ecological Footprint LITE Checklist I

Check items you already practice. Draw a line through the impossible and circle a few you are willing to take on. Set a goal and go for it! Visit list again in a few weeks.

TRANSPORTATION

- Drive less and travel less
- Walk and bike safely
- Carpool - it's good for your social life!
- Plan meals and trips; clump errands
- Take transit when possible
- Work at home or close to home
- Keep your vehicle well maintained and tires properly inflated
- Select safe efficient cars
- Rent other vehicles when needed
- Vacation close to home

ENERGY AND WATER

- Get a good sweater; Keep the heat on low
- Close the door - don't let the heat out
- Use energy efficient appliances and bulbs
- Turn lights off when not in use
- Minimize opening the refrigerator
- Wash clothing with cold water
- Dry clothing on a rack or clothes line
- Conserve water
- Plant year round gardens
- Select native and drought resistant plants
- Use mulch and compost to reduce water use and feed the soil

FOOD

- Eat fresh, locally grown food
- Choose organic whenever possible
- Make your own dressings, sauces and condiments
- Minimize animal products
- Enjoy natural snacks
- Avoid empty calories
- Share meals with neighbors and friends

WASTE

- Buy less and consume less
- Choose locally made goods
- Use non-toxic products
- Reduce, reuse, recycle and share
- Compost; try worms!
- Reuse bags, containers and paper
- Carry a cup and refill water bottles glass or stainless steel
- Buy in bulk; avoid packaging
- Try refillables; avoid disposables.
- Visit the Library for books and videos, and rental businesses for party equipment and power tools.