

Learning Sustainability

Not that long ago, as part of the FLCC initiative to go green, I took a paperless pledge to examine and improve my own sustainability practices. The opportunity to assess my progress at that time came in the form of an interactive computer program, that, among other choices allowed me to choose the personae of a moderately dressed bald headed rather old man as I punched in my answers to the full range of my behaviors related to sustainability.

Back up a moment . . . my past is significant in determining who I am today, in particular how I conduct my interface with the larger world. My passionate love for the Natural World coalesced in my early childhood with untold hours of wandering about frog ponds and trout streams and sitting in owner built tree houses. Then, I could not have articulated why I was so happy. This connection to nature transcends my being to this very day. As a Boy Scout, Outing Club trip leader, tripping counselor at a boys camp, middle school science teacher, US Forest Service trail maintenance volunteer, graduate student in forestry, nine years as a Scout Master in three different towns and today at the end of my 36th year as a teacher of Conservation at FLCC, I have a strong sense of mission.

The naiveté with which I embarked upon my graduate thesis topic: “How to change littering habits by users of Wilderness Areas” lead me through coursework in sociology, psychology, criminal law and correction and ultimately toward economics and politics. There was just too much to know – changing the world would be more difficult that I thought!

So how can we change the world? We might try to confront recalcitrant as we gain power, status and wealth as individuals to the dawning point of an imperial empire that successfully dominates others and society at large. The historians tell us that every such empire has ended . . . Getting in someone’s face just does not work very well over the long haul. Besides, Empires have had an awful track record in regards to Environmental sustainability.

Gandhi tells us we must live the changes we wish to see; Margaret Mead tells us that social change starts with a dedicated group of individuals. We often refer to such folks as the lunatic fringe but if the change is right for the time, a critical mass builds. The time to reach for Global Sustainability has arrived. Without engaging in the litany of Global tragedies our very survival as a human race is contingent upon our ability to fall within the inviolable limits our Space Ship Earth imposes upon us. See Lester Brown’s “Plan B 3.0 Mobilizing to Save Our Civilization” available for cheap in the FLCC bookstore for the most sobering assessment yet.

Forward to the present, I was delighted to have the chance to see how well I was doing to lighten my footprint upon Mother Earth. I knew my small, well insulated and air tight home would stack up very well. As a conscientious non-consumer I do recycle, reuse, reduce, repair everything I am able. By refusing to purchase items with excessive packaging and sorting materials into totes in the cellar, I am filling only one or two full bags of “trash” per year. Using only compact fluorescent bulbs (one on at time), unplugging all of the little winking voltage converters, setting the water heater at 105°, splurging on an energy star refrigerator, hanging laundry in the sun, my actual monthly consumption of electricity always falls below ten dollars a month. My heat comes about 95% from wood cut from my own land. At this rate, I would need only six tenths of an Earth if everyone was just like me!

In the food arena, I would do quite well too. I have been a member of a Community Supported Agricultural program for five years now and have shifted the bulk of my eating habits to include local organic produce. I purchase grass fed meat from a local organic farm and have little remorse from feasting on venison that contains, in part, the oak and maple seedlings from my forest. So far really good! From there, my foot print expanded. My love for shade grown, bird friendly, fair trade coffee hit a snag – this luxury item comes from afar! I was distressed to learn that wine consumption expanded my foot print even more.

Already tense at this point I typed in my vehicle identity and driving habits. Even with only a nine mile commute and great care extended to minimizing trips, the pick-up that I must have to carry logs to feed the Woodsmen's Team and to visit my grandsons in Boston from time to time put me well into the multiple Earth requirement for subsidizing my behaviors.

Horror befell me when I admitted to the computer I am guilty of engaging in commercial airline travel. Sixteen times now, I have been guilty of transporting not only myself but as many as a dozen students to Tropical Forests in Central America or to the Wilderness areas of Alaska. My footprint upon this, our only Earth, expanded to not six tenths of a planet but to six entire planets. The best thing I can say in defense of this incredible demand is the value of such travel to students. We will not work to save natural areas unless we have learned to love them with enough passion to act on their behalf. Fearful of being deemed a hypocrite I will continue to share with my students whilst sitting around a campfire the spiritual joys in living an ever more simplified life. Might they choose to learn from my example!

I know too well that as a higher than average consumer in Canandaigua, my impact upon Earth is excessive. I know that sharing Earth's resources equitably with more than six an a half billion other humans mandates a 90% reduction in my carbon footprint. Though I do not anticipate retiring any time soon, when I do, I will become even more mindful of my dependency upon interactions with this beautiful Earth. I will continue to live as I do in my home, grow many more of my own vegetables, and purchase one of the soon to come to America vehicles made in India, a Ratan Tata for \$2,500 that will use less gasoline than my chain saw.

To calculate your carbon footprint – and gain valuable insight about reducing it – visit <http://sustainability.publicradio.org/consumerconsequences>.

Written at 4:14 a.m. 05/05/2008 by Marty Dodge, Professor of Conservation, Coach FLCC Woodsmen, and part-time consulting forester