

ONE PLANET FITS ALL

By Wes Kempfer

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Ever since I first heard about ecological footprint calculators a few years ago, I had been meaning to try one out. And yet I never really thought the results would tell me anything that I didn't already know, which was that I'm probably doing just fine by our home planet. I am a vegetarian after all, and rarely drive a car, preferring to get around by bicycle and public transit. I guess you could say I'm like quite a few Portlanders: proud of my ecological sensibility, with a sometimes contemptuous attitude toward the wasteful masses in those unenlightened cities elsewhere in the United States.

A few months ago, on one of those leisurely winter Sunday afternoons, I finally got around to entering my lifestyle data into the footprint calculator at www.earthday.org. I answered the questions confidently, certain that my commuting habits, along with my low-on-the-food-chain diet, would evoke praise and accolades from the above mentioned calculator. I imagined that I might even win a free iPod or something, in honor of my exceptional eco-coolness. I pushed the final "submit" button, and waited proudly as the Internet Explorer browser flag waved in the breeze of a downloading bit stream. The answer: if all 6.4 billion human beings living on earth today lived the same lifestyle that I do, we would need a total of 3.3 planets.

"Wait a minute. This can't be right," I said to myself. I entered my data a few times more. Even giving myself a very generous benefit of the doubt on some of the questions, I couldn't get my planetary shoe size down below 2.7. Though I could take some personal comfort in a comparison with the U.S. average, 5.3 planets, it was humbling to realize that I too was among those ugly Americans cited in all of those World Watch Institute statistics--the ones that read, "The United States, with 5 percent of the world population, consumes (enter large and disproportionate percentage here) of (enter just about any natural resource you can name here)."

To help find out why I was considered such a resource hog, and to find out what a single-planet lifestyle would look like, I plugged in some "what-if" responses into the calculator. For example, I told the calculator that we live in a more compact and efficient residence instead of where we really live: a circa 1915 Portland bungalow, which is to energy what a colander is to water. I also told it that most of our food is unprocessed and locally grown, instead what we really eat most of the winter: things like bananas, avocados, and off-season produce from sources way south of the Oregon border--sometimes way south of the equator even—along with a lot of packaged and processed mystery food that comes from who knows where. After several tries, I was finally able to come up with a hypothetical personal lifestyle profile that achieves "oneness" with the Earth, so to speak, which is as follows: a vegetarian diet; most of the food we eat is locally grown, unpackaged, and unprocessed; we generate very little garbage; we are a household of three occupying a 500 square foot "green design" residence with energy conservation features; we always travel by bike or public transit; and, we never fly.

Wow. Attaining such a lifestyle should be no problem, especially that part about talking my family into moving into a 500 square foot living space. I might as well stuff myself into a coat closet with twelve feral cats. But that illustrates some of the difficult challenges that we must face if we are ever to reach sustainability as a society. First of all, even if as an individual household we can achieve a sustainable lifestyle, it isn't truly sustainable until all other households do also, which brings us to one of the core obstacles in reaching sustainability: culture. Even though the one-planet lifestyle is probably technically achievable, at this point in time such a lifestyle would be considered Draconian misery to most Americans. While living in a clean and well-heated 500 square living space might be considered relatively palatial to about three fifths of the people in the world, in the U.S, where a 2500 square foot home plopped down on a mini-Ponderosa is now considered practically an entitlement, the proposition of living in such a space would usually be answered with the word "impossible." And a meatless diet? Forget about it.

Another exercise that I tried with the calculator was to plug in a what-if scenario that might be more culturally acceptable to see how close it comes to sustainability. That lifestyle profile is as follows: we eat meat once or twice weekly; about one fourth of our food is processed and non-locally grown; we still generate little waste; we live in a 1500 square foot green-design residence with conservation features; we still try to avoid automobile travel but do drive a few miles a week in a hybrid, usually with a passenger on-board; we fly about 25 hours a year. The calculator estimates that this would require 2.3 planets, still 1.3 too many if we are to achieve sustainability as a society.

How do we make up the 1.3 planet gap? In my opinion, to achieve sustainability we must take a "meet in the middle" approach between changes that individuals ultimately must make in their lifestyles, and the changes that society as a whole must make in its infrastructure. An individual's ecological footprint is, after all, a combination of the impact of individual lifestyle choices and the infrastructure to supports those choices. For instance, I could optimize the energy efficiency of my home, but if all the electricity I use is generated by coal-fired power plants, my individual impact is still not sustainable. This is just another way of stating the obvious conclusion that anyone who studies our environmental predicament eventually reaches; to achieve a sustainable global civilization, we must make changes at all organizational levels.

That brings us to the perennial activist's question of how do we initiate such changes, especially when they mean calling into question dearly held cultural values? Around this question there has been a lot of well-publicized self-doubt and reflection in the environmental community since the last election. I certainly don't know what the ultimate answer is but I am inclined to agree with the conclusion reached by many analysts: the environmental community must begin to create an appealing vision of a sustainable future. For example, to sell the 2.3 planet lifestyle scenario listed above, the 1500 square foot eco-residence must be more than just an ordinary house or bee-hive apartment. Around it we must plant fragrant hanging gardens. There must be colorful places nearby to play for children and adults. It must be architected in a way that fosters a sense of belonging and community while somehow accommodating the American penchant for privacy. We must also sell the idea that for the price of sacrificing a few hundred square feet of personal living space, we can regain the openness and wildness that is now being gobbled up by urban sprawl.

To promote that vision, we must also begin to actually live it. I think most of us who pursue a truly sustainable lifestyle, as elusive as it apparently is at this time, pride ourselves on our sacrifices and “voluntary simplicity.” Maybe we want to believe otherwise, but in a nation in which buying more stuff is considered patriotic, many of our fellow citizens may not be so impressed by our efforts. Maybe we’d inspire more to action by aspiring to sustainable lifestyles that are more celebrations than sacrifices. An example of this approach is the local cycling advocacy group, Shift (see www.shift2bikes.org). Shift celebrates the joy and freedom of cycling such that commuting to work is transformed from flat tires and wet drudgery through Portland puddles to breakfast on the bridge, the smell of flowers and greenery, meeting friends and neighbors on the way to work, and even making new friends on the way. Who would want to put up with traffic jams, freeway salutes, and road rage instead? Shift demonstrates that to change culture, we must create appealing alternatives. They can only be created by starting to live them.

Of course, inevitably there will be personal sacrifices to be made in order to achieve sustainability, but again, we must keep an eye on what will be gained for the effort: a just and equitable global society, and the preservation of wildness and biological diversity for all future human generations. When considering the current political situation, the entrenched consumerism in the U.S., and the observation that many of the symptoms of overshoot forecasted in the book *Limits to Growth* over thirty years ago are now being realized, it is sometimes hard to see us getting there. I like to think though that here in Portland we are starting to live the vision that will take us there. As for me, I have a couple planets to shed. I think I’ll start by whistling while I weather strip, and making more frequent trips to the farmer’s market.