

The Guilty Environmentalist

My Big, Fat Environmental Footprint

Looking into the rear-view mirror, I could tell I had to make a tight squeeze into the parking space. As I threw the transmission into reverse, the woman who had been fussing with her seat in the vehicle parked behind me got out and stood between our cars, waving her hand in front of her nose.

Was this a signal that my parallel-parking skills are not so great? No. She was telling me in a universal language that my car stunk.

Then I noticed the dark plume of exhaust rising from my tailpipe. And so, the guilt begins.

It's been almost two years since the Subaru wagon barely passed its last smog test, and nearly as long since I actually brought her in for a tune-up.

It's not that I drive very often, just to the store and for other errands, I swear. Maybe 20 miles per week, at most. One of the great benefits of working from home is the limited commute necessary to get to work. One of the greater drawbacks is that "routine maintenance" of the car becomes an oxymoron.

A quick inspection under the hood revealed how close I'd come to wrecking my engine. There was virtually no oil left in the engine block. The dipstick was completely dry.

Oh, I could tell myself that oil prices are too high, that it's all part of a plan to reduce my personal consumption of fossil fuels, and a protest against the nation's need to import oil products from the Middle East. I also try to rationalize my ownership of an older gas-guzzler by claiming partial credit for the fact that my spouse drives an electric/gas hybrid Honda. Her car's fuel-efficiency of 45 miles per gallon more than offsets my all-wheel drive Subaru's average of 15 mpg—at least in my imagination.

I could get a bumper sticker: *"My other car is a hybrid...really."*

When I attend an energy conference in the hybrid, I proudly drive right up to the hotel's front door and sometimes even let the valet take the keys.

When I'm in the guzzler, I park way out of sight.

The truth is that I'm a terrible environmentalist. My denial of the oil-based requirements of owning an automobile had almost reached the point of causing even worse ecological disaster—in the form of another dead hunk of metal and plastic, bound for a scrap yard or junk pile somewhere.

This is the dilemma faced by a Guilty Environmentalist. I know that I really don't *need* a car and that both the world and I'd be better off if I walked everywhere.

The Guilty Environmentalist

But I just cannot bring myself to let the Subaru go. I am, after all, an American with an American-sized environmental footprint. So I just go around feeling guilty.

I first learned of the concept of an “environmental footprint” at a Green Living Fair in San Francisco. The Sustainable Sonoma County group had presented results of their local survey of human-caused environmental impacts, determining that a typical Northern Californian requires 22 acres of land and sea throughout the world to support our everyday demands on Mother Earth—food, shelter, heat, light and transportation. “If everyone in the world consumed like the average person in Sonoma County,” the group chastised, “we would need about four more Earths.”

Again, I tried to rationalize with averages. Maybe as an urban dweller, who doesn’t drive nearly as much as a suburbanite, my ecological footprint might not be as great.

Then I took the test and failed miserably. If anything, I have an even worse than average impact on the planet. “How many people live in your home?” asked the questionnaire. Two, I replied. “What is the size of your home?” I grimaced as I checked the “2,500 square feet or larger” box.

“On average, how far do you travel by public transportation each week?” Here, at least, the survey showed me some mercy. I could check “1-25 miles” and pretend that my public transport use was on the upper end of the scale, even though it was closer to 1 mile than 25 miles.

“How often do you drive a car with someone else, rather than alone?” Almost never, I hated to admit. Does taking the dog to the park count as another passenger? No, that excuse doesn’t work for the interstate highway car pool lanes either.

“Approximately how many hours do you spend flying each year?” More than 100 hours, I winced. By now, my personal ecological footprint had expanded across international boundaries and I envisioned the length of the fuel-vapor trail from my own composite Boeing 747, streaming across the sky, spelling out my name above the clouds for all to see.

Many people experience “fear of footprint” when they think about their impact on the Earth, noted the Sonoma survey. “Other common responses are sadness, powerlessness, apathy, avoidance, anxiety, anger and guilt.”

That’s me in a nutshell: anxious, guilty and deep in denial. The very essence of being a Guilty Environmentalist is knowing that whatever actions I take are insignificant in the long run, that whatever choices I make are wrong, and that even the lesser of two evils eventually results in a bigger hole in the ozone layer.

The Guilty Environmentalist

Not even these words of comfort from Mahatma Gandhi can assuage my guilt; *“Anything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.”*

These are some of the things that I could do to relieve my guilt and reduce my big, fat environmental footprint:

- Increase the amount of organically grown food that you eat by 50 percent;
- Dry 12 loads of laundry per month on the clothesline rather than in an electric or gas dryer;
- Shower 3 minutes less each day;
- Keep the thermostat set 5 degrees lower during the heating season;
- Fly five hours less each year;
- Drive 20 miles less each week;
- Substitute one meat dinner a week with a vegetarian alternative.

I can try, I promise. I tell myself, “I’ll do it for Mother Earth!”-- knowing that no matter how much organic spinach I eat, or how cold I allow the house to be in winter, I’ll never really shed my guilt.

Then I see my salvation. Out of all the alternatives for reducing my environmental impact, the biggest, the best, the most effective is something I don’t even have to think about. To reduce your footprint by 1 acre per year, said the survey, all one has to do is “Postpone having a child for one month.”

Heck, there’s never been the pitter-patter of little ecological feet tramping around my part of the planet (just three sets of paws of various species). That’s untold hundreds of acres saved for posterity!

Fill ‘er up, with Premium! Top off that crankcase with 10-40 weight Valvoline! It’s time to celebrate!

Check out Arthur O’Donnell’s latest books, articles and appearances at The Energy Overseer: www.energyoverseer.com