



## Residential Environmental Management: Household Environmental Issues

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### Introduction

Environmental problems are growing faster than proposed solutions. This condition presents humanity with an uncertain future. Given the rapid rate of change in the environmental situation, many experts agree that modern society has only 10 to 20 years to shift course—making the changes needed to save the planet from ecological collapse and economic turmoil.

Despite 20 years of hard work on the part of environmentalists—teachers, writers, researchers, policy makers, civic leaders and business owners—the planet is in trouble. The environmental movement in the United States has fallen short of its goals, principally because it has been too limited. To meet the challenge of the environmental crisis, profound changes are needed in our society. The most needed change is a change in attitude. It will require replacing old ways of thinking with a “sustainable earth ethic.”

Author Daniel Chiras says, “It is time for serious reflection and self-examination. It is time for individual action. It is time to step out of the fray to examine the environmental response to chart a new course.”

The household is a critical element in the environment. Decisions made by household members greatly influence the environmental condition. These household decisions, along with strategies for improving the environmental situation, are presented here.

### Household Consumption

How much is enough? What level of consumption can the earth support? Does consuming more and more greatly improve satisfaction and happiness? Futurists indicate that overconsumption by



the wealthiest fifth of humanity is an environmental problem unmatched in severity by anything but perhaps population growth. They project that surging exploitation of resources threatens to exhaust or permanently disfigure forests, soils, water, air and climate.

The United States is known worldwide as the ultimate consumer society. Since World War II, we have prided ourselves on our ability to develop new products, to manufacture them quickly, and to move them into the mass market at rapid rates. Examples include automobiles, home appliances, labor-saving devices of every type, new kinds of textiles, new ways of constructing and using our homes, new ways of obtaining information through television and on and on. These products in all their varied forms have become powerful symbols of the “American Way” or “The American Dream.”

This “American Way” drives the aspirations of people in other societies around the world. To illustrate, consider recent changes in Eastern Europe as they are trying to shift their economies to parallel ours. They are trying desperately to reshape their economies to develop capital, creating industry, to raise their food and to obtain material goods which we take for granted.

There is a hidden cost for the material prosperity in our country. The United States is often referred to as the “energy hog” of the world. Our five percent of the world’s population consumes approximately 20 percent of all the energy used each day in the world. This energy use has serious environmental implications.

You might ask, “How can I make a difference with this large and complex problem?” We each make decisions daily about what we will consume and how we will use various resources in our lives. The total of our individual decisions greatly influences the world’s environmental condition. Increasingly, individual decisions over what we buy, use, throw away and waste will determine the future of this country and perhaps the world.

To be an accountable environmental consumer, it is helpful to view our individual actions and their effect on the ecosystem in these three major environmental areas:

- Pollution—when something is present in land, air or water in concentrations greater than desirable to maintain ecological balance, human health or aesthetics;
- Resource Depletion—using up the earth’s most valuable assets, especially those that are either nonrenewable or difficult to recover in useful form;
- Public Health—having a disease-free environment, and adequate food supply and positive factors that enhance quality of life.

With these areas in mind, let’s consider some specific strategies that we can do as individuals and families to become effective and efficient environmental managers—consumers who support a “sustainable earth ethic.”

## **What You Can Do**

### **1. Reduce the threat of global warming.**

- Reduce your use and unnecessary waste of energy.
- Support efforts to reduce permanent deforestation.
- Plant trees and help cool the globe and your house.
- Urge state and national legislators to sponsor

bills aimed at greatly improving energy efficiency and curbing emissions of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants.

### **2. Protect forests and other land ecosystems.**

- Cut down on the use of wood and paper products you do not really need.
- Plant and care for trees on a regular basis.
- Rather than artificial or cut trees at Christmas, buy a living tree to plant later.

### **3. Reduce waste.**

- When purchasing consumer products, consider the following: don’t buy unless you need it, reuse, recycle and choose products made from recycled materials.
- Emphasize waste reduction over waste management.
- Do not use disposable products when other alternatives are available.
- Buy products with the least packaging.
- Put your garbage out in reusable plastic or metal containers instead of throwaway plastic bags.
- Carry groceries and other items in a reusable basket, canvas or string bag.
- Recycle newspapers, glass and aluminum.
- Use rechargeable batteries.
- Support mandatory trash separation, recycling programs and waste reduction in your community and schools with the goal of reducing waste output at least 60 percent.

### **4. Food and controlling pests.**

- Use organic cultivation techniques to grow some of your own food in a backyard plot, a window planter, a rooftop garden or a cooperative community garden.
- Use natural alternatives to pesticides for controlling common household insect pests.
- Buy organically grown produce that has not been grown using synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or growth regulators.
- Do not waste food.

### **5. Conserve energy.**

- Select a car that gets at least 35 miles per gallon.
- Walk or ride a bicycle for short trips.
- Use a car pool or mass transit as much as possible.
- Weatherize your house by insulating, weather stripping and caulking.
- Consider using solar energy to heat part of your house and your household water.



#### 6. Soil conservation.

- Use organic methods for growing vegetables and maintaining your yard.
- When building a home, save all the trees possible and have the contractor set up barriers to catch any soil eroded during construction.
- Landscape any area not used for gardening with a mix of wildflowers, herbs, low-growth ground cover, small bushes and other forms of vegetation natural to the area.
- Use a compost bin to produce mulch and soil conditioner for yard, window box and garden plants.

#### 7. Protect the ozone layer.

- Do not buy products containing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), carbon tetrachloride and methyl chloroform.
- Avoid buying halon or carbon dioxide fire extinguishers for home use.
- Use roll-on and hand-pump products instead of aerosol spray products.
- Frequently have your auto air conditioner checked for leaks. If it needs to be recharged, take it to a shop that has the equipment to recycle its CFCs. Leaky air conditioners in cars are the single largest source of CFC emissions in the United States.
- Share your concern about the use of CFCs, halons, carbon tetrachloride and methyl chloroform with your legislator. Encourage them to initiate legislation that will require the use of substitutes for these environmental threats.

#### 8. Hazardous waste.

- Do not use pesticides and other hazardous chemicals unless absolutely necessary and in the smallest amounts possible.
- Use less hazardous cleaning products.
- Use rechargeable batteries.
- Do not flush hazardous chemicals down the toilet, pour them down the drain, bury them or dump them down storm drains. Consult your local health agency, environmental agency or the Cooperative Extension Service for safe disposal methods.
- Discuss the need to reduce the production of hazardous waste with your legislator. Encourage policymakers to prevent pollution through reduction of the production of hazardous products rather than focusing on hazardous waste management.

#### 9. Conserve water.

- Check frequently for water leaks around your home and repair all leaks promptly.
- Reduce the amount of water used per flush by putting a tall plastic container weighted with a few rocks into each toilet tank. Insert a toilet dam or install water-saving toilets.
- Install water-saving flow restrictors on all faucets and showerheads.
- Water lawns and gardens in the early morning or in the evening.
- Use drip irrigation systems and mulch home gardens to improve irrigation efficiency and reduce evaporation.
- Do not wash your car or wash it less frequently. Wash the car from a bucket of soapy water; use the hose only for rinsing.

#### 10. Reduce indoor air pollution.

- Have your home, apartment or office tested for radon and take corrective measures as needed.
- Do not smoke, or only smoke outside or in a closed room vented to the outside.
- Install air-to-air heat exchangers or other ventilation systems.
- Reduce indoor levels of formaldehyde and several other toxic gases by using house plants such as the spider or airplane plant, golden pathos, syngonium and philodendron.
- Avoid using room deodorizers, air fresheners or aerosol spray products.

#### 11. Reduce water pollution.

- Limit use of commercial inorganic fertilizers, pesticides, detergents, bleaches and other chemicals unless absolutely necessary, and

then use them in the smallest amounts possible.

- Recycle old motor oil and antifreeze at a gas station.
- Landscape with a variety of water conserving ground-cover plants and energy-conserving trees adapted to Oklahoma.
- Use low-phosphate, phosphate-free, or biodegradable dishwashing liquid, laundry detergent and shampoo.
- Do not use water fresheners in toilets.
- Do not pour products containing harmful chemicals down the drain.

As you review this list of suggestions, you will notice that many of the suggestions appear in more than one category. This reminds us that our decisions will impact many aspects of the environment rather than just one. You are encouraged to review this list of strategies and develop a plan for improving your environmental sensitivity and household habits that will improve the quality of our environment. The decision is yours!

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