

Earth Day 2012

Ten Things You Can Do to Help Save the Planet

By Chris Davis

April 22, 2012 was the 42nd Earth Day, an event that passed with limited notice by most Americans and the news media. For all but a few of us who work in the field, the environment is no longer a “top 10” issue. Yet objectively, the planet is in materially worse shape than it was on the first Earth Day in 1970. As a species, we are collectively destroying the earth’s natural systems, plundering its resources and squandering its natural capital at an accelerating and unsustainable rate. The “Tragedy of the Commons” that Garrett Hardin wrote so eloquently about in advance of the first Earth Day is rapidly unfolding just as he predicted.

On a global scale, the earth’s ecosystems are under siege. With a human population of 7 billion, and headed for at least 10 billion fairly soon, growing greenhouse gas emissions and resultant climate change, increasing regional water scarcity, and growing global competition for dwindling resources, the trends are to put it mildly, not looking good. It has been estimated that we are now consuming the planet’s resources, emitting pollutants and generating waste at about 1.5 times the earth’s carrying capacity. The “externalities” of our ever growing global economy are overwhelming the earth’s ability to assimilate them. [For a fairly comprehensive and sobering account of the causes, effects and trends of global environmental degradation, I recommend Paul Gilding’s recent book, [The Great Disruption](#).]

If we continue on our present course, our environmental, social and economic systems appear to be headed for collapse, or at least some very rough sledding with unacceptably high (and of course, inequitably distributed) human and ecological casualties. Catastrophic and irreversible climate change is a growing possibility, if not a probability, without fundamental changes in how we use energy. After more than 40 years of effort, and a proliferation of “green” policies and initiatives, we are clearly losing the war of environmental protection and conservation. This is particularly disquieting for those of us who work in the environmental profession, supposedly understand these issues, and presumably care about the real world outcomes.

As environmental lawyers, our business is to diligently represent our clients’ interests, and hopefully provide them with some wise, thoughtful, ethical advice along the way. Our clients, in many cases, consist of major industries, corporations and facilities that impact the environment, individually and collectively, in a range of ways (generally in accordance with applicable permits, regulations, and industry standards, we hope). But as individuals, apart from the clients and interests we get paid to represent, we are parents, grandparents, spouses, friends, citizens, church, mosque, or synagogue members, and often community leaders. And we have superior knowledge of environmental problems and solutions, compared to most of our fellow citizens. We can’t claim ignorance or incapacity. We each have a choice about whether and how we choose to manage our personal, family and community environmental footprints, and perhaps those beyond our immediate circle of influence.

So what are we going to do about the environmental crisis that is unfolding around us, and our direct and indirect contributions thereto? Continue with our affluent, consumptive lifestyles and “business as usual,” or actually make some real changes in what we value, what we consume, how we live, and how we influence the behavior of others? What role do our personal moral, ethical and religious beliefs have in informing our actions? What kind of a world do we plan to leave our children, our grandchildren, their children, and our fellow humans living in developing countries who had little to do with causing these problems but will bear the brunt of their effects? If we don’t lead, who will?

I wrote what appears below for my church’s recent Earth Day service. It summarizes much of what I’ve learned about environmental issues, problems and solutions over the last thirty plus years (to be sure I’m a slow learner)--now that I’m free to speak candidly on this subject, unfettered by client constraints or economic self interest. I suspect many of my legal friends and colleagues (and their loyal clients) will disagree with at least some of my “top 10” list and supporting commentary. Feel free to let me know where you think I’m wrong and why. But I challenge you to at least think seriously about what I’ve written here. Nor do I claim that I personally do all of these things, or most of them consistently, or that I occupy any moral high ground on these issues.

OK, enough preface. Here goes.

- 1. Stop Eating Beef.** Beef is a very energy inefficient and environmentally destructive source of protein. Corn fed, feedlot raised cattle cause a great deal of pollution—from the nitrogen fertilizer and massive water use to grow the corn, petroleum to till, harvest and transport it and resulting GHG emissions; manure runoff, and methane emissions from bovine digestion and excretion—contributing significantly to global warming, among other negative impacts (e.g., all the antibiotics fed to the cattle). If you can’t give it up, eat local, grass fed beef, which is much healthier for you and the planet.
- 2. Drive Less.** Carbon dioxide emissions from our cars are a major contributor to climate change, and our gasoline use supports environmentally risky and pollution generating new oil production (e.g., expanded offshore drilling, shale oil fracking, Canadian tar sands mining). Look for ways to eliminate or combine trips, share rides, walk, bike or take public transportation. Keep your car well tuned, your tires fully inflated, and don’t let your car idle. You’ll save money and reduce your contribution to global warming, and maybe even get more exercise.
- 3. Make Your Home More Energy Efficient.** Buildings—including our homes and offices-- account for 40% of total U.S. energy use, and their heating, cooling and lighting causes about 40% of U.S. greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that cause global warming. Adding insulation, sealing cracks, and installing a more efficient heating system will save energy and cut your heating and cooling costs. In many cases, our electric utilities have energy efficiency programs, including free home energy audits and subsidized retrofits. Talk with your utility. Also, try heating and air conditioning less—wear a sweater, use fans, save money. And of course, use only

efficient CFL or LED lighting, and turn off lights, computers and other electronic devices when not in use.

4. **Buy Organic, Local Food.** Minimize the “environmental footprint” of your food—the energy and resources used to grow and transport it. Conventional food is produced using environmentally polluting fertilizers and toxic pesticides, and on average our food travels over 2000 miles, increasing its “carbon footprint” of GHG emissions used to move it to market. Organic food generally costs more but is much easier on the environment—grown without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. And locally grown organic food has the smallest footprint, is fresher and healthier, and supports local farmers. If you can’t buy organic, at least try to buy locally sourced meat and produce.
5. **Buy Less Stuff.** We Americans comprise only about 4% of the world’s population, but use about 20% of global energy and resources-- an unsustainable and irresponsible level of consumption. What if the 2.5 billion people in China and India all emulated our lifestyle—the planet would be cooked (and who’s to say they have no right to live as well as we do...?). The manufactured goods we buy (think electronics, appliances, new cars, clothing, toys) all use energy, water, oil, and mineral resources, contributing to pollution in China or wherever they are made. (Think of whose stuff they’re making before criticizing China’s energy use and GHG emissions!) Buy only what you need, buy quality long lasting items, and observe the old Yankee credo: “use it up, wear it out, make do.” Think of all the money, time (and pollution) you’ll save. High consumption and spending actually are not correlated with happiness, and living simpler lives may be—ask the good folks in Bhutan.
6. **Use Recycled Products.** Recycling all of our paper, glass metal and plastics is a good first step, but to close the circle and make recycling economical (and more widespread) we need to create market demand for recycled products by buying them. Use recycled printer and copier paper, toilet paper and paper towels—all now widely available and of decent quality. Look for products made of recycled plastic (like decking) and metal. Ask stores to carry recycled products. When you need to buy things, do your homework and try to truly be a “green consumer.” Vote with your wallet for sustainable products and services.
7. **Buy Green Power.** Most of our electricity comes from burning coal (which is environmentally destructive to mine, and the largest source of carbon dioxide and mercury emissions) or nuclear power (which generates radioactive wastes that we haven’t figured out how to manage). Renewable energy sources (wind, solar, small scale hydro) generate electricity with no GHG emissions. In some states, you can elect to buy renewable sourced electricity under “green power” programs. It costs more, but renewable power costs are falling, and buying it supports further renewable energy development and reduces pollution from your electricity use. Check it out.

- 8. Support Conservation.** The Earth’s forests, ecosystems and wildlife habitat are disappearing at an alarming rate, and their destruction exacerbates climate change and loss of biodiversity. Mankind is ultimately dependent on functioning natural systems in many ways. Locally, development continues to replace farmland and woodlands with housing developments and strip malls. Support the preservation of our remaining local, national and global natural areas by joining and contributing to a local land trust, the Wilderness Society, National Wildlife Federation, the Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund, or another conservation organization of your choice.
- 9. Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is.** We have the choice of contributing either to the problems or the solutions both through what we buy and how we invest our money. Stop buying the products of companies with poor environmental records. Patronize “green” companies that actually have environmentally sustainable business strategies, operations and practices (and beware of the fog of “greenwash” that many companies issue while continuing substantially with business as usual). And invest at least part of your 401(k) or personal portfolio in high quality “green” companies and mutual funds, instead of in oil, coal and power companies that perpetuate our unsustainable fossil fuel dominated economy. Think beyond this quarter, this year—become a long term, responsible investor.
- 10. Practice Green Politics.** Make your vote, your voice, and your political contributions count for the environment, not against it. Support candidates that support environmental protection, and contribute to organizations that lobby for the environment and conservation. Let your elected officials know you support strong environmental laws and oppose efforts to weaken them. Help vote anti-environment legislators out of office. Contribute to the League of Conservation Voters. Help break the stranglehold of the fossil fuel lobby and its massive political contributions (and extensive image advertising) on our national energy and environmental policies. Collectively, we can make a real difference for the environment!