

CARBON ACTION

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“Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think...”

→ In the months following the “inconclusive” Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, I imagine old codgers in rural pubs leaning against the bar and saying things like: “The bloody problem with sustaina-bloody-bility is that they can’t seem to make up their bloody minds. One minute they’re saying we have to recycle and next they’re telling us there’s no point. I mean, if we’re stuffed we might as well enjoy it, right?”

In franchised city cafes, subsets of baby-boomers will no doubt be smugly positing similar views: “Until the governments come to a consensus, then I don’t see why I should have to give up the SUV. I’m going to bloody enjoy it while it lasts.”

Well yes, but it all depends on what your idea of “enjoy” is.

I have to admit that the more I find out about the enormity of the sustainability cause, the more I question whether humans are actually capable of avoiding the “environmental collapse” being predicted by some researchers.

One thing is clear – it’s time we stopped mucking about (which is not how I’d put it if I was in a pub).

In “Trivial Tips Cause Carbon Complacency: Prioritise Carbon Now” (www.biointeraction.com/carbonfocus/carbonfocus.pdf) Edwin Datschefski and Katharine Robinson note that the average UK household produces 28 tonnes of carbon a year, so if The UK Climate Change Act is to succeed in reducing carbon emissions by at least 80% by 2050 (compared to 1990 levels), there needs to be “a target reduction of 5 tonnes per person” by that date.

According to a Wikipedia article ranking countries according to their 2005 carbon figures, New Zealand weighs in at 18.8 tonnes per person – which next to the UK’s 28 tonnes is great right? Look again – the above UK figure is per household – according to Wikipedia, their per person figure is 10.6 tonnes.

“...if we can’t cut back voluntarily, we’re looking at the global equivalent of stomach stapling – performed by a backyard hack without an anaesthetic.”

So here in Aotearoa, if we’re going to avoid being completely pakaru (the evocative te reo word for broken) we too have our mahi cut out for us.

In the study, Datschefski and Robinson argue that over 75% of carbon saving tips are trivial and suggest that it’s time everyone stopped focussing on the “small savings” that add up to less than half a percent of a household’s total emissions per year, and start acting on the big. They posit that: “The promotion of tips with unquantified and uncontextualised benefits is leading to a ‘carbon complacency’ where consumers feel they are doing good by doing actions that are actually trivial.”

According to the study, things like switching off the TV at the wall (0.07 tonnes) and refusing plastic carrier bags (0.02 tonnes) are actually not that effective. The authors write that: “We are not implying that these actions are not worth doing, but when they are not put into proper context, they distract people from seeing what the most important and effective actions are.”

Instead, they offer the following list of One Tonne Carbon Actions, where each action could save one tonne of carbon dioxide per year:

↘ TRAVEL

- Fly one less long haul trip
- Fly three less short haul trips
- Get a better car [with greater fuel savings]
- Drive 3000 less miles [5000 kilometres] per year

↘ FOOD

- Have 75% of your food be [local] AND Seasonal
- Reduce Meat and Dairy consumption by 75%

↘ HOME

- Give your house a Thermal Makeover
- Switch your thermostat 3 degrees lower
- Share your house with an additional person like a friend, relative or lodger

↘ STUFF

- Shift £2000 (\$6000) of spending from high carbon goods to low carbon goods and services, for example spend on experiences rather than physical goods.

Whilst many of these actions will be doable for a number of households, as a recent graduate trying to make it as a freelancer, I can’t even afford the amount of travel and vehicle use they’re suggesting I cut back by, and the idea of having \$6000 spare for ‘stuff’ is inconceivable. Meat got the boot years ago, and feta and the occasional ice cream add up to less than 5% of my food intake. Unless your university career is funded by Fonterra, you too are probably looking at that list and going, “wicked – I’m already doing it, I can go back to drinking beer out of aluminium cans.”

Hence, I have serious concerns about the message being sent by such a study. I agree that the need to reduce carbon emissions is the single largest man-made crisis facing us, but I am worried that such information – aimed at middle income homeowners – risks putting us lower socio-economic types off. I don’t dispute Datschefski and Robinson’s findings, but the carbon issue is not the only one at stake. I believe that anything we do to reduce our overall consumption is going to help. One household turning off appliances at the wall may seem inconsequential within the narrow focus of such a study, but if a million households saved 0.07 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year by doing it, then it still adds up to 700 000 tonnes.

Besides, the need to reduce carbon dioxide is not the only environmental challenge facing us – and all these ‘trivial’ tips are likely to have other benefits such as reducing pollution or landfill.

Like it or not, we’re going to have to become more sustainable in all areas. Think of it as the difference between losing weight by drastic dieting, or by following a healthy eating plan so that it stays off. Because, if we can’t cut back voluntarily, we’re looking at the global equivalent of stomach stapling – performed by a backyard hack without an anaesthetic.

So whilst, I can’t exactly cut out my (non-existent) international travel, I do intend to continue living, not by calculating carbon credits, but by trying to create more and use less – a challenge that I also happen to enjoy. ←