

## *From the Kitchen*

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I live in a well-to-do country and I live comfortably. A constant question for me is: how much am I willing to compromise and how much am I willing to give up for the benefit of the 'environment'?

Using the word 'environment' in this way has it sound like something separate from me, something 'out there', but, of course, it isn't. When we really think about it, there is no separation between me and my environment. The question should be restated as: how much am I willing to give up for *my* benefit? Even, how much am I willing to give up for *my* survival?

The questions can be asked in relation to so much of what I own and what I do. The answers may not always be easy to come by. It is not as simple as putting in rainwater tanks, installing solar panels and solar heating elements on the roof, replacing the power-hungry appliances and entertainment equipment and trading in the car for an electric one. In each of these cases there are environmental plusses and minuses, including manufacture (raw materials, manufacturing processes and energy use), transport, energy use in the home or on the road and eventual disposal. How can I obtain data on the environmental impact of the plastic or metal used in the rainwater tank and the plumbing needed to connect it; the impact of transport of the raw materials to the factory, the factory to the 'shop' and then to my home? Similarly, there are impacts from mining the minerals that are used for making photovoltaic cells, metal pipes, etc.

Products made in Australia may be more expensive than those manufactured in China or the Philippines, but there is less transport involved. However, while the finished product may have been made here, most of the component parts could well have come from overseas. How would I know? Without this information, how can I possibly make an informed choice? How can I know if I am truly doing something that really redresses any adverse impact I may be having on the world?

Instinctively I feel that by installing all these items I am doing the right thing; however, I doubt that this is the case in reality. There is so much data that would be difficult or impossible to obtain and without it I cannot be sure that I am doing something meaningful rather than merely symbolic.

It would be very useful if all manufacturers and vendors were compelled to make accurate assessments of the total environmental impact of each stage in the process. There *would* need to be consistent and verifiable methods for measuring environmental impacts and a standard way of expressing them.

Even in the food I eat I may be having a greater or lesser impact. Leaving aside the debate of vegetarian versus meat-eating, many of the fruits and vegetables I buy are grown in the far north or far north-west of this country or overseas. Am I justified in buying oranges from North or South America or mixed salad leaves from South-East Asia? What impact does all that transportation have? But there are people who maintain that produce grown in some countries has an inherently lower impact on the world through the difference in production

methods, making its transportation around the globe justifiable.<sup>1</sup> However, ‘cheap’ food from some countries may in fact be at the cost of local health and wellbeing. But there is some obvious insanity in the shipping of food: I am naturally appalled when reading the label on the packaged sandwiches sold at a Melbourne petrol station, that they are made in Perth (and then flown the 2730 kilometres to Melbourne to arrive ‘fresh’). It is even possible that the lettuce in these sandwiches was grown in the Ord River Irrigation Scheme, over 2000 kilometres from Perth.

The argument against eating meat is often sustained by the figures on the amount of methane produced by cattle, sheep and pigs. However, there are also pastoralists who claim that running dense herds of cattle on their land increases the carbon held in the soil so that it more than compensates.<sup>2</sup> A similar argument is advanced in favour of non-plough cropping, using direct-drill sowing.<sup>3</sup>

In order to even start to make a reduction in the ‘footprint’ we leave on the world, we need to be well educated (be literate and numerate and be able to choose between competing arguments) so that we can make sense of all the data. And while there continue to be those individuals and corporations with vested interests in protecting certain practices, information will continue to be hidden, manipulated and counterfeited.

At the disposal end of things it is also difficult to know how much we can reduce our impact. Is everything I place in the recycle bin going to be recycled? How much energy and what resources does that recycling take? Are we dealing with a myth?

The ultimate answer is probably to radically change how we live and how much we use and to have those things we use be made, from the very start, with as much ‘old’ raw material as possible and to be easily recycled at the end.<sup>4</sup> Politically, we need to demand that more meaningful data be made readily available, so that *we* can make the choices instead of having them foisted on us.

1. see for instance [www.i-sis.org.uk/FMAS.php](http://www.i-sis.org.uk/FMAS.php)
2. [www.savoryinstitute.com](http://www.savoryinstitute.com) (Allan Savory has been transforming desert into grassland in Africa, using these methods.)
3. see for instance <http://tinyurl.com/3nn2wn8> for and <http://tinyurl.com/6rbjhb> against
4. It is worthwhile reading *High Tech Trash* by Elizabeth Grossman ([Island Press](http://www.islandpress.com) / Shearwater Books, 2006; ISBN: 9781559635547).