

Lexa McAllister

Climate Change

ATS 320

Andreas Schmittner

Easy Ways to Reduce Your Personal Carbon Footprint

Our climate continues to change and destabilize, which largely results from greenhouse gas emissions. Scientists consider the most influential greenhouse gas to be carbon dioxide. The United States has hugely contributed to these large carbon dioxide emissions through the continual burning of fossil fuels in order to obtain greater economical gains. This paper will discuss the ways in which normal citizens of the United State could lower their carbon emission for a healthier future through a series of options. The different options we will look at include reduced electricity use, alternative transportation, and smarter grocery shopping methods. Within each section we will discuss the current situation and what steps can be taken in order to improve this situation. Change cannot solely exist in Washington DC, it has to start in the homes of normal citizens across the globe.

Electricity plays a massive role in the daily life of most American Citizens. As the lives of North American citizens continue to increasingly depend upon electricity, the idea of living without electricity becomes more and more absurd and terrifying. As winter storms of 2014 continue to bombard the East Coast and the Midwest, thousands of citizens have been left without power. While these people remain frustrated that they cannot charge their laptops, they are losing sight of the fact that approximately 20% of humans on Earth still don not have access to electricity. These humans without electricity have subsisted successfully so far and can teach Americans a few lessons on conservation of natural resources.

According to the EPA, about 38 percent of the United States' carbon dioxide emission comes from electricity use (United States Environmental Protection Agency). This stands as a direct result of coal, oil, and gas utilized as the country's main source of electricity. Within this issue lies a huge disconnect between the citizens using the electricity, the power companies providing the electricity to citizens, and the fossil fuel companies stripping the land to obtain the resources to create this energy. In order to create a paradigm shift, there needs to be greater awareness amongst citizens about what happens to our Earth as we continue to conquer it for more fossil fuels in order to power our refrigerators, our lights, and other common appliances.

Many people feel like they do not have any power pertaining to helping save the climate. In reality, citizens can easily contribute to a more sustainable future for generations to come through making smart choices for electricity use. Some cleaner alternative energy choices include wind energy, solar energy, and many others. Most electricity companies actually offer an opportunity for consumers to pay a little extra in order to only get power from cleaner renewable energies. For example, Pacific Power offers a deal to customers that if they pay about 10% more money than they currently pay, their power will only come from renewable energies. According to Pacific Power, signing up for 1 block of energy (about 100 kilowatt hours) of renewable energy alternatives would save about 1,462 pounds of CO₂ from being emitted into the atmosphere. This is closely equivalent to not driving a car about 1,483 miles (Pacific Power).

One of the easiest ways for citizens to help slow down climate change through decreasing CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere would simply be to use less power. This not only takes demand away from electricity companies that drive demand for fossil fuel burning, but it also reduces costs for the user. Learning to go through simple motions such as turning lights off whenever possible or unplugging appliances and electronics that are not in use can have a huge positive impact on saving energy.

Making a difference doesn't always have to be inconvenient. Changing light bulbs in houses and apartments can be incredibly simple and can make a massive difference in decreasing fossil fuel use. As of January 1st, a law making the manufacturing and distributing of 60 and 40 watt light bulbs illegal (Breckenridge, 2013). This massive step towards greater efficiency through simple actions such as buying new light bulbs will help decrease dependence on fossil fuels. According to Energy Star, the energy efficient light bulbs they sell each year have helped to reduce greenhouse emissions by 830 million pounds and saved 59 million dollars in energy costs (Energy Star).

Not only can replacing your light bulbs be easy, but select local environmental organizations across the United States will install them for you for free. Simply research online if any organizations in the area conduct house visits, apply, and a trained professional will come to your house and install the new energy efficient light bulbs for free.

Other easy ways to decrease electricity use include: utilizing heating/air conditioning less, unplugging superfluous electric devices, upgrading to EnergyStar appliances, installing more efficient insulation, and many other options.

One of the easiest ways for U.S. citizens to contribute less CO₂ emissions would be to drastically change the way they use and view transportation. Right now approximately 31% of CO₂ emissions comes from transportation (United States Environmental Protection Agency). As people continue to enjoy the amount of freedom and independence a personal car provides for them, the amount of fuels burnt and released into the atmosphere continues to rise rapidly. Citizens can be empowered to make a huge difference simply through the action of reducing their dependence on fuel-powered vehicles, more specifically personal automobiles. Vast amounts of alternative modes of transportation exist such as biking, walking, commuting, riding a public bus, and many other interesting types of transportation. Bike sharing programs within large cities has gained a large amount of popularity due to the ease and convenience. According to research from the University of Florida, bike sharing programs have been gaining popularity in urban cities due to their increased benefits of healthier communities and less negative impacts on the environment (Vidalis). U.S. citizens cannot continue to simply watch their environment become destroyed through the tinted windows of their Lexus mid sized SUVs. There needs to be a greater shift towards alternative modes of transportation, which will definitely push people out of their comfort zone and their heated seats. Biking stands as a classic mode of transportation. Bikes require few resources to build and generally require only occasional cheap repairs. Compared to cars, bikes stand as one logical alternative depending on the terrain and geography of where you live and work.

As public transportation systems become more developed they have had an increase of riders over the past decade. According to the American Public Transportation Association citizens that use public transportation reduce their fuel use by approximately 223 gallons per year.

The previous example stands as only one of many examples displaying how people can make a difference through a small and simple choice. Another choice citizens can make remains tightly interwoven with an action we take every month, every week, or sometimes every day.

When citizens visit the grocery store, they face many choices regarding what types of food or brands to buy. When customers make those decisions, they support or vote for those items or brands. This creates greater demand for those specific products. When customers chose smarter choices, foods with less packaging, they drive up the demand for more sustainable packaging options such as bulk foods. A vast amount of foods at grocery stores gets packaged to an extreme, general consisting of plastic.

Most plastic products will be made from either natural gas or oil, both fossil fuels. Stanford alumni estimate that plastic products release about 100-500 million tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere every year, which is equivalent to about 10-45% of U.S. driving emissions. Plastic protective layers also serve the purpose of selling products through aesthetic means. Without a package, companies might struggle to create a brand name for themselves. The increased amount of packaging used also creates a more convenient product. For example, some brands now portion snacks into bags with only 100 calories total for consumers to grab on the go.

As demand for plastic packaging continues to increase, easy solutions to discourage this shift present themselves in the bulk food section at huge grocery stores such as WINCO and Fred Meyer or at local co-op grocery stores. Shoppers that bring their own reusable containers to fill with dried or wet goods in the bulk section will successfully decrease the demand for fossil fuel based packaging. Shoppers can find a myriad of food choices in their bulk section such as pasta, rice, or oatmeal, and even wet foods like honey, vinegar, or salsa.

After reading this essay you may be thinking, what difference can I make even if I took all of these environmentally friendly measures? Many people also have this approach to climate change amongst other issues, the idea that someone else will deal with the issue. But the good news remains that people across the U.S. also try to reduce their carbon footprint. The effort to reduce the United States' carbon use would be futile without the passion and drive from large amounts of normal citizens. These small actions on a local change put pressure on politicians and drive larger campaigns for effective policy change on a large political scale. Citizens do not need to get arrested for participating in civil disobedience or begin rallies to make a difference, they simply need to re-examine their choices they make each day that affect a huge range of people and organizations.

Works Cited

American Public Transportation Association. (n.d.). *Facts*. Retrieved 02 12, 2014, from American Public Transportation Association:
<http://www.apta.com/mediacenter/ptbenefits/Pages/FactSheet.aspx>

Breckenridge, M. B. (2013, 12 29). *Jan. 1 changes to shed new light on what bulbs we can use*. Retrieved 02 12, 2014, from The Seattle Times:
http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2022559173_lightbulbsxml.html

Energy Star. (n.d.). *Light Bulbs for Consumers*. Retrieved 02 12, 2014, from Energy Star: http://www.energystar.gov/certified-products/detail/light_bulbs

Power, P. (n.d.). *Reduce Your Environmental Footprint*. Retrieved 02 12, 2014, from Pacific Power: <https://www.pacificpower.net/env/rycf.html>

United States Environmental Protection Agency. (n.d.). *Carbon Dioxide*. Retrieved 02 12, 2014, from EPA: <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/gases/co2.html>