

A Livable Future

By Gene Bullock

We hear so many grim predictions about global warming, dwindling oil reserves and the threat of environmental collapse, it's easy to feel hopeless. But a growing number of families are choosing action over resignation. Instead of meekly accepting the gloomy predictions, they're taking stock of their daily choices and finding ways to cut down on waste. When multiplied by the efforts of countless others, they are making a real difference.

Some changes are easy, such as switching to fluorescent light bulbs and bringing fabric shopping bags from home. Some take a little more effort, such as turning down the thermostat and wearing a sweater instead of keeping all rooms a cozy 70-plus degrees. But there is no shortage of resourcefulness among those who are serious about reducing their impact on the environment.

The boldest are downsizing to smaller, more energy efficient homes. Many are installing solar panels and buying hybrid cars. Not everyone is able to go to these lengths; but there is growing resolve to move beyond the culture of excess and waste.

Ray and Charlotte Garrido have converted their VW beetle to run on 99% biodiesel. They feed their table scraps to the chickens, which supply them with eggs and fertilizer for the garden. They use a battery powered lawn mower--and sheep-- to keep grass cropped short. And they telecommute at least one day a week.

Lillian Crawford says she nags her husband when he leaves lights on and has switched to a kitty litter that doesn't require strip mining and can be used as mulch. She is also one of many who reuse the blank sides of copier paper for scratch notes and routine copying.

Chris Christensen uses the "Catalog Choice" website www.catalogchoice.org to tell mailers not to send her catalogues. She says it gave her a sense of triumphal accomplishment to list 27 catalogues she does not want to receive.

It is easy being "green" if you put your mind to it, says Mary Hrudkaj. "Once it becomes a part of your life you don't have to think about it. You just do it." An avid birdwatcher, Mary now limits most of her birding to local areas. As the child of parents who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, she grew up shunning waste and remembers the war efforts to conserve scarce resources. The depression-era adage was, "use it up, wear it out or do without." In the pre-disposable era families handed outgrown clothing down to younger siblings, cousins and friends -- and people saved jars and containers to store odds and ends.

Of course there are extremes, such as the old lady who is said to have saved three balls of string: one with long strings, one with short strings and one with strings too short to use.

Karen Salsbury says she hasn't bought incandescents in years...except for Christmas lights, a big oops! She has stopped getting a newspaper and shares one at work. She pays bills on line instead of using paper. She has trained her children to use rechargeables and washes clothes and dishes during off-peak hours. She even uses a clothesline when weather permits. She avoids

Styrofoam and disposables and takes her own mug when she buys a cup of coffee. She keeps car tire pressures up because it helps fuel mileage and reduces tire wear. Another water saving measure is to capture the cold water while waiting for hot and using it for drinking, dogs and plants. She charges her kids ten cents if they leave a light on (“not real consistent about it, but it’s always met with grins”). She uses Craig’s List to buy used instead of new. And she reuses lunch bags, zip-locks and yogurt containers for lunches and leftovers.

Sara and Byron Kane try to buy for the long haul and keep appliances and other major purchases as long as possible. “We try to recycle everything we possibly can and keep potentially toxic things out of the garbage. We save up our used batteries and take them to the recycle station when we have a bag full. The same with oil and anti-freeze - it’s all recycled. We don’t use fertilizers on the lawn - it grows fast enough around here without it. We don’t use poisons in the gardens and I clean house with the mildest of products. We try to always be aware of the consequences of our actions when we make purchases - both large and small.”

Linda Gabriel keeps her thermostat programmed for 67 degrees when she is home and awake, and 57 degrees when she is away or sleeping. She bought a washer and dryer that use less energy, water and detergent. She drives a Prius, but says her next car will be all electric if they are available and affordable. Linda buys used clothing and household items at thrift shops whenever she can. “I raised my daughters to shop thrift shops and consignment shops. One of them just bought me an outfit at a consignment store in Florida. I’ll bring it home when I visit them next, rather than having her package and mail it to me.”

Sharon Peterson washes plastic zip-lock bags and water bottles with hot, soapy water and then reuses them. She fills her water bottles with tap water and keeps them in the refrigerator. She also does home canning and reuses the jars year after year.

Claudia Kilburn just had vinyl windows installed in their 29-year-old home. “I try to purchase locally grown food and other products. I also try to purchase from locally owned businesses. Sometimes it is not possible, but I do my best (in other words, I have never set foot in the Wal-Mart at Olhava!) I know I could do better, but I am on the right path. If we do all the right things and global warming isn’t caused by man then what have we lost? I do know that for every action there is a reaction and what we are doing to this world environmentally can’t be good.”

Of course everything has a down side. As Katya Bridwell points out, compact fluorescent bulbs contain mercury and shouldn’t be deposited with regular trash.

With a new baby in the house, Carol Ann Davidson buys used baby items, such as strollers, and hand-me-down clothes and uses mostly compostable diapers. She also uses biodegradable (made from corn starch) trash and doggie waste bags. Other measures include buying organic food from a local farm share and using cloth napkins and rags instead of paper. They grow some of their own food and use soaker hoses and drought tolerant plants.

Jan Meredith has a worm bin. “The worms eat all my vegetable/fruit waste, so I get to harvest a bit of great soil twice yearly. I keep my grocery sacks in my car trunk, so I'm never without them.”

Lee Robinson says her biggest energy saver is to ride her bike to work. “It's great exercise, and I don't melt when it rains! My husband Kirk has ridden his bike to his workplace in Seattle for all 19 of the years we have lived here. He doesn't melt either.”

Bernie Henzi says they recycle everything they can and that usually means two trips to the transfer station with recyclables versus one trip with garbage (“still too much for me”). They also bought a used Prius, grow vegetables organically, compost and recycle horse manure from five horses.

Beth Wilson says her family has been doing most of the things others are doing for a long time, but she hasn't found a good alternative to going to work in Tacoma every day in her car, alone. She limits Christmas gifts to one per person or gifts of donations to social justice agencies and buys all the organic food she can afford. She keeps tree cutting and clearing to a minimum on their land. She reuses the blank sides of computer printer paper and irons gift wrapping paper, as well as recycling ribbons. She uses recycled paper towels and toilet paper.

Lou Richard says he and Sally have lots of work still to do, but they're on the way. In addition to buying a hybrid car, recycling and all the usual measures, they plan to install photoelectric panels on their roof. They have also purchased a second home for their older years, which is currently rented. The new home is half the size of their existing home and within walking distance of shopping and the ferry terminal.

Chris Christensen says she now washes clothes in cold water 90% of the time and hangs clothes up to air dry 30% of the time. “We try to not drive our car two days/week. We also find that keeping tire pressure at recommended levels increases mileage by 2-4 miles per gallon. This seems just a little silly, but I have used lots of paper tissues to blot my nose and it finally occurred to me to raid my husband's cloth handkerchief drawer. I now carry a cotton handkerchief with me and have drastically reduced the use of paper tissues in our household. These are all very easy things to do, and are not in any way a ‘sacrifice.’ Our lives have not been negatively impacted. In fact, by using our car more efficiently and planning ahead just a bit more, it has been relaxing to have more nontravel time.”

We all want to preserve our environment and the natural resources that make Kitsap such a special place to live. But the first step is being honest with ourselves about how our choices affect them. Many people are reluctant to give up anything or make the extra effort. For them it's easier to make excuses and duck the tough choices.

Fortunately, more families are seeking their own solutions. Undaunted by all the dire predictions, they're living their values by taking positive steps to ensure a more livable, sustainable future.