

Chapter 1

Being Greener for the Good of People and the Planet

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring choices and the benefits of change
 - ▶ Making small changes every day for big, green gains
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What, exactly, does *green* or *sustainable living* mean? Different people use different definitions, but it all comes down to one fundamental concept: The Earth's resources shouldn't be depleted faster than they can be replenished. From that concept comes everything else, including caring for the environment, animals and other living things, your health, your local community, and communities around the world.

When you start to look at all the different kinds of resources — from fossil fuels to forests, agricultural land to wildlife, and the ocean's depths to the air that you breathe — it's easy to see how everything is interconnected and how the actions that you take today can affect the future. This chapter looks at the impact your lifestyle has on the Earth's resources and then summarizes positive steps that you can take to protect and preserve those resources — starting today.

Understanding the Impact of Your Choices

Think about the concept of sustainable living as being a lot like your family budget. If you spend more than you make each month and neglect your bills as a result, the bill collectors start calling, and if you keep going down the same path, you end up owing so much that you can't possibly pay it back. On the other hand, if you're careful with your monthly expenses (maybe even saving a little), you're able to live within your means and keep everyone happy, especially you.

The planet's no different. Right now, its resources are being depleted far faster than they can be replenished. The call of the bill collectors is getting louder all the time, with the clear implication that bankruptcy's down the road if something doesn't change. Fossil fuels such as oil are becoming more difficult and more expensive to bring out of the ground, and their reserves are dwindling. Burning fossil fuels to provide energy for homes, vehicles, and industries emits carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases along with pollutants that affect the health of the planet and its people.

Other resources are in trouble too, including water. In some parts of the United States, drought conditions are becoming more common and more widespread. Debates continue about where to find sources of water: to pipe it in from other areas, to drill into underground aquifers, or even to build desalination plants to take the salt out of seawater. One possible effect of global warming is the further reduction of groundwater sources. Decreasing the demand that people place on water sources is essential in order to continue having enough water to go around.

Thankfully, it's not too late to turn the situation around — to make the changes that the planet and its people need for a safe, healthy, prosperous, and compassionate future. Changes need to happen quickly, however: According to the United Nations, some parts of the world are nearing the tipping point, after which the damage will be irreparable.



A useful way to understand your impact on the environment is to measure your *ecological footprint*, which is the land needed to support your consumption of goods and resources. Think of it as a way of describing the amount of land required to farm your food, mine your energy sources, transport your goods and services, and hold your waste. You make decisions every day that have an impact on the planet: choosing between the car and local rapid transit, for example, or selecting local or organic fresh food instead of packaged, processed food that has been transported long distances. Think about the impact that each individual decision has, and weigh the pros and cons of your everyday actions.

Carbon emissions are another measure of your ecological footprint. We have more about how carbon and other gases contribute to climate change in Chapter 2; for now, it's enough to know that carbon is released when many substances — particularly fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal — are burned by vehicles and planes; by the manufacturing processes of many consumer goods; and by the heating, cooling, and electricity for your home.

The Earth Day Network, a network of environmental organizations and projects, estimates that there are 4.5 biologically productive acres worldwide per person. The average American's ecological footprint, however, is 24 acres, which means that a lot of people are using more resources than the planet can afford.

You can measure your own ecological footprint simply by visiting the Earth Day Network Web site at www.earthday.net and entering some information about your lifestyle. You're asked questions about

- ✓ The size and type of your home
- ✓ How often you eat meat and processed foods
- ✓ How many miles you drive or take public transportation each week
- ✓ How energy efficient your home and vehicle are
- ✓ How much waste you generate

If you're only just starting a greener lifestyle, reducing your ecological footprint may seem a little daunting. You can reduce it significantly, though, and it won't take long. Use the questions from the Earth Day Network to think about where you'd like to start reducing your impact.

Recognizing the Rewards of a Sustainable Lifestyle

As you begin to make your life greener, you'll see benefits well beyond the immediate green ones such as reducing carbon emissions, reducing waste, and supporting the local economy. You'll discover that being green can improve your life in all kinds of areas.

Here are just a few of the major benefits of a sustainable lifestyle:

- ✓ **Saving money:** Consuming less of any commodity — from electricity to water to clothes — means that you pay less, too. You'll discover lower utility bills and a budget with breathing room when you take actions such as buying quality items that last a long time and even growing some of your own food.
- ✓ **Encouraging profits:** When you support green and ethical businesses such as stores and financial institutions, you help them to stay profitable enough to continue acting in environmentally and socially responsible ways. You also send a message to less responsible companies that they need to clean up their acts.
- ✓ **Boosting health:** Following the tips in this book about walking and cycling instead of driving and about reducing the amount of chemicals in your food, your home, and your garden can leave you with an improved cardiovascular and immune system, stronger muscles, and cleaner lungs.

- ✓ **Leaving a legacy:** The opportunity to protect what's vital about the planet for future generations is perhaps the most important benefit of all. If you consume only what you need, reduce your trash, live more naturally, and invest carefully, you do a great deal to leave a planet that will benefit people and wildlife for centuries to come.

Changing What You Can as You Can

Although you can't change the world and save the planet single-handedly overnight, you can make a difference — and you can start right away with whatever budget and time you have available. Buying a hybrid-electric vehicle in order to reduce fossil fuel consumption and emissions is an excellent strategy, but few people can afford to go out and buy a new car tomorrow (not to mention the implications of getting rid of your old one before its time). You have tons of options that are both easy and affordable, however.

The best strategy is to take change one step at a time and implement small changes when and as you can. Also assess where you're starting from (calculating your ecological footprint is one way to measure this; see the earlier section "Understanding the Impact of Your Choices") and figure out what you can do to counter your effect through carbon offsetting if you can't yet make the changes you want to make.

Adopting the four primary green strategies

Here are four green living strategies (which you'll encounter throughout this book) that you can implement in a variety of ways to contribute to the solutions that the planet needs:

- ✓ **Reduce consumption.** Anything that you do to decrease the amount of the Earth's resources that you use — from choosing goods with less packaging to turning down your home's thermostat a few degrees in the winter — helps you to lead a more sustainable life.
- ✓ **Choose carefully.** Assessing where certain products and services come from by thinking about their entire life cycles from manufacture to disposal helps you to make the greenest choices possible. You not only protect the environment but also protect the people involved in the manufacturing process.

- ✓ **Opt for renewable resources.** Replacing your use of nonrenewable resources (such as energy based on fossil fuels) with renewable resources (such as solar or wind energy) is a very powerful green action — and it may be easier than you think.
- ✓ **Repair when needed.** There are plenty of ways that you can help to fix the damage that's already been done to the environment, from supporting tree-planting projects to helping out with community programs at home and around the world.

Taking those first small steps

Making small changes as and when you can puts you firmly on the road to living a much greener lifestyle. Trying to jump into it all at once can be counterproductive, in fact, because the subject area is immense and is growing all the time. Instead, decide what your priorities are: Think about where it would be easiest for you to begin. Start there, and work up to the bigger or more difficult issues.



Your priorities may not be the same as other people's, but that's okay: They're yours, and you're entitled to them. Be prepared to adjust them as new information becomes available, however. Research is ongoing in most areas of green living, so arguments will change. In the meantime, take one small step every time you're ready to, and keep aspiring to be greener.

You can find quick and easy green actions listed on the Cheat Sheet at the front of this book and also in Chapter 18. We chose them specifically because they make you significantly greener with minimal effort. Examples include replacing your light bulbs as they burn out with compact fluorescent models and replacing your cleaning supplies as they run out with environmentally friendly ones.

Another tip that's super-easy to implement is to buy items with less packaging. Consider, for example, what would happen if you bought toilet paper in double rolls, which contain twice as much toilet paper in a roll than regular-size rolls. That cuts down the number of cardboard tubes inside the rolls by half, and it also decreases the amount of plastic that's used to wrap the packages! If you recycle the cardboard tubes that remain, even better. And if you slit the plastic wrap open only at the top of the package, you can reuse the wrap, perhaps as a trash bag. See how easy that was?



As you read through this book, jot down a list of actions that you could see yourself taking fairly easily. When you have a list, it's easier to prioritize the tasks so that you don't feel you need to tackle them all at once.

Turning Green Choices into Habits around Your Home

Reducing, reusing, repairing, and recycling are the four most important actions when it comes to adopting a greener lifestyle because they all contribute to conserving the Earth's resources. Tips throughout this book help you reduce your consumption of everything from packaged goods to energy.

Your home is one of the best places to start making green living changes because you have the control to make the choices that are best for you. Chapter 4 looks at the green issues that you can consider when you're moving into a new home or building or renovating one, and Chapter 5 addresses the habits that you can adopt for a greener lifestyle within the home.

Along with energy efficiency, water conservation is a major issue, and it's where you can really make a difference. Between the source and your faucet, water has to be pumped at various stages, and that takes energy, as does the process of treating the water. If you conserve water, you do double-duty by conserving both water and energy, and that helps to reduce the amount of carbon emissions pumped into the atmosphere.

Most of the water used in homes — whether it's for flushing, washing, cleaning, or drinking — is processed to the point of being high-quality drinking water. Although systems do exist to divert *greywater* (water that's been used in sinks, for example, for hand or dishwashing) to toilets for flushing, they're not yet a common feature of home building and renovations. However, you can make a difference by preventing as much good-quality water as possible from running down the drain into the sewers from where it has to be reprocessed back into drinking-quality water.



When it comes to waste, reduce what you buy as much as possible — including choosing the least amount of packaging possible — as this will naturally reduce the waste you generate. Then assess your waste to see what can be reused or recycled — what's waste to you may be useful to your friends and neighbors or to a nonprofit group (see Chapter 6).

Of course, your home extends to your yard, as well. Chapters 7 and 8 describe what a green yard looks like (Hint: it doesn't have to have grass to be green!) and provide tips on taking your yard off chemicals and growing your own organic food with the help of composting.



When you introduce green living at home, everyone can be involved. Children learn from adults and then pass the word on to their friends, who pass it on to their parents. Give everyone an age-appropriate role to play by putting them in charge of some aspect of your greener household. You can find more about raising green children in Chapter 9.

Making Your Greenbacks Even Greener

When it comes to spending and saving money, your dollars can go a long way toward greening your lifestyle. Start with the necessities of life — choosing what you eat and what you wear — and assess how you can do both in ways that are both socially and environmentally responsible. Then expand these issues to the banking arena, looking at where you can park your money and how you can invest your savings to help you as well as your community and the planet.

Shopping greenly and ethically

Shopping is a great opportunity to make your lifestyle more sustainable. Choose the greenest options available to you, such as food produced using as few chemicals as possible, grown locally in season, and transported over as short a distance as possible to reduce the amount of fuel used. Other green options include clothes made from organically produced materials, goods made from recycled materials rather than resources that have to be mined from the earth, secondhand or vintage goods, and those made from biodegradable materials.

Ethical issues, including how the people and animals involved in the production processes were treated, are also important to consider. Ask stores whether the workers, producers, suppliers, and farmers involved in the production chain are paid fairly, have good working conditions, and can sustain their production (meaning that they have enough left after feeding themselves and their families to maintain their premises or buy new equipment and seeds). Avoiding goods produced using child labor or in sweatshop working conditions also may be a priority for you. Animal welfare is a growing concern as well; consider choosing meat and dairy products that come from animals raised in humane conditions rather than intensively farmed, overcrowded pens and cages.



Support your local community socially and economically by buying your food, gifts, crafts, home items, and clothes from local producers and businesses. If that's not possible, look for Fairtrade-certified products that assure you that growers and producers were treated fairly.

You can find out more about both green and ethical issues when it comes to shopping for food and clothing in Chapters 10 and 11.

Saving, investing, and donating wisely

When it comes to saving or investing your money, you can make it work for both you and the environment by choosing where you bank. An increasing number of financial institutions offer savings accounts or entire suites of investment services that support green, sustainable, and socially responsible programs, often in your own community. Even better, some financial institutions offer these accounts but also conduct their day-to-day operations in a socially and environmentally responsible way.

The kinds of financial programs that these institutions offer may include using the money in savings and investment accounts to leverage low-interest loans to help local businesses improve their energy efficiency or to build alternative energy infrastructure such as solar or wind power. Programs also may help nonprofit organizations set up work or self-employment training programs or affordable housing initiatives.

When it comes to long-term investments such as mutual funds or the stock market, you can go green there too by opting for an ethical or green fund that invests in companies that meet various environmental or social criteria or by investing directly in the companies themselves. Some green-minded investment accounts ask you to accept a lower interest rate on your savings in exchange for these positive effects, but for others, you have the opportunity for just as much of a return as you would get if your money were in conventional accounts or investments.

Of course, you also can put your money where it provides an investment for charitable organizations instead of yourself. There's a vast array of causes out there that you can support, so it pays to do your research before you part with your money in order to make sure that it will be used wisely.

You can find more information about socially responsible investments and charitable donations in Chapter 12.

Venturing Out into the World

The greenest thing you can possibly do when it comes to traveling and transportation is simply not to go — vacation locally instead of halfway around the world, for example, or work from home instead of commuting. That's not always possible, practical, or even desirable, however, so this section looks at ways to get on the road while minimizing your impact on the environment, particularly your greenhouse gas emissions. From using public transportation for your commute to opting for greener vehicles and ecologically friendly holidays, it's all here.

Getting around

Transportation, particularly passenger vehicles and planes, emit a tremendous amount of carbon and other pollutants into the atmosphere, where they contribute to climate change and a range of health problems (see Chapter 2). Although researchers have found ways to improve fuel efficiency, power vehicles with organically based fuels instead of petroleum-based fuels, and use different technology to power the vehicle, much of this work is still at an early stage of adoption.

As a consumer, you can make a difference by reducing the amount that you fly or drive. Vacation locally, for example, or work from home one day a week if possible. When you have to travel, choose more-sustainable methods of transportation, including local bus, rapid transit, and train services. These methods of transportation still emit pollutants, but because they carry more people at one time, their emissions per person are much lower than if the passengers were all in their own cars.

Chapter 13 provides practical information about how to start decreasing your car use and boost other modes of transportation, including cycling and walking. Chapter 14 offers a look at the exciting technology that's available (or on its way) to power vehicles differently, including the pros and cons of some alternative fuels.

Traveling mindfully

Before you book your next vacation, consider where you want to go in the world and why, and think about whether you can achieve the same effect closer to home (to cut down on your greenhouse gas emissions) or in a more ecologically friendly way (like by taking the train instead of flying).

There are still good, valid reasons to travel widely, though — including that it can broaden your horizons and facilitate better understanding between cultures. So consider taking fewer long-distance vacations and making them last longer in order to get the best possible investment from the greenhouse gas emissions that your travel is responsible for. Consider the location to which you're traveling, too; keep in mind that you'll be a guest in that country, and try to follow the people's standards for dress and behavior to avoid giving offense.

To take your vacation deeper into environmental or social responsibility, consider an ecotourism trip that provides insight into the local ecosystem (including fauna and flora) or a volunteer vacation in which you spend part or much of your time on a project that helps either the local people or the environment.

You can help to compensate for the greenhouse gas emissions that your travel produces by considering ways to become *carbon neutral* — this means that you reduce your carbon emissions as much as possible and balance the remaining carbon emissions by offsetting them with processes that consume carbon. *Carbon offsetting* refers to paying for or participating in programs that reduce the carbon in the atmosphere. Many of those programs involve planting trees; others, however, fund research into alternative or cleaner conventional technologies. Planting trees or other vegetation is the most common carbon offsetting measure; when plants grow, they take in carbon dioxide, removing it from the atmosphere.

It's essential to reduce the amount of carbon emissions that you produce, but it's not always easy. You may not be able to control whether your local power plant runs on coal or solar energy, for example (although you can certainly advocate for solar energy and make your home as energy efficient as possible). That's why carbon offsetting has become so popular recently.

Carbon offsetting isn't the silver bullet answer to the problem of carbon emissions because it often doesn't address the underlying problem. Tree planting, for example, only deals with the existing carbon; it doesn't reduce the production of it, which is where the real emphasis needs to be. However, purchasing offsets helps if you're careful about the programs you support, and we tell you how to do so in Chapter 15.

Building a Green Society

You can have a powerful effect on the people and systems around you by encouraging a greener society. Some of this influence simply comes from leading by example (perhaps by taking your lunch to work in reusable instead of disposable containers), but you also can go further by advocating for positive, constructive changes at work, in your local community, and even around the world.

Being environmentally sound at work

All the measures you put in place at home — energy-efficient appliances and equipment, water-saving and energy conservation devices and strategies, recycling and reusing programs — can translate very effectively to the workplace. Many employers already take action to improve their environmental and social responsibilities. You can encourage this wherever it's happening and ask for change where it's not. Chapter 16 offers strategies to help you.



Many businesses that don't embrace green practices simply for their environmental benefits will go green if it saves them money. If you explain how the company can reduce energy, paper, and transportation expenses by employing green tips and techniques, you may achieve the goal you're aiming for.

Setting up community projects that work

Look around your community and you're likely to find plenty of ways to get involved with improving both environmental and social concerns. From cleaning up riverbanks to redesigning neighborhoods, the list of projects is virtually endless. If there's something missing, though, seize the opportunity to gather support in the community and set up a project to fill the gap. Find ideas for projects, along with advice about setting them up for success, in Chapter 17.

Your First Step toward Contributing: Evaluating Your Shade of Green

Take this fun little quiz to find out how green you already are and what you can do to green up your life.

1. When the supermarket clerk asks "paper or plastic?" you
 - A. Go for plastic.
 - B. Go for paper.
 - C. Say "neither" because you brought your own bags.
2. When you start your car on chilly winter days, you
 - A. Idle for ten minutes to let the engine warm up.
 - B. Idle for less than a minute to let the engine warm up.
 - C. Do neither because you're taking the bus.

3. When you use your dishwasher, you
 - A. Run a cycle when you need the items that are dirty.
 - B. Run full loads through all the cycles, including “dry.”
 - C. Run only full loads and use the “air dry” setting.
4. When you just have to get away from your everyday life, you
 - A. Hop on a plane for a tropical getaway.
 - B. Jump in the car and drive to the closest national park.
 - C. Volunteer for a local community home-building project.
5. For your waste reduction efforts, you
 - A. Recycle air when you breathe.
 - B. Recycle newspapers weekly.
 - C. Recycle everything possible and compost organics.

How did you do?

Mostly As? Yikes! Your shade of green is verging on olive, as in drab. The good news? There's plenty that you can do right away to boost the green factor. Check out Chapter 18 for fast and easy tips that you can follow right now.

Mostly Bs? You're like a lime-colored spring leaf, budding out with plenty of promise, but it's up to you to turn that promise into green reality. Go to Chapter 19, where you find strategies to deepen your shade of green.

Mostly Cs? Consider yourself an emerald gem — and keep shining! Dip into this book wherever your fancy takes you, whether it's remodeling your home (Chapter 4) or considering a greener vehicle (Chapter 14).