

Living green: on a mission to reduce my carbon footprint

Living a 'low-carbon' life is the green brigade's latest idea on how individuals can help halt climate change. **Toby Green** spends a week trying to limit his carbon emissions to see whether he can make a difference - without breaking the bank

When even Rupert Murdoch is vowing to fight climate change, you know that environmental issues are starting to make an impression. My aim a week ago was not quite as grand as the Australian business giant's vow to cut down the carbon emissions of News Corporation from 640,000 tonnes to zero in three years. However, inspired by *How to Live a Low-Carbon Life*, a self-help guide for the environmentally wasteful, I decided to spend seven days reducing the impact of my personal carbon footprint on the world.

The ethos behind the book, written by Oxfordshire Green Party parliamentary candidate Chris Goodall, is direct: individuals, rather than big companies, are the defining factor through which climate change can be halted. To accept this is rather unsettling: it is easy to convince yourself that as long as businesses in China and America pump out billions of tonnes of carbon emissions, then your own contribution to the cause will be utterly worthless. However, as the book states, governments are failing to do anything because they have no public mandate.

Yet I had a problem. The two biggest sources of consumer carbon emissions that need to be addressed

are flying and driving: not generally day-to-day activities that students can address. I put this to Chris, who agreed that it's a problem: "It is true that students probably have the least control over their environment, although even a small amount of flights produce a massive carbon footprint. However, after flying and driving, it is energy usage in your home that is the next most carbon-intensive activity. Again, though, it's things like insulation that students can't do much about."

Chris did have plenty of suggestions, though. "It's all about thinking what you can control - take food for example. You should be aiming to limit your air miles [the distance food has been flown], the amount of processed food you consume and the packaging. Secondly, switching off plugs instead of leaving things on standby may sound basic, but it is still vital. And thirdly, recycling. To make an aluminium can from scratch uses up 10 times more energy than recycling a can."

Despite having a book, a personal carbon mentor and clear aims for my new lifestyle, the first day was a bit of an anti-climax. Thanks to upcoming essay deadlines, my life had been revolving around two objects: my computer and a coffee cup. Fitting these two into my new life was going to be a

problem. Would using campus computers be better or should I work at home? Should I buy fair-trade coffee from Vanbrugh or avoid it completely because of its energy-intensive brewing

"At the moment, reducing the carbon emissions on campus is not a priority - and will only happen if students demand it"

process? I decided to go to campus, but my willpower wasn't strong enough to leave off the coffee.

The verdict from Chris that evening was mixed. In terms of writing my essay, I had done the right thing: "One of the big things about cutting your carbon usage is using resources that are already emitting carbon. Since your university computers are on most of the day anyway, they are only using 10 to 20 watts of energy less than when you use Microsoft Word. Yet by using your computer at home, you're adding 120 watts.

"However, it is better to make coffee yourself than to buy it. Boiling a kettle at home uses a lot of energy, yet nowhere near that produced by keep-

ing an establishment open."

The next day I decided to tackle the fruit and vegetable situation and took a trip to the market. Supermarkets tend to be the worst offenders in terms of carbon emissions as air travel is used to shift food all over the world and the buildings themselves are extremely energy intensive. Markets, theoretically, should be much better. And they are - as long as you're careful. I was later informed that my two aubergines were highly unlikely to have been grown in Yorkshire in the middle of spring. Alongside this, I had brought a muffin to take out for breakfast, and with it, a vast amount of packaging. Throwing away the offending vegetable was not an option since, as the book explains, food waste in landfill sites produce methane. The wasted packaging was something I was going to have to accept on my conscience and move on.

By the next day, I was starting to get into the swing of things. With a 21st birthday party to go to at Dusk that evening, I had already predicted that the consumption of alcohol could be a possible ethical minefield. Chris had told me that I was going to have to stay away from intercontinental beers, and that locally produced ales were a much better option. With Yorkshire Terrier, I thought I had found the perfect solution. Brewed on Micklegate itself and sold in many campus bars, it must surely be the definition of low-carbon drinking. Yet the prevalence of mainstream lagers in Dusk meant no local options. I feel I owe the bar girl an apology for what she must have thought was the worst ever chat-up line: "What's your lowest carbon-producing drink?" We settled for bottles of Stella that at least came from a closed fridge, but I still felt slightly tainted.

At the halfway point of my week, I met up with Heike Singleton, the University's Energy Conservation Officer, Willy Hoedeman, Energy Manager, and a YUSU Environment rep, Tom Langley, to find out the University's position. Working with other members of staff, they have made great progress in improving the environmental impact of the University. Yet they were clear that there was a lot more to be done. "People are more keen

How to live the low-carbon student lifestyle

>> Turn things off

It sounds simple, and it is. Turning lights off when leaving a room or corridor can reduce lighting costs by 15%. There's a myth that turning a light on and off actually uses more energy than leaving them on - rubbish. Turning a light on does produce a surge of electricity, but only equal to two seconds of it being on. And if you don't have energy-saving lightbulbs by now, what planet are you on? They use only a quarter of the energy of standard light bulbs whilst lasting up to eight times longer.

>> Limit produce stored in refrigerators
Chilled foods use energy - loads of it. Try and reduce what you buy from chilled storage in supermarkets and shops as much as possible, especially open-faced fridges. Up to 40% of their energy usage could be saved just by placing a door on them, so is there really any

need for campus baguettes and bottled drinks to be stored like this?

>> Local, local, local

This isn't some nationalist trip: buying British really does help the environment. In fact, buying Yorkshire is even better (or your local equivalent during the holidays). The carbon emissions that you save by cutting out any short-haul flights will be wasted if you're buying fruit and vegetables from the other side of the world. This means you're going to have to accept you won't be able to eat fresh strawberries all year round, but a bit of self-education and you should be able to easily find out what's in season when. Most shops now should be able to tell you where stuff comes from and how it was transported, and if they don't, challenge them! Not only will local food tend to be cheaper and higher quality, but packaging will be reduced as well.

>> Make sure it's fresh

Alongside buying local, you should also avoid processed food. Thankfully the two go together - you can get great local fresh ingredients from the market whilst avoiding the processed chilled food flown in from the other side of the world that comes from the supermarket. With things like vegetables this may mean you need to shop more often, but it's a habit you can easily get into.

Useful links

Information about St Nicholas Fields
www.stnickfields.org.uk

Energy-saving advice from the University
www.york.ac.uk/energyconservation

Tips on reducing your climate impact
www.climatesafe.co.uk