Common Experience

2010-2011

Sustainability
So this book, in short, is about my attempt with my little family to live for a year causing as little negative environmental impact as possible. If what I’ve described so far sounds extreme, that’s because it’s meant to be. My intention with this book is not to advocate that, as a culture, we should all give up elevators, washing machines, and toilet paper. This is a book about a lifestyle experiment. It chronicles a year of inquiry: How truly necessary are many of the conveniences we take for granted but that, in their manufacture and use, hurt our habitat? How much of our consumption of the planet’s resources actually makes us happier and how much just keeps us chained up as wage slaves? - Colin Beavan

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone. - Henry David Thoreau

The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth. Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, you cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the co-operations. You can regulate them—cautiously—but not abolish them. - Aldo Leopold

Men argue; Nature acts. – Voltaire

We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children. —Haida Indian saying
February 22, 2010

In my humble opinion, at some point in life everyone should sojourn and embark on at least a “mini journey” of self discovery. I did this for a two month period during the summer of 1997, and the place I chose to do it was Yellowstone National Park. There is nothing on this Earth than can rival the majesty of Yellowstone- the wildlife, mud pots and geysers, back country trails, rivers, and pristine mountain lakes are sources of great insight and inspiration.

Because of my experience that summer, I am excited that Sustainability has been chosen as this year’s Common Experience theme. I am hopeful all of our students each will take at least one positive step in their own way toward leading sustainable lifestyles and perhaps even creating culture change. As a result, maybe we will begin to see more children on the highway staring out the window from the back seat of their family hybrid instead of staring at a television set from the inside of their family SUV.

Mr. Peter Theodore Ingwersen
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I. Proposal for Common Experience 2010-2011—Sustainability: Science, Policy, and Opportunity

This year’s proposal was submitted by: Michael Abbot (River Systems Institute), Emily Armitano (River Systems Institute), Judy Behrens (Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education), Tina Marie Cade (Agriculture), Sylvia Crixell (Family and Consumer Science), Richard A. Earl (Geography), Elizabeth Erhart (Anthropology), BJ Friedman (Family and Consumer Science), Janet Hale (Finance and Economics), Gwendolyn Hustvedt (Family and Consumer Science), James Kimmel (Geography), Vicente Lopes (Biology), Nancy Nusbaum (Associate Vice President for Finance and Support Services), Stephen Prentice (Parking Services), Rosanne Proite (Housing and Residential Life), Walter Rast (Biology), Chad L. Smith (Sociology), Laura Stroup (Geography), Julie Westerlund (Biology)

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Traditional academic institutions encourage relatively rigid disciplinary boundaries and mechanistic methods. In contrast, the Common Experience at Texas State University-San Marcos is meant to embrace multidisciplinary discussions on pressing issues facing today’s students. The Common Experience not only brings lively discussion to campus, it also affords students the opportunity to engage ideas that cross disciplinary boundaries and to interact with peers and faculty from multiple disciplines. A Common Experience focused on the issue of “sustainability” will provide a timely discussion at the intersection of social and physical worlds and encourage engagement of our students in one of the most important and practical topics of our time.

As background, humanity has reached a crossroads in its relationship with the natural world. As our technology and productivity continually grows, humans have caused unprecedented changes in the functioning of natural systems to meet growing demands for food, freshwater, fiber, and energy. Over-exploitation of resources, global climate change, species extinction and loss of biodiversity have all focused attention on the need to better understand, protect and manage the natural and modified environments around us. The scale and scope of these problems require the integration of social and ecological research within an interdisciplinary planning and policy framework. Solving these problems will also require a capacity to handle complexity and uncertainty, and the application of different methods of analysis and different approaches to governance and community engagement.

The concept of sustainability has grown in popularity in recent decades as a new way of thinking about humans’ relationship to the planet and to one another. Sustainability has generally been defined as “meeting our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need” (Brundtland 1987). Although sustainability has been widely discussed in the fields of ecology, economics, and conservation, the challenge of sustainability extends beyond how we use natural resources to larger questions of social justice and human health. Even though sustainability clearly concerns natural systems on which life depends, it simultaneously engages quality of life issues that include personal accountability and social, economic, and political considerations. Engaging sustainability on this broader basis must include these considerations: What exactly do we want to sustain and why? What current and future needs are we working to meet? Therefore, setting goals for the sustainable management of ecosystems is not only a scientific endeavor, but also a question of values requiring active, interdisciplinary participation for the creation of a new planetary ethic.
We therefore propose that the Common Experience for 2010-2011 be centered on a discussion of **Sustainability: Science, Policy, and Opportunity**. This interdisciplinary theme affects all students, staff, faculty, and administrators of Texas State University as well as community members of San Marcos. Because of the integrative nature of the problems that humanity faces as we approach a key point in our evolution, the only way in which these problems can be realistically addressed is through interdisciplinary dialogue, outreach, and education. The capacity of humanity to adapt in a dynamic world that is constantly presenting new challenges, are essential in the 21st century.

The questions and challenges embedded within the sustainability enterprise require the input of all members of the university community, and beyond. Indeed, issues of sustainability not only involve an understanding of our history, but compel us to look ahead to the future. The challenges facing Texas State students are many, but a central topic of concern revolves around sustainability. Changes in behavior and social policy, building scientific understanding, connecting the local and the global, and reshaping values are all crucial components to a “sustainability revolution”—an opportunity for the Texas State community to embrace and actively participate in the science and practice of sustainability.

II. **The Impact of University Seminar Objectives**

1. To facilitate students’ adjustment to the challenges of life and learning at Texas State.
   - *Impact Theme:* Self reflection
   - *Impact Theme:* Evaluation of current lifestyles
   - *Impact Theme:* Living for today while planning for the future

2. To expand students’ understanding of the nature and purposes of a university.
   - *Impact Theme:* The higher purpose of education
   - *Impact Theme:* Solving world issues
   - *Impact Theme:* Creating culture change

3. To identify practical learning skills and concepts that will promote students’ academic success.
   - *Impact Theme:* Communication/connection with community versus isolation in the information age
   - *Impact Theme:* Assessment of priorities and values

4. To encourage students to explore the connection between university study and life enrichment, life-long learning, and civic responsibility.
   - *Impact Theme:* Consumerism
   - *Impact Theme:* Happiness and satisfaction in life
   - *Impact Theme:* Solving the world’s problems
   - *Impact Theme:* The economics and politics of industrialization and technology versus sustainability

5. To promote respect for diversity issues and concepts.
   - *Impact Theme:* Zen
   - *Impact Theme:* Classism

III. **Origins of the American Environmental Movement**
In the late 1800’s, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot differed on how our natural resources should be protected.

1. Muir’s (naturalist, activist, and writer) perspective was that the human agenda contaminates “the sacred nature.”

2. Pinchot (first Chief of the United States Forest Service and later, Governor of Pennsylvania) approached environmentalism from a modern day sustainability perspective: using natural resources for our livelihood in such a way that we don’t destroy those resources—"manage it like a crop, don't protect it like a temple."

Links:

- This article describes the roots of the American environmental movement, conservation, key environmental legislation, & development of lobbying strategies: [http://www.sonoma.edu/users/w/wallsd/pdf/Environmental-Movement.pdf](http://www.sonoma.edu/users/w/wallsd/pdf/Environmental-Movement.pdf)

- *The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920* documents the historical formation and cultural foundations (a chronology of events) of the movement to conserve and protect America’s natural heritage, through books, pamphlets, government documents, manuscripts, prints, photographs, and motion picture footage drawn from the collections of the Library of Congress: [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome.html)

- Conservation, Preservation, and Environmental Activism: A Survey of the Historical Literature- this literature review contains resources on conservation, pollution, science and the environmental movement, nature in American culture, and resources for teaching the history of environmentalism: [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/nps-oah.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/nps-oah.htm)


IV. Selected Trends from the Text (The “Notes” section of the text, pp 245-255, cites sources for all statistics below and more from within the text.)

a) Sustainability is one of the top five emerging majors.

b) 66% of students would like more information on sustainability.

c) We need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050 to keep global warming from spinning out of control.

d) There is a gigantic patch of floating plastic garbage twice the size of the continental United States in the middle of the pacific ocean, west of Hawaii.

e) 32 million acres of forest are chopped down every year to make toilet paper and coffee cups.

f) Diseases associated with chemicals in the air, water, soil include lung disease, infertility, breast cancer, prostate cancer and autism.

g) By age two, one child goes through some 4,000 plastic diapers. Diapers make up 4% of our trash.
h) The population of New York City makes nearly 9 billion pounds of garbage every year. An average American produces 4.6 pounds of trash every day, or 1700 pounds per year.

i) Food packaging makes up 20% of our solid waste nationwide.

j) Ten billion pounds of paper napkins, cups, plates hits US landfills every year. 10 billion pounds of trashed paper = 10 billion pounds of dead trees.

k) Kimberly-Clark, a company that makes disposable paper products, uses half a million tons of trees a year from Canada’s ancient boreal forests.

l) The world consumes paper at the equivalent of nine football fields of trees in the Amazon every minute.

m) An estimated 100,000 sea turtles, a million sea birds, and countless fish starve to death each year as a result of plastic in their digestive tracks.

n) So many people are now taking Prozac that un-metabolized traces of the drug, excreted in their urine, show up in our drinking water supplies.

o) American adults average 72 minutes per day driving a car.

p) In North America, the average distance food travels from farm to plate is about 2,000 miles.

q) Agriculture is the United States’ leading source of water pollution, its biggest water consumer, and the main cause of soil erosion.

r) The year 2000, 85% of our nation’s farmland produced only four crops: corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay.

s) Raising cattle is one of the top contributors to the worst environmental problems around the planet at every level- from global to local.

t) If current trends in fishing continue, the world’s oceans will essentially be barren by 2048.

u) The average American watches 4.5 hours of TV per day.

v) No more than 25% of dairy cows in typical cattle farms live to be more than seven years old.

w) Number of people on Earth by 2050: 9 billion.

x) Number of people living in the developed world by 2050: 1 billion.

y) Use of toilet paper is mostly a Western practice. The rest of the world washes.

z) 1.6 billion people (1/4 the world’s total population) has no access to electricity.

aa) Lack of electricity is closely linked to poor health, poor drinking water, and poverty.

bb) Use of electricity: residences (37%), industry (27%), business (36%).

cc) World energy needs are expected to rise by 45 percent by 2027.

dd) By 2025, two-thirds of the world’s population will face water scarcity. By 2050, we will need an 80% increase in water supplies in order to grow food.

ee) The average single-family American household uses 70 gallons of water every day, 25% of which gets flushed down the toilet. (Americans flush 2.5 trillion gallons a year down the toilet.)

ff) California has 20 years worth of drinking water left, New Mexico has 10 and the state of Arizona is out of drinking water.

gg) A child dies every 8 seconds from drinking dirty water.

hh) Nationally, 850 billion gallons of raw sewage overflow into our waterways every year due to rainwater overflow in sewers.
V. In Lay Terms

a) **Acid Rain**: precipitation (rain, snow, sleet) containing relatively high concentrations of acid-forming chemicals, as the pollutants from coal smoke, chemical manufacturing, and smelting, that have been released into the atmosphere and combined with water vapor: harmful to the environment.

b) **Air Pollution**: The addition of harmful chemicals to the atmosphere. The most serious air pollution results from the burning of fossil fuels, especially in internal-combustion engines.

c) **Asceticism**: the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like.

d) **Biodiesel**: a fuel made primarily from oily plants (such as the soybean or palm oil), it has found more acceptance in Europe and is used in diesel engines and usually blended with petroleum diesel fuel in various percentages.

e) **Biofuel**: A source of renewable energy. Fuel produced from renewable resources, especially plant biomass, vegetable oils, and treated municipal and industrial wastes. Biofuels are considered neutral with respect to the emission of carbon dioxide because the carbon dioxide given off by burning them is balanced by the carbon dioxide absorbed by the plants that are grown to produce them.

f) **Carbon**: A nonmetallic element occurring in many inorganic and in all organic compounds.

g) **Carbon Dioxide**: a colorless and odorless gas formed during respiration, combustion, organic decomposition, and the burning of fossil fuels. The gas is absorbed by green plants which convert it into oxygen.

h) **Carbon Emissions**: carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide produced by motor vehicles and industrial processes and forming pollutants in the atmosphere.

i) **Carbon Footprint**: a measure of the amount of carbon dioxide produced by a person, organization, or location at a given time.

j) **Carbon Monoxide**: a colorless, odorless, and highly poisonous gas formed when carbon burns with insufficient air, thus causing incomplete combustion. For example, in automobile exhaust.

k) **Carbon Offset**: a way to mitigate the amount of greenhouse gas emitted from manufacture or personal activity where energy is used.

l) **Clean Coal Technology**: development of technologies aiming to reduce the impact of coal energy generation.

m) **Climate Change**: any long-term significant change in the weather patterns of an area; also used figuratively. Can be natural or caused by changes people have made to the land or atmosphere.

n) **Coal**: Extracted from the Earth by mining. Used to generate electricity. Produces large amounts of carbon dioxide.

o) **Community Supported Agriculture groups**: Individuals in a community join together to purchase food directly from local farmers.

p) **Ecology**: The study of the detrimental effects of modern civilization on the environment, with a view toward prevention or reversal through conservation.

q) **Ecosystem**: A collection of living things and the environment in which they live. For example, a prairie ecosystem includes coyotes, the rabbits on which they feed, and the grasses that feed the rabbits.

r) **Ethanol**: An alcohol obtained from the fermentation of sugars and starches or by chemical synthesis. It is the intoxicating ingredient of alcoholic beverages, and is also used as a solvent, in explosives, and as an additive to or replacement for petroleum-based fuels.
s) **Fossil Fuels**: fuels (oil, coal, natural gas) that were formed from the remains of plants and animals that lived millions of years ago. When burned, they produce carbon dioxide and thus cause air pollution. (see pg 171)

t) **Geothermal Power**: Heat stored in the Earth is a sustainable and environmentally friendly source of power.

u) **Global Warming**: An increase in the average temperature of the Earth's atmosphere, especially a sustained increase sufficient enough to cause climate change. A subject of scientific debate. May result from the greenhouse effect.

v) **Greenhouse Gas**: any of the gases whose absorption of solar radiation is responsible for the greenhouse effect, including carbon dioxide, methane, ozone, and the fluorocarbons.

w) **Greenhouse Effect**: A term used to describe the heating of the atmosphere owing to the presence of carbon dioxide and other gases. Without the presence of these gases, heat from the sun would return to space in the form of infrared radiation. Carbon dioxide and other gases absorb some of this radiation and prevent its release, thereby warming the Earth. This is an effect analogous to what happens in a greenhouse, where glass traps the infrared radiation and warms the air.

x) **Halocarbon**: any of a class of compounds containing carbon, one or more halogens, and sometimes hydrogen. Contribute to an increase in greenhouse effect.

y) **Halogen**: Any of a group of five chemically related nonmetallic elements including fluorine, chlorine, bromine, iodine, and astatine.

z) **Hydrogen**: a colorless, odorless, flammable gas that combines chemically with oxygen to form water. Used in petroleum refining.

aa) **Hydroelectric power**: A source of renewable energy.

bb) **Muslin Cloth**: a finely woven cotton fabric.

c) **Organic**: grown with fertilizers or pesticides of animal or vegetable origin, as distinguished from manufactured chemicals.

dd) **Ozone**: a form of oxygen that is formed naturally in the atmosphere by a photochemical reaction and is a major air pollutant in the lower atmosphere but a beneficial component of the upper atmosphere.

e) **Ozone Layer**: the layer of the upper atmosphere where most atmospheric ozone is concentrated.

ff) **Preservation**: to maintain and reserve wildlife for continued survival.

g) **Red Tide**: seawater discolored by the presence of large numbers of dinoflagellates which produce a toxin poisonous especially to many forms of marine vertebrate life and to humans who consume contaminated shellfish.

hh) **Renewable Energy**: any naturally occurring, theoretically inexhaustible source of energy, as biomass, solar, wind, tidal, wave, and hydroelectric power, that is not derived from fossil or nuclear fuel.

ii) **Solar power**: A source of renewable energy. Energy from the sun that is converted into thermal or electrical energy.

jj) **Sustainable/Sustainability**: Capable of being continued with minimal long-term effect on the environment.

kk) **Wind power**: A source of renewable energy (does not require the use of fossil fuels). Turbines convert the kinetic energy of wind into mechanical or electrical energy that can be used for power. Historically, wind power in the form of windmills has been used for centuries for such
tasks as grinding grain and pumping water. Modern commercial wind turbines produce electricity by using rotational energy to drive a generator.

II) **Xeriscaping**: environmental design of residential and park land using various methods for minimizing the need for water use.

VI. **Suggested In-Class Activities for University Seminar**

1. Class discussions- see reflection topics starting on page 14
2. Aquarena Springs Glass Bottom Boat Tour
3. Trip to Freeman Ranch
4. Assign two students each week to bring a sustainability theme-related article from any major newspaper (available on-line) and share it with the class.
5. No Impact Week Class Discussions
6. Have a “local eating potluck”
7. Invite students from the Bike Cave to class
8. Use calculators to tally the class’s total carbon footprint or water usage and discuss ways the class can reduce (see “Internet Resources”)
9. Discuss incentives that the federal government could realistically offer energy companies to move to renewable energy.

VII. **40 Out Of Class Assignments for University Seminar**

1. 4Cs: ask your class to plan and implement a project or marketing campaign that would Create Campus Culture Change. (Keep it simple. Perhaps launch a campaign on a single issue, such as the use of plastic grocery store bags.)
2. Participate in No Impact Week
3. Journal for each week of No Impact Month
4. Beavan’s methods are not suitable or even possible for everyone. Choose a way to lead a more sustainable lifestyle and adapt it in your own way.
6. Volunteer at a Spring Break Beach Clean Up.
7. Participate in Earth Day activities.
8. Suggest sustainable projects for Bobcat Build.
10. Participate in Groundwater Festival – Aquarena Center; [http://www.aquarena.txstate.edu/Educational-Tours/Groundwater-Festival.html](http://www.aquarena.txstate.edu/Educational-Tours/Groundwater-Festival.html). Every fall semester Aquarena Center hosts the Groundwater Festival—a free day of learning about the importance of groundwater.

13. Organize a Texas beach clean-up for spring break.
15. Plan a campus “black out:” everyone stops using energy for one hour simultaneously.
17. Choose a related topic and write a class letter to your congressman stating your opinion. Pay a personal visit to your congressman.
18. Interview students who don’t have cars. How do they make it?
19. Find out how the garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean got there and report to the class.
20. Petition Associated Student Government to implement a “borrow a bike” program for the campus.

Writing Prompt: Comment on the Austin American Statesman’s (Reese Halter, 2/10/2010) opinions article “The dramatic decline of honeybees poses a serious threat to the planet.”

Writing Prompt: comment on the Austin American Statesman’s (Marty Toohey, 2/21/2010) article “How green can we get?”

22. Writing prompt: As a result of reading No Impact Man, how have you been inspired? If you are not inspired, why? (Be specific.)
23. Keep a log of everything you throw away for one week and share it with the class.
24. Choose three ways you will live more eco-friendly this semester and report to the class at the end.
25. Choose any statistic from the “Notes” section (pp 245-255). Research & expand upon it. Report to the class.
26. Research Germany’s system of “extended producer responsibility” and share with the class.
27. Live without television for a week (this means you can’t record your favorite shows and watch them next week- that would be cheating). Report to the class on your experience.
28. Give up your car for a week & report back to the class.
29. Find out how landfills work and report back to the class.
30. Research alternatives to landfills.
31. Find out what the Edwards Aquifer is and explain “recharge zone.”
32. Research how recycling works. How do we keep up? Do we keep up? Where does it go? What is the cost?
34. Work out (using one of the elliptical machines at the Rec that has been fitted with the kinetic energy converters) half an hour for every hour of power you use on your laptop. This makes your laptop have zero impact.
35. Create a list of all the places to buy groceries that come from less than 200 miles away.
37. Comment on if fossil fuels are more cost efficient than renewable energy. Agree? Disagree? Why?
38. Ask students to find a partner and assign each pair a “Worst Enemy” of the planet (according to Rolling Stone, 1/21/2010). Each pair will research the “Enemy” and present both sides of the “Enemy’s” story to the class.
39. Writing prompt: Beavan mentions “engaged citizenship” in the epilogue. What does “engaged citizenship” mean to you?
VIII. Resources

1. Film
   
   
i. *The Eleventh Hour*
   
ii. *Nobility*
   
iii. *Exxon and Climate Change*
   
iv. *Subdivided: Isolation and Community in America*
   
v. *Sacred Planet*
   
vi. *Baraka*
   
vii. *Human Footprint*
   
   
ix. *Cadillac Desert: Water and the Transformation of Nature*
   
   
   
   xii. *The Story of Stuff*—online. Annie Leonard. [http://www.storyofstuff.com/](http://www.storyofstuff.com/). A documentary about how our obsession with stuff is destroying the planet. Excellent for a discussion on consumerism, one of the major themes of No Impact Man.
   
   
xiv. *Taken for a Ride* [http://newday.com/films/Taken_for_a_Ride.html](http://newday.com/films/Taken_for_a_Ride.html). A documentary about the demise of the streetcars and the campaign led by General Motors.
   

2. Music
   
i. FocusEarth video- greening the music industry. The music industry can be a dirty business for the environment. From buses to pyrotechnics to large amounts of waste generated from concert tours, bands produce tons of CO2 emissions. Can something be done?
   

3. Internet
   
i. Colin Beavan’s Blog: [http://noimpactman.typepad.com/](http://noimpactman.typepad.com/). The author’s blog about what each of us can do to end our environmental crisis,
make a better place to live for ourselves and everyone else, and hopefully come up with a happier way of life along the way.

ii. TreeHugger is the leading media outlet dedicated to driving sustainability mainstream. [www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com). Topics include transportation, technology, architecture, food, health, politics, and travel.

iii. Welcome to the No Impact Experiment: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOa-FNPvLnA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOa-FNPvLnA) (A three minute video introducing the experiment.)


v. Break Through: Why We Can’t Leave Saving the Planet to Environmentalists [http://www.thebreakthrough.org/breakthroughbook.shtml](http://www.thebreakthrough.org/breakthroughbook.shtml). Authors argue that politics can’t save the planet. Only “big and bold investments in the future,” such as a new kind of economic development, can combat global warming.

vi. Planet Green is the first and only 24-hour eco-lifestyle television network with a robust online presence and community. [www.planetgreen.discovery.com](http://www.planetgreen.discovery.com). Topics include health and beauty, fashion, cosmetics, skin care, food, organics, cooking, cancer, recipes, detoxing the home, insulation, recycling, cars, computers, transportation, gadgets, eco-friendly travel, ecological footprint, pollution, climate change, workplace, etc.

vii. FocusEarth video—clean coal: [http://planetgreen.discovery.com/videos/focus-earth-coals-hard-truth.html](http://planetgreen.discovery.com/videos/focus-earth-coals-hard-truth.html). The harsh truth is, America relies on coal and yet it’s a huge part of our environmental crisis. A company called FutureGen is investing in Clean Coal technology as the way to go.

viii. Since so much was made out of “the year without toilet paper” and Beavan never really answered the question about what he did instead, here is a bit more information on History of Toilet Paper on ABC News.com [http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=93597](http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=93597).


x. Water Usage Calculator: [http://www.csgnetwork.com/waterusagecalc.html](http://www.csgnetwork.com/waterusagecalc.html). Designed to tell us how we use the most water and how much we use.


how much impact a person has on the environment and recommends offsets to neutralize a person’s impact.

xiii. General Motors and the end of streetcars:
    http://www.lovearth.net/gmdeliberatelydestroyed.htm Tells the story about how GM led an initiative to end the streetcar lines.

4. Food
   i. Whole Foods
   ii. San Marcos Farmer’s Market
   iii. Cueva’s Produce
   iv. Rhea’s Ice Cream- on the square
   v. Texas State University Professor James McWilliams (History): Just Food:
      Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly

IX. Topics for Reflection & Discussion

Chapter 1: How a Schlub Like Me Gets Mixed Up in a Stunt Like This
“...No one can live without making some environmental impact. Even breathing creates carbon dioxide. You can turn your own lights out, but residing in a culture that provides street lighting means you still have an impact.”

- Colin Beavan went from being “the type of guy who shopped for the fifty-two-inch television, then thought he was a rebel against consumerism because he bought the discounted floor model” to someone who didn’t even own a TV. What type of person are you and could you not own a TV?
- Beavan theorizes that the Earth’s 6.5 billion people are no-where near as happy as they could be. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- You are a college student. What can you do to solve the world’s problems? Are you helpless? Do you have the ability to take any real action?
- Have you ever complained about the actions of other people without considering the inaction of yourself?
- Which of the four phases of the No Impact project do you think were the most difficult? (1) Trash, (2) Transportation, (3) Food, (4) Sustainable Consumption (Consumer Purchases/Household Operations)

Chapter 2: Day One and the Whole Thing is a Big Mistake
“...I wanted to figure out, with my family, what the world could productively offer us rather than considering only what we wanted. Deprivation was not the order of the day. I simply wanted to see if we could learn to behave like good guests while enjoying a good life.”

- Do you think Beavan’s actions were extreme? What are the things that he did that could you do and what things could you not do? Why?
- Would you be satisfied with your life if you embarked upon your own No Impact project?
- After reading this book, do you believe it is possible to enjoy a good life on Earth without harming the planet?
Chapter 3: What You Think When You Find Your Life in the Trash

“Michelle, like the other working minions, then whooshed in elevators back to her desk to each as she worked because she couldn’t waste time. She needed to keep working to get a raise. She needed the raise to afford the $5,000 a year in lunches she had to buy so she could get back to her desk so she could get a raise so she could afford her lunches so she could get back to her desk...”

- How much trash do you produce in a day?
- Do you think we work for/pay for convenience in order to live our lives or do we live our lives in order to work for/pay for convenience?
- Have you ever thought about the amount of time and money you spend on something you will throw away in ten minutes?
- Do you pay more attention to how you live your life right now or to how you want to live your life in the future?
- Is where our trash comes from more important than where it goes? How did we decide that where we put the trash and how we recycle it is more important than how we made it?
- Do you think you live a “throw away” life style? Why/why not? Do throwaway products really make you so happy that you could not give them up?

Chapter 4: If Only Pizza Didn’t Come on Paper Plates

“What I’ve accomplished until now mostly has to do with investigating and planning—where to shop, what unpackaged product to buy. Passing up a slice of pizza (and the paper plate) would have more to do with accepting that, if I want to live sustainably, I can no longer have exactly what I want when I want it. Because our systems are not designed to be sustainable, I had to swim against the cultural tide, and sometimes I got tired.”

- Discuss the role of Zen (or philosophy in general) in Beavan’s No Impact project.
- Discuss the role of discipline & self restraint in the No Impact project.
- Beavan notes (pg 66) that before the 1900’s, most households did not have a trash can. How and why did trash cans come about? How did people used to dispose of their trash? What changed? Can we go back?
- Who is more responsible for litter? Individual consumers or large companies?
- Are all people driven by selfishness or do most people want to do more harm than good? If selfishness, why? If more harm than good, why don’t more people actually act on that? Or do they?
- What effect does television have on your life?

Chapter 5: How to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint and Anger Your Mom at the Same Time

“As my theory goes, the mechanized boxes that transport our brains from here to there and the portable electronics that keep us constantly connected have robbed us of the ho-hum. Those periods that interrupted the daily rush, like a red light periodically bringing the quiet of stopped traffic, have been excised. Now peak moment follows peak moment and they are all accordioned together. Is that good for us? Does that make us happy?”

- What has been the effect of industrialization on our lives and on the environment? When weighing the positives and negatives, which is more important to you—modern convenience or the planet? Is it possible to have both?
What was the role of the automobile companies in establishing the car as an integral part of our lifestyle and popular culture? Do we have a love affair with cars, or was it a forced marriage?

Does American society need more “ho-hum” in our lives? How many times a day do you check your e-mail, make a phone call, or send a text? How many times an hour? When was the last time you went anywhere without a phone, or when you kept your phone in your possession but turned off for any real length of time? Your laptop? Your iPod?

Chapter 6: The Cabbage Diet Saves the World

“What Michelle drinks four iced quad espressos a day from her reusable cup. A switch to peppermint tea seems akin to giving a heroin addict an ice cream cone and telling him to enjoy the sugar buzz.”

“I’m looking at my baby-poop-containment system and really hoping that this world is worth saving.”

How many times a week do you ponder the purpose of your life and where you are heading? How many times a week do you ponder the material things you want to purchase?

Consider if the way to happiness is to fulfill our desires? Are our desires limitless? And how do our desires relate to the planet’s resources?

What are your thoughts on today’s version of “organic” food?

Consider Beavan’s statement about our lack of social connection with community. Could it be at the root of our environmental problems? Should we be accountable to anything/anyone beyond ourselves?

What was the “byproduct” of the No Impact project on Beavan’s family?

Chapter 7: Conspicuous Nonconsumption

“It’s a vicious circle. We work our butts off so we can get the stuff, but the making of the stuff destroys the planet, which makes us more depressed, so we think we need to buy more stuff to cheer us up, so we work even harder.”

Take a ballot vote: how many students in the class think “stuff” is more important than the planet? How many students in the class think the planet is more important than “stuff?” How many students in the class think Beavan’s take on “stuff” is wrong?

What makes you happier?

○ Actively participating in the community or new blue jeans?
○ Working toward a higher purpose or a new cell phone?
○ Using your talents or a trip to Cancun?

What does Beavan mean by “Working toward a higher purpose?” Why are you in college? Better paycheck or “higher purpose?”

In the final days of your life, what do you think will be on your mind?

If only a small portion of the world’s population lives in developed countries, how do we transfer renewable energy and sustainable product manufacturing to everyone else? Should we even bother with this whole sustainability thing? Does this frustrate anyone? What should be our role to help developing countries?

Is the entire American economy predicated on the idea that the more resources we use, the better?

Are the priorities and values of American society out of whack? Why or why not?
What does the class think about Beavan’s concept of “repetitive consumption?” Do manufacturers really purposefully look to make their own products obsolete for the purpose of replacement, or is this just the nature of progress and technology?

Comment on the hypothesis that if things were built to last, our economy could still grow in other ways because we would purchase services rather than new items? See page 151.

Should the resources we use to recycle paper be used for something better than toilet paper?

Have any of you been to a country where toilet paper was not common place?

What are your thoughts on Isabella’s rocking horse?

Chapter 8: Click and the Lights Go Out

“I researched the possibility of buying canisters of cooking gas that had been extracted from someone else’s anaerobic digester. Let’s just say that the few phone calls I made that contained the question “Do you know how I can buy cooking gas extracted from rotting animal feces?” didn’t go that well.”

“I simply feel that now we’ve so utterly perfected the walkie-talkie to the point where it has become the iPhone, maybe we could turn the great minds that brought us the Nintendo Wii to, say, getting fresh water to the 1 billion people on our planet who don’t have it.”

Do you agree/not agree with the New York Times’ estimation of the project?

Both Colin and Michelle make comments about defining their lives for themselves instead of living their lives in certain ways because “that’s the ways it’s always been.” What are the class’ thoughts?

What is the difference between individual action and collective action?

Is Beavan crazy for turning out his lights? What was the purpose?

Why do you think a lack of electricity is closely linked to poor health, poor drinking water, and poverty?

How do residences contribute to global warming?

What are our alternative (to burning fossil fuels) methods of creating electricity?

What are the schools of thought on government intervention regarding the economy of renewable energy?

What are the costs of not reversing climate change?

What do you think about our government’s current strategy for combating climate change? Why is this our current strategy, according to Beavan?

Comment on creating culture change and habit change.

Does the No Impact project irritate you? Why? Okay dig a little deeper... Now, why?

At what level of non-resource use would you voluntarily go in order to save the planet?

Seven months into the project, the Beavans were not making trash, not creating carbon when they traveled, only eating local (save coffee and olive oil), not buying anything new, and not using electricity (save the washing machine). They had five months to go. Could you do it?

Chapter 9: Trying to Do Enough Good to Outweigh the Harm

“...environmentalism is not about trying to use less but about trying to be more. It is not about sucking our tummies in but about pushing our hearts out. Environmentalism is not about the environment. It is about people. It is about a vision for a better life—for people.”
One source claims that corporations will one day control all the drinking water because it will be so scarce. How will people who can’t afford to pay have access to drinking water?

Would it be possible for you to wear clothes more than once before washing them? What about letting it “mellow if it’s yellow”? How would your life change?

What is life’s true meaning? For what purpose do you live your lives? What is Beavan’s position?

Who in class regularly volunteers? Where? Why?

Do you think an individual’s reduction in resource use will do any good? Can individuals make a difference?

Are you the type of person who believes they can make a difference? Are you willing to try?

What do you use resources for? To improve your life? How? Or do you regularly waste resources? How?

Do you think politicians often say one thing and do another?

What is Beavan’s point in telling readers that his wife had a miscarriage?

Epilogue: Life After the Year Without Toilet Paper

What were some of the negative impacts that Beavan could not eliminate?

What makes sense when determining an ecological balance for your own lifestyle? What is a good life and can we design out social and technological systems to sustain it?

Do comfortable lifestyles make people complacent and if so, how can people get past complacency?

How does Beavan believe individuals can begin changing the world?

X. Discussion Questions from TreeHugger’s Official Discussion and Resource Guide to No Impact Man

1. At the beginning of the No Impact experiment, Colin Beavan asks, “Is it true that a guy like me can’t make a difference? Or am I just too lazy or frightened to try?” What answers to these questions did he come up with by the end of the book? Which of the family’s actions made the most significant impact?

2. Beavan’s experiment took green living to an extreme. If you were to choose just a few of his actions to implement in your own life, what would they be? Which conveniences or behaviors should society change in order to reduce our collective environmental impact?

3. Is there such a thing as a lifestyle that makes no impact on the environment? How much impact is too much? How much personal obligation do we each have in reducing our individual carbon footprints? For great ideas on ways to leave a smaller carbon footprint, visit 1Sky at www.1sky.org and Carbon Shredders at www.carbonshredders.org.

4. Beavan traces much of our wasteful culture back to consumerism and the “hedonic treadmill,” the notion that there is always something better out there than what was just purchased. Can you identify purchases or habits in your own life that fit this psychological profile? What consumer products truly improve your life? What are the true necessities? What could you do without altogether? To learn more about the relationship between consuming responsibly and enhancing overall quality of life, visit the Center for a New
American Dream (http://newdream.org) and take a look at Buy Nothing Day (www.buynothingday.org) and the Alternative Gift Registry (www.alternativegiftregistry.org).

5. Food plays a major role in this story. How much of the food you eat is locally grown? Organic? Processed? Did No Impact Man inspire you to change your eating and drinking habits? Learn more about food health and safety issues at Food and Water Watch (http://fwwatch.org).

6. Beavan runs into many situations in No Impact Man regarding the profusion of packaging waste: paper or plastic at the grocery store, paper plates at the pizza joint, delivery in Styrofoam clamshells. How much packaging waste do you accumulate? How does your community manage landfills and recycling programs? Should it be up to individuals, businesses, or governments to reduce waste? One way to help is to take the Pledge to Break the Bottled Water Habit, organized by the Center for a New American Dream (http://water.newdream.org).

7. At first, Beavan’s wife, Michelle, is a reluctant partner in the No Impact experiment. Discuss her transformation. Why do her attitudes change over the course of the year? How would the project have been different if Beavan had tried it solo?

8. Did Isabelle have a harder or easier time than her parents in adjusting to the No Impact lifestyle? Did the perspective of a child make the project more challenging, or less? Would you consider transporting your child by bike or on foot? What would the world be like for Isabelle’s generation if all parents set the No Impact example?

9. The Beavan family spends a lot of time considering where all their stuff—especially packaging and anything disposable—comes from and goes to during manufacturing and after it gets tossed away. How much do you know about the origins of your stuff? Has this knowledge caused you to change your buying habits?

10. Colin and Michelle run into friction with their respective families for proposing that flying for twice-yearly visits is too carbon intense. Colin’s sister is especially rankled to learn that her brother won’t be at her baby shower. Are they right to be mad? Have your own actions and principles, environmental or otherwise, ever gotten you in trouble with people you care about? How have family expectations changed since the rise of interstate highways and the airline industry?

11. For most people, giving up a car would be a complicated life change. No Impact Man aspires to give up all fossil-fuel transportation. What would be your biggest adjustments if you sold your car, gave up taxis, buses, trains, and planes, and commuted entirely by bike or on foot? What would spur you to do this? What would the drawbacks be? The Alliance for Biking and Walking (www.peoplepoweredmovement.org) has great tips for making this change, including how to create communities that are practical and safe for bicyclists and pedestrians.
12. Happiness forms a theme in *No Impact Man*. Would you be happier if you slowed down, dispensed with the instant conveniences, and did more things the old fashioned way? What are your options for slowing down? What holds you back?

13. Colin Beavan’s experiment is similar to Henry David Thoreau’s sojourn to Walden Pond in the mid-nineteenth century. Is it human nature to want a simpler life (Thoreau craved it before the Industrial Revolution), or is it natural to want to be a consumer? What difference did it make when Thoreau decided to remove himself from society, while Beavan consciously remained an active part of his community? How would the No Impact experiment look in a rural location? What were the challenges and benefits of performing the experiment in New York City?

14. Who has the greater responsibility in addressing climate change and pollution: the government or individuals? How can individuals most effectively help usher in change, locally and at the federal level? What does *No Impact Man* teach us about persuading naysayers? Visit www.1sky.org to get active on tackling global warming.

15. Although Beavan’s previous books have nothing to do with saving the planet, there is a common thread in all his work: it showcases extensive research. Browse the notes at the back of *No Impact Man*. What do they indicate about the amount of information currently available on the importance of environmentalism? Does the Information Age make it easier or harder to learn the facts and promote the cause?

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