

How to be an environmentalist in two steps

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- 1. Become a vegetarian.
- 2. Don't drive.

Bonus: Do lots of crap like changing your light bulbs and buying stuff in paper packaging, which won't have a tenth the impact of #1 and 2, but may make you feel better.

I know this is a little different from the easy steps list you may see here and there, because for many people the steps in the two-step program aren't easy. But the rest is a farce, a list of things which have an impact that is orders of magnitudes smaller than the big two.

For example, the statistic bandied about is that it takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce a pound of beef; by contrast, my water bill tells me that my house (two residents) uses that much water in 25 days. Anything I can do, like fixing leaky faucets or showering instead of taking a bath, is an order of magnitude smaller than the amount of water I could save by reducing demand for beef by a single pound. [Of course, if you live in Santa Fe, NM, then you care deeply about water, because the city has such a limited supply, because so much of the Western U.S.'s water supply is funneled off to beef production.]

As for driving, buying a car and cutting down on trips still induces most of the damage caused by producing and disposing of a car. If you buy a small car instead of an SUV, you may cut gas consumption in half, but that's still hundreds of gallons a year and half a ton of steel, paint, plastics, and chemicals with no non-technical name. Driving less is a far cry from not driving.

The question of why the press so often fails to mention the big two when discussing environmentalism are probably obvious to you, but it is worth enumerating a few:

They involve not consuming The big two are both typically characterized in terms of *not* consuming either cars or meat. It's hard to make money off of people not consuming, so all of the advertising which comes our way fights against these principles. Sure, the bike industry and faux meat providers are making good cash from not consuming cars or meat, but they are clearly an order of magnitude or three behind.

Meanwhile, the light bulbs and the environmentally friendly solvents and the other bonus niceties all involve purchasing—and paying a premium for—a product. Extensive advertisement immediately follows.

They take effort It's easy to imagine switching from plastic bags to paper bags (or vice versa. Have I stressed enough how irrelevant the debate is relative to curbing auto and meat consumption?) Switching from driving everywhere to biking everywhere is a much greater leap of the imagination—and one which only conjures images of sweat, sweat, sweat. Of course, it is the change which is difficult. As a bicyclist, I can't imagine driving: I never troll for parking, I am never stuck in traffic, and I have no monthly insurance payments. But since the default is a driving world, most need to imagine making the change to not driving, which takes effort.

Not eating meat is a much simpler task than not driving, since the alternatives are abundant and served/sold in the same place. Nor are there special dietary issues. [I am oh so tired of people asking me where I get my protein. I get it from food. In fact, there's evidence that excess protein consumption (and that means most Americans) leads to calcium depletion = osteoporosis. Don't drink cow's milk for strong bones: just don't eat the cow.]

However, what we eat is almost entirely determined by what we are familiar with. Again, changing the status quo of what we think of as good food takes great effort.

Environmentalism is an identity It's hard to internalize the effect one would have on the invisible air or the boundless oceans. Much easier is to feel the effects of a self-identification, and so it is the self-identification which people seek to cultivate. The hundred little tasks provide a person with a hundred little reminders that she or he is an environmentalist.

Meanwhile, they are basically costless: you get to live the same lifestyle you had before, but with more paper and less plastic. Food and transportation are fundamental, and to a great extent, being a vegetarian or being a non-driver is its own self-identification, which many don't find to be desirable. Given the package of vegetarian plus environmentalist, many would like to just drop the vegetarian part.

Minimizing scolding Folks just don't like to read about their failings, and don't like to be lectured. Information about how to be a better environmentalist therefore has to walk that fine line between telling the reader how to do it better and not making them feel lousy. Telling readers to not eat meat and to not drive takes a flying leap off of that fine line. If the reader considers him or herself to be an environmentalist, eating meat is a fundamental, massive failing.

Impossibility It is very possible to turn down your air conditioner 100% of the time, but never riding in mechanized transport is darn near impossible in the modern world. I'm sorry to say that the same is true of avoiding animal

products: every day, you will use some products which are the result of animal breeding and slaughter. I'd like to say that I'm a vegan, but I know enough food chemistry to know where whey and casein come from, and read enough labels to know that they're in everything—even the typical soy cheese includes dairy products. Never eating meat is indeed easy, but never consuming mono- and diglycerides is a pain beyond belief.

This is all a reminder that if your criteria for being a good environmentalist are strict adherence to nos 1 and 2 above, the nobody in modern society is a good environmentalist. Isn't it so much more pleasant to define good environmentalists by whether they bring their own mug to the coffee shop?

These interdependent causes add up to a massive avoidance of the big issues by the environmental advocates (and I am in no position to say whether such a strategy has been a net winner or loser for the environment). Most of the discussion among environmentalists is not about not driving, but about driving something a little smaller, and discussion about diet is typically entirely missing. Instead, we are inundated with little details, which are several orders of magnitude less important, but orders of magnitude less threatening.