

## Living green: on a mission to reduce my carbon footprint

By [Toby Green](#)

Thursday 31 May 2007

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



**Toby tries to buy ethically viable produce**



### **Recycling bikes, St Nicholas' Fields**

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 keeping 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 and aware than they used to be, but there remain two main impediments: money and resources," Hoedeman said.

One area on their list is Commercial Services. I had already been avoiding the open-faced fridges that are used throughout Costcutter and Your:Shop due to their nonsensical wastage of electricity - a simple door on each would cut their energy usage by up to 40%. Hoedeman also sees catering facilities as a major problem: "At the moment, Vanbrugh kitchen uses 60-80 KWs constantly throughout the day and at night it's running at 10 KWs. We've started to work with them to raise awareness amongst the chefs, so that carbon prevention becomes part of their training. At the moment, reducing carbon is not a priority in some places, but it will only happen if students demand it."

Langley's main aim is to raise student awareness and get them to start taking responsibility for their personal carbon footprint. "By far the biggest thing that people can do is behavioral changes since they don't realise how much energy they are using. The problem is that most first-year students have never cooked for themselves. In Freshers Fortnight, people are encouraged to get drunk, but not to think about their use of energy."

St Nicholas Fields, only 10 minutes from the University in Tang Hall, is one opportunity for students to take green matters into their own hands. Set in the middle of a small but idyllic nature reserve, an environment centre runs a recycling scheme that recycles 350 tonnes of waste a year. Using special bikes

and trikes that can reach places the Council can't, it's a prime example of how a community works together. Many students volunteer here, providing the perfect way to get involved in local green issues.

As a celebration for the end of my week, I was to cook a three-course meal for nine people. The aim was to examine whether, by cooking together, students could improve their carbon footprint. However, before I embarked on my culinary expedition, I visited a man whose environmental efforts put everything else I'd done and seen over the last seven days in the shade. John Cossham is something of a local celebrity, and has even appeared on Newsnight twice to display his ethical lifestyle. In 2002, he was inspired by a book called The Humanure Handbook to build a composting toilet in his own back garden. By letting human waste compost for two years, he produces human manure which is nutritionally identical to the traditional farmyard animal variety. Alongside his natural toilet, he collects over 100 kilos of unsold fruit and vegetables every week to go in one of his 31 compost heaps. For over 20 years now, he has been interested in the social side of sustainability, believing that, "there are clear social, natural and economical benefits to a green lifestyle." His clear satisfaction with his style of life was supplemented by the fact that his fuel bills were just over £200 a year. Although meeting Cossham left me slightly downhearted about my own efforts, it also summed up a key theme of my findings over the week: however much you think you are doing to help, you can always do more.

Despite this, the meal was a success: a starter of homemade garlic bread using a baguette from a bakery, risotto with locally sourced vegetables and English strawberries with organic cream all went down well. Coming to a total of £18, it managed to benefit both the environment and my wallet. An impromptu discussion group after the meal produced mixed attitudes towards what students do and could do. There was a general consensus that they would pay a pound extra for a meal on campus if they knew it contained locally-sourced food. Most people's first-year habits were also a source of shame, with none of those in their third year remembering receiving information. Three weren't even able to turning their heating off in their rooms on campus, and landlords that wouldn't pay for energy-saving measures were also a source of resentment. Yet my feeling is ultimately it must come down to the individual. The University, YUSU, supermarkets, landlords: they are all essentially driven by their 'customers'. Although Chris predicted that over the week my impact had been a fifth of the standard UK citizen, I felt I had barely scratched the surface.



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## 3 comments

Allyson

1 Jun '07 at 9:04 am

Your efforts may not have been as 'grand' as Rupert Murdoch but in your own way you have done more. As a family we try to live as ethically as possible but whatever we do is a drop in the ocean and doesn't really do very much. BUT by speaking out about what you are doing has brought an awareness of the situation to the people around you and that is what counts. Only governments can ever change the situation to the extent that this planet will be saved from the downward cycle of destruction that exists. As a family we have been recycling since the middle 80's but only now that every one is made to recycle will the situation in this area improve. I have 6 girls aged 6,16,17,21,23 & 25 and my ethical living over the years has really influenced them and they also try to live an ethical life. We live in an ordinary house in an ordinary street and apart from the water butt and the compost bin we look just the same as any other family in the street but the awareness is important. Keep up the good work of raising awareness.

[Report](#)

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Jo Birch

15 Jun '07 at 7:17 am

As a long-standing member of University staff I related to a lot of what is said and am one of Heike

Singleton and Willie Hoedeman's campus Energy Champions. That does not just mean turning light and equipment switches off. We compost and recycle everything possible

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Daniel

18 Mar '08 at 5:18 pm

I took an intensive driving course to pass my driving test faster. I was shocked to see how part of the course was how to drive greener. It's funny how you can save money by driving to save the environment. I'd definitely recommend that anyone who feels they 'have to' use a car look into intensive driving courses so that they can still do something for the environment.

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