



How to Eat a Green Elephant

A SUSTAINABILITY TOOLKIT FOR THE WORKPLACE & HOME LIFE

Bite 2

Eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of chemicals and compounds produced by society.



What's the problem?

As a civilization we contribute to the earth's stockpile of junk through our use of pesticides, fertilizers and other harmful toxins produced when we make our stuff. One prime set of culprits are known as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) which seep into our air, water and soil from pesticides like DDT, and other manufacturing processes. These toxins multiply as they move up the food chain, and invariably end up poisoning us. The situation is so bad that even breast milk wouldn't pass FDA standards today. "Properly" dumping our waste into landfills doesn't help either since the rate at which we create garbage is quickly outstripping the pace at which the earth can handle holding on to it, and there's more of us coming. In addition, non-biodegradable substances like plastics don't disappear when the garbage is picked up, they might break down into smaller pieces, but they accumulate in places like **The Great Pacific Garbage Patch**¹ where they wreak havoc on the local ecosystem.

As individuals, we contribute to the devastation by buying more than we need, throwing away more than we should, and relying on irresponsibly made products. Because of the 4.3 gazillion ads² we're bombarded with everyday, we buy into the notion of perceived obsolescence, which is just a fancy way of saying that we're slaves to fashion. Not just in the couture sense, but that we feel we always need to have the latest, greatest, newest, coolest looking thing.

So how do we stop it?

Simply, by **consuming responsibly**. It would be futile to suggest we stop consuming altogether, but changing the manner in which we do so, will go a long way. One note of caution though, the following suggestions require a little extra effort on your part to do some research.

Greenwashed* products are becoming more prevalent, so keeping yourself informed is the only way you can make sure you're actually doing some good with your decisions.

Most of these suggestions work for both at Work and at Home situations, but where indicated, **AT WORK** items are identified.

"It's greenwashing when a company or organization spends more time and money claiming to be "green" through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact. It's whitewashing, but with a green brush."

- www.greenwashingindex.com

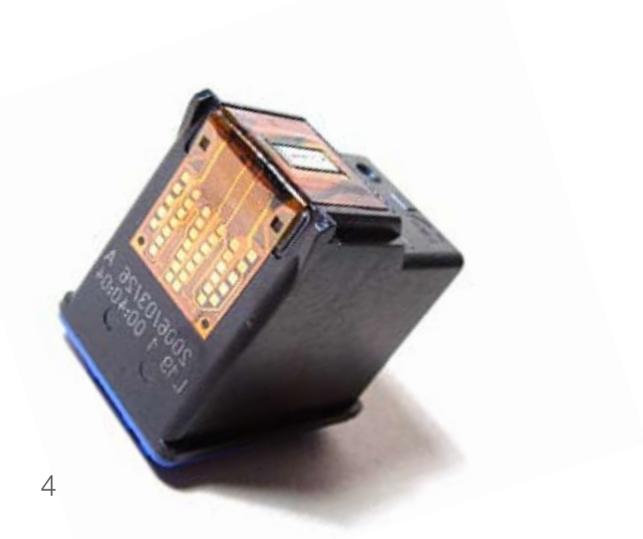
1. Buy Less (or Buy used)

- **Reduce the amount of stuff you buy** by asking yourself some hard questions before making that next purchase. Questions like "Do I need this?" "Do I need this now?" or "Can I get this used instead of new?"
- **You don't have to be the first adopter all the time.** Make use of services like craigslist to find a slightly used version of the item you want.
- **Buy things that last longer**, for example CFLs instead of incandescents. The savings earned over the life of the product more than make up for the extra up front costs.
- **Eat out less.** You save money and gas, the restaurant has 1 less plate to wash plus the few times you do eat out will seem that much more special.



2. Waste Less

- Find out if your product has a **Return to manufacturer** option, (e.g. Patagonia long underwear³) or **[At Work]** have your ink cartridges refilled professionally if you're not adventurous enough to do it yourself.⁴
- **Recycle** - whether commercially or personally, just don't dump it. Use services such as Freecycle.org, donate to Goodwill or have a good old fashioned garage sale.
- **Buy products with less or biodegradable / compostable packaging.**
- **[At Work]** Buy **presentation materials** that are biodegradable, compostable or recyclable from companies like Univenture⁵.



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Example of a presentation binder from the EcoEndure line.
(Image from Univenture.com)



3. Eat Fairly

- **Which means organic** - no pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers were used to grow the product and the soil was managed properly. But buyer beware, there's a difference between "100% organic" and "made with organic ingredients."
- **As well as local** - small farms use less pesticides and properly manage the topsoil to avoid killing the land.



For a brief explanation of what foods can wear this label, check out www.mayoclinic.com/health/organic-food/NU00255

4. Wear Responsibly

- If you're wearing a T-shirt right now you're also wearing 1/3 of a pound of pesticides. So find clothing that use **renewable fibers** like organic cotton, modal, lyocell, bamboo, merino wool, and hemp⁶. These don't use pesticides and other chemicals in the cultivation process.⁷

Organic doesn't necessarily mean potato sack, there are a lot of very stylish options for the eco-conscious fashionista like this bamboo penelope shirt available from envi. (Image from Shopenvi.com)





Just a few of the readily available organic cleaning products and detergents on the market. (Image from www.cleaningchemfree.com)

5. Clean Responsibly

- **Replace conventional cleaning chemicals** with eco-friendly ones, you could even make your own at home. e.g. diluted tea-tree oil as a disinfectant or white vinegar to clean floors.⁸
- **Avoid "perc"*** using DryCleaners (i.e. almost all drycleaners) - there are other options such as wet cleaning and liquid CO₂.⁹

**perc AKA perchlorethylene, PCE, tetrachloroethylene, and tetrachloroethene.*

6. Kill responsibly (bugs, that is)

- Sure we want them dead, but we don't have to be mean about it. Plus we don't want to kill ourselves in the process. Use **organic replacements** to pesticides. There are plant-based alternatives to almost every kind of pesticide on the market, some of them can be created at home using common natural ingredients. For example citrus-based Orange Guard¹⁰ works as a non-toxic general insect killer, while a concoction of garlic, onion, cayenne pepper and dish soap works well against slugs¹¹.
- If you still choose to buy the dangerous stuff, there are ways to **properly use and dispose of them**. For instance not buying more than you need means you're not forced to stockpile them which reduces the risk of leaks. Other tips include keeping them in their original containers and NOT throwing the excess down the drain, toilet, storm drain or just on the ground¹².



A few of plant-based, biodegradable insecticide options from EcoSmart.com



Not only are Method's products biodegradable, packaged in recyclable materials, they offset their staff's CO2 emissions and power their plants with green energy credits.
(Image from Methodhome.com)

7. Support Responsible Companies

- **Those that don't pollute** in the process of doing business e.g. Method- home cleaning products or a local restaurant that grows their own food organically¹³.
- **Those that recycle** their products or use recycled products to make new ones. Such as reclaimed wood from antique houses instead of virgin wood. E.g. Vetrazzo recycled glass counters¹⁴, Structured Green recycled furniture¹⁵
- **Those that design their products to outlast fads & trends** (i.e. perceived obsolescence). This might seem like a trivial and subjective decision but if you have to keep replacing it because "that's so last year" then that's one more item in the landfill and less money in your wallet.



From discarded wine bottles to windshields, Vetrazzo takes glass trash and creates beautiful counter tops. But their commitment to sustainability doesn't stop there, they've now begun a program to collect and recycle their own products ensuring that none of their products end up in a landfill, "if they can help it."
(Images from www.Vetrazzo.com)

Excercise 2: Backcasting

Another useful tool in achieving sustainability involves a little imagination. You've heard of forecasting, using current information to predict the future, now try backcasting. This creative excercise involves 3 simple steps:

1. Imagine your ideal sustainable future.

It might help to think in terms of the principles in this manual, but don't limit yourself, think big!

2. Working backwards from that ideal scenario, think of all the necessary steps that would lead up to it.

For example if completely clean energy use is part of your vision, then what would need to happen immediately before that? Ok, now before that...

3. Use those steps as guides as you move towards your ideal future.

You probably realize it already but you now have a roadmap towards your vision of sustainability. Now wasn't that simple?

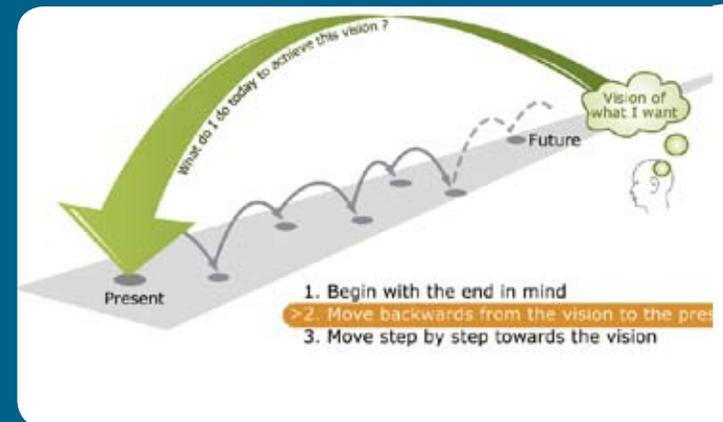


image from naturalstep.org

Principle 2 Sources

- 1 www.greatgarbagepatch.org
- 2 gross exaggeration just to make a point
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