How to Eat a Green Elephant

A SUSTAINABILITY TOOLKIT FOR THE WORKPLACE & HOME LIFE

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Eliminate our contribution to the progressive physical degredation and destruction of natural resources.

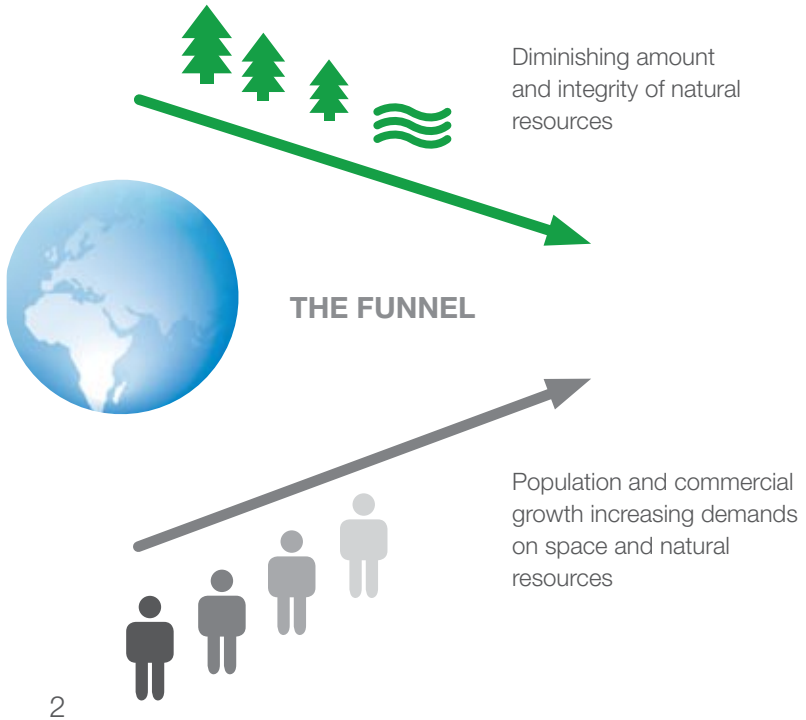


Fig.1

What's the problem?

We all need space to live.
We not only have to share this space with each other but millions of other forms of life. The problem with this scenario is that both the rate at which we're using up this space and the rate at which we're multiplying are increasing rapidly. Plus, it may not seem like it at times, but there's a finite amount of space available on this planet.

What does this mean? It means that while the amount of usable space is diminishing, our need for those natural resources is increasing. (see Fig.1) As you can see, if things continue in their current directions, eventually we will not only run out of physical space to live on, but also the valuable resources that the natural space around us provides. This includes the soil we plant in, the water we drink, the medicines we extract from plants, the paper we use and much more. We may not realize it but the foundation of how we eat, work and live rests on the services we get from the environment. Just look at our water consumption, for example. 140 litres of water is used throughout the entire production process to get just one cup of coffee[1]. Now multiply that by the amount of coffee drinkers you know and you get a taste of how important it is to have access to clean water. But we continually pollute the little clean water we have by improperly dumping waste, fertilizers, sewage and other harmful chemicals into it.

So, what can we do?

Preserving the balance between how quickly we use natural resources and how quickly they can be replenished is the key issue of principle 3. This would involve curbing our wasteful use of nature while contributing to the replenishment process .

1. Plant Something

Aside from the health benefits we receive from working outdoors and getting dirty, planting indigenous, non-invasive plants and trees helps reduce pollutants in the air, maintains soil integrity (which helps reduce soil erosion) and supports native biodiversity in your own backyard.

At Work

- **Start an office vegetable garden.**

- **Clean and beautify the office with plants.** Indoor plants remove pollutants from the air and make your workplace feel more home-y.[2]

At Home

- **Grow your own herbs.** If toiling in dirt isn't your idea of fun, or you need some green ROI for your effort, then growing hearty indoor or outdoor herbs that you can cook with is an easy way to exercise your green thumb.

2. Save the Virgins!

Americans use around 730 pounds of paper each year. Unfortunately most of it still comes from trees and virgin trees at that. So reducing the amount of paper we waste, using paper products that have already been recycled and recycling the paper we use ourselves means that fewer forests have to be destroyed on our behalf.

At Work

• **Buy PCW recycled copy paper.** Instead of traditional copy paper buy paper with any of the following specifications: 100% recycled Post Consumer Waste (PCW), Process Chlorine Free (PCF), FSC certified.

• **Put a collection bin near the copier or fax machine for recycling paper.** If it's near the source of the waste you're more likely to use it.

An example of the recycled copy paper options available.
image from staples.com

At Home

• **Buy recycled paper products.** Like Seventh Generation recycled bath tissue.

• **Reduce junk mail.** Sign up for junk mail reduction services like Green Dimes.com or Catalog Choice.com.

• **Recycle the rest.** It's almost impossible to avoid receiving some kind of junk mail, so recycle as much of the remaining junk as possible.

Seventh Generation 100% recycled toilet paper.
image from SeventhGeneration.com

3. Waste Less Water

There are many ways in which we can reduce the amount of water we use both in the home and at work, some of these include:

• **Buying high-efficency washing machines** and dishwashers and only using them on full loads.

• **Installing low-flow toilets.**

• **Installing aerating faucets,** especially for showers. This reduces your water usage by as much as 50% as well as energy used to heat the water.[3]

• **Check regularly for leaks.** For example, drop some dye in the tank of your toilet and check to see if any seeps into the bowl.

• **Taking shorter showers.** 20 to 40 gallons of water go down the drain in a 4-minute shower, you do the math.

• **Reuse greywater.** Installing a greywater system at home allows you to maximize the water used in washing and bathing. Although some caution should be exercised in the safe handling of greywater, there are tremendous financial and ecological advantages to this form of recycling.[4]

• **Collect rain water.** If food were to fall from the sky, would we let it go to waste?

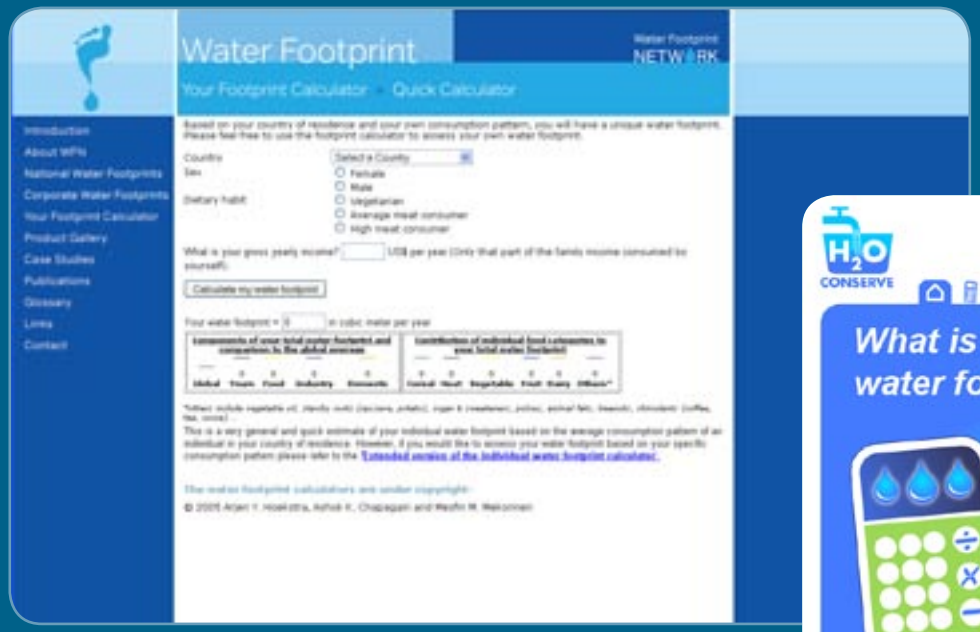
For a more complete list of water saving tips go to:
www.eartheasy.com or
www.wateruseitwisely.com

Excercise 3: Calculate Your Water Footprint

A bit more precise than the carbon calculator, this audit of your water usage also gives you ideas on how you can lower it. It takes into consideration such things as your dietary habits, how often you brush your teeth and whether you shower or take baths.

WATER CALCULATORS

- nwf.org/water/watercalculator.cfm
- waterfootprint.org



Sample water footprint calculator from waterfootprint.org

H20 Conserve has a fun, visually interactive calculator

Principle 3 Sources

1 www.waterfootprint.org/?page=files/home

2 www.ext.vt.edu/departments/envirohort/articles/misc/plntclar.html

3 www.eartheasy.com/live_lowflow_aerators.htm, www.metaefficient.com/bathroom-products/the-most-efficient-faucet-aerators-of-2008.html

4 Greywater resources:

www.oasisdesign.net/greywater

ag.arizona.edu/AZWATER/arroyo/071rain.html

www.cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_m/m-106.html