

An environmentalist in winter

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12 October 2005

The reader will recall my two easy steps for being an environmentalist:

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

That post was intended to be about the enviromedia and why they wholly fail to mention these two items, preferring to talk about hemp luggage or handbags made from old rubber. But many readers took it as a personal affront. One reader, who doesn't drive but is not vegetarian, agreed with me on not driving but chided me on being so righteous about vegetarianism. A second reader, who is vegetarian but has a car—oh, it's all so predictable.

I've been trying to think of other things one can do to continue to live in Western civilization but maintain a significantly smaller ecofootprint [please, leave yours in the comments section]. Here's one or two more:

- 3. Live below 35 degrees of latitude.
- 4. Live in an apartment.

Had been meaning to write about this sooner, but am driven to write about it now because I am, as I write, on hold with a home heating oil company, waiting to be told that heating oil is a dollar a gallon more than it was last year. One more way in which we are paying for the war in Iraq. But this isn't about being cheap; that's just bonus points for not polluting and wasting energy. The environmental damage prevented by not heating up a 90 square meters of space for four or five hours is an expletive of a lot more than that saved by turning off the faucet when I brush my teeth, not using paper cups, covering the lid when I boil water, and fifty other enviroconsumer tricks combined.

My house gets zero miles per gallon, and over the course of last year used on the order of a thousand gallons of heating oil. Multiply this by the millions of houses here in sunny Baltimore, and you've got fuel consumption on the same order of magnitude as the fleet of cars driving around the city, at least for this half of the year.

Some people think the choice of location is a trade-off between higher air conditioning costs and higher heating costs, but this is a too-modern view of things, fostered by bad architecture. Our air conditioning bill last year was zero.

The house was built 105 years ago, meaning that it was designed to be cool, and it works: open the transoms, open the doors and windows at either end of the house, and the breeze doesn't stop. Without an air conditioner anywhere in the house, the first floor was always about three degrees C cooler than the outside. Architecture to keep people cool is well-established; architecture to keep people warm doesn't exist, except to the extent that there are means of keeping the heat from the fire or the burner or the boiler from escaping.

I'm doing what I can to fix up the place to retain heat. Have fixed that draft under the kitchen door; will be covering the windows in plastic; will wear socks more often. It's too late to take action on this now, but this time next year, I will have a green roof.

Number four in the list can generalize to being around people. I'm in a townhouse, so I share most of my wallspace with two other houses, meaning that we share heat. During those days when I experimented with just turning off the boiler entirely, the house never fell below ten degrees C (fifty F), because the neighbors were running their heat full blast. The logical extreme is the apartment, which shares virtually all of its surface with other houses. You're all in it together, and share the effort of warming up the larger box of which your little box is a slice.

Alternatively, there's the coffee shop. When you go to the coffee shop and see thirty people there, that's maybe around twenty houses which aren't being heated right now. Spending a cold night at a crowded locale can save maybe ten or twenty gallons of fuel (or natural gas equivalent); then at closing time you can trundle home to your bed and start up the space heater in every bedroom. I imagine that this is how many folks of old lived, and why stories of the middle ages always begin at the tavern.

None of this means that you have to be uncomfortable and miserable. The idea is not to sit around in a space where the thermostat is set so low you can see your breath, though if you're into that, run with it. The idea is to just not be in a place where you have to expend energy to keep large spaces warm. [Of course, you could also just get a smaller house.] This means either being in San Diego or in a shared space where everybody shares in the energy expense of warming up the area.