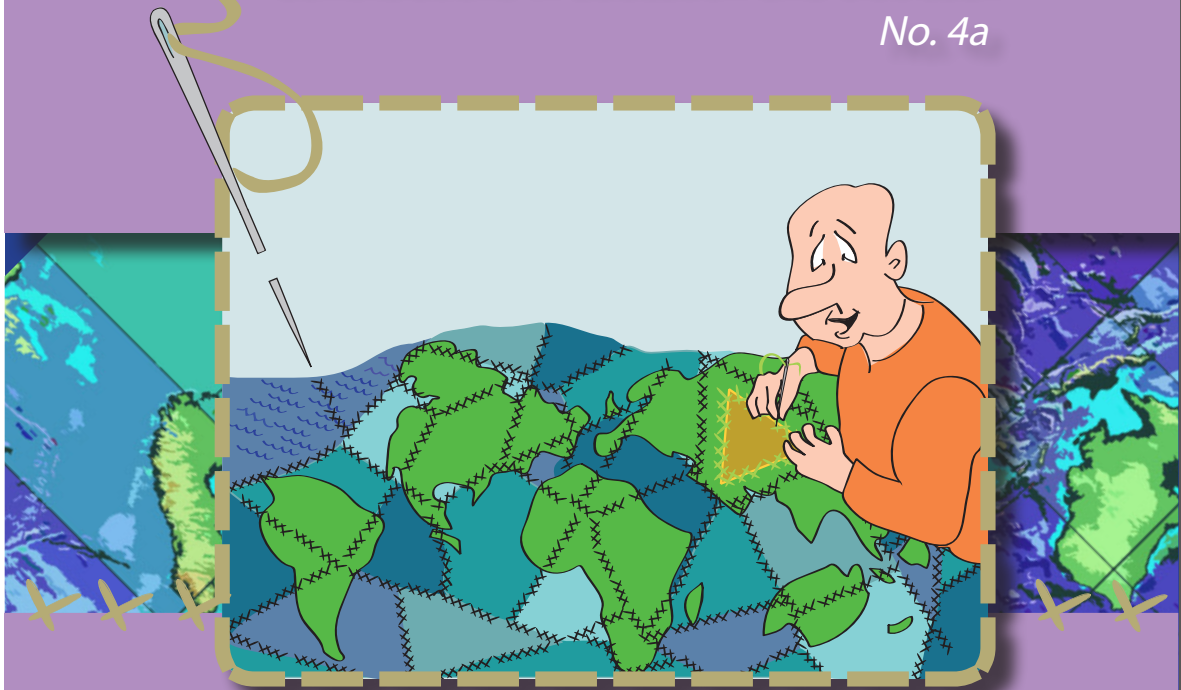


November 2011

Contributions in Education and Outreach

No. 4a



Sustainable Living Handbook: A Citizen's Guide to Thoughtful Action

College of Forestry
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon

Oregon State
UNIVERSITY

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This guide is a National Network for Sustainable Living Education project. NNSLE improves quality of life and reduces environmental degradation by fostering new consumption patterns and sustainable lifestyles through Cooperative Extension Service programs at land-grant institutions.

ABSTRACT

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Sustainable living is a lifestyle that is deeply satisfying, fulfilling, and appealing because it is socially, environmentally, and economically responsible. Focusing on making choices to improve quality of life and reduce negative impact on the environment, the authors introduce the concept of sustainable living. They identify three barriers to living sustainably in the United States: the time crunch, consumerism, and a disconnect from the spiritual and natural world. They present activities to help the reader identify personal values, and incorporate sustainable behaviors into everyday decision-making. Books and websites are offered as additional resources.

Keywords: Sustainable living, intelligent consumption, lifestyle changes, voluntary simplicity

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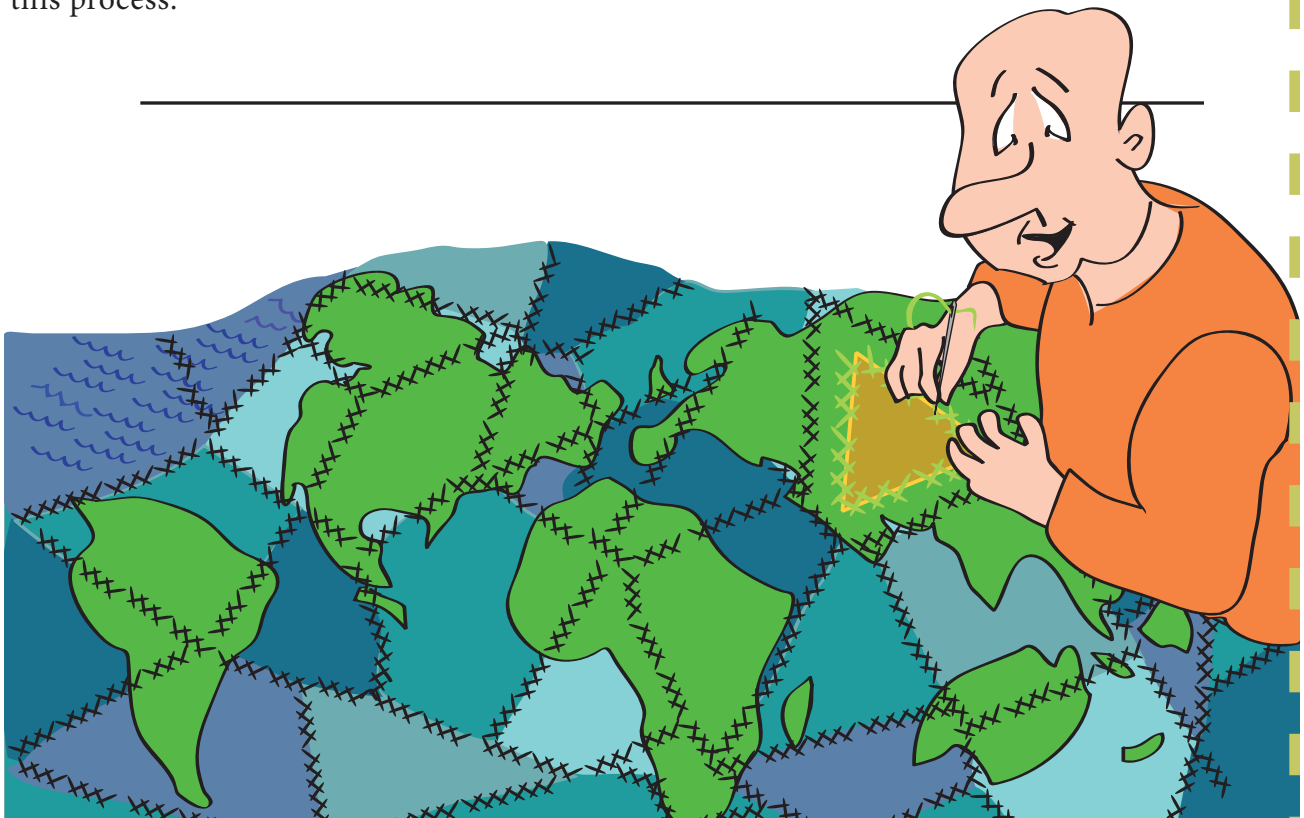
1 Sustainable Living

1.1 What is sustainable living?

Personally speaking... “Sustainable living is a lifestyle that is deeply satisfying, fulfilling, and appealing because it is socially, environmentally, and economically responsible.”

The decision to live sustainably is intensely personal. Some people make changes to save money; others make changes to allow more time to pursue other things in life. Climate change is one of the most compelling reasons to live more sustainably on our one and only planet. If we think of climate change as a large, sharp needle, then sustainability is the thread on that needle that must be woven into the fabric of our lives.

Whatever your reasons, the end result—a more sustainable life, community, and planet—is the same. Each and every reason is valid and contributes to the individuality of this process.



Sustainable living is about making informed choices, even small ones, that improve both the quality of our lives and that of the planet for future generations. However, there can be misconceptions about what a sustainable lifestyle looks like.

- *Can I have credit cards, shop at a mall, or go to the movies?*
- *Can I drive the kind of vehicle I want and still be living sustainably?*

Can I, Can I, Can I? **YES, you can!**

Sustainable living is an ongoing learning process based on our individual definitions of quality of life. It's about making decisions that make sense to us, given our needs and values. It's about living with intention. It's about being fully aware of the consequences of our decisions, both positive and negative. What's important to you may not be important to the person next to you. And that's okay. That is the beauty of sustainable living.

Are you thinking that to live sustainably, you'll have to give up the things you love most? It's not that at all. It does, however, require being more deliberate in making choices. Too often we operate on autopilot. We don't take the time to really think about our strongest values, our deepest beliefs, and the consequences of our actions, and to act accordingly. Instead, we buy things, and then wonder why we are in debt. We cram more and more obligations into our schedules, and wonder why we're stressed. We go about our daily lives and are startled that the community park has become a parking lot.

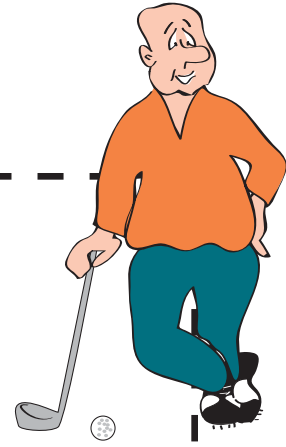
According to lifestyles coach Steve Pavlina, "The main benefit of knowing your values is that you will gain tremendous clarity and focus, but ultimately you must use that newfound clarity to make consistent decisions and take committed action."

"We can earn more money, improve our physical bodies, and repair broken relationships, but we cannot redo yesterday." Steve Pavlina

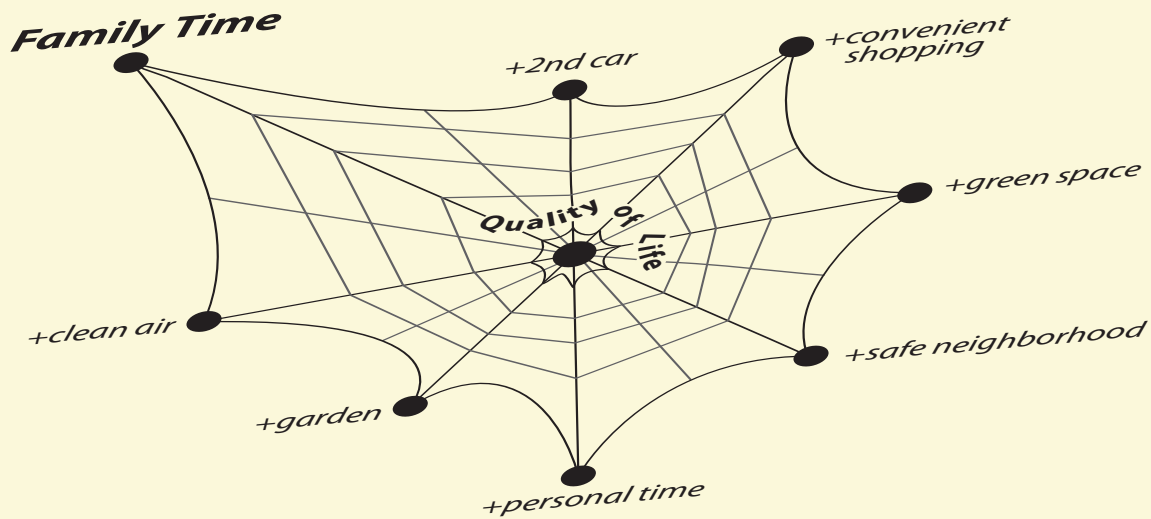
1.2 What really matters to you?

Take a moment to answer these questions:

1. Name three things you love to do.
2. Name three things you used to do.
3. Name three things you have never done but would like to try.
4. Name three reasons you don't do the nine things you just named.
5. What does this exercise tell you about your values?
And why is that important?



For most people, values are unconscious lifestyle priorities, achieved through trial and error. However, if we are at our happiest, least stressed, most effective and most motivated when we are living our personal values to the fullest, then it seems like a good idea to know what those values are.



Example

If you live in the city near your job but have a chance to move to the suburbs, should you move? If you consider the time involved in commuting, the environmental impact of adding another car to the traffic, and the likely increase in stress, you'd probably say no. Alternatively, you might say yes, if the suburban area was cleaner, offered garden space and room for your children to play safely, and had nearby shopping malls. Declining the opportunity would agree with values such as time with family, avoiding air pollution, and keeping stress low. Accepting it would agree with values like access to green space, family safety, and shopping convenience.

The reason to prioritize your values becomes clear when two values might give conflicting answers. If you value the garden space but don't want the commute by car, which one should you follow? The priorities you've established should help. If you've always wanted a garden and don't mind the commute because it gives you a chance to think or listen to music, then the garden is a higher priority. On the other hand, if you have no young children but want more time to spend with your family and friends, then time is likely to be a higher priority for you.

2 Barriers

When you did the “What Really Matters to You” exercise, what were the three reasons you identified as barriers to doing what you love?

The most *common barriers* for Americans are

- *The time crunch*
- *Too much “stuff”*
- *Our disconnection from nature and spirituality*

2.1 The time crunch

There’s not enough time! is our universal cry. What we really mean is, “I’m trying to jam too many things into the time I have!” The consequences of “time poverty” are serious: loss of family time, obesity, anxiety, stress, and even depression.



No matter who we are, how much money we make, or where we live, we have the same amount of time as everyone else on this planet: 60 minutes in each hour, 24 hours in each day, 365 days in each year, with a bonus day for leap year! It’s how we *choose* to spend that time that makes the difference, because our choices contribute to—or take away from—our quality of life.

Consider this

- **Americans work an average of 47.5 hours per week at their paying jobs.** *That’s approximately 163 hours more per year than in 1969.*
- **Vacations in the U.S. are vanishing.** *In 2006, 25 percent of American workers had no paid vacation at all, while 43 percent didn’t take a full week off.*
- **Forty percent of American workers report that their jobs are very or extremely stressful.**
- **Americans spend an average of 7 hours per week in their cars,** *primarily commuting and doing errands.*

2.11 How do you spend your time?

Do you often feel that time is slipping away? Did you list “not enough time” as a reason you don’t do the things you love? Let’s start by taking a look at how you spend your time, by charting your “typical” week. Make sure you chart no more than 168 hours! In addition to the activities listed, include things like chores, volunteer work, hobbies, TV, and exercise.

	<i>Hours</i>											
	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60
<i>sleep</i>												
<i>work</i>												
<i>travel</i>												
<i>meals</i>												

2.12 How would you prefer to spend your time?

Now think about how you would prefer to spend your time. Remember that you can add more columns, but there are still only 168 hours in a week!

	<i>Hours</i>											
	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60
<i>sleep</i>												
<i>work</i>												
<i>travel</i>												
<i>meals</i>												

In 1985, 61 percent of Americans said they were satisfied with their jobs. Now fewer than half say they are satisfied.

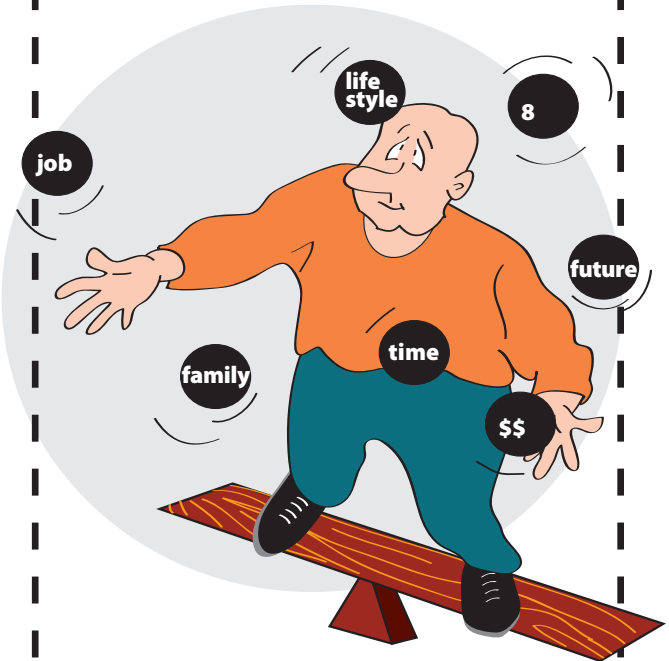
Last, but most importantly, what is the first thing you'll do, starting today, to move closer to living your perfect week? It doesn't have to be big. Baby steps are just fine.

Write down your ideas— even if they seem silly or unrealistic right now. Then set those priorities. And remember to start with something that you can do right now!

<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Priority</i>

Example

If getting a little exercise each day is important to you, but you work fulltime, can you leave home 15 minutes earlier, then walk the last 15 minutes of the trip to your workplace? That's 30 minutes of walking, five days a week!



There are certainly bigger steps you can consider too. Can you move closer to your workplace to reduce commuting time? Or can you change jobs to a workplace closer to home? Can you work from home part of the time?

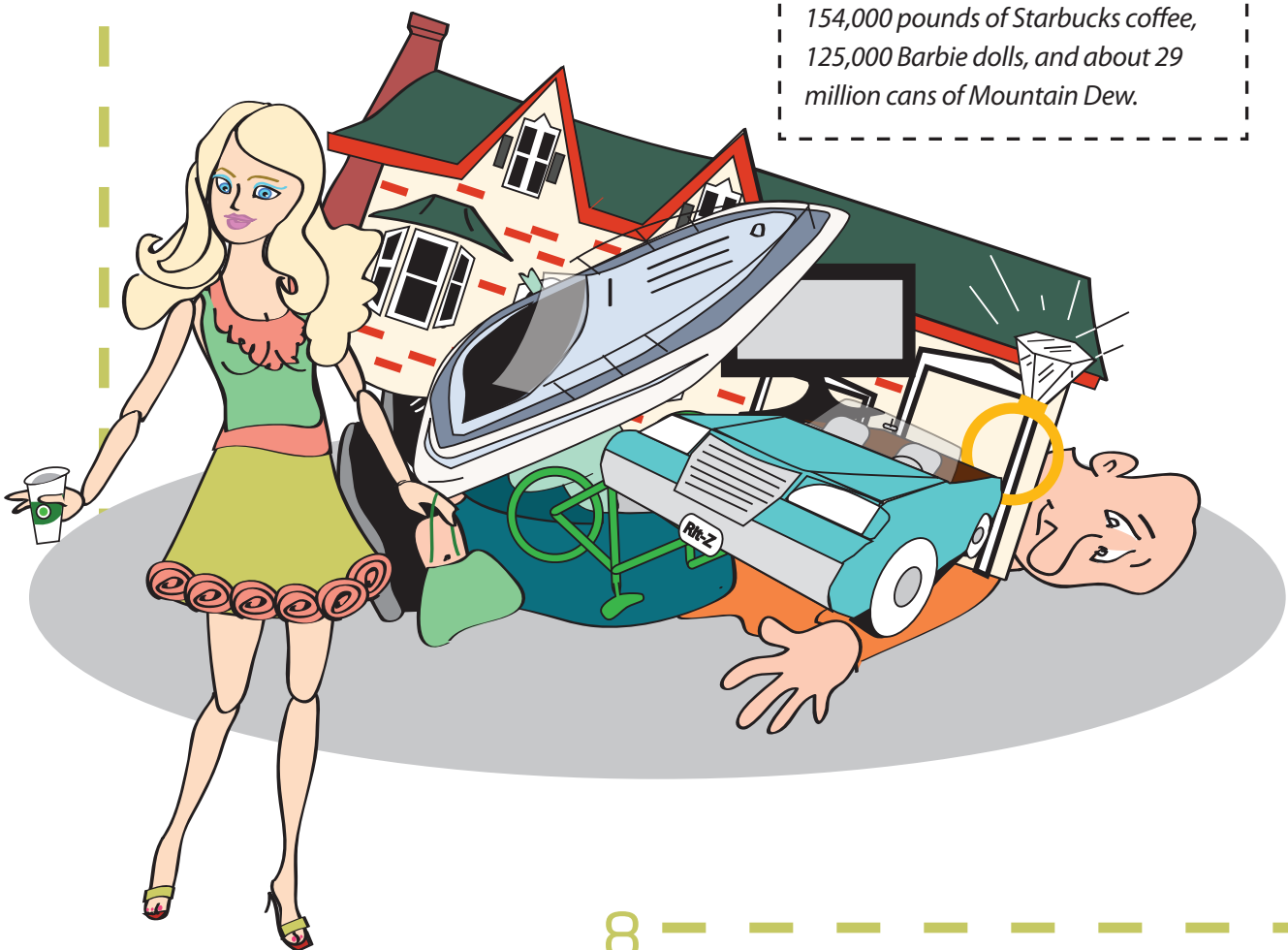
“Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car, and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it.” Ellen Goodman

2.2 Too much “stuff”

When we feel the time crunch, we tend to compensate in other ways. We purchase items to make us feel better or buy gifts for loved ones to make up for the lack of time spent together. Marketers have figured this out and use it to their advantage! We also buy things because we are encouraged to do so by commercials. (The average American is bombarded by approximately 3,000 per day, in one form or another, all urging us to buy.) We receive the strong message that to be happy, respected among our friends, and considered successful, we must acquire certain things or live a certain way.

American consumption far exceeds consumption in any other country. ***In fact, if everyone in the world lived an American lifestyle, it would require four Earths to sustain that level of consumption.*** Harvard economist Juliet Schor has written that it's difficult to make an ethical argument that people in the world's richest country need “more” when the disparity of the world's resource use is so vast and when strong evidence exists that we are already consuming beyond the capacity of the earth to provide. Yet, it seems as if there is always some new “status” product and pressure to acquire it, often on credit, whether we truly need it or not. The associated stress, pressure on resources, and absence of real satisfaction make such behavior unsustainable, but it is considered “normal” in our society.

Every day U.S. consumers purchase 154,000 pounds of Starbucks coffee, 125,000 Barbie dolls, and about 29 million cans of Mountain Dew.



2.21 What belongings are important to you?

Picture your favorite room in your home:

- If there was a fire, what items would you want to save?
- What items would be most helpful in an emergency?
- What items bring you great pleasure or truly make your life easier?
- What about all the other items in the room? Why do you have them?

Consider this

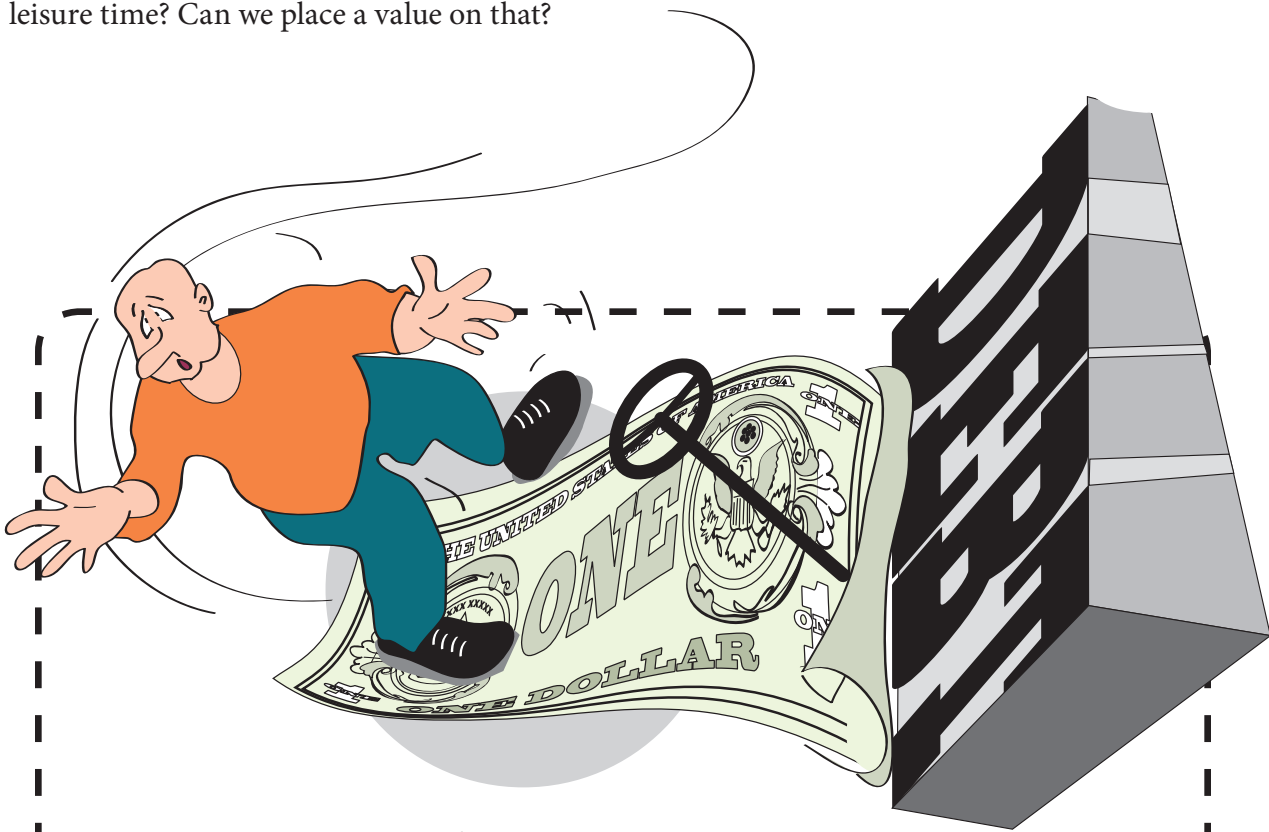
- **The average American family has 9,918 pounds of belongings**, according to the American Moving and Storage Association.
- **The self storage industry is one of the fastest growing new business sectors.** One in 10 American households rents a storage locker.
- **In 1950, the average American house size was 983 square feet.** In 2005, it was 2,414 square feet.
- **Everyone knows the three R's: Reduce, reuse, and recycle.** Try adding two more: Repair. Can you fix it? And finally, the most important: Refuse! Refuse to take something you don't need or want. Then you won't have to reduce, reuse, repair, or recycle it!
- **About 43 percent of American families spend more than they earn each year.**

2.22 How many hours of my life is it worth?

We rarely examine the relationship between the number of hours we work, the amount of leisure time we have, and the amount of money—and time—we spend on various activities.

Let's start with money itself and what it means to us. Do we think of it as security? As a burden or responsibility? Does it make us happy or stressed? Do we think we never have enough? Is it a necessary evil, or does it provide us with freedom or joy? The answer is that it's sometimes all of these things; our perceptions vary over time.

Although we wish for jobs that are fulfilling and enjoyable, in large part, all of us work to earn money to support ourselves and our families. However, how often do we truly think about the ways we're spending our incomes now, and the ways we'd like to spend our savings in the future? Are we making and saving money so that we can free up our time down the road? What about our current leisure time? Can we place a value on that?



According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010, the average American earned about \$39,880 before taxes, and spent about \$34,471. That means Americans save very little of what they earn and end up paying on credit for much of what they buy.

Let's take a closer look at some of these questions about money and time...

Have you ever determined your “real” hourly wage? That is, your wage after you factor in taxes and all other work-related expenses. Here’s an example, with space for you to do your own calculation.

Example		Your turn
Actual hourly wage	\$15.00/hr (\$31,200/yr)	
- Taxes	-\$3.50/hr (\$7,280/yr)	
- Child care	-\$2.50/hr (\$5,200/yr)	
- Food for work	-\$0.50/hr (\$1,040/yr)	
- Work-related clothing	-\$0.25/hr (\$520/yr)	
- Vehicle or commuting	-\$1.25/hr (\$2,600/yr)	
- Other?		
= Real hourly wage or “life hours”	= \$7.00/hr (\$14,560/yr)	

So, what does the real hourly wage tell us? In a nutshell, it allows us to better understand the net benefits we receive from our job or jobs. How much time do we truly spend working? What’s the monetary value of all our work-related benefits, and how much of our own money are we spending to work at this particular job?

The next time you make a purchase, think of the number of “life hours” you need to exchange to buy that item. Ask yourself:

Is it worth it? *Do I really need it?*

And remember... if you purchase something on credit, you have purchased that item with life hours you haven’t yet lived! On the flip side... it’s important to keep in mind that when we save money for the future, we’re also saving life hours: that’s time we won’t have to work to use that money!

2.3 Reconnecting with nature & spirituality

Because of the time crunch and our consumerism, most of us have only limited contact with the natural world around us. Many adults spend the equivalent of one day a week either commuting or watching TV, plus another 40 or more hours at paid work. Americans spend almost 90 percent of our time indoors.

2.31 Why is contact with nature important?

We all depend on products and services from the natural world. Our society demands more and more of these products and services from an ever-shrinking natural land base.

We all consume resources, but most of us have no direct role in producing or protecting our food, water, air, and other natural resources. In fact, few of us connect our resource consumption—from pumping gas to eating carrots—to what must be done somewhere on the land to make it possible. And, it's difficult to care about something if we know little about it and don't see the role it plays in our everyday life.

We must reconnect with the natural world if we expect it to continue to provide the benefits and services on which we depend.

2.311 Nature and Kids

Lack of connection with nature is a particular problem with our children. Electronic devices and games, coupled with a dramatic increase in parental concern over safety, mean that children rarely come in contact with nature. There is increasing evidence that for our children, lack of time in the outdoors can have a significant effect on their health, self-esteem, and academic success.

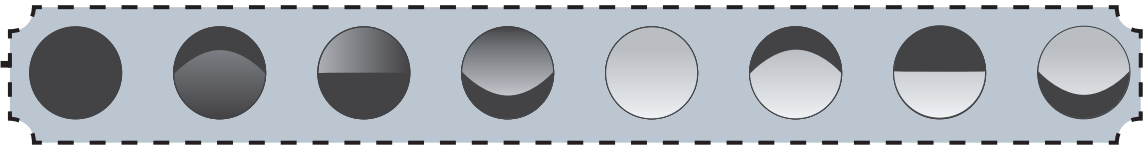


In his 2005 book “Last Child in the Woods” author Richard Louv coined the term “Nature Deficit Disorder,” referring to the consequences of a life that lacks time in nature. According to Louv, in a typical week, only six percent of children age nine to thirteen play outside on their own. (He differentiates between unstructured playtime and sports, saying it is the unstructured playtime that has seen such a significant decline and that is so important for children.)

2.312 Spirituality

For many people, spirituality and contact with the natural world are tightly interwoven. More conscious, direct encounters with nature can develop our sense of the sacred and deeply affect our lifestyle choices. Sustainable living is compatible with spirituality and many cultural and religious traditions.

- What do you do that connects you with your spirituality?
- What does your spiritual belief system say about how the planet is to be treated?



- What do you do that brings you in contact with the earth?
- When was the last time you were deeply moved by something you observed in nature?
- When was the last time you touched a tree?
- Do you know what phase the moon is in now?

2.32 Imagine a world holiday

One fun way to look at how we value nature and spirituality is to create a World Holiday for *everyone* on this planet. Think about this imaginary celebration.

- Who and what would it honor?
- Where would you go?
- When would it be held?
- What would you do?
- What sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings would it include?



Describe your holiday, including as many details as possible. Highlight words and phrases that are most important to you – these are your personal values.

3 Striking a balance

3.1 There is a different way

Stress results when we act in ways that are contrary to our values—when the time crunch, too much “stuff,” and a disconnection from nature and spirituality take the place of what’s really important to us.

Americans have a set of values that characterize who we are as a society. These values delineate our perception of good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. They underlie our beliefs about what is true and what is not. In sustainability issues, these values fall into three basic categories: societal, economic, and environmental.

3.11 Describing terms

“*Social sustainability*” has to do with developing a sense of equity and fairness and the creation of vibrant community life. Social sustainability means paying attention to actions and systems in your community that:

- Support individuals, families, and groups
- Build community connections
- Encourage individuals and families to make healthy choices about food and exercise

“*Economic sustainability*” entails maintaining or increasing our standard of living without decreasing that of others. Economic sustainability is supported by systems and structures that:

- Support local businesses, farms, organizations
- Reduce transportation and packaging costs
- Reduce waste ... of materials, of time, of money

“*Environmental sustainability*” involves conserving and managing our ecosystems for future generations. Environmental sustainability is necessary to our continued existence on this planet. A healthy environment allows us to benefit from the many “ecosystem services” provided by the natural world, now and into the future. The goal is to be able to meet our needs for natural resources and ecosystem services without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Environmental sustainability means we will have:

- Clean air and water
- Healthy soil that provides healthy food
- Natural resources for our homes, businesses, and industries

3.12 What do you value?

1. Think of the three most important things you would like to accomplish in your life. Consider these your life goals.
2. Now let's say you have only 6 months to live. How would you choose to spend this remaining time?
3. Do your lists match? Of all the activities you thought about, which two or three are the most important? Do they align with your life goals? Do they align with your responses to earlier questions about things you love to do?

Daily Times Want Ad

Lost, No Reward Lost, yesterday, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered for they are gone forever.

—*Unknown*

4 How to get there

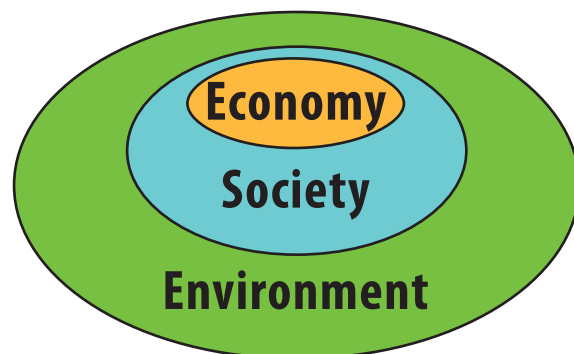
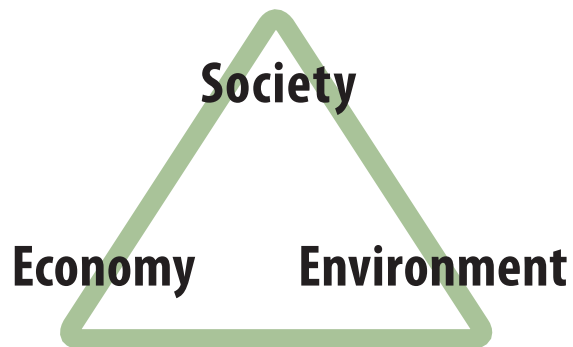
After you've identified what's most important to you—what you value—you can make your decisions based on these values. If you do this, you will be living intentionally, fully aware of the impacts of your decisions. For example, if spending more time with your family is extremely important to you, then your major decisions, such as the type of job you have or what you choose to spend money on, can be evaluated against that value.

Sustainability is achieved when there's a relatively equal balance among our social, environmental, and economic values. This is the "triple win." It's simple, yet marvelously complex.

4.1 Sustainability triangle & nested model

The sustainability triangle conveniently reminds us of the three factors – environmental, economic, and social. For our personal decision-making, it works the best.

Keep in mind another image, one that is more accurate from a biological perspective. In this "nested model" scenario, our economy is a small part of our society, and our society is a small part of our environment.



Example

Locally produced food, harvested at the right time, has a longer shelf life, can be more nutritious, and tastes great. These are economic and social values.

Purchasing food at a farmers' market provides the opportunity to meet local farmers. You can provide input on how your food is produced, thus addressing social and environmental values.

Appropriate farming practices can conserve soils, protect watersheds, and improve wildlife habitat, all of which address environmental values.

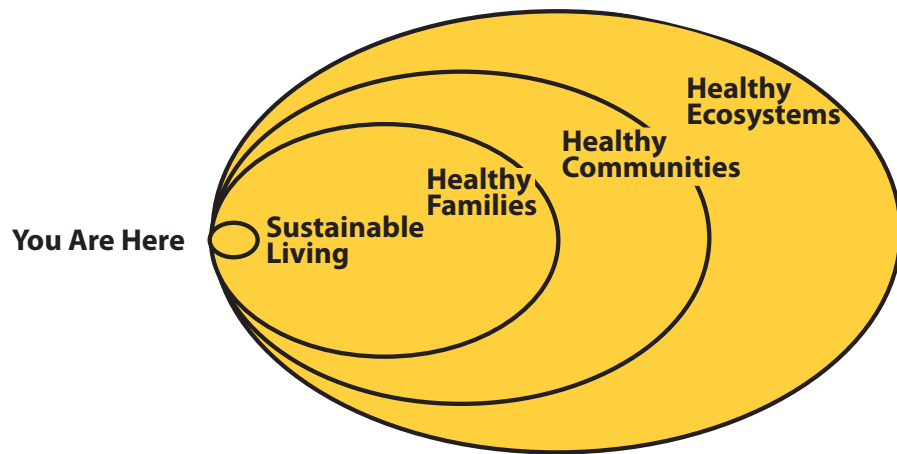
Buying food that is produced locally reduces the amount of transportation needed. This can mean lower food costs and fewer greenhouse gases, addressing both economic and environmental values.

Rural areas provide access to open space and recreational areas for both residents and tourists, addressing economic, environmental, and social values.



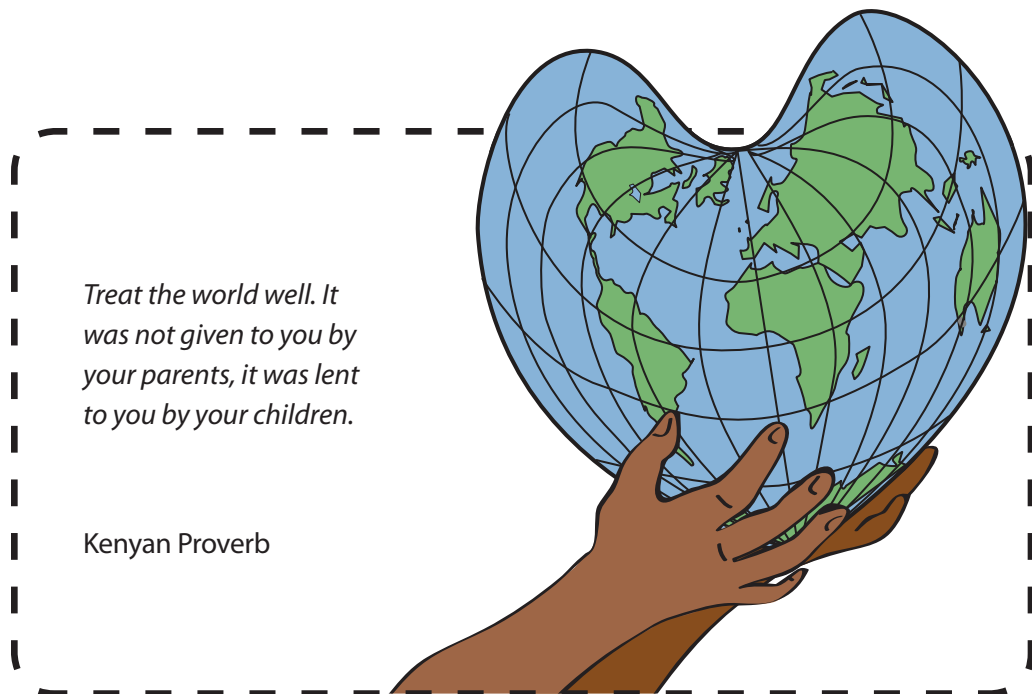
This is one example of the “triple win.” Other potential benefits of living sustainably include:

- Spending less money
- Saving more money
- Experiencing a better quality of life
- Having improved health
- Strengthening communities
- Building a more just world
- Creating deeper connections among individuals, communities, and nature
- Minimizing climate change impacts



4.2 Individual action

Sometimes we think we are too small to make a difference in this big world. Our actions seem insignificant in comparison to global issues such as climate change and population growth. However, the reality is that action on an individual level is **exactly** how big changes are made. Without individual and family sustainability, there's no community sustainability. And without community sustainability, there's no global sustainability. In fact, earth-wide change is absolutely impossible without individual change.



It really *does* come down to you and me.

What's your first step? Create an action plan!

4.3 Personal action plan

My Personal Action Plan

To enhance the quality of my life and to benefit the environment, I pledge that

• In the next week ***I will:***

• In the next month ***I will:***

• In the next year ***I will:***

Signature: _____ Date: _____

5 Resources

Local libraries and the Internet have many excellent resources. Here are a few to get you started.

Books

Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic, by John de Graaf, David Wann, Thomas Naylor, Vicki Robin (2005). ISBN 1-5767-199-6

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, by Barbara Kingsolver, Steven L. Hopp, and Camille Kingsolver (2007). ISBN 978-0-06-085255-9

Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World, by Linda Breen-Pierce (2000). ISBN 0-9672-0671-5

Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder, by Richard Louv (2005). ISBN 10:1-56512-391-3

Material World: A Global Family Portrait, by Peter Menzel, Charles Mann, and Paul Kennedy (1994). ISBN 0-871-564-300

Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping, by Judith Levine (2006). ISBN 0-7432-6935-7

The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Natural History of Four Meals, by Michael Pollan (2006). ISBN 1-59420-082-3

The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need, by Juliet Schor (1998). ISBN 0-06-097758-2

Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things, by John Ryan and Alan Durning (1997). ISBN 1-886093-04-0

Your Money or Your Life, by Joe Dominguez and Vicky Robin (1999). ISBN 0-670-84331-8

This handbook is a project of the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE), an initiative of the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (ANREP) <http://www.anrep.org/>. NNSLE improves quality of life and reduces environmental degradation by fostering new consumption patterns and sustainable lifestyles through Cooperative Extension Service programs at land-grant institutions.

To order booklets, contact viviane.simon-brown@oregonstate.edu at Oregon State University, or call 541-737-3197. Free downloadable PDFs are available in ScholarsArchive@OSU, <http://hdl.handle.net/1957/25843>.

Websites

The Center for the New American Dream
<http://newdream.org>

Living Green
<http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Personal Development for Smart People
www.stevepavlina.com/articles/list-of-values.htm

The Story of Stuff
<http://www.storyofstuff.com>

The Sustainable Living Project at OSU
<http://www.cof.orst.edu/cof/extended/sustain/>

Take a look at our sustainable living online course at:

<http://campus.extension.org/course/view.php?id=286>



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