

## Can one generation do what previous generations failed to do?

What can I do to help?

This is one of the most common questions that people ask me regarding the climate crisis.

In response, I often launch into a discussion of voting, activism, and things of that sort. However, many people are asking something different with this question. They want to know what they can do right now, today. Since human actions brought about the climate crisis, they want to know what sort of actions, personal actions, can help grind it to a halt.

In other words, they are asking how best to live their lives in order to avert climate catastrophe.

Although this is certainly a big question, I have a number of suggestions that can help make a start. Usually, I give five or so. Amazingly, these five things can cut your climate footprint in half or even more.

How is this a generational issue? I have noticed that people of my generation tend to respond very differently to these ideas than do my students and their generation.

This generational difference is more than a little important, as it reveals one of the truly daunting challenges that we face, which is the subject of this section.

First, let me quickly articulate five things that can Americans can do to dramatically reduce our personal climate footprints. Then we can move to the two very different generational responses to them. (Incidentally, you might find these interesting in their own right. In future sections, I will be taking each of them up individually in detail, along with a range of similar suggestions.)

1) Transportation. For the average American, owning and driving an automobile accounts for around a quarter of our individual climate footprints. Hence, if you trade your car for mass transit, a bike, or walking shoes, or some combination of these, you will have done the earth (and humanity and the rest of the life on the planet) a huge favor.

2) Housing can account for another quarter of your climate footprint, especially if you live in a large suburban or rural home. Move to a micro-apartment or certain co-housing communities, and you can greatly reduce another big chunk of your climate footprint.

Incidentally, the good news for both transportation and housing is that there is a simple way to approach both: move to a city. City living can mean dramatically less car use (in Manhattan, only one in five people commute to work by car) and generally smaller, more efficient housing. Many cities have made major commitments to mass transportation and bicycle use, Portland and Vancouver are excellent examples, as well as micro-apartments, such as New York's adAPT NYC program.

3) Waste less food and eat a largely plant-based diet. Food production is the second largest producer of greenhouse gases on the planet. Yet, we waste between 1/3 and 1/2 of the food that we produce. For Americans, much of this happens at the consumer level. Meat is another problem. Producing a pound of beef emits the same amount of greenhouse gases as producing 30 pounds of lentils, which are also a significant source of protein.

4) Have no more than one child per person. In other words, a couple should have either two, one, or zero children. When I was born (1959), there were just under 3 billion people on the planet. There are now 7.7 billion. By mid-century, it will be near 10 billion. The planet simply cannot sustain this many human beings. We need to reduce our global population.

5) Re-think your relationship to stuff. For example, the average American purchases over 60 items of clothing each year (not including socks, underwear, and other incidentals). Nearly everything we buy has a climate footprint. The solution: for a start, buy less, keep what you have longer, and consider preowned options from places like thrift stores.

(By the way, these last three suggestions – regarding food, population, and our appetite for stuff – are related. While it might seem that a swelling human population is the principal threat to our planet, we need to always keep in mind the relationship of population to consumption. As it is home to just 4% of the world’s population, the United States would seem to be pretty insignificant environmentally. However, as I noted in a previous section, 25% of all greenhouse gases that human beings have put in the atmosphere were done by this tiny population, in part because we have a voracious appetite for meat and all sorts of stuff. So, we can’t just think in terms of population: we must also consider the emissions of each person. In the future sections, we will be taking up this issue in detail.)

In any event, if you do these five simple things, you may well cut your climate footprint in half, perhaps even to a quarter or less of its present size.

Now, for the generational responses.

Over the years I have heard a range of different responses to these suggestions from my students and people of their generation. There are two in particular that I hear more than all others. They sound something like this:

1) “Is that it? Just doing these five simple things can make that big of a difference?” (It can!)

The second response often goes hand-in-hand with the first:

2) “Not only doesn’t this sound very bad, in many ways it actually sounds pretty exciting, even desirable.”

It’s true, moving to a place like Brooklyn or Vancouver (or a less expensive urban option) and living without a car can sound pretty appealing. Perhaps far more appealing than life in a cookie-cutter suburb, shuttling around in a minivan or SUV. Since many of my students have at least toyed with the idea of becoming largely vegetarian or vegan, switching to a mostly plant-based

diet may be enticing for a range of additional factors, such as the ethical treatment of animals. And very few of my students are thinking about having large families. Regarding stuff, many of them are frustrated with our consumer culture and perhaps already visit thrift shops or have been intrigued by movements like minimalism.

So, all this doesn't sound so bad and, in fact, can seem pretty desirable.

Although we are often told that adapting to the climate crisis will mean that we will need to make do with less and live drab lives of deprivation, this is not generally the perspective of my students – not by a long shot.

However, when I list these five things to people of my own generation, the response is often quite different. As it turns out, I primarily hear two answers from them as well. They often sound something like this:

1) “That sounds positively horrible! I love my car, and the freedom that it gives me. I’ve worked hard all of life for my house, it is incredibly important to me. And I enjoy the fruits of my labor; all the things that I now deserve as a result of all that work. Instead, you want me to live in a tiny, cramped apartment or with a bunch of other people in co-housing, to get around by bus or on a bicycle, to eat lentils for dinner, and wear somebody’s used clothing? Could you possibly be serious?”

The second response is also pretty common:

2) “This is a direct assault on the American way of life. We should be able to live where we want to live, drive what we want to drive, eat what we want to eat, wear what we want to wear, buy what we want to buy, and, of course, have as many children as we please. What you are suggesting sounds like communism, totalitarianism, or something of the sort!”

To these folks, the changes that I outline not only suggest a decidedly unpleasant and drab existence, it comes at the cost of what are actually posited as freedoms.

Throughout this series you’ll hear me cite statistics and quote papers, but let me be clear, what I am relating here is my personal experience. And it is admittedly skewed. My students are a select group. The majority of them are from California, a very progressive state, or are progressive thinking international students, they will soon to be college educated, and they are likely more than a little drawn to environmental issues, otherwise they wouldn’t be taking my classes. In contrast, every now and again I run into members of their generation who hold very different views than I am relating here. I once had a student tell me that he “wanted everything that my parents had – and a whole lot more. I want it all!”

Nonetheless, experience has taught me that the generational divide that I am outlining here is real. And, as far as I am concerned, more than a little worrisome, as it suggests that the generation currently controlling our planet has been crafting and settling into a way of life for decades now that is, quite simply, an environmental nightmare. What’s more, my generation likes it – and often recoil from change almost instinctively. As my generation has

shaped our modern world more than any other, many in this generation are actually proud of what was accomplished – and seemingly comfortable with it.

While it may seem that my generation simply inherited its behavior and practices from previous generations (and in some sense we did), we significantly innovated and often outrageously supersized them in a way that was disastrous for the planet. Take housing, for example.

In 1950, shortly before I was born, the average size of an American house was just under 1000 square feet. Today, the average size is over 2500 square feet – more than two and a half times larger, even though American families are now considerably smaller. And of course, as with so many things American, bigger is often perceived as better. Hence, if you can afford it, the ideal home is often much larger. One in five new houses in the US. is now, in fact, over 3000 square feet in size. One in ten is a McMansion, at over 4000 square feet.

In contrast, a traditional Japanese home, which housed families of four or more, was one tenth that size at 400 square feet.

Housing is just one example of how American lifestyle has grown more and more environmentally disastrous during my lifetime.

The light at the end of the tunnel is, as far as I am concerned, the generations that will supplant us.

Had my generation prepared the way, you would be faced with a far less daunting challenge. For example, if we had already written cars, big houses, meat, and the love of all sorts of stupid stuff out of your lives, mitigating this crisis would be far easier. And not just with respect to these particular issues, as this would have made clear that we can indeed change our lives and lifestyles. In a general way, it would have underscored to this new generation coming on the scene that the way of life that we are handed at birth can be changed at any time.

In short, our example would have made clear to you that it is possible to effectively make sweeping and profound cultural changes. That would have been a lesson of inestimable value. Sadly, it is one that my generation never learned. Hence, we could not, did not, teach it to you.

What's to be done now? If you hope to effectively mitigate our climate crisis, you need to embrace sweeping change. Throughout this series, we will consider specific ways of doing just that.

In the next section, I want to address the question of what my generation knew about the climate crisis and when we knew it. Although interesting in its own right, this is an important issue to take up, as understanding why my generation failed to act on what we clearly knew was an impending environmental catastrophe on a global scale can hopefully help keep your generation from making the same horrific mistake.