



## Light green is the new black. Or the new definition of environmentalism.

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The New York Times style section today has an article called "[Greening Up with the Joneses](#)", about lifestyle choices that people are making based on their desires to consume less energy. In some cases, these choices may revolve around people's cars, or it may have to do with the kinds of appliances they buy. The underlying theme of this article is that today's middle class isn't necessarily going all out in their environmentalism, but they are making some choices that reflect their conscience. The NYT is calling these people "light greens":

The trick, Mr. Brotherton said, was not to give up nice things, but to buy nice things that were ecologically sound. "I don't even pretend to be a hard-core environmentalist," Mr. Brotherton explained. "But I do aspire to be a 'light green' kind of guy -- one who thinks carefully about the choices I make as a consumer and tries to tread as lightly on the planet as possible, within my chosen lifestyle."

In other words, "light greens" are people who live within the realm of today's society but try to cut down where they can. One woman near Washington DC who has an 11-mile commute decided not to sell her Toyota 4Runner, but rather carpool with a friend, because, as she said, "I realized if I sold my S.U.V. it would just be bought by someone else who would almost certainly drive it a lot more than I would." Those Brothertons remodeled their kitchen, but did it using "'sustainably harvested' cork floors, recycled glass tiles, and sturdy countertops made -- to the surprise of their friends -- from recycled paper."

If these people are merely "light greens", then what is a true environmentalist in this country? Do you have to live in a log cabin with no running water and no electricity? In fact, the people featured in this article are the paragon of [treehuggers](#), if the new definition of treehuggers is defined by the lifestyle website that gets an awful lot of hits these days.

They even have Carl Pope weigh in:

Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, said that if the buzzword for traditional environmentalists is conservation, for the newest converts -- the light greens -- it's efficiency. "It's about getting better results from the same behavior," Mr. Pope said. So while these newly minted environmentalists are not overhauling their lives, many are trying to edit them.

Now, I have never met Mr. Pope, but my guess is that his home in Berkeley, CA has running water and electricity, and all of those modern amenities like a refrigerator, microwave, internet, water heater, and so on. He may even drive a car. Even if every one of his appliances is the most EnergyStar efficient that he could find, doesn't this still fit into the "light green" rubric rather than "hard-core environmentalist"?

Still, what Mr. Pope says should be addressed within the context of the article. He makes a distinction between "conservation" and "efficiency", and perhaps the appropriate reflection of "light green" is people like the Brothertons, who still have their nice remodeled kitchen but who did it using sustainable materials. Perhaps that's the right distinction to make, but my interpretation of the article is that the author is conflating the Brothertons with the woman who stopped using air conditioning in her home altogether, or the guy who lives in an apartment in downtown Charlotte, NC and drives a Vespa. The latter group of people are choosing to conserve, and if more people took these medium-sized actions, we'd be in a better place environmentally.

If you take this article to the extreme, The New York Times sets up an unfair implication. One interpretation is that if you don't eschew the amenities of modern life, you are not an environmentalist, you're only a watered-down "light green". To me, the point of environmentalism is not to return to a pre-industrial and pre-green revolution lifestyle. The point is to keep as many advances as we can while making them sustainable.\* If someday we're going to run out of affordable gasoline, the answer is not to get rid of your car and become a farmer. The answer is to resituate the human environment—someday for everyone—so that we can live close to work. The answer, as [peakguy said earlier this week](#), is to rezone residential areas so they're mixed use and amenities are within walking distance. No environmentalist is advocating getting rid of electricity, or our precious internet, or our refrigerators. The guy who chooses to live in a downtown Charlotte, NC is **green**, not a mere "light green".

Right now, there is a lot of low-hanging fruit. There are many ways to continue our lifestyles while getting rid of the extravagance and excess. No one *needs* to live in a 6000 sq ft house and drive a Hummer. In my opinion, the goal should be to lengthen the peak oil plateau as long as possible while we work to find alternatives, not cut ourselves off preemptorily while returning to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

\*As usual, I don't want to hear it about Jevons paradox. Whenever people bring that up, it seems to have the ring of "Well, why should we bother with conservation, and trying to convince others to conserve, since it just means that there'll be more for someone else to waste, and they will, too!" While a large scale education campaign promoting conservation may be a pipe dream, many people now argue that the only way to slow down the consumption of fossil fuels is personal and corporate conservation efforts. And that—at least the personal part—is what I'm writing about.



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