



Dispensing with the hogwash

Posted by [Yankee](#) on August 19, 2005 - 8:35pm

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

Thought I'd help you all get your weekend started. Try this one on for size.

I have heard it said many times that it's not worth conserving oil, gas, water—you name it—because one person's conservation frees up the resource for Hummer Howard to use it. Witness this exchange from a [recent comment thread](#):

Roger: I think the only way is to change your own life-style and start making an example yourself. Me, I'm changing it right now. My car uses Natural gas and i drive as little as possible, only for work (I'm an IT-manager). I have wood-stove installed in my house and I am storing a over 3 years supply of wood in my garden (yes, hand sown and chopped by myself). I've installed only 4 watt special light bulbs in my house.
...(etc deleted)

Reno: unfortunately Roger, for every savings you make, someone else is wasting your effort, just as Congressman Bartlett refers to in his Peak Oil speeches.. Its will take the effort of EVERYONE before any real results are realized on a national level. But I do applaud your effort.. I actually walked to the grocery store instead of driving the other day...

No offense to our wonderful commenters, but please. This is such a load of hogwash. Let's see if I can explain why.

It's true that one person's consumption is a drop in the bucket. So on one hand, it may be accurate to for someone to use it as an excuse not to conserve if no one else is (please note that I am NOT accusing reno of that). But the flip side of that coin is that if a single person's usage is relatively insignificant, then you aren't really providing much for Hummer Howard to guzzle up in your absence.

Given that, then, there are reasons why a single person's conservation efforts may ultimately affect many people.

1. If you do it, you can talk about it. Roger's neighbors clearly see him stocking 3 years worth of wood in his backyard, and may have asked him what he's doing. Visible actions especially make an impact, and can be a conversation starter that allows you to talk to people about the relevant issues.

Another case in point: The other day, my neighbor saw us taking the compost up to the drop-off location. We chatted about it briefly. A few days later, we found a letter under our

door. The building's tenant's association is starting a newsletter, and my neighbor wants us to write a short article about composting. Now we'll reach nearly a thousand people, all because my neighbor saw me with a bag of reeking organic waste.

2. You're doing the right thing. Does it really make sense to say, "Well no one else is doing it, so why should I?" Or, "If I don't use it, someone else will." This is merely a cop out, and one that's inconsistent with your beliefs. While you may not have the space or the land to plant a garden and dig a well, there are other little things you can do. Drive less. Carpool, or get a bike. Consolidate your errands. Carry cloth bags. Buy [eco-responsible cleansers](#). Help out at a community garden. Join a [CSA](#). If you start doing it now, while there are still plenty of other amenities in life to make you comfortable, you'll be better off later on when you're forced to take these changes on.
3. You are a role model for people who are close to you. If you have young children, you're raising them to do the right thing. They won't have to reprogram themselves, because you will have already instilled in them the right values. It will be second nature for them to look for minimally packaged goods, or even run their cars on biodiesel, should that be something you want to attempt.
4. How do we get reno's EVERYONE to start taking conservation seriously? Well, there has to be a first for everything, right? Why not you? And once you do, you have the moral high ground, and can start broadcasting your message however you best see fit. Find a nearby farm that will collect compost, and put up fliers in your area about it. Join a neighborhood association. Comment on blogs. Heck, start your own.

If it were up to me, I would ban any further mention of the idea that "if you don't use it, someone else will" on this blog. Since none of us rule by fiat, however, I ask you to please refrain from voicing that sentiment around here so we can move on to the positive (again, no offense to reno, who is also to be commended for his own positive contribution).

Update [2005-8-20 8:53:43 by ianqui]: Some of you have taken my final paragraph here as trying to stifle debate. I would never mean to do that. As I wrote in [a comment below](#): "I just don't think it helps us—or the debate—to dwell helplessly on the idea that "if everyone doesn't change, no one will." You're absolutely right—we have to figure out ways to get people to change, and I like to think that this post was presenting an argument for why personal conservation efforts might be a catalyst within our communities." That was my intention here; I would never want to censor conversation on The Oil Drum.

Also, please see [my comment](#) on why I didn't use the term Jevons Paradox to describe what I wrote about in this post.



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