

Personal contribution to sustainability

The greatest long-term personal contribution that most people can make to sustainability is to refrain from having an unsustainable number of children, as explained in [making the case for smaller families](#).

Nevertheless, the world is already very crowded and many resources on which we depend are becoming increasingly scarce. Although Population Matters' main focus is on the effect of human numbers, we also recognise the need to start reducing human impact on the environment as widely and as soon as possible. This means that those of us already enjoying high standards of living – the

wealthy minority in developing countries and the majority of the population in the wealthier developed countries – need to take immediate action to reduce our 'footprint' on the planet.

The list below summarises a number of things that individuals can do. Some are simple and relatively painless, others are more difficult and require a greater level of commitment. The list is not intended to be exhaustive and many readers will be aware of more examples. If there is anything you think is particularly important that we have missed out, [please let us know](#).

Travel and leisure

- Plan journeys to use the most efficient means of travel and the optimum route
- Walk or cycle rather than drive short journeys
- Car share
- Go by train or bus for medium/longer journeys
(but note that empty buses or trains use more energy than a car, so provision of more public transport is not always the best long-term solution)
- Holiday nearer to home, to reduce demand for air travel in particular
- Work from home
(even one day per week worked from home reduces the environmental impact of commuting by 20%)
- Live nearer your workplace
- Use a more economical car
(but note that because a lot of resources and energy go into making cars, the lifecycle energy cost is not necessarily reduced by buying a new, more efficient car when an older one is still serviceable)
- Drive more slowly
(most cars are much more fuel efficient at 40-60mph than at 70mph)
- Choose pastimes/hobbies that don't require large amounts of fuel, electricity or material resources

Personal contribution to sustainability, contd.

At home

- Insulate the building to the best practicable standards
(in the UK high insulation standards for new buildings are specified in the building regulations but insulation of older buildings can often be improved. Sometimes this is prohibitively expensive, though upgrading loft insulation is usually cost effective.)
- Stop draughts, keep windows and doors closed during the heating season
(but ensure sufficient ventilation to avoid condensation)
- Turn off lights and appliances when not required
- Use low energy bulbs
(high efficiency bulbs typically use less than 20% of the electricity for an equivalent light output compared to old-style (incandescent) bulbs)
- Draw curtains or close shutters at night to reduce heat loss
(daytime heat gain during hot weather can be minimised in a similar manner)
- Set heating thermostats to the minimum comfortable temperature
(similarly, set air conditioning to the highest comfortable temperature in hot weather)
- Set heating system timers to operate only when the heat is required
- Use natural ventilation rather than air conditioning whenever possible
- Dress appropriately rather than heating the building more than necessary
(note that in climates such as in the UK, a small reduction in heating temperature results in a proportionally large reduction in heat demand)
- When cooking or making hot drinks, do not heat or boil more water than necessary
- Avoid unnecessarily deep or frequent baths
- Take showers as these generally use less water and heat than baths
(but power showers have a high flow-rate and may use more water than a bath if run for more than five or ten minutes)
- Use low water flush WCs
- Use water efficient techniques for garden watering
(plenty of tips can be found on the internet)
- Consider rainwater harvesting and grey water recycling
- Use renewable energy
(but check out the overall 'lifecycle' energy costs of the equipment, supply and transport of renewable fuel, etc)
- Compost organic waste
(check local regulations to avoid creating health hazards or other nuisances)
- Explain the importance of sustainability to your family and friends

Personal contribution to sustainability, contd.

Goods and food

- Reuse carrier bags and other containers rather than obtaining new ones
- Complain to retailers and manufacturers when goods are supplied with excessive amounts of packaging
- Insist that goods are properly labelled regarding origin, environmental standards, etc
(look for recognised and audited environmental assurance schemes; ask for carbon footprint information)
- Buy local wherever practicable
(look for 'food miles' information – but note that buying seasonal food may be better than buying local food out of season if it is energy-intensive to grow)
- Adopt a lower meat content diet
(there are environmental arguments for and against a vegetarian diet, but it is clear that a high meat content diet is less sustainable than a low meat one)
- Repair rather than replace items where possible
- When buying appliances that use water or energy, look for efficient models
(but note that the environmental cost of manufacturing an item may outweigh any reduction in the environmental impact when in use; also some efficient devices may have so much energy 'embedded' in their manufacture that overall it may be better to use a simpler model)

Governments

Individuals can lobby their representatives to persuade government to put measures in place that will improve sustainability. Such measures include:

- Financial incentives for individuals and organisations to reduce their environmental impact and penalties for those who don't
- Awareness campaigns to highlight the real environmental costs of things that people and companies do
- Legally binding regulations regarding environmental labelling
- Auditable environmental and energy efficiency standards
- Increased emphasis on sustainability in education
- Removal of environmentally perverse incentives
(both taxation and government benefits/grants, etc, sometimes have the perverse effect of encouraging environmentally unsustainable behaviour. This needs to be pointed out and corrected.)

Personal contribution to sustainability, contd.

At work

Individuals as well as employers can contribute to sustainable practice in the workplace. The best way to do so can be summarised very simply.

- Treat your environmental impact at work as you would do that at home
(in particular, treat your consumption of resources – water, heat, power, etc – as if you were paying for them yourself)
- Encourage your employer to invest in efficiency and support any workplace initiative to do so