

SUSTAINABLE LIVING

a companion guide for the video
Rethinking the American Dream



A small house
A large garden
A Few good Friends
And many good books

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What this package is all about

The video *Rethinking the American Dream* and this companion guide help us understand the impact our lifestyle has on ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world. This package is for anyone who teaches about sustainability issues as well as for those who want to examine their own quality of life. The goals of these educational materials are to:

- ▲ Raise awareness of Americans' highly consumptive lifestyles
- ▲ Identify alternative consumption patterns and their relative impacts on ourselves and our world
- ▲ Help individuals evaluate current lifestyles
- ▲ Suggest ways to implement desired lifestyle changes

The video briefly examines America's consumptive lifestyle, then focuses on choices that can improve our quality of life **and** reduce our negative impact on the environment. This companion guide contains information and short activities to help you create your personal version of living sustainably.

Both the video and the booklet can help you be thoughtful about quality of life choices and what's really important to you and your family.

You can watch the video first and then read this booklet, or do it the other way around. It's your choice.

Some background

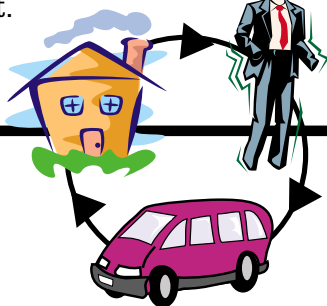
Did you know that . . .

- ✿ Voluntary simplicity is one of the top trends in America.
- ✿ More than 35 million people in the United States have taken steps to simplify their lives.
- ✿ Between 1990 and 1996, nearly 19 percent of adult Americans made a voluntary lifestyle change that entailed earning less money (not including regularly scheduled retirement). Eighty-five percent of them are happy about the change.
- ✿ More than two-thirds of Americans say they want more balance in their lives.

What is "normal"?

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



What is sustainable living?

Our definition is "A life that is deeply satisfying, fulfilling, and appealing—and at the same time, environmentally responsible."

To understand what sustainable living is, it helps to understand what it's not.

First of all, it's not about living in the woods, eating nuts and berries, and wearing tie-dyed clothes. It's for mainstream adults—typical Americans with two cars in their garage, one of which might be a sport utility vehicle. It's for people who ski, watch TV, hike, read, snow-mobile, go to movies, rollerblade, play video games, bowl, and camp. For people with mortgages and those who drop their kids off at child care. It's for people with credit cards and those who shop at malls. And for people who regularly drive up to fast food windows.

Second, sustainable living is not about never buying anything again. It **is** about making thoughtful decisions, considering the impacts of our consumer choices, and finding alternatives.

Third, sustainable living is not competitive. Individuals have different needs and values. Sustainable living is deeply personal, based on individual definitions of quality of life. For example, the quote on the front cover of this booklet might express your sentiments exactly—or it might not.

Fourth, sustainable living is not guilt-driven. It focuses not on what was done in the past but on what will be done in the future. It combines practical ideas—such as turning off lights—with intangibles such as lifestyle values and personal quality of life.

And finally, sustainable living is not “gloom and doom.” It does, however, put our individual actions into a global context. While it’s about taking positive steps at the individual and family level, the world we live in is an important consideration. Wackernagel and Rees, in *Our Ecological Footprint*, state, “It would require four Earths for everybody on the planet to live the lifestyle of North Americans.”

The road to sustainability

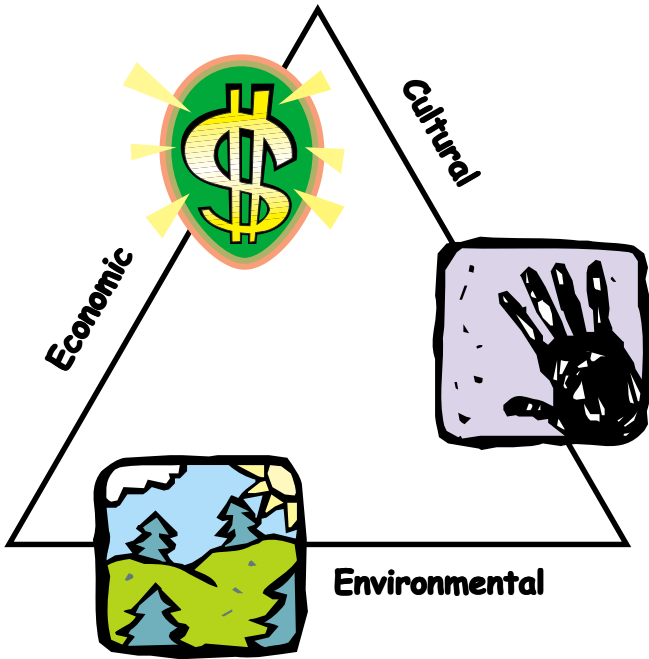
The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.

John Shaar, political scientist



The “sustainability triangle”

Americans have a set of values and beliefs—most nations do—that characterize who we are as a society. These values and beliefs fall into three basic, overlapping categories: cultural (sometimes called “societal”), economic, and environmental.



Here are some examples of how it works. Do any of these ring true to you?

- ▲ American *cultural* values might include “close family,” “good friends,” “connections to our community,” “religious freedom,” and “rights of the individual.”
- ▲ If you asked Americans what’s *economically* important to them, many would say “financial security,” “enough to live comfortably,” “a good job,” and “meaningful work.”
- ▲ *Environmentally*, American values could be “taking care of the land,” “being good stewards,” “being close to nature,” and of course “only you can prevent forest fires.”

Each person has his or her own list of values for each category. Later on in this booklet, you’ll have a chance to list your own. Then, you’ll have a model for what’s important in your life.

Notice that the sustainability triangle is equilateral—each side is equal. Balancing our economic, cultural, and environmental values is the whole idea of sustainable living.

Another view of the triangle

In business, this increasingly popular notion of three integrated sustainability goals sometimes is called the “triple bottom line”—increasing profits, improving the planet, and improving the lives of people.

What really matters to you?

In our hectic lives, it's easy to lose track of what's important. Try this exercise to remind yourself.

List three things you love to do.

List three things that sound fun.

List three things that sound fun, but you never would do yourself.

List three silly things you would like to try.

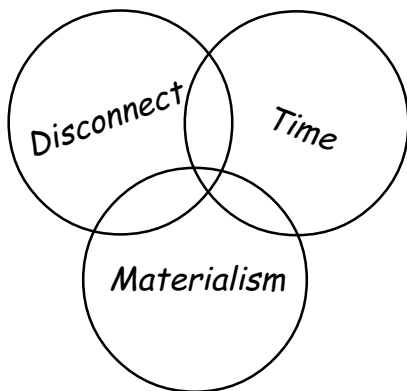
List three things you used to enjoy.

List three reasons why you don't do the 15 things listed above.

Barriers to sustainable living

As Americans, we face three major barriers to living sustainably:

- Time
- Disconnection from the natural and spiritual world
- Materialism



Time

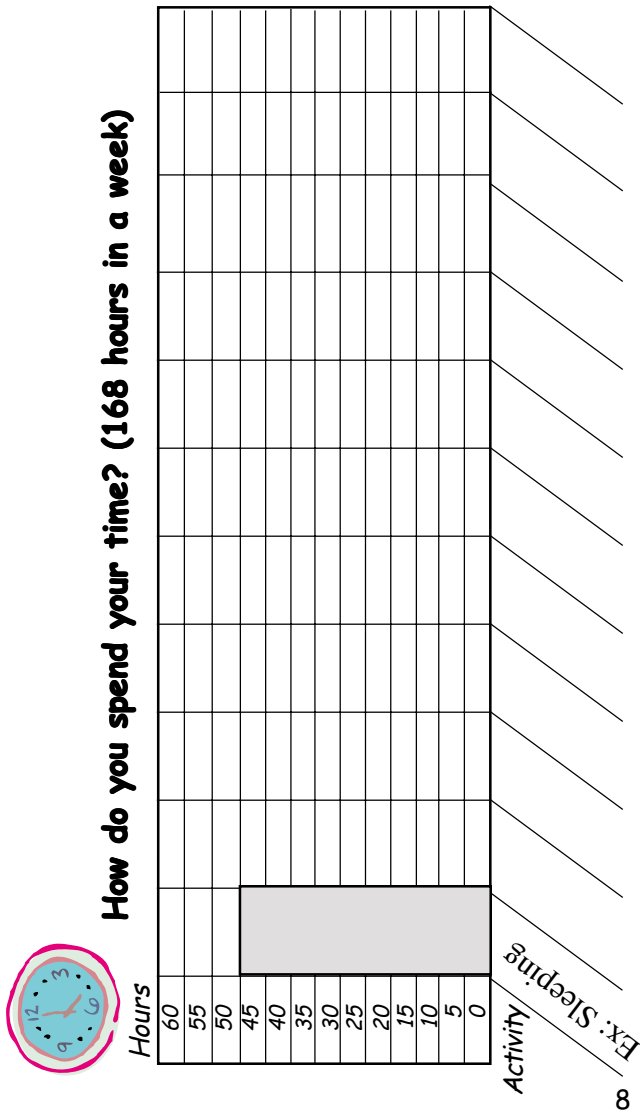
"There's not enough time!" is our universal cry. What we really mean is, "I'm trying to jam too many things into the time I have."

A major time-eater is paid work:

- Americans on average work 47.5 hours per week at their paying jobs, usually with 2 weeks of paid vacation.
- In 1989, the typical American worker was on the job approximately 163 hours more per year than in 1969—that's 20.3 more days.
- From 1967 to 1997, the number of workers putting in 50 or more hours a week jumped from 24 percent to 37 percent.
- Americans have now surpassed the Japanese to become the long-hours champions of the advanced industrial world.
- Meanwhile, France, Spain, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Sweden, and Switzerland have formally adopted a 35-hour work week with an average of 5 weeks of paid vacation.

Where does the time go?

It often seems that time is slipping away from us. (On page 6, did you list "not enough time" as one of your reasons for not doing the things you enjoy?)



Remember: While you can add more columns, there still are only 168 hours in a week!



Create your perfect week (168 hours in a week)

[illegible]

Disconnection from the natural and spiritual world

Many Americans spend the equivalent of 1 day out of every week either commuting or watching TV, plus 40 or more hours at paid work. As a result,



it's easy to become disconnected to the natural world. We watch nature shows on the Discovery Channel rather than exploring a nearby forest, beach, or desert. We use climbing walls in gyms rather than climbing real rocks. We walk on treadmills rather than along a river. Ask yourself:

- ★ What phase is the moon in?
- ★ When was the last time I went barefoot outdoors?
- ★ Do I ever take time to "smell the roses"?
- ★ When was the last time I sat quietly and did nothing but observe nature?

Our spiritual connections to our world deeply affect our lifestyle choices. Sustainable living is compatible with many spiritual traditions—Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, Judaism, and indigenous religions and philosophies. But fostering a more conscious, direct encounter with the earth—developing a sense of the sacred—seems difficult for Americans. Talking about spirituality makes us as uncomfortable as announcing how much income tax we paid this year!

However, natural and spiritual values can come to the surface painlessly in the following thought-provoking activity.

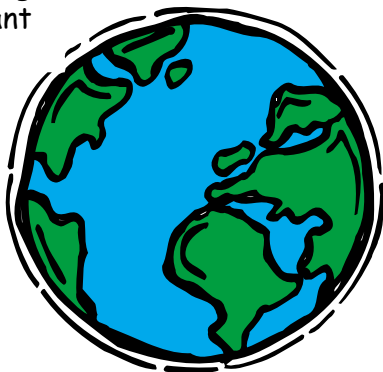
Imagine a **world holiday** (remember "holiday" started out as "holy day")—a special day of celebration by everyone on this planet.

- ★ Who and/or what would it honor?
- ★ How would it work?
- ★ What would it sound, smell, taste, and feel like?
- ★ What would be its key components?
- ★ When would it be?

Write down your descriptions, making them as detailed as possible. Then, highlight the words and phrases most important to you.

Now, draw a blank Sustainability triangle (like the one on page 4). Look again at the highlighted words in your holiday description. You'll find that many of them are cultural and environmental values you believe in. Put them into your sustainability triangle. Let them sit for awhile. As you think of others, jot them down. You're on your way to identifying what's really important to you.





And since you've created a new holiday, how about inviting your family and friends to its first celebration?



Materialism

We Americans are confused. We belong to the world's most materialistic society, yet polls indicate our deepest aspirations are nonmaterial. Juliet Schor, in *The Overspent American*, says we are accomplished at rationalizing ("I'll buy the bigger vehicle so my family will be safe") and at ratcheting up (increasing the number of things we "need"). Fifty-nine percent of the people she polled consider television a necessity, and seventeen percent said cable TV is a necessity. What do you think the percentage would be if she had asked about the remote control?

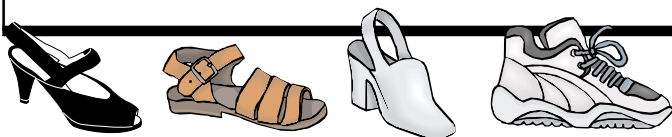
Ask yourself:

-  How many pairs of footwear do I own? (Americans average 23!)
-  Do I feel comfortable borrowing things from my neighbors? Why or why not?
-  What would I buy "second-hand"? What would I never buy "second-hand"?
-  What's the best birthday present I ever received?

Too much stuff?

The median size of a new house in the U.S. increased from 1,385 sq ft in 1970 to 1,950 sq ft in 1996. (*U.S. Bureau of the Census*)

The average American family has 7,780 pounds of belongings. (*American Moving and Storage Association*)



Needs and wants

There are a lot of things we want in life but don't really need. This activity will help you distinguish between the two.

Think about your favorite room in your house:

- 🏠 What items in this room would help you survive in an emergency—for example, a power outage that lasted several days?
- 🏠 What items in the room bring you great pleasure?
- 🏠 What items genuinely make your life easier?
- 🏠 What items don't fit any of the above? Why do you have them? What are you going to do about it?



The fourth "R"

Everyone knows the three R's: Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Add a fourth one: Refuse! Refuse to take something you don't need or want. Then you won't have to reduce, reuse, or recycle it.

Bringing it all together

This is almost the end of this booklet, but hopefully, it's just the beginning for you. Congratulations for taking the time to view the video, read this booklet, and try the activities. What happens next?

Using this booklet and the video, you have begun to examine what quality of life means to you. Now, it's time to select the positive changes you wish to make. The video offers suggestions in several categories:

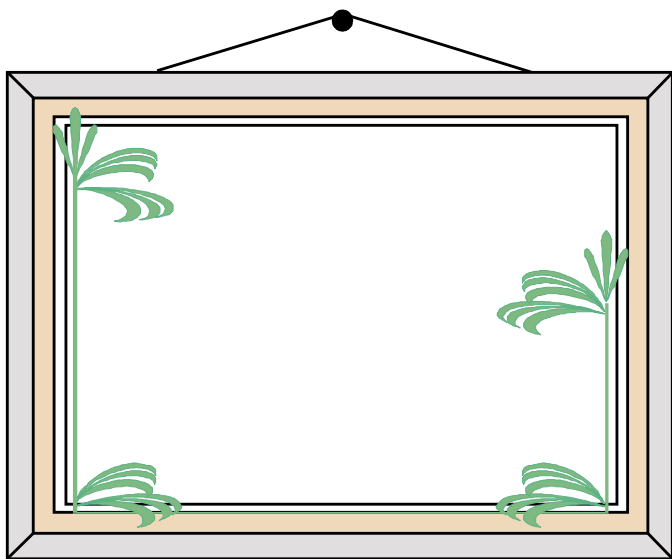
- Connect with the world.
- Practice and encourage family planning.
- Reduce spending by 20 percent.
- Be an earth-friendly consumer.
- Become an earth steward.
- Enhance personal health.
- Build relationships, friendships, and community.
- Make one small, positive change per week.
- Learn more about sustainable living.
- Multiply individual efforts with actions in your home, workplace, and community.

Or you might want to explore one particular aspect a bit further. To help you get started, some resources are listed on page 16.

What does sustainability mean to you?

The front of this booklet reflects one person's vision of true quality of life—a small house, a large garden, a few good friends, and many good books.

If you hung a plaque on your wall, reflecting the things most important to you, what would it say?



Resources

There are many excellent resources in your local library and on the Web. Here are a few to get you started:

The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists, by Michael Brower and Warren Leon (1999). ISBN 0-609-80281-X

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

Sharing the Work, Sparing the Planet: Work Time, Consumption and Ecology, by Anders Hayden (1999). ISBN 1-896357-28-8

The Simple Living Guide: A Sourcebook for Less Stressful, More Joyful Living, by Janet Luhrs (1997). ISBN 0-553-06796-6

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

Your Money or Your Life, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (1992). ISBN 0-14-016715-3

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

The New Road Map Foundation
<http://www.newroadmap.org>

Northwest Earth Institute
<http://www.nwei.org>

The Simple Living Network
<http://www.slnet@slnet.com>

The Sustainable Living Project at OSU
<http://osu.orst.edu/extension/sustainableliving>

Order form

_____copies of *Rethinking the American Dream*
videotape, VTP 030 (\$24.95 each). Each videotape
includes one copy of *Sustainable Living*, EM 8790.

_____copies of *Sustainable Living*, EM 8790
(\$1.50 each)

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