

How Did We Green our Carbon Footprint?



-by Sue Wall Oleyer, Green Sanctuary Committee member

George and I thought we were pretty green until we met the California Cool Calculator!¹ It turned out we're warmer than we thought and not as green as we'd like to be. But the good news is that we learned a lot and the calculator empowered us to make some lifestyle changes that are healthier for us and the whole planet. First we got an accurate snapshot of the impact of our energy usage in terms of travel, home, food and goods/services. Then we learned what savings could be had in tons of CO2 and personal dollars by reducing our carbon footprint. Finally, the calculator offered us a list of possible actions ("pledges") with any upfront costs from which we could pick options.

We chose what was practical and doable for our household and found that making even small changes in our everyday activities adds up to a lot. We'd like to share some of these actions with you.

Transportation is a major contributor to the carbon problem and so we adopted some new behaviors: eco-driving (i.e. reducing speed and no quick starts and stops), ride sharing, combining trips for shopping, appointments, etc. and one very important rule: "Shut off engines! No unnecessary idling!"

When we're ready to replace a vehicle (we drive one hybrid now), we'll definitely opt for the most efficient one, hopefully an Electric Vehicle if it's practical by then.

¹ This is the Carbon Footprint Calculator that UCB is using to help us measure our CO2 emissions and make a pledge to reduce the size of our carbon footprint.

Shopping wise, we recently replaced an old printer with an energy savings model, and anticipate the replacement of some even older kitchen appliances with Energy Star models. In the home, we installed a programmable thermostat, raised the summer temperature setting to reduce AC usage and on less humid days, shut the AC off and open windows to get fresh air (we intend to make similar adjustments during the heating season). We switched to cold water washing for almost all laundry and limit electric dryer use by air drying as much as possible with outdoor and indoor clotheslines. Of all the changes, the biggest one by far is the adoption of a low carbon diet.

Simply replacing some meat, especially beef and dairy products with more plant-based foods (fruits and veggies, legumes, grains) results in a significant reduction in CO2 emissions due to the huge carbon footprint their production creates. We are also feeling and eating healthier (and losing weight), saving money and more plants on our plates inspired us to build a compost pile (less trash to the dump and more fertilizer for the garden).

Having recently moved to the Cape, we did the calculator in tandem with a FREE Cape Light Compact home energy audit. A no brainer! The audit details all recommended improvements by carbon footprint, savings, and, better yet, provides financial incentives which reduce costs by 75%. We had our basement crawlspace and attic insulated and sealed resulting in energy savings that pay off in 2 years and after that bonus savings. We also received valuable free services e.g. replacement of all incandescent bulbs with LED lighting. And audits can be repeated yearly to take advantage of further and new incentives.

Overall the calculator was a positive and fun experience! Now we're walking a bit lighter on the earth and it feels good to know we're making a difference, one step at a time. You can too. So, be COOL! Try out the calculator (it is on the UCB website) and take one or two actions that inspire you. Remember:

“Reduce, Re-use and Recycle.” Together we can, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the **change** that we wish to see in the world.”