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EcoConsumer

It's a good year for eco-resolutions

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

In 2006, the environment became hip.

Newsweek proclaimed "the New Greening of America" on its cover. Concerns about global warming gained urgency, spurred by Al Gore's film, "An Inconvenient Truth." Oprah did a show on global warming. Consumer choices multiplied for green products and services. Even Wal-Mart embraced "sustainability." The challenge for EcoConsumers in 2007: Build on these encouraging developments, and prove that environmental awareness is not just a passing fad. Consider making these EcoConsumer resolutions for the New Year:

Put the brakes on. Driving contributes to global warming far more than any other consumer activity. With all the creative alternatives now available — ride-sharing, Flexcar, new public-transit options, more resources for biking, better fuel-efficient cars and alternative fuels, to name a few — reducing the impact from cars no longer has to be a sacrifice. Instead, you may feel liberated, as you save money and reduce stress. If you drive to work alone every day, start out by pledging to get to work a different way at least once a month in 2007. If you have already reduced driving or have become more fuel-efficient, resolve to take it a step further this year.

Cool down. To show you take global warming seriously, make a resolution to go "carbon neutral" with some of your activities this year. Carbon dioxide is the major "greenhouse gas" that contributes to global warming. Being carbon neutral involves calculating the rough amount of carbon dioxide you produce from a specific activity — driving or taking an airplane flight, for instance — and then making a payment to offset the amount of greenhouse gases you produced.

As one example, on the Web site of the nonprofit organization Sustainable Travel International (www.carbonoffsets.org), you can calculate your emissions and then pay an amount that offsets those emissions with investments in alternative-energy projects in developing countries. Just don't use your "carbon neutrality" to justify wastefulness or excessive use of resources.

Secondhand, not second best. Buying certain products used instead of new may save you more money than any other environmental practice. For furniture and other items, explore the print and online classified listings or the King County Online Exchange (www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/exchange). To find used books, CDs or DVDs at under \$5 (including postage), try innovative barter exchanges, including www.zunafish.com and www.barterbee.com.

New year, less stuff. Buying less stuff, or buying products with fewer toxic materials, certainly does not have to make your life worse. In most cases, it will make it better.

You could think big: Move to a smaller, easier-to-maintain house, where you won't need as much stuff. Or you could start small with an individual purchase, such as a hand-crank radio. It's essential for your emergency kit, in addition to reducing waste and conserving resources by not using batteries. Crank it for 90 seconds, and listen to the radio for an hour. Mine came in handy last month, after the windstorm knocked out our power. You will find these radios online and at local stores, including Radio Shack and REI, for \$20 to \$50.

Help businesses do the right thing. Wield your consumer power by telling businesses you want them to take responsibility for their products and activities, from start to finish. Known as "product stewardship," this happens when a company uses fewer toxic materials or less packaging, for example, or provides a system so a product can easily be recycled or reused. Call or e-mail a business asking it to reduce excess packaging, or use less-toxic materials.

Remember, you can make a statement as an EcoConsumer with your wallet and by making your voice heard.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.