

Columnists

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It is possible to make a dent in global warming

A growing green sensibility really does exist all around us, if we look hard enough.

By EcoConsumer; Tom Watson Special to The Seattle Times

We can do this. We, as a society, can stop global warming, reduce pollution and conserve resources for future generations.

Certainly, progress seems agonizingly slow, and many experts believe we're already in dire straits, especially when it comes to global warming.

But the bright side is positively glowing. Environmental awareness, the first step toward change, has skyrocketed in recent years. Thanks to the Internet, answers to green questions are at our fingertips. What's the best way to dispose of pet waste? How do you build a solar oven? Just jump online and find out.

And think of all the eco-choices we enjoy today. Local green-commuting alternatives, for example, now include electric cars, hybrid cars, safer streets for bikes, electric bikes, bike racks on buses, light rail, new faster bus service on several main routes, expanding streetcar service, carpooling programs and car sharing.

Despite all this green good news, everyday life often seems "the same as it ever was," to quote a classic Talking Heads song. But a growing green sensibility really does exist all around us, if we look hard enough.

Today we'll take a little sojourn where fans of eco-living may have rarely gone before, searching for signs of green life in the most unexpected places.

Q: Let's start with a tough one. Can fast-food restaurants possibly be green?

A: With a pervasive image of unhealthful food and obscene amounts of throwaway packaging, fast-food restaurants appear to be the antithesis of green living. But several fast-food chains are taking a bite out of waste.

For instance, many of Subway's 25,000 stores in the U.S. have aggressively reduced energy and water consumption. Subway also uses 100-percent recycled-paper napkins, paper towels and toilet tissue.

The cities of Seattle and Issaquah have greened up fast-food restaurants by banning the use of polystyrene (commonly called Styrofoam) in takeout packaging because production and disposal of polystyrene can cause environmental problems. Both cities require food-service businesses to provide only recyclable or compostable food containers.

Q: What's another unexpected green trend?

A: Here's a lively example: Green burials. An increasing number of folks are recognizing that

burial in a permanent casket, using toxic formaldehyde for embalming, is not the only way to go.

Green burial means "caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact," according to the nonprofit Green Burial Council (www.greenburialcouncil.org). This sustainable "death care" reduces carbon emissions and preserves natural resources and habitat.

Cremation has green advantages over traditional burials because it requires fewer resources overall, but a cremation furnace demands lots of energy and may generate pollution.

Locally, Woodlawn Cemetery in Snohomish dedicates part of its grounds to green burials. In that section of the cemetery, bodies are buried in simple cloth shrouds or biodegradable caskets. Embalming, if desired, uses only formaldehyde-free fluids.

Q: What about long-distance travel? Doesn't that have a massive carbon footprint?

A: Global airplane travel consumes staggering amounts of fossil fuel. But the air-transport industry, with Boeing taking a lead role, has made great strides recently developing renewable jet-airplane fuels made from crop oils or animal fats. Ideally these jet biofuels will become the norm within 10 years.

Q: Any other unexpected green pleasures to leave us with?

A: To help celebrate the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which runs from July 20 to Aug. 17 this year, a "green Ramadan" movement has blossomed in the Seattle area. At the traditional daily communal meal at sunset called Iftar, for example, some groups now use durable dishes instead of disposables to reduce waste.

Also, even a mundane habit such as wearing a tie to work every day can have a green side. A new national service, TieTry.com, rents ties through a subscription system similar to that used by Netflix for DVD movie rentals.

Whether you need a tie, a new way to fly, or a resting place when you die, it's never been a better time to go green.

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