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How Large is Your Footprint?

By Zack Gross

With the snow and ice having receded from our yards and fields, and warm sun and spring showers greening up our grass and trees, encouraging the first flowers to bloom, we have the opportunity once again to contemplate losing what is most precious to us – our planet.

Earth Day has just passed, but Mother's Day is coming. And to all people, our mother is Mother Earth!

It is redundant to say, especially in this column, that we have fouled our nest. Our consumer society, which is now spreading worldwide, produces and ultimately throws away an inordinate amount of goods. Whether it is electronic devices or plastic toys, building materials or vehicles, we create more garbage than we know what to do with.

Besides turning Earth into a landfill site, we also are changing our climate by the emissions we create in our production processes. There was a time when the vast majority of people lived more cleanly, efficiently and frugally, out of both choice and necessity, when people grew their own gardens, made their own clothes, bought locally and only what they could afford.

Our impact on the Earth has been plotted in recent years by groups such as Redefining Progress in the US and academic and government institutions here in Canada. This is done using the term "ecological footprint" and is measured in hectares (2.5 hectares is one acre). It expresses the amount of productive land area required to sustain one human being.

On a global scale, the average ecological footprint is 2.8 hectares, which is already more than what is sustainable, that being 1.9 hectares per person. In other words, on average today, we require about one and one-half planet Earths to sustain our rate of consumption and pollution. The largest ecological footprint belongs to US citizens at 9.6 hectares (five times what is sustainable), while Canadians stand at 7.8 hectares, about four times the sustainable.

Bangladesh's average ecological footprint is just 0.5 hectares as it is a very poor and agrarian society, but also one that may be more self-reliant than ours in many ways. China's is 1.36, which is also low, but the prospect is that it will grow quickly and ultimately will rival that of the US. At that point, experts calculate that we will need twenty-five Earths to fulfill everybody's consumer desires.

Here is a test devised by Waste Reduction Week Canada so that you can determine your own ecological footprint. If you score less than 150 on the test, you have

snuck in under 4.0 hectares; 150 to 350 will put you at 4 to 6 hectares; 351 to 550 will mean 6 to 7.7 hectares (an average Canadian); 551 to 750 takes you from 7.7 to 10; and over 750 points means over 10 hectares and makes you an honorary American in consumption/pollution terms.

1. **How many people live in your household?** 1 = 30; 2 = 25; 3 = 20; 4 = 15; 5 or more = 10.
2. **How is your home heated?** Natural Gas = 30; Electricity = 40; Oil = 50; Renewable = 0.
3. **How many faucets/toilets do you have in your home?** Fewer than 3 = 5; 3 to 5 = 10; 6 to 8 = 15; 8 to 10 = 20; More than 10 = 25.
4. **What type of home do you live in?** Apartment / Condominium = 20; House = 40.
5. **Are you a vegetarian?** Yes = 0; No = 50.
6. **How many meals do you prepare/eat at home per week?** Under 10 = 25; 10 to 14 = 20; 14 to 18 = 15; More than 18 = 10.
7. **Do you buy locally produced food?** Yes = 25; No = 125; Sometimes = 50; Rarely = 100; Don't Know = 75.
8. **How many cars does your household own?** 0 = 5; 1 = 25; 2 = 50; 3 = 75; More = 100.
9. **How do you get to school/work?** Car = 50; Bus = 25; School Bus = 20; Walk / Bike = 0.
10. **How often do you take public transit per week?** 0 = 50; 1 to 5 = 40; 6 to 10 = 30; 11 to 15 = 20; More = 10.
11. **Where did you go on your last vacation?** No vacation = 0; Within my province = 10; Within Canada = 30; To the US = 40; Outside North America = 70.
12. **How many times did you go summer camping or to the cottage?** 0 = 0; 1 to 3 = 10; 4 to 6 = 20; 6 to 9 = 30; More = 40.
13. **How many large purchases has your household made this year (e.g. electronics, appliances, vehicles or furniture)?** 0 = 0; 1 to 3 = 15; 4 to 6 = 30; More = 45.
14. **Does your household reduce waste and pollution by buying in bulk, using natural cleaners and storing food in reusable containers?** Yes = 0; No = 30.
15. **Does your family compost?** Yes = 0; No = 20.

16. Does your family recycle? Yes = 0; No = 20.

17. How much garbage do you leave for pick-up each week? None = 0; Half bag = 5; One Bag = 10; Two Bags = 20; More = 30.

From the above data, although the questions are sometimes imperfect, you will get an idea of your ecological footprint. Compare it to what the Earth can handle and to the average in poor and wealthy countries. See where you might be able to make changes in your lifestyle.

Mother's Day might be the perfect day for a discussion with family, friends or colleagues about how our homes and offices, our schedules and habits can be realigned with what is sustainable for our planet.

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