

# Good, Better, Best: Cutting Your Consumer Carbon Footprint

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*This is the second in a series of five articles that help you find ways to reduce your carbon footprint. We consider the main carbon culprits in the average American's lifestyle.*

America is famous — or perhaps infamous — for inventing and exporting consumer culture. The burst of [post-war spending](#) in which Americans overcompensated for the shortages of WWII saw citizens converted to consumers.

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, few people even questioned George Bush's [declaration](#) that spending was a patriotic response to 9/11. But the impulse spending and [planned obsolescence](#) of a consumer economy have terrible consequences for the environment. If you want to reduce the impact of your shopping, here are some good ideas, better choices, and best practices.

## Carbon Footprints

Because carbon dioxide emissions are a leading cause of [climate change](#), measuring the amount of carbon dioxide released by a particular activity can serve as a useful shorthand for environmental impact. This measurement of the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere by particular human activities is known as its [carbon footprint](#). Every product and service, as well as many of the actions we choose to do without spending, has a carbon footprint.

There are many [ways to calculate](#) your family's overall carbon footprint, which can be higher or lower depending on the number of people in your household, the size of your house, how much and how you travel, and myriad other major and minor decisions you make throughout the year.

[On average](#), each American generates 18.55 tons of carbon dioxide emissions each year. This is 3.5 times the global average of 5.3 tons.

## Shopping Footprints

Whether you use [EPA estimates](#) of total emissions or the Union of Concerned Scientists' [household averages](#), [transportation](#) is the largest source of greenhouse gases in the U.S. — generating 28 percent of the national total.

Yet for most households, the stuff you buy comes in a close second at 26 percent. This is somewhat of an amorphous category that includes everything from furniture to haircuts, which can make it hard to pinpoint effective changes. It's clear that American consumer culture is a critical component of our environmental impact. Our consumption habits explain how the United States, with only [4.3 percent of the world's population](#), generates 15 percent of global greenhouse gases.

How can we change our shopping habits to reduce our consumer carbon footprint?

## Good

One of the simplest steps may be one of the most effective: think before you shop. [Precycling](#) is greener than recycling, so take a moment to [rethink your purchase](#) before pulling out your wallet.

Have you been influenced by marketing to want something you don't need? Are you engaging in "shopping therapy"? If you do need the item, could you find it second hand or make repairs to something you already own instead? Will this purchase actually fill your need or is it a band-aid solution that will need replacing right away?

You don't have to wait for the day after Thanksgiving to participate in [Buy Nothing Day](#). Challenge yourself to live for one day with only what you already have. It may be harder than you think, but it can also be surprisingly satisfying.

## Better

Once you've started making fewer casual purchases, you'll have more time to dedicate more energy to [shopping your values](#). Take the time to research products before purchasing. The effort will help you make greener purchasing decisions, and train your mind to think before spending. And once you know how much environmental damage various products cause, you may be convinced to buy even less stuff.

It doesn't take a lot of consumer research to realize that green products often come at a price premium. Once you've cut out unnecessary purchases, you may be able to afford more of these expensive, eco-friendly products. But you can't spend your way to sustainability. Put yourself on a budget, and stick to it. [Living cheaply](#) is usually greener by default, and it forces you to find creative, [low-impact solutions](#) to everyday choices. Healthier personal finances are an important side benefit.

As an extension of budgeting, put yourself on a spending diet. Schedule regular personal Buy Nothing Days; delay purchases until after the next payday; or wait for other milestones before making important purchases.

Playing with the balance between [delayed gratification](#) and [hedonic adaptation](#) helps us maximize our pleasure from the purchases we do make. And sometimes we find that once the assigned waiting period has passed, we no longer want to make the purchase.

## Best

Most people think of minimalism as a visual style marked by white backgrounds and perfect Instagram photos. But [minimalism is a mindset](#) unrelated to aesthetics that Americans need to adopt to cut their environmental impact.

Adopting a [zero-waste lifestyle](#) is a major change that completely eliminates wasteful shopping. Learn from those who have already gone before you, and embark on a [Buy Nothing Year](#). Even if you don't succeed in the challenge, it is sure to reset your relationship to stuff.

*What steps have you taken to curb your consumer carbon footprint? Share your*

*ideas with the community in the [Earthling Forum](#).*

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