
Ways to Go Green

by Theresa Harper

A resourceful A to Z list of green alternatives to everyday activities you can implement today. If you have an idea that's not listed, just let me know and I'll add it.

A

Adopt Something

An animal, a stream, a whale, a section of highway... There's almost no limit to the number of environmental causes to which you, your friends, or your coworkers can turn.

Avoid Fast Food

Most fast food is over-packaged and most fast food companies are responsible for producing mountains of trash. By avoiding fast food whenever possible, you'll help reduce this needless waste.

B

Bike Instead Of Ride

Riding your bike instead of riding in a car saves gas and reduces pollution, of course, but its fun too! That makes it a double benefit.

Boycott A Product

Choose something that you know isn't good for the environment. Once you decide not to buy it, write a letter to the company's president (the address is often right on the package) and tell him or her why you've decided not to buy the product anymore. If lots of people did this, companies would start making more environmentally responsible products!

Buy Products Made Of Recycled Paper

How can you tell if a package is recycled? Look right on the package. Many have specific claims, such as "made of 100 percent recycled material." However, some recycled packages don't advertise this fact, although there are ways you can find out for yourself. For example, when shopping for cereal, cookies, crackers, and other groceries packaged in cardboard boxes, make sure the boxes are made from recycled paper. If the underside is gray or dark brown, the cardboard is made of recycled material. If it's white, it is made of un-recycled material.

C

Change A Light Bulb

By replacing a standard bulb with a compact fluorescent one you'll get more light for less money and save a lot of energy.

Clean Up A Park

Get a group of people together and find a park that needs some tender loving care. Arrange for everyone to meet at a specific time to pick up the trash, weeds, perhaps even plant some flowers. Ask local businesses to donate money, tools, or other supplies you'll need for the task. You should also invite a newspaper reporter or TV news team to come along and report on the event. Make sure to check with the proper local authority in charge of the park to get permission.

Close The Refrigerator Door

By leaving it open for just a few extra seconds, you waste a lot of energy. Decide what you want before you open the refrigerator door. Then get it and close the door right away.

Collect Aluminum Cans

You might raise a lot of money in the process. The best thing is to combine this with your park cleanup. Sell the cans you collect to a local aluminum recycler and use the money for something fun! Or donate the money to a worthy environmental organization.

Contribute To A Good Cause

You don't have to contribute a lot of money. In fact, you don't have to contribute money at all. A local environmental group can probably use your and your friends' help in a variety of ways. By volunteering for just a few hours a week, you'll be making a worthwhile contribution to the environment. It will make you feel really good!

Create A Compost Pile

It's easy to do. Find a corner of the yard that's out of the way. Carefully throw food wastes (leftovers, eggshells, coffee grounds, spoiled vegetables, etc.) into a pile and mix with dirt. Every week or so, turn the pile over with a shovel to give it more air. In a few weeks, it will turn into a rich, nutrition soil that will help plants grow. Just think: What used to be "garbage" is now a valuable substance!

Cut Down On Packaging

We've already given you several ways to do this. Keep in mind that about half of what we throw away is packaging. By buying products that have as little packaging as possible, you can help to reduce those mountains of trash.

D

Donate Toys To A Worthy Cause

When you get tired of your games and toys and other things, don't throw them away. Even if they're broken, they may be fixed and used by children less fortunate. You'll also be keeping these things out of the trash.

Don't Buy Aerosols

There are environmentally better packages for most products. Aerosols can't be recycled—which means that they're guaranteed to end up in landfills—and some of their ingredients contribute to air pollution. Instead of aerosols, look for spray bottles, liquids, powders, and roll-ons.

Draw Up A Petition

If you find something in your community you think needs to be changed, one way to convince the people in charge is to circulate a petition, getting as many people to sign it as possible. The petition might say something like: "We, the undersigned, believe that our community should begin recycling all paper, glass, and aluminum immediately, and should place recycling containers throughout the community to make recycling easier. Make sure the signed petition reaches the people in charge; send it to the person at the very top. Send a copy of the signed petition to local newspapers and TV stations.

E

Eat Organic Produce

Organic produce contains far fewer chemicals than other produce. That's probably better for your health, and it's definitely better for the environment. All those chemicals get washed off of farmers' fields into rivers and streams, where they pollute our water. In addition, many of the chemicals are made from petroleum and other nonrenewable resources. So, don't eat chemicals—eat real food!

Elect “Green” Candidates

During election campaigns, ask candidates about their position on the environment. Try to ask specific questions that relate to situations in your community—whether they support a mandatory recycling program, for example, or whether they plan to get tough on polluting companies.

F

Feed The Birds

Birds need water to drink and food to eat. Feeding birds not only brings a bit of nature to your backyard, it also helps rid the yard of many kinds of bugs. You can hang a birdfeeder from a tree or place it outside your window, or build a birdbath in your yard from which the birds can drink water.

Find Out How To Dispose of Hazardous Waste

Nearly every household has some kind of hazardous waste: old paint cans, used motor oil, unused pesticides and weed killers. If you dump these things down the drain, you'll end up polluting the water supply. They should be disposed of in a site specially designed for hazardous or toxic wastes. Some cities and counties have monthly or annual pickups. Other areas have special drop-off sites. Call your city or county government to find out the proper way to dispose of such trash in your area. Try organizing a hazardous-waste-collection day in your neighborhood, encouraging others to dispose of materials properly.

G

Go To A Zoo

You'd be surprised how much you'll learn about the Earth. Find out how many of the animals in the zoo are at risk of becoming extinct. (Find out how many animals already ARE extinct.) Ask the zookeeper what role humans have played in animal extinction.

Grow A Garden

A garden provides flowers, vegetables, and environmental benefits. It can help to reduce soil erosion and may help to reduce some kinds of air pollution. Try to grow your garden using as few pesticides and chemical fertilizers as possible.

H

Have A “Green” Picnic

Plan an outing that doesn't create a lot of waste or pollution. For example, if you're having a barbecue, avoid using lighter fluid—it contains naphthalene, an air pollutant which is suspected of causing cancer. Instead, use an electric starter or, better yet, a device that lets you start coals using newspapers instead of fluid. Use real plates and utensils instead of paper or plastic and reusable tins or heavy plastic cups instead of disposable paper or plastic ones. Wash the cups and use them over and over. Set out separate trash bags for paper, glass, and aluminum. Just because you're outdoors doesn't mean you can't recycle.

Hold On To Balloons

Helium balloons—the kind that float up into the sky—are lots of fun, but if you let them fly away, they may harm fish and animals. Helium balloons eventually fall back to earth and can be blown by strong winds miles away into the ocean. Some sea animals mistake the balloons for jellyfish. When an animal tries to eat a balloon, it can kill the animal. So if you have a helium balloon, hold on tight. If you know of others planning to use them for a celebration, warn them about the dangers of letting the balloons fly away.

I

Identify Energy Wasters

There probably are several companies in your community that are wasting precious resources. Does a used-car showroom leave its bright lights shining all night long? Do parents waiting to pick up their kids from school leave their cars idling at the curb for a long time? Wherever you see people being wasteful, say something! Write a letter, give a call, or walk right up to them on the street and ask them not to waste our Earth's precious resources.

Insulate Your Home

You may find a lot of energy being wasted right in your own home. After you've finished your energy audit, make a list of the things you believe should be done. Your local hardware-store sales person can help you determine how much the improvements will cost, how much energy they'll save, and how much money your family will save in reduced energy bills.

Invite A Speaker

A good speaker can provide a lot of useful information and can answer your questions. Almost every environmental group has individuals who will speak to your organization, usually free of charge. Consider hosting a series of speakers, each on a different environmental topic. Even better, invite two people with opposing views on a single subject. You may be in for an exciting debate!

J

Join An Environmental Group

There are hundreds of good organizations around the country. Most of them have annual membership fees of \$25 or less, and some have special rates for kids or students. Try to find one that focuses on something you're particularly interested in. Go to a meeting, event, or other activity. You'll probably meet some other people with similar interests as yours.

K

Keep The Car At Home

You've learned by now that automobiles are one of the single biggest sources of pollution. Most driving trips are under five miles, and you'd be surprised how many are under one mile. Try walking, biking, skateboarding, roller-skating, or taking the bus.

L

Learn About Your Community

As you travel around your community, watch the local news, or read local papers, looking for things that might be causing environmental problems. Locate sources of pollution. And make suggestions to people in charge about what you think could be done to improve the situation.

Look At Labels

Reading labels can tell you a lot of things. First, you can find out about a product's ingredients—whether it contains anything that might be hazardous to your health or the environment. A label will also tell you how to contact the product's manufacturer with your questions and comments. Feel free to let them know what's on your mind. Do you think their product is good? Let them know! Could it be better? Let them know that, too. In particular, let them know if you've decided to buy—or not buy—their product for environmental reasons. Companies listen very carefully to what their customers have to say. It doesn't take very many letters and calls for a company to think seriously about making changes.

M

Make Scratch Pads

Here's a good way to recycle paper. When you use a piece of paper on only one side, don't throw it away when you are done with it. Instead, put it in a pile with all of the blank sides surfacing up. When you get a big pile, you can turn the paper into scratch pads. First, cut the pile of paper in half. Then, staple small batches of paper together into "pads."

N

Notify The Authorities

Do you know a polluter? Is a company in your community doing things that are bad for the environment? Don't think twice about reporting them to the local, state, or federal government. You will be doing yourself and your community a big favor. You might even get a reward!

O

Observe The Three R's

Refuse, Reuse, and Recycle. Whatever you buy, wherever you live, the Three R's are the most important rules to live by, at least as far as the environment is concerned. The next time you go shopping—whether by yourself or with friends—think about the Three R's every time you pull a potential purchase off the shelf. Is it something that's over-packaged or wasteful? If so, Refuse it. Is it something that is made of or packaged in recycled material, or which you can reuse in some way? If so, Reuse it. Is it something that can be recycled easily? If so, Recycle it.

Organize Your Friends

You've probably heard that "two heads are better than one." Well, ten heads can be even better! You and your friends can probably accomplish a lot if you set your minds to it. Think about the ways you and your friends (or family, co-workers, club members, or whatever) can help out as a group. Then contact a local environmental group and volunteer your services. Think how much fun everyone can have helping to save the planet!

P

Plant A Tree

How would you like to plant your very own tree and watch it grow? There are organizations in most communities that have tree-planting campaigns. But you don't even need one of these. Visit a local nursery to find out what kinds of trees will grow best in your area. The nursery people might also help you find a good place to plant a tree. You can watch the tree's progress every year, and have the pleasure of knowing that you put it there for everyone to enjoy!

Protest Animal Cruelty

Each year, millions of laboratory animals—rats, mice, dogs, monkeys, and others—suffer needlessly because companies use them to test new products, including most cosmetics and personal-care products. Many of these are extremely cruel. These animals are routinely burned and injected with poisonous substances, among other tests. The worst part is that many of the products for which they are being tested include ingredients that have already been proven safe! Some companies don't conduct these tests. They often label their products "cruelty free" because they do not cause harm to animals. If you had a choice between a product that caused animals to be harmed and a similar one that didn't, which one would you choose?

Q

Quit Throwing Away Batteries

Americans go through more than two billion batteries a year to power such things as radios, calculators, watches, flashlights, and computers. Unfortunately, batteries contain many hazardous materials, which leak into landfills when batteries are thrown away. Many of these dangerous chemicals get into our water supply. There are two ways you can avoid throwing away batteries. One is by using batteries that can be recharged over and over. You should also find out if there are companies in your area that recycle batteries. If you must throw batteries away, do so at a hazardous-waste collection site, if there is one in your area. Still another idea is to send the batteries back to the manufacturers, signifying that you consider used batteries a potential danger. This may encourage companies to begin recycling.

R

Recycle Everything

Well, not everything, but just about. As described earlier, there's little you can't recycle one way or another. One exception is plastic, most of which is not easily recyclable. Set up recycling boxes in your home—one for collecting newspapers, another for collecting other types of paper, another for glass, and another for aluminum. Try composting, which is a way of recycling food and other organic matter. You can even try recycling plastic, if you can find a place that accepts plastic for recycling. If you can't recycle something, see if there is some way you can reuse it.

Reuse A Bag

Some people believe that bags made of trees—paper bags—are less harmful to the earth than bags made of chemicals—plastic bags. The fact is, making both types of bags creates a lot of pollution, and both paper and plastic bags use a lot of resources. Neither is much better than the other. The best solution is not to use any bag at all, or to bring your own bag. Some people carry a canvas or mesh bag they can use over and over. If you must use a paper or plastic bag, don't throw it away. Try to use the bag over and over—as many times as you can.

S

Spend Your Money Wisely

When you buy toys or gifts, beware of things made of endangered animals or things made of wood that come from tropical rainforests. If you're not sure, don't be afraid to ask questions. The more you know about the things you buy, the better decisions you can make. Your spending money is powerful! If you spend it wisely, you can help influence companies to do things that don't harm the environment—or the things that live in it.

Stop A Leak

Organize a Stop-the-Leak Day on which everyone in your family tightens, insulates, replaces, caulks, and does whatever else is necessary to make your home as "tight" as possible. Your local water, gas, or electric utility company may be able to provide help, or even instructions and supplies.

Support Green Companies

In the past, most companies haven't paid much attention to the environment. But now, a growing number are changing the way they do business. Some are changing their products so that they are less wasteful or polluting. Others are encouraging their employees to carpool or to recycle. Still others are helping their local communities improve their environments. These companies deserve all of our support!

T

Take A Hike

Or go fishing or bird-watching. Whatever you do, go outdoors to a place where there are as few people, cars, and buildings as possible. Take a look around. Isn't it beautiful? It's important to keep our natural areas in good shape, so that you can enjoy them and your children—and their children's children—can enjoy them, too! So enjoy the great outdoors whenever you can. And if you see some litter there, pick it up and carry it to someplace where it can be safely thrown away or recycled.

Talk To Your Children

Don't be afraid to share with them the information you've learned through this site. Help them learn about ways they can be Green Consumers and spend their money in ways that will help the environment. Although it doesn't always seem that way, kids do listen to parents. If you share your concerns with them, they will become concerned, too. Together, you can help.

Turn Off The Lights

This is such a simple thing to do, but sometimes it's so hard to remember! You can put little stickers near the light switches you leave on the most often, reminding everyone to turn them off when they leave the room. Consider starting a Lights-Off Fund, to which each person must donate a nickel or dime every time he or she forgets to turn off the lights. As those nickels or dimes add up, you might donate them to an environmental organization.

U

Use Recycled Paper

There's just no reason why you shouldn't buy recycled paper whenever it's available. In most cases, it's just as good as "virgin" paper—even better, in fact, because it helps save trees! You can buy toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, writing paper, books, newspapers, and many other things made of recycled paper. If you can't find recycled paper products in your local grocery store, ask the manager to stock them.

V

Visit A Recycling Center

If there's a center nearby, stop and take a look around. Look at all the different things being recycled—lots of different colors of glass, paper, cardboard, cans, maybe even tires and household appliances. Ask the people who run the recycling center what happens to all this stuff after it leaves the center. Think about how wasteful it would be if all that garbage wasn't being recycled, but being thrown away instead.

W

Work For The Environment

Most environmental organizations need lots of help, and some of these jobs can pay you. Check with the local parks department to see if there are any jobs in the parks taking care of plants or flowers. Check with the local zoo to see if you can work with animals. It might be hard work, but it might be a lot of fun. Either way, you can go home each day with the satisfaction of knowing you're helping make the world a better place.

Write a Letter

You'd be surprised how much just one letter can do. Most companies don't get many letters from customers, and most politicians rarely hear voters, so when they do get letters, they read them very carefully. According to some experts, if a company or politician receives just twenty letters on the same subject within a few weeks, they consider the subject high priority. You and your friends or co-workers can write twenty letters in a just few minutes! So, if a company is doing something that you don't like, or if a politician isn't taking actions that can help protect the environment, write a letter. And encourage your friends, neighbors and co-workers to write letters, too.

X

eXercise Your Rights

As a human being living on planet Earth, you have the right to clean air and water, a safe environment, and the unspoiled beauties this world has to offer. You should speak firmly and loudly against those people and companies who threaten to take those rights away from you by polluting or by making decisions that encourage polluting or other wasteful behavior. That's the only way that you can be sure that the world will still be just as beautiful for your children when they grow up. If you don't dream of a better world—and do something about it—no one will do it for you.

Y

Yell At A Litterbug

Well, maybe you don't have to yell, but if you do see someone littering, you definitely should say something. Be polite, but state your case. Explain that littering not only is ugly and costs us money (because we have to pay people to pick up the litter and dispose of it) it's also bad for the environment.

Z

Zero In On Specifics

While we've covered a wide range of environmental problems and solutions here, you can be most effective by choosing one or two specific problems to focus on. Don't try to do everything at once. Pick a problem and learn as much about it as you can. Find the individuals and organizations in your area working on the problem and see how you can get involved. That will make you one powerful Green Consumer!