

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Seven New Year's Resolutions that could change the world

I hear people say that they want to make the environment better but don't know where to start.

I also take it as a given that most people want to live long, healthy, and fulfilling lives. It turns out one of the best ways to improve one's health and well-being is by protecting, cleaning, and engaging with the environment. This concept seems trite, but it is very true. But what can little (old/young) you do? Tons. Yes, you can make a huge difference in your and others' lives. And by so doing, you can "be the change" that is so desperately needed. Since January 1, 2007 is as good as any day to start, let's just do it.

There are so many places where all of us can make improvements. And the more we know the more we realize how much we can do. This list of seven resolutions hopes to provide several places where we might begin (or expand). Do one, do all seven, but whatever you do, begin the process of becoming a healthier, happier, and more involved individual. (Caveat: In offering these "words of advice" I don't mean to upset or offend anyone. I am not telling you what you "should" do. Rather, I am telling you what you "can" do and what things I believe will make a difference in people's lives and the planet's health.)

1. Educate yourself. The rate at which information is being created and disseminated these days makes it seem impossible that you could become well-informed about an environmental issue. Almost everyone feels this way, especially about issues about which we haven't been formally educated. But since so many people are in this boat, the truth of the matter is that you can become more knowledgeable about a specific issue than the 99% of the population in a fairly short period of time. Take the issue of "climate change" (aka, global warming), for example. If you were to read a couple of the many great books written on the subject and supplement this with a few magazine and newspaper articles, you would know more than the vast majority of the populace.

Isn't there an easier way than self-education? Unfortunately not. There should be but the main sources of information and knowledge (i.e., television and school) suffer greatly when it comes to good, thorough, relevant reportage and analysis of environmental matters. Even as we approach 2007, it is the rare student that has been exposed to the key issues of our time (the availability and quality of food, water, energy and the sustainability of our lifestyle). Hence it is imperative for us to educate ourselves.

Where should we start? What should one read first? It is impossible for me to say where you should start, but I do highly recommend these books (which are accessible to people from nearly every background and skill level; authors in parentheses): *Living Downstream & Having Faith* (by Sandra Steingraber), *When the Smoke Ran Like Water* (Devra Davis), *Collapse* (by Jared Diamond), *Making Peace With the Planet* (Barry Commoner), *Fast Food Nation* (by Eric Schlosser), *The Ecological Footprint* (by Wackernagel & Rees), *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (by Michael Pollan), & *Biomimicry* (by Janine Benyus). If a magazine is more your style, I recommend these: *The E Magazine* (www.emagazine.com), *Scientific American* (www.sciam.com), *Orion* (www.orionmagazine.org), and *World Watch* (www.worldwatch.org). Start the process of self-education but beware of where it might lead you; one can become pretty passionate about an issue as one gets informed about it.

2. Invest money ethically. Whether you have \$100,000 or merely \$100, you can still invest in ways that are in keeping with a healthy Earth and a healthy you.

Unfortunately, I get the feeling that very few of us really put our money where our mouth is; that is, we don't invest our wealth to support causes that we care about. Sure, many of us give money away but most of us don't have that much to give and those that do often give only sparingly. And in terms of our invested money (in banks, stocks, mutual funds, or bonds), we often don't even know what it is doing in the economic realm.

Since there are definite differences between what those that have tens of thousands can do and what those with less can do, I will talk about each investor separately.

For those that have at least \$5,000 to invest (which takes into account any money you may already have invested, including retirement monies), consider the following. Fundamentally, people's investment strategies support big business with little eye on important ethical considerations. Generally, we invest money so that it will grow in value. Rather than focusing solely on personal growth (as the primary criteria), I recommend that we begin to invest money to bring about changes that we want, i.e., to support organizations and companies that are "doing the right thing." We need to begin to do this because nearly all of the most visible investment options (e.g., bank accounts, brokerage houses, etc.) spend their time trying to maximize profit (for their investors) rather than on promoting peace, justice, or environmental health. In this mixed up economy that often rewards perverse activities, this means that investment agents will purchase stock in companies that are doing some very questionable things (such as, shipping jobs overseas or privatizing prisons—it is any wonder why we now have more prisoners than any country in the world when we have made it so investors make money when more people are incarcerated or convicts have sentences lengthened?). Therefore it is incumbent on us to begin shifting our investments to those companies that are doing good for the planet—but advancing renewable energy technologies, producing toxic free cleansers and household chemicals, manufacturing safe toys for children, etc.

Investing in humane and ethical ways isn't easy but it can be done. Social Funds (www.socialfunds.com) provides a list of about eighty mutual funds that are dedicated to social good. Many of these funds, however, only remove (or "screen," to use business lingo) those companies that have done bad things to the environment (or to people). Thus, most of the companies that these mutual funds invest in are large, well-known companies that you wouldn't connect with social or environmental good per se. Despite this, investing in them is likely much better than what most of us are doing now; please don't get defensive, but it is very typical for people to be rather blind to the activities of the companies they are investing in, just as long as they see their funds/investments increasing with time. Some of my preliminary research has revealed that two funds, Winslow Green (www.winslowgreen.com; WGGFX (ticker symbol)) and New Alternatives (www.newalternativesfund.com; NALFX), go beyond just eliminating the "bad apples" by actually support companies that are doing good for the environment and our health. So check these out (order a free prospectus and take a look for yourself) and if you find them appealing, support the Earth while thinking about you and your progeny's future. Keep in mind that you need not sacrifice personal economic growth by investing in these types of mutual funds. As you will be able to see for yourself (once you do a little research), these funds, albeit

less known and publicized, do quite well economically as well as environmentally.

For those that have less than \$5,000 to invest (which includes the bulk of our fellow citizens), there are still many ways you can do great things with your money. Two strategic steps are essential. One, do what you can not to spend money that you don't need to (for instance, on non-essential items such as tobacco, alcohol, coffee, perfume, etc.). (All people, rich, middle-class, and poor, could benefit greatly by taking this first step.) Two, create goals (such as saving \$50 a month) and keep track of your progress. Saving \$50 every month can put you in a position to purchase mutual funds in just 5 years (typically, mutual funds have an initial buy-in of between \$2,000 and \$5,000). Also, if you have any retirement money, check into whether you can have this reinvested in an environmentally-conscientious mutual fund; some retirement plans allow people to invest their money as they wish.

And even if you don't have money to invest, you can still support environmental causes by: (1) buying foods through cooperatives (contact me to check out the one in Galesburg), locally-owned grocery stores (like Cornucopia), and farmer's markets; and, (2) spending money on environmentally-sound products, many of which are mentioned below. It helps to consider the environmental impacts of things we buy. Doing so often helps us say "no" when we would otherwise say "yes" or "why not."

(I plan to write a more in-depth article on environmental investing in an upcoming essay. Stay on the look out for it and if you have any suggestions, please share them.)

3. Downsize. One of our biggest environmental problems that we face is driven by our continued increase in the extraction and use of natural (and often limited) resources. Thus, one way to make a significant environmental impact is to reduce the use of "stuff." Typically, reducing one's use of just about anything is associated with negativity, in that it is assumed that by "giving up" something one has sacrificed and lost too much. Often, however, when you give up something, you get something in return. In the case being presented here, not only do you get a cleaner and healthier environment but you get many other good things as well. Let's look at a few examples to illustrate this.

If your family has two (or more) cars, then consider giving one up. Surely you will lose some convenience, but you'll also collect benefits. Think of how much money you will save with lower gas expenses, lower insurance bills, and fewer repair costs. Compute this monetary savings, and stare at it awhile (if you are so inclined). Next, if you live in a small city, like Galesburg, consider how much good, walking or biking will do (if you didn't make driving everywhere so essential or convenient).

Anecdotally, my family got rid of our second car about two years ago now and I find that I really enjoy walking/biking very much. When I walk, I actually get a chance to think and I see more of my neighborhood and neighbors as well. I am also more aware of the fact that many of my fellow Galesburgites walk or ride their bikes. This awareness makes me much more inclined to support better public transportation and more bike lanes so that everyone can get around safely and without "losing" their wallets.

If you live in a house with more bedrooms than people, then consider moving into a smaller home. (Having read this, all my friends are telling me to go look in a mirror right about now.) Nationally, while average family size continues to go down, the average size of new homes keeps going up. We've become conditioned to think that



bigger is better. Well, once again, bigger homes mean higher energy bills, more square feet of cleaning, higher property taxes, a greater compulsion to buy things (such as, furniture and knick-knacks). Additionally, if we all lived in smaller houses we would have more room for other life forms to cohabitate with us—such as song birds, butterflies, and squirrels. Do we really think about how much money we spend annually for this "extra" space? Do we think about how much enjoyment (and benefit) we derive from spending a moment watching a colorful butterfly flutter its wings or hearing a melodious song from a native bird? If we did, we might realize that there are better, more important things to spend our money on and likely more hospitable ways to live in our environment.

So you see, the stuff we use (and live in) comes with both positives and negatives. If we emphasized the negative, even redundant, aspects of our choices, and focused on the positives associated with more spacious, lively, uncluttered landscapes and environments, we might decide that "downsizing" isn't so bad after all.

4. Green our homes. Most of our homes are very anti-green. They are poorly insulated (so they waste heated and air-conditioned air). They are filled with toxic chemicals (not only in the cabinetry under our sinks but throughout the house as well—in our rugs, tiling, paints, varnishes, etc.). They rarely take advantage of natural lighting or heating. They have lawns and gardens that we poison each year. They contain too few indoor plants. They use antiquated light bulbs and energy-demanding appliances. This list could go on and on. Yet, as wasteful and poisonous as our homes may be, there are simple alternatives that are often cost-saving as well. Let's discuss a few.

Changing all light bulbs from incandescents to fluorescents will not only save you lots of money (over the lifetime of the each bulb) but also reduce pollution from fossil-fuel combustion. (The price of incandescents have come down a great deal and so have the variety of these bulbs available.)

Installing a low-flow shower head (less than 2 gallons a minute) will reduce your water bill without compromising water pressure very much (again, technology has made many useful and green advancements).

Replacing your use of poisonous chemicals (for cleaning, polishing, eliminating pests, etc.) with eco-friendly ones can make your indoor air quality go up substantially; it will also greatly reduce harmful chemical exposure to your children (the most vulnerable among us) and your pets. Eco-friendly chemicals come in the form of natural compounds that you probably know well (including, lemon juice, vinegar, baking soda, etc.) and manufactured compounds that have been formulated to be very good

cleansers without being damaging to us. For example, did you know that borax (a naturally found chemical) can be great at getting rid of ants and can also serve as a fire retardant? Potatoes can be used to get mud off of clothes. Club soda can be great as a polisher and stain remover. There are so many examples of natural products which have beneficial chemical and physical properties enabling them to take care of nearly every household task, that there is actually no reason for people to continue to buy (and use) the poisons found in the grocery and hardware stores. (I will put a few short articles on my website <www.onehuman.org> which will contain many more of the recommended product substitutes.)

Buying furniture made out of natural materials (such as, wood, cotton, and wool) will greatly improve air quality in homes. This is because these natural resources will not outgas (or, technically, aerosolize) poisonous substances like other, typically less expensive, ones (such as, polyvinyl chlorides, polyesters, and formaldehydes).

Placing plants throughout your house will improve air quality as well. Many plants are able to absorb dangerous chemicals and thereby detoxify a home. They will also improve the atmosphere of a home too.

Purchasing energy star appliances will reduce your electricity bill and clean the air and waterways. Typically, there is a huge difference in the energy needs of functionally identical furnaces, washers, driers, televisions, etc. Ask retailers what the energy demands are of these products. Purchase the products that save energy. If your local store doesn't carry energy star appliances (and some appliances are not yet designated these way), inquire as to why they don't and request that they do. Go online and compare energy costs. You will likely be surprised how much savings can be had. For example, in the computer realm, a laptop uses only one-third of the energy of a desktop computer (including its monitor) over the course of a year.

And finally, and likely most impactful, slowly transitioning to a home that is colder in the winter (and warmer in the summer) will do wonders to save energy (and money). In the winter, my home is set at 61 degrees and my heating bills definitely reflect it. Sure, long sleeved shirts are a must, as well as cozy, and well-insulated slippers, but it beats \$300-\$700 monthly heating bills and the associated air pollution. In the summer, a mobile fan is much less expensive than an air conditioning unit (or central air conditioning). Opening windows, drinking ice water and living in the cooler parts of one's house (i.e., downstairs) can also allow one to make it through the sweltering months of summer without "wasting" energy/money. Having windows open throughout the summer also has the important advantage (particularly in Northern Illinois) of letting the radioactive radon gas out into the atmosphere (where it becomes diluted). Hermetically-sealed homes allow indoor radon to accumulate to dangerous levels; when it enters our lungs, it does serious cellular damage.

5. Eat lower on the trophic scale. By eating more plants and eating fewer animals, we not only leave more land for diverse life forms and greatly reduce the poisons circulating in our environment but we also live healthier as well. How so?

We all need energy to survive. We get the majority of this energy from the foods we eat and drink. On a planetary scale, nearly all the energy that exists on Earth comes in the form of light from the Sun. Yet, we cannot "eat" or "drink" sunlight directly. Plants and microscopic organisms in the ocean, called phytoplankton, can however. They absorb the Sun's energy and convert it into a form that we (and other animals) can use. For this reason, plants are said to be producers and they occupy the lowest trophic level.

By eating plants and not the animals that consume them, we can have much more efficient diets. Typically, when we eat beef, we consume anywhere from 10-40 times more total energy than if we ate the plants that cows consume (or plants that could be substituted for these crops that cows eat). The eating of fish and crustaceans, and other animals of the sea, also requires much greater amounts of total energy than eating of plants; for example, eating tuna, a carnivore occupying a very high trophic level, consumes thousands of times more total energy. Thus, if we all ate fewer meat products, more land (and ocean) could be set aside for wild or recreational areas. Also, since our food systems are almost completely dominated by toxic pesticides and petroleum-based fertilizers, the more land left alone, the less these toxins will enter our body (via our stomachs or our lungs). People mistakenly think that eating fruits and vegetables that are sprayed with pesticides and herbicides must be more dangerous to consume than eating meat products (that aren't sprayed). But actually, consuming non-organic meats (which are the bulk of meats found in the market these days) exposes its eater to much higher levels of pesticides (due to bioaccumulation) as well as hefty doses of antibiotics and hormones (which are linked to the development of many cancers).

So, the next time you plan to eat a steak or a tuna fish sandwich, consider eating a hearty salad, a hummus or falafel sandwich, or a seitan stir fry instead. Not only will you be acting environmentally-responsibly but also be lessening your exposure to dangerous chemicals. And if you choose to eat a steak instead, insist that it is free range, organic, and a fair trade product.

6. Turn off the television. Consider that 100% of content of television is driven by (i.e., paid for) its commercials—this is a significantly higher proportion than newspapers and magazines. Thus, the vast majority of television content is created to sell products. In other words, the content presented is made for the marketers (of products) not the viewers, despite what we might think. Once one begins to understand this, one begins to sense why the content of television is so devoid of useful information. In this environment, almost all shows become "entertainment" (grabbing the viewer's attention by pandering to their base instincts). Even news is converted into 30-second sound bites that usually depict very few points of view and avoid deep penetrating questions and analysis; analysis of this sort might just expose television for the cultural trap that it is.

The problem with television is as much as what it does present as what it doesn't. Research suggests that the more one watches television the more one has materialistic tendencies and the less one engages civically. Television grabs our attention which removes the viewer's consciousness from social and physical environments and problems. Thus, environmental problems, and the future of our planet, are things largely absent from the minds of people in our culture. Yet, since so much recent scientific and economic analysis suggests that our civilization is suffering greatly now and is likely only to become worse if we don't change our current ways quickly, it is imperative that we spend much more time away from television and doing other, more productive things. Alternatives include, but aren't limited to: (1) reading books and magazines (that aren't so tied to consumerist principles); (2) exercising outside of the house (to improve health and at the same time increase contact with neighbors and local environments); (3) working with local social and political leaders (see more on this in the next resolution); (4) engaging with family and friends on projects that you mutually care about; and, (5) challenging creative talents

(to improve self-image while also making positive cultural contributions).

And if the above isn't enough for you to consider shutting off you TV, perhaps a savings of \$20-\$100 a month (which translates into \$240-\$1,200 a year) for deactivating cable (not to mention the savings that can be garnered by not buying the latest four-figure plasma set in the first place). Savings of this magnitude should do wonders to opening up money for other worthwhile causes.

7. Get politically active. Become an active member in democracy. Last, and perhaps the most difficult for most of us, we all need to better participate in making this the best democracy it can be. As described in an earlier column this year, many indicators question the health and vitality of our democracy at the present time. Thus, it is critical that more of us take an active role. But how?

Voting in state and national elections (as well as the primaries) is certainly an important way to be active. Yet, since both major parties (and, thus, their candidates) are so tied to corporate interests and big money lobbies, it is essential that we look beyond these elections to make genuine progress.

Local elections, where major party candidates can sometimes avoid being so "obligated" to repay favors to big donors and where third party candidates can actually win, might be a place for people to start. Local and state referenda are another.

But probably the most important way one can be involved is through community awareness raising and questioning/challenging the status quo at many levels—schools, tax structures, park development, pollution producers, etc. New laws need to be passed, ones that take human life/health as well as the environment into account. Some existing laws (such as the Clean Air Act

and the Endangered Species Act) need to be properly enforced and not compromised or undermined. Tax loopholes for the super rich and large corporations need to be eliminated. Humans need to have more rights than corporations (not the other way around, as is usually the case today). All children should be given every advantage possible, since it is certainly immoral to allow any child to go hungry, uneducated, or without health care in the richest nation in the world.

In order to effectuate changes in these areas, it is critical that people begin to become politically active. Volunteer at schools, community centers, or other service institutions. Join an environmental organization and participate in projects they sponsor. Demand fairer and more thorough news coverage by our media. Whatever you do, don't sit back and assume that someone else is going to protect your rights or bring about the necessary environmental changes without input from you. A free, well-informed, and active citizenry is the only way a true democracy can exist.

This above list is clearly not exhaustive. I'd love to hear what other folks think are important steps on the way towards a sustainable society. If you have ideas, or attempt one of the resolutions stated above, please let us know.

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