8 Ways to Not Get Tricked While Going Green

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Published on March 30th, 2009

Just like the game of Telephone has taught us, information filtered through multiple sources starts to get a little less reliable. The same concept can be applied to environmentalism. Like any major trend, with mass awareness comes misconception.

For this reason we thought we would dedicate this eight ways to shedding some light on common environmental myths. Most come from simple mix ups or a lack of public education, so we think it should be pretty easy to help set the record straight.

1. Just throw it out, it's biodegradable!

We've heard people and companies brag about biodegradable materials since this whole green craze started. And though we love them, we don't love the misconceptions that surround them. The prime example – "I can just throw this bottle out, because it will break down." That would be true if we kept our landfills open to the elements such as light, air and water. This, however, is not the case. Throwing a biodegradable bottle into a landfill means it's not going to break down (at least in a time frame that counts). Landfills are meant to keep the elements out, and it is precisely these elements that need to be present in order for a material to successfully biodegrade.

Need some cold, hard evidence? I think we can all agree that food is the most biodegradable material out there. It can break down in an ice cold fridge, so a landfill, it seems, would be a perfect environment. Think again: A trash study project conducted by the University of Arizona found some interesting things during their years of trash digging in more than 20 landfills across North America, including "hundreds of undecomposed hot dogs, corn starch and lettuce dating back to the 1960s." Since produce doesn't come with a date, they used some of the still readable 2,425 newspapers they found to get the date of disposal.

FACT:

Now don't get us wrong, we love that packaging is becoming more aware and that biodegradable materials are more widely used. However, the way these products are disposed is the key when talking about waste reduction. Don't fret, there are alternatives.

Recycle it if possible. If not, see if composting is an option. Though your home composting system might work well for paper based products, bioplastics may need a more advanced system. Try your city's composting program or check out local stores or garden centers that utilize composting.

2. All paper should be recycled

Though we would be the first to promote recycling as a fantastic option, it isn't always the right thing to do. You can actually do some damage if you just throw everything into your recycling bin. Enter the pizza box. Though there are some obvious recycling bin no-no's, paper is usually a perfect participant in the recycling game.

So, why the warning? Unlike plastic or glass, where the recycling process includes heat, paper is broken down using water. And as the old adage clearly states, water and oil don't mix. That's right, throwing a used paper plate, napkin or stained pizza box in with the rest of the paper for recycling can actually do more harm than good. In fact, we're talking about 700 million dollars in contamination each year.

Since the paper is mixed in large vats, and inspection at a recycling plant can only catch so much, it just takes a few contaminates to add oil to the watery pulp, and in turn, render the entire batch useless.

FACT:

Though there are tons of paper types that can be recycled, make sure to follow the rules of your local recycling services for what works for you. Some can recycle envelopes with those peek-through windows, while others can't. Recycling is a game of knowledge, and knowing a little can get you a long way.

3. Organic food is *always* better for the planet

An organic banana from Chile that had to travel more than 5,000 miles to reach your table in Los Angeles, is not overall better than a conventional banana that was grown at a farm five miles from your home. It just doesn't add up. Though organic is a great attribute to look for when shopping for produce, it shouldn't be the only factor in consideration. Buying locally has a huge impact on a product's overall footprint.

FACT:

Though organic may be a great asset, if local options are abundant and you have to make a decision between the two, make sure to weigh the pros and cons of each. For instance, though organic is better for water systems, soil health and bio diversity, when talking about the health effects of organic, one can be less worried about fruits and vegetables whose skins or outer leaves aren't eaten.

For more delicate skins, the levels of pesticides that can be absorbed is much greater. In fact, according to studies by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Consumer Reports and the Environmental Working Group, 97.3 percent of nectarines sampled were found to contain pesticides. The below list can help be used as a shopping guide:

When you should buy organic	When you can pass on organic
Celery	Papaya
Bell peppers	Pineapples
Potatoes	Asparagus
Spinach	Bananas
Apples	Kiwi
Cherries	Avocado
Grapes	Broccoli
Nectarines	Cauliflower
Peaches	Corn
Raspberries	Onions
Strawberries	Peas

Pears	Mangos

4. But the label said Eco!

Any time a trend or lifestyle gets popular, a lot of people try to get on the bandwagon. The good news is a lot of great ideas and products get created. The bad news, a lot of bad ones are too! This wouldn't be a big deal if consumers could easily tell the difference. Unfortunately lots of marketing can go into making sure you can't.

According to the Natural Products Association, which represents more than 10,000 natural product companies and retailers, Americans spent $7.5 billion in 2006 on personal care products that claimed to be all-natural but often were not.

Thankfully there are some major regulations in place for some of the products we rely on. Organic, for example, is a statement that is regulated by state and federal agencies.

According to Cathy Greene with the Economic Research Service/USDA , "Private organizations, mostly nonprofits, began developing certification standards in the early 1970's as a way to support organic farming and thwart fraud." For these reasons, most people feel confident in purchasing products labeled organic.

FACT:

This same consumer confidence can be found in other green products with the help of labeling. Below are a few of the ones to watch for:

Looking for seals such as these can help insure your product is truly green. Photo: GoodHousekeeping.com

- ENERGY STAR – This blue and white symbol can be found on products that have qualified as more energy efficient. To earn the ENERGY STAR, products must meet strict energy criteria that have been set in place by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or the U.S. Department of Energy. These products include refrigerators, dish washers and light bulbs.

- Forest Stewardship Council – The FSC has developed "a set of Principles and Criteria for forest management that are applicable to all FSC-certified forests throughout the world." These 10 principles and 50 plus criteria address multiple areas of forest management including indigenous rights, multiple benefits and environmental impacts. This tree-shaped logo can be found on products ranging from paper and printers to pulp mills.

- Good Housekeeping Green Seal – This label bares a strong resemblance to its famous counterpart with the distinction of it's color (green). The Green Good Housekeeping Seal will debut later this year, after the Good Housekeeping Research Institute and a consultancy firm complete development of product evaluation criteria. To be eligible for the green seal, a product must meet the criteria for the original seal of approval, as well as meet standards related to product composition, manufacturing and packaging.

- GREENGUARD Indoor Air Quality – These planet-toting logos can be found on building materials that are manufactured to help "improve indoor air." The GREENGUARD Environmental Institute (GEI) is a nonprofit organization that oversees the certification programs for building materials and indoor products. These logos let a consumer know that the products are regularly tested to meet chemical and particle emissions acceptable under IAQ pollutant guidelines and standards.

- Scientific Certification Systems - This independent company gives certification of environmental, sustainability, food quality and food purity claims for products across the globe. Their extensive network covers consumer goods such as produce, fisheries, forestry, eco-products and floral.

5. Adjusting my thermostat wastes energy

Many people come from the school of thought that maintaining a temperature uses less energy than dropping the thermostat while gone and adjusting when you return. It isn't that crazy of a notion. In fact, we can recall some similar theories around florescent lights and computers. In order to find the truth, we went to the people that know it best.

FACT:

According to the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy, it is better to turn down the thermostat while not in the the house. In fact, "If you are out for a good stretch of time (say 8 hours or so), this temperature 'set-back' will save more energy than it will take to bring your home back to the desired temperature. (Note: If you have a heat pump, make sure you have a heat pump thermostat designed for your heat pump, and that it has been properly programmed." There, it's settled!

6. I have to spend a lot of money to *go green*

If you have ever checked out the price of a hybrid, or taken a stroll through a natural market, you know that green can add some extra numbers to most price tags. Sure as more people enter the market, prices get more competitive and eventually drop. In the meantime, don't let those higher priced items dictate your level of commitment. Buying certain products is not the only way to green your act.

FACT:

In one of our recent 8 Ways, we explored the concept that some green acts actually save you money. Take for instance the simple task of buying in bulk. A *Real Simple* Magazine experiment in 2003 found that purchasing 15 common items at a warehouse store in bulk as opposed to the supermarket saved $58.74 in Illinois and $109.72 in New York (including a membership fee), and the major reason for the price discrepancy were the supermarket prices per state. It's safe to assume that doing a majority of your shopping in bulk would save **over $200 on supplies** and **$20 per year on gas,** regardless of where you live.

It doesn't have to stop there. Tons of everyday tasks can take the planet into consideration while not costing a thing. Even building materials can be more cost effective when sustainability is kept in mind.

Organizations like Floresta help to promote agroforestry, reforestation and soil conservation in rural areas. Photo: Floresta.org

7. I'll just plant a tree – that'll fix it!

Most everyone will agree that planting trees is an all around win. Not only does it help the environment by cooling the air, reducing air pollutants and absorbing sunlight, but they are also a beautiful addition to any area.

The issue at hand is not so much about the what (planting) but the where (benefit). According to writer Maria Colenso, "recent scientific studies show those benefits depend on where those trees are planted. Plant in the wrong part of the world and you may be wasting time and money."

FACT:

Don't give up on the planting, just make sure you have a plan. If you are planting it locally, in a park or community center, then plant away! Those venues are a great place to add a little foliage and make a small difference.

If you are planning to donate to a company or support a cause, do a little research to make sure they are putting their resources to the best use. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Forests that are located in the tropical belt that surrounds the equator have a large benefit on the planet.
- These forests absorb CO2 (a process called carbon sequestering) which helps lower temperatures.
- Forests located outside of the this belt could have little or no impact on climate change.
- In fact, the farther away from the equator forests are, the more harm they can do.
- Known as the albedo effect, forests outside this belt are more likely to trap in heat, in turn, raising temperatures.

8. If I can't do it all, I might as well do nothing

We have all done it. The overwhelming number of factors involved with the *act of changing* can leave even the most steadfast individual discouraged and on the verge of giving up. It is usually around this time that a little voice pops in with the final blow, "what difference does it make anyway?"

Or perhaps you haven't felt this at all. You are filled with motivation and nothing stands in your way. Until…a co-worker pipes up over your reusable bag and Sigg bottle, giving you a piece of their mind. This usually includes something to the extent of, "you're just one person, and one person can't change the world."

Both statements have some merit, but, that doesn't make them true.

FACT:

When words don’t come easily on a subject as huge as this, using the words of another can usually do the trick. So here it goes.

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

This simple statement by M.K. Gandhi sums up why always trying is as important as actually doing. Though you may not see the results of your actions in one day, over time, all those actions add up.

Take for example our curbside recycling rate. In 1960, U.S. curbside recycling processed 5.6 million tons of waste. In 2006, we recycled 81.8 million tons, an **increase of over 1,300 percent**! Though not everyone who recycled an item between the 60s and today knew about it, they were part of a huge movement that helped change the way we approach waste disposal. What movement are you a part of?