

# **How to be Green**

## **Australian Edition – Friends of the Earth**

‘The definitive guide on how each and every one of us can do our bit  
for the maintenance of Planet Earth’

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# FOREWORD

xiii **Living is polluting. Our very presence on the planet makes us all exploiters of its natural wealth and contributors to the vast volume of waste we collectively spew out into earth, air and sea. In essence, we have created today's ecological crisis, not industry or government. After all it is we who demand industry's products and continue to condone the government's environmentally damaging policies. This is why the notion of individual responsibility is central to the business of cleaning up the planet and developing sustainable ways of creating wealth in the future. It's down to each and every one of us to do our bit for the future by learning to tread more lightly on the planet right now.**

Awareness of just how much we can do is greater than ever before. The last 12 months have witnessed a veritable explosion in 'green concerns' and it is becoming harder and harder for people to go on claiming that there is nothing they can do. That thin line between feelings of genuine powerlessness and good old-fashioned laziness has been exposed to a far more rigorous scrutiny!

**But millions of people still feel they lack the basic information they need to change their lifestyle.** How To Be Green fills that gap in a no-nonsense, highly practical way. Indeed, as far as our current understanding of green issues goes, it is the definitive guide on how each and every one of us can do our bit for the maintenance of planet earth.

xiv **However small and insignificant these everyday actions may sometimes seem, they are the individual bricks and mortar needed to build a more caring, responsible society.**

'Green consumerism' has suddenly become all the rage and many businesses are making quite genuine efforts to operate in a more environmentally sensitive way. **But bandwagons are an alluring means of transport. So we need to beware of those companies and industries that are out to earn a few cheap 'greenie points' simply by making a couple of cosmetic changes in their product ranges or production processes.**

**By the same token, green consumerism really means a great deal more than simply changing over from an earth-bashing product to a slightly more environmentally sensitive one. It means questioning both the nature and the volume of our consumption. It means reassessing our role as individuals in reinforcing or transforming the fundamental inequalities in today's world economy.** And it means challenging politicians to create a policy framework that will encourage more people to adopt a greener lifestyle.

## 253 THIRTEEN - PRESS FOR ACTION – EVERY LITTLE HELPS

**Nothing is guaranteed to bring about environmental disaster faster than everyone in the world believing that, whatever they do, it won't make any difference. Everything we do makes a difference. Every decision we make about how we live our lives, whether momentous or seemingly insignificant, works either towards the greening of the planet, or against it.**

**Realising that we have that individual responsibility** can easily tip us into panic or inaction, but that too is a decision we must make as consciously as we can. In order to care for ourselves and for the earth we must choose not to panic, and we must choose to act. **Unless we are actively for a green future, then greyness will surely prevail.**

**Recognising that every little thing we do has environmental implications and repercussions can be frightening.** Recently the media have been running stories about the dangers of aerosols, bleached paper products, plastic bags and pesticides contaminated foods. It seems that nothing can protect us from the damage caused by decades of human carelessness.

254 As we approach the last decade of the twentieth century there is **a growing awareness of the importance of personal commitment within the wider greening process, of changing our day-to-day habits to take the earth into account.** Members of the recently established Ark Trust, (an organisation founded by environmentalists and performers including Sting and Chrissie Hynde) for example, are asked to show their commitment to environmental protection by taking 'The Ark Pledge'. This is a personal commitment to use unleaded petrol instead of leaded, use environment-friendly household products, save energy in the home, recycle household rubbish, eat less meat and insist on organic produce.

This may seem a lot to commit yourself to all at once, but greening starts at an even more **mundane level.** Never let yourself believe that one bit of litter thrown out of the car window, or one drink bought in a can rather than a reusable bottle, isn't going to make a difference. Occasionally we all make unecological choices, and every decision must be taken in the light of the prevailing circumstances. Yet, even if the circumstances justify the lapse, it still makes a difference, You don't need to feel guilty or self-judgemental-absolute purists can be real bores-but you can't duck your responsibility.

**You may sometimes think that the mess we are in is somebody else's fault, and they should do something about cleaning it up. They probably think the same. In reality it is up to all of us to do something. Even though what you do to help the environment may seem small and insignificant, imagine what a difference it would make if everyone in the country did it. The change has to start somewhere, and it might as well be with you.**

When ecologist Barry Commoner wrote *The Closing Circle* (one of the classics of green thinking) in 1971, he included a very simple formulation of the basic 'laws of ecology'. They are so clear and straightforward that it is well worth memorising them:

- Everything must go somewhere.
- Nature knows best.
- There's no such thing as a free lunch.
- Everything is connected with everything else.

258 The first law is the one to do with pollution. **Whenever we throw something away it doesn't just disappear. Whether we put it in the bin, throw it out of the window or dump it in the middle of the ocean, we must live with the repercussions. Our planet is finite; a closed system'. Wherever we put our 'rubbish' it will continue to haunt us, just like the boxes of junk under the stairs.**

The second law warns us that **we thwart and destroy nature at our peril**, and that nature has been evolving excellent life-support systems for millions of years longer than human beings have.

**The third law makes it clear that everything we consume has an environmental and social cost. Though we might like to imagine that the luxuries of life simply appear before us without any provenance, it is a costly delusion.** Up to now most people in Australia have been able to consume as they do at the expense of ignoring the continuing decline of their own health, that of their surroundings, and the chronic ill health of the Third World. Today, however, the legacy of profligacy and pollution is hard to ignore.

Of the four laws, the last is the key and the one that helps us to understand the others. **Everything is connected to everything else. This is the philosophy and practice of holism, or holistic thinking, which says that you can never make complete sense of anything unless you take into account all its circumstances and complex interconnections.**

**Holistic thinking has a hard time in a culture which wants quick, simple answers. Radioactive waste? Bury it. Sore throat? Dose it with antibiotics. Traffic jam? Build a new road. Such 'solutions' may deal with superficial symptoms, but they rarely take into account the wasteful way in which we use energy. The antibiotics won't take away the stress and pollution upsetting the membranes of the throat. The plans for the new road won't question the social and environmental problems associated with the continuing rise in car ownership.**

The quickfire 'who's-to-blame?' approach of the media doesn't help either. Politicians and industry representatives each have two minutes to put their arguments, **which inevitably emerge as simplistic whitewashes.** There is also considerable political and commercial advantage in a policy of divide and rule, **where different aspects of important issues are deliberately compartmentalised in order to discourage the public from asking difficult questions.** Thus, **the remit of public health officials to look after drinking water quality is carefully separated from the responsibilities of the Agriculture Department to keep pesticides and fertilisers from polluting streams and reservoirs.** Where two government departments have opposing loyalties, as with Health and Agriculture over issues of food hygiene, or Energy and Environment over nuclear energy policy, the resulting confusion is entertaining but profoundly worrying.

**Even apparently quite separate issues can be seen to influence each other. When you choose to protect your health by buying organic produce, you are also helping prevent land degradation.** The future of the threatened tribespeople of Sarawak may depend partly on the Australian government's import policy on rainforest timbers and choices you make when buying timber.