

Your Ecological Footprint

Everyone today is talking about the environment: What is going wrong with it? How can we save it? How can we measure the damage that we are doing? Who is responsible for solutions: governments, corporations or individuals? The discussion often becomes confusing.

A simple way to determine your personal responsibility for the environment is to figure out your own impact, or “ecological footprint.” What does this mean? Well, your ecological footprint is a measurement of how much resources you as an individual consume annually.

Most ecologists agree that for the world to sustain itself no individual’s ecological footprint should be more than the equivalent of 1.8 hectares; this assumes that everyone shares resources equally. The calculation is made by taking the total of all the biologically productive land available, meaning that which can be used for growing food to eat or plants and trees to supply oxygen, and dividing it by the world’s population. The result is a sustainable ecological footprint of 1.8 hectares per person.

Of course, however, the world is not a place where resources are shared equally or even equitably. People living today have ecological footprints of greatly varying sizes. The average individual ecological footprint in North America is 9.6 hectares, more than the resources required to sustainably support five people. In Great Britain it is 4.6 hectares, better than in North America, but still more than two-and-a-half times an ecological footprint that is sustainable.. In Bangladesh the people consume very few resources; 0.5 hectares is the average individual ecological footprint.

How is it that some of us make such a huge ecological footprint compared to others? In North America our large ecological footprint is a result of all the resource-demanding choices we make: the kinds of foods we eat; the size of our houses; and our ways of travel.

Unfortunately, we are consuming resources faster than the planet can replace them. Our global ecological footprint is 20 percent larger than the sustainable capacity of the planet; in other words, Earth can regenerate only 80 percent of the resources people are consuming. The planet’s wealth of natural resources has declined by 30 percent just since the 1970s. If we continue at this rate, there will be no resources available for future generations.

So, what can you do to reduce your impact on the environment? Start by finding a site on the Internet that can help you to calculate your personal ecological footprint. Then, take steps to reduce the amount of resources you consume and shrink your ecological footprint; for example, take public transportation more often, buy and throw out fewer items, and eat less meat. Become more aware of the impact on the environment of your choices and decisions. Your grandchildren and great-grandchildren will thank you.