

What Can We Do? The 5Rs

Reduce ... Reuse ... Relocalize ... Reskill ... Reconnect

Consider the familiar old jingle: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Many people aren't aware that this is really a hierarchy: **Reduce and Reuse** are far preferable. It's remarkable that, of the three concepts, recycling is the one our society has most eagerly embraced. Recycling discarded materials is a great idea but it requires lots of fuel and related greenhouse gas emissions to transport those materials to the sorting center, and then to the processing center. Much of our discarded material is shipped overseas to other continents for processing. Then it takes fuel to melt the materials down and re-form them, and fuel to transport them to their new function. Recycling as we know it today is inextricably part of the dinosaur past. It is a process which conveniently enables our outrageously unsustainable use-it-once consumerist attitude toward the earth's resources.

Yes, recycle everything you can. But strive for better. For a lower-powered, lower-emissions, earth-wiser future, the more appropriate answer is a form of Reduce which the waste management industry calls "source reduction." Eliminate the flow of single use containers, go package-free, and reduce your overall level of discards.

Don't overlook the ultimate recycler--a compost pile on your property. Reduce your food wastes as much as possible, but apply the trimmings, together with yard clippings, toward rich garden soil. You'll get earthworms, microorganisms, and fantastic garden nutrition, all with little effort and zero additional transportation or fossil fuels burden.

Reduce and Reuse truly are the direction of our future. Rethink the amount of stuff you're telling yourself that you "need," and Reduce the incredible volume of it. Cut it back substantially. Take a look at other cultures, perhaps through a book such as Peter Menzel's *Material World*. Understand how little stuff is truly necessary to live productive, fulfilling lives amid family and community. Understand that our North American definition of "normal" is way out of line.

Quit participating in the outrageous flow. Stop buying cheap mass-produced consumer imports, because these entail transportation excesses, higher greenhouse gas emissions, waste of the earth's materials to planned obsolescence, and human rights violations. Stop judging the Chinese for what they do when they're doing it mainly to provide for our insatiable demands. If you really need something, buy reused. Seek a second-hand item which is already manufactured, already here in your local vicinity.

Boycott disposable products. Then reach beyond, and choose those which are durable. That means stuff that will really last, like tools and goods you'll hand down to your grandchildren. Learn how to maintain and repair your tools. Think about what you really need and whether the item might serve multiple functions. A good knife accomplishes many tasks, while a multi-bladed chopping gadget serves only one function, is difficult to clean, and will likely break, soon to be thrown "away."

Reduce the transportation distances over which we haul that stuff and ourselves. **Relocalization** is really a subset of "reduce," in that it involves reducing our transportation in every way possible. As global warming and peak oil work in tandem to curb our lavish transportation habits, we'll no longer be able to import food and goods as we have in the past 50 to 100 years.

Bring local foods into your diet, more of them each month, each year, as you discover them or as they become available. Question your "need" for vast quantities of resource-intensive foods like conventionally raised beef; travel-intensive imported wines and cheeses; or foods like sugar and conventional coffee, which carry high social justice costs. Ease these out of your regular shopping list; perhaps save them for special occasions.

The next time you change jobs or change residences, strive to bring work and home physically closer together. Question the wisdom of moving far away from family and friends because this only creates greater pressure for frequent travel. Rather than foreign destinations, rediscover the joy of local vistas and vacation hideaways.

As we reduce transportation, other issues come to light. What if your local community doesn't have the supplies, the sources, or the skills you need? **Reskilling** brings necessary skills for living back into our local

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communities and teaches these to future generations. As we advance through the second half of our oil supplies, the resulting transportation constraints will mean we’ll truly need more skills in our local neighborhoods.

How could your livelihood become more localized? It takes time to cultivate and develop a localized skill base, time to learn, time to gather information and tools, time to discover and adjust to shorter supply lines. Now is the time to start.

If you know how to sew, teach your grandkids. We don’t expect fine couture tailoring here; rather, the basic skills of layout and constructing garments. Teach your kids how to clothe themselves. Show your kid woodworking, with power-free hand tools; teach her how to set a French drain to absorb rainwater. Teach her how to repair and modify a shelter. If you know how to grow vegetables, teach a child. Not just beans in a kindergarten paper cup, but the real thing. Show how to care for the soil and its ecosystem of living organisms, how to care for the growing plants, how to cook the harvest, and how to save seed. Teach them how to feed themselves Sustainably.

Help our kids understand that these real life skills--rather than text messaging and faster, smaller iPods--are the reality of their lower-carbon, power-down future. Purposeful work and a functional place within society go a long way toward alleviating delinquency and obesity. Hopelessness comes with helplessness. Our kids see the craziness of the mainstream financial scurry, but they don’t know a way out nor are they sure they really want in. They glimpse the magnitude of our environmental and social problems and feel helpless to solve them. A generation empowered with skill and knowledge (rather than the fossil kind of power) becomes able. Through *doing*, our next generations become part of the solutions for their own future.

We eat three times a day. Food is one of the very basic needs of life. It’s a great place to begin to **Reconnect**. Learn how your choices about how you fulfill this need can have profound impact on the ecosystems of the earth and on other people on this earth. Here you’ll begin to discover your interconnected nature.

In many of our meetings in Westchester we emphasize Edible Landscaping. Our reasons for this repeated topic go far beyond our personal love for gardening. When we bury our hands in the earth, something astonishing happens. We feel the cool gritty texture around our fingers, under our nails. We remember being little kids in sand pits. We remember our roots. *This earth nourishes me. I am a part of it. This is where I come from, and to this I shall return.* It’s sacred.

When we learn to care for the soil, we learn about a living organism. Earthworms are only the beginning, a visible part of a vast spectrum which includes microscopic mycorrhizae, mycelium, nitrogen-fixing bacteria, beneficial nematodes and much more. This vital and living community feeds the plants, which feed us.

Food and earth and life and meaning are just that basic.

Modern science knows little about this vast empire. We’re only beginning to appreciate it, in many cases as we try to restore that which we have already devastated. No corporate interest has found it profitable to pay scientists to explore much of it. Thus we see our soil as an inert asset on a financial statement. We sear it with petroleum-based chemicals. We slice it to ribbons with machinery. We leave it bare and cut open to bake in the sun. Dead and lifeless, our once-fertile agricultural soils drift listlessly in the wind and wash away in the rain. When we ignore the life in our soils ... well ... we get into the current ecological mess.

So follow the catchy kindergarten poem and plant a bean in a paper cup. Then go beyond the poem and transplant that growing sprout into a pot on your balcony or a cleared spot in the parkway between sidewalk and street. Protect the little beanstalk. Learn what it needs to survive: a pole to cling to, yes, but more importantly, fresh water and pure sunlight—*nourishment*; live soil, complete with earthworms and micronutrients—*interconnection*; protection from destructive erosion and careless trampling--*a sacred space*.

The bean plant needs these. You have similar needs. Your children and other people’s children and future generations do too. And the ecosystems of the planet need similar care.

These five guidelines--*Reduce, Reuse, Reskill, Relocalize, Reconnect*--point the way ahead. Like the signs alongside the freeway after a major interchange, these guidelines confirm that, yes, indeed, we are on the right track. Amid the confusion of brand names and corporate promotions, the 5Rs propel us in the direction of our true course: Sustainability. They help orient us beyond a few greener purchases into much deeper levels of earth-wiser practice.

Excerpt from *Environmental Change-Making: How to Cultivate Lasting Change in Your Community*, by Joanne Poyourow and the Reverend Peter H. Rood, Jr. (Cathedral Center Press, 2008).