

Environmental tip of the month: cut your carbon footprint June 2022

Fossil fuels (coal, oil, petrol, diesel, gas) are made of carbon which turns into greenhouse gases when burnt and these heat the atmosphere causing the climate to change. Your carbon footprint is a measure in tonnes of how much carbon dioxide and methane you produce in a year. Everything we do uses carbon: everything we heat, everything we buy, everything we eat, every mile we travel.

The UK government target is 6 tonnes of carbon per person, per annum. Our average is currently 12.7 tonnes so there is a lot to be done. We would each need to plant 580 trees every year to offset this, which is clearly unrealistic. A plethora of carbon offsetting nonsense abounds including greenwashing - airlines planting trees and ludicrous proposals like 'carbon capture and storage' to extract CO₂ from the atmosphere, freeze it to a liquid and pump it into old oil wells.

So what can we do to play our part? There are numerous online carbon footprint calculators to help us identify where we can make savings. Using the one from WWF, I discovered that mine is 9.93 tonnes (I am lucky to have an electric car). According to WWF the UK average is 10.5 tonnes, the PL8 postcode is over 11 tonnes, whilst globally it's only 4 tonnes.

Homes account for 34% per household, mainly from heating which produces 2.7 tonnes of carbon. We have some of the poorest levels of insulation in Europe and this simple and relatively cheap solution can rapidly reduce emissions, save money on energy and create more comfortable homes. Maybe, given Europe's dependency on Russian fossil fuels, those pesky Insulate Britain activists who blocked motorways had a point after all.

Travel generates 23% of our emissions and flying is the big choice we have to make. On average every flying hour adds a quarter of a tonne to your carbon footprint. Shamefully, only 3% of the world's population can regularly fly at all. Can *you* fly less?

Food at 19% is next on the list. Meat production, particularly beef, generates by far the most greenhouse gas. If you eat a couple of servings of beef a week – say 150 grams or two beef burgers – that alone will add over half a tonne to your carbon footprint. On average that's equivalent to driving 1,500 miles or heating your house for around 95 days.

Stuff accounts for the remaining 25%. We are all guilty of buying too much, throwing away too much (when you throw stuff away, it doesn't go away, it just goes somewhere else), and cluttering our lives with things we'd like but don't really need. Recycling alone will not save the planet.

A 50% chance. The first international climate conference (IPCC) was in Paris in 2015 and it was there that scientists warned that the world was on track to reach a dangerous 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels by 2050. They actually said we had a 50% chance of avoiding this so long as urgent steps were taken. Breaching this temperature threshold is liable to set off irreversible tipping points and chain reactions which will lead to much higher temperatures and mass extinction. Not just of wildlife.

According to the UN things have got far worse since 2015, we are still accelerating our use of fossil fuels: 'the red lights are flashing'. A 50% chance: would you board a plane if a toss of a coin could decide if it crashes? Would you put your grandchildren on board with those odds? Let's do everything we can to cut our carbon footprints.

Chris Bray 2022