

This book, in short, is about my attempt with my little family to live for a year causing as little negative environmental impact as possible. If what I've described so far sounds extreme, that's because it's meant to be. My intention with this book is not to advocate that, as a culture, we should all give up elevators, washing machines, and toilet paper. This is a book about a lifestyle experiment. It chronicles a year of inquiry: How truly necessary are many of the conveniences we take for granted but that, in their manufacture and use, hurt our habitat? How much of our consumption of the planet's resources actually makes us happier and how much just keeps us chained up as wage slaves?

What would it be like to try to live a no-impact lifestyle? Is it possible? Could it catch on? Would living this way be more fun or less fun? More satisfying or less satisfying? Harder or easier? Worthwhile or senseless? Are we all doomed or is there hope? Is individual action lived out loud really just individual action? Would the environmental costs of producing this very book undo all the good, or would the message it purveyed outweigh the damage and add to the good?

But perhaps most important, at least when it came to addressing my own despair, was I as helpless to help change the imperiled world we live in as I'd thought?

These are the questions at the heart of this whole crazy-ass endeavor. Answering them for myself required extreme measures. How could I figure it all out if I didn't put myself in the crucible of going all the way? This was not intended to be an experiment in seeing if we could preserve the habitat we live in and still stay comfortable. It was to be an experiment in putting the habitat first and seeing how that affected us.

As it would turn out, my environmental exercise would wind up drawing the attention of both some independent filmmakers, who wanted to make a documentary about the No Impact project, and *The New York Times*, which halfway through the year would stumble upon my blog and write a profile of my family. The result of that profile was as much a surprise to me as anyone. The world media was fascinated by my experiment, and I found myself in the middle of a press storm, sometimes centering, to my chagrin, on the somewhat trivial fact that, as part of the project, I'd chosen to find a more environment-friendly approach to bathroom hygiene than toilet paper.

I was thrust into a debate about collective versus individual action and unwittingly became something of an environmental spokesman. I got thousands of e-mails from people asking what they should do, how they should live their lives. I suddenly found that I was, though I hesitate to say it, an accidental leader.

So much has changed since I began this project. My thinking. My career. My friendships. My fatherhood. My marriage.

But on the eve of the start of the No Impact project, I simply thought that by taking a personal approach to the problem of the health, safety, and happiness of our species, maybe I had found a non-finger-wagging way to change some minds after all. But if I couldn't, when all was said and done, at least I would have been able to change myself. At least if I couldn't solve the problems, I'd be able to say that I had tried.

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A quick and partial inventory of the crap I found collected in our three large garbage bags in only four days: fourteen plastic coffee cups, two cardboard coffee cups, four Styrofoam coffee cups, twelve plastic straws, six plastic straw wrappers, nineteen paper napkins, fourteen small paper bags, nine sets of plastic cutlery (unused), five receipts (never even looked at), three balls of used paper towel, fourteen plastic bags, three plastic and four aluminum take-out containers and their lids, two sets of wooden chopsticks, one cardboard french-fry container, three crumpled balls of tinfoil, and two cardboard boxes that had contained a new pair of desk lamps, along with the Styrofoam packing materials.

I call this a "partial" inventory because I dissected my way through the insides of only two out of the three bags. To the third, we had added the contents of the bathroom garbage pail, the last resting place of Isabella's dirty diapers. Some of them had burst open, and I couldn't bring myself to paw through the result without a gas mask. Suffice it to say that the third bag added to our trash a

total of about eighteen dirty diapers, a further twenty-five gallons or so of shit-covered takeout containers, some greasy chow fun noodles, pizza crusts, and a head of lettuce gone bad in the fridge before we ever used it.

Surrounded by all this debris, sitting there on my hallway floor with a pen and paper in my hand, I felt like I'd just stepped on the scale and the news was much worse than I'd thought. It was not trash per se that got me. It was the throwing away of things used for less than five minutes without so much as a thought before reaching for the exact same product to use for another five minutes before throwing that away, too. The truth was that every coffee cup and every water bottle in the corner trashcan gave me a tiny micro-twinge of guilt. For years, I had been giving myself a daily pass with the intention of eventually doing better.

If you had asked me if I tried not to make trash, not to waste, I would have told you that I certainly didn't produce the average American's 4.6 pounds of trash per day, or roughly 1,700 pounds per year. I would have probably told you I didn't try as hard as I should but that I tried. I made an effort, I would have said. I'm not all talk. I care about the world.

What had the crumbled-up, grease-covered dross around me demonstrated? That I had a long way to go.

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Michelle says that having no electricity in the apartment is like a nonstop vacation. Every summer night we search for things to do outside—play in the fountain with Isabella's friends in Washington Square Park, make a trip to the river. Then we come home in the dark, put Isabella to bed, and sit up, talking in quiet tones by candlelight.

We go, one night, to the community garden with a jar because fireflies are in season. We catch the tiny lightning flashes, Isabella stares at them through the glass of the jar, we let them go. "Daddy, this is so much fun," she tells me. We stay in the park till after dark, since there is no point going home to an unlit apartment, and we listen to a group of Japanese music students play Bach.

The world of techno cannot intrude. It's like we're taking a break. Summer is here and all sorts of fruits are bursting into our lives courtesy of the farmer's market. I spend lots of time with Isabella because there's no light to work by anyway.

"Daddy," Isabella says when we come in to the dark apartment the first night after the electricity is turned off, "turn on the lights."

"We don't have lights anymore, honey, we only have candles," I say.

Next night, when we come in, Isabella, without blinking, says, "Daddy, turn on the candles."

We eat blueberries and strawberries and plums around the table by candlelight. Then Isabella goes to bed and Michelle and I talk. We are asleep most nights by ten. People keep telling us how good we look.

Excerpts from NO IMPACT MAN: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process by Colin Beavan, published in September by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC. Copyright © 2009 by Colin Beavan. All rights reserved.