

## Going Green? Easy Doesn't Do It

By Michael Maniates

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Thanksgiving nicely focuses our attention on things of lasting importance: family, friends, community, a rich harvest. None of these blessings come without cost or sacrifice. Today, then, we might consider what we must give of ourselves to preserve such abundance in the face of increasing climatic instability.

One needn't ponder this question in a vacuum. Several best-sellers offer advice about what we must ask of ourselves and one another. Their titles suggest that we needn't break much of a sweat: "It's Easy Being Green," "The Lazy Environmentalist," or even "The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time."

Although each offers familiar advice ("reuse scrap paper before recycling" or "take shorter showers"), it's what's left unsaid by these books that's intriguing. Three assertions permeate the pages: (1) We should look for easy, cost-effective things to do in our private lives as consumers, since that's where we have the most power and control; these are the best things to do because (2) if we all do them the cumulative effect of these individual choices will be a safe planet; which is fortunate indeed because (3) we, by nature, aren't terribly interested in doing anything that isn't private, individualistic, cost-effective and, above all, easy.

This glorification of easy isn't limited to the newest environmental self-help books. The Web sites of the big U.S. environmental groups, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and even the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) offer markedly similar lists of actions that tell us we can change the world through our consumer choices, choices that are economic, simple, even stylish. [Al Gore](#) himself isn't immune. His recent Live Earth concert featured a who's-who lineup of celebrities who said that if we all do our little bit to recycle and conserve -- the simple things, mind you, because that's all we'll need (translation: that's all they think we'll go for) -- we can together rescue the world for our children and grandchildren.

Never has so little been asked of so many at such a critical moment.

The hard facts are these: If we sum up the easy, cost-effective, eco-efficiency measures we should all embrace, the best we get is a slowing of the growth of environmental damage. That's hardly enough: Avoiding the worst risks of climate change, for instance, may require reducing U.S. carbon emissions by 80 percent in the next 30 years while invoking the moral authority such reductions would confer to persuade [China](#), [India](#) and other booming nations to embrace similar restraint. Obsessing over recycling and installing a few special light bulbs won't cut it. We need to be looking at fundamental change in our energy, transportation and agricultural systems rather than technological tweaking on the margins, and this means changes and costs that our current and would-be leaders seem afraid to discuss. Which is a pity, since Americans are at their best when they're struggling together, and sometimes with one another, toward difficult goals.

Throughout our history it has been the knotty, vexing challenges, and leaders who speak frankly about them, that have fired our individual and communal imagination, creativity and commitment. [Paul Revere](#) didn't race through the streets of [Middlesex County](#) hawking a book on "The Lazy Revolutionary." [Franklin Roosevelt](#) didn't mobilize the country's energies by listing 10 easy ways to oppose fascism. And it's unlikely that [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)'s drafts of his "I Have a Dream" speech or his "Letter From [Birmingham Jail](#)" imagined a practical politics of change rooted in individualistic, consumer-centered actions.

This Thanksgiving, the greatest environmental problem confronting us isn't melting ice, faltering rain, or flattening oil supplies and rising gasoline prices. Rather, it's that when Americans ask, "What can I do to make a difference?" we're treated like children by environmental elites and political leaders too timid to call forth the best in us or too blind to that which has made us a great nation.

Surely we must do the easy things: They slow the damage and themselves become enabling symbols of empathy for future generations. But we cannot permit our leaders to sell us short. To stop at "easy" is to say that the best we can do is accept an uninspired politics of

guilt around a parade of uncoordinated individual action. What of the power and exhilaration that comes from working with others toward bold possibilities for the future? What of present sacrifice for future gain?

The time for easy is over. We're grown-ups who understand the necessity of hard work and difficult choices. We're ready for frank talk about how we best confront -- in ways rewarding, confusing, creative and hard -- the planetary emergency before us.

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