

It really is possible to consume less

VALORIE ROCKNEY/GUEST COLUMNIST



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You already know much of the bad news, so I'll keep it short: Global warming is real.

The Arctic ice cap is actually melting at this moment and we're using up the earth's resources much faster than the Earth can renew them. We Americans lead the rest of the world in converting natural resources to garbage.

Mathis Wackernagel, director of the Global Footprint Network, points out that, factoring in everything we use — the strawberries we eat, the cotton in our socks, the gas we burn when we drive to work — an average American consumes about twice the resources used by someone who is Swiss or Japanese. If all people lived like Americans, we'd need 4.4 planets to accommodate us.

We often assume that reducing our consumption means living lives of deprivation, but actually the reverse is true. In fact it's quite possible for us Americans to consume significantly less and in the process lead more satisfying lives. The Center for a New American Dream sums it up as "less stuff, more fun." Best of all, living sustainably works, for us and for the planet.

On a personal level, we often find that over-consumption doesn't really make us happy. As syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman put it, many of us work long hours to pay the mortgage on a house that sits empty all day. We often find ourselves over-worked, short on time and struggling. If so many of us

feel this way, why do sustainability and, time with family and friends often seem like crazy dreams?

Part of the answer may be that some changes, like composting or turning off lights, seem so small that we despair that they'll ever make much difference. Other changes, like buying a hybrid car or working fewer hours may seem so large and expensive that they're overwhelming. And yet, over time, even small changes are cumulative, build momentum and can produce dramatic results.

My friends Karen and Mike, for example, live downtown with their two small children. Long-time practitioners of simple living, they live below their means and use their extra cash to pay down their mortgage. They shop at yard sales, buy necessities in bulk and do their own home repairs. They value time with their children more than money and as much as possible they both work part-time. They have an abundance of friends who appreciate them

as much as I do.

We can all find creative ways to improve our lives and consume less. We can invite people over, grownups and kids alike, for an evening of music or stories. We can get together with a few friends and freeze or can lots of tomato sauce and blueberry jam. We can host a free clothing exchange for people we know. We can join with friends who have a big living room, share the organizing and clean up and have a dance party.

John Sutér, a participant in Sustainable Tompkins, encourages us above all to support and care for each other. He points out that sustainability is not a destination but "a continuous process of learning how to live with billions of people on the planet and still have the planet be able to support billions of people."

Vicki Robin, president of the New Road Map Foundation and author of the best-selling book, "Your Money or Your Life," sees a culture shift already starting. In her paper "From Excess to Enough,"

Robin points out that fully "Twenty-eight percent of Americans have voluntarily reduced their incomes in order to have more free time — and very few regretted the choice."

For the past five weeks, many of our neighbors have met and talked about these issues at sustainability salons. This week, the last of the series will address "Moving Toward a More Sustainable Culture."

We hope you'll join us in the conversations at the salons and with your loved ones. Let's see what each one of us can do, and what we can do together. Let's use what we already have — to connect with each other and to co-create the future.

The salons are a project of Sustainable Tompkins, which has gained the support of Ithaca College, the Park Foundation, Cornell University, and various local foundations, businesses, and organizations.

Rockney lives in the Town of Ithaca.

Sustainability salons:

■ **Today:** 5:30-7 p.m. at Gimme Coffee, 506 W. State St., Ithaca.

■ **May 5:** 5-6:30 p.m. at Juna's on The Ithaca Commons.

■ **May 6:** 7-8:30 p.m. at WowNet Digital Cafe, 111 N. Aurora St., Ithaca.

■ **May 6:** 7:30-9 p.m. at Simply Red Bistro, 53 E. Main St., Trumansburg.

Resources:

■ Sustainable Tompkins, www.ithaca.edu/sustainability/sustain6.html.

■ The Global Footprint Network, www.footprintnetwork.org/.

■ Center for the New American Dream, www.newdream.org.

■ The Simple Living Network, www.simpleliving.net.

■ Deliberative Democracy, www.deliberative-democracy.net.

■ The New Road Map Foundation, www.newroadmap.org.