

Diet to Save a Planet

Taking On Global Warming Pound by Pound

Interview by Carol Ann Raphael

David Gershon is an expert on behavior change and large-scale organizational transformation. Coauthor of the bestselling book *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It*, he has helped thousands of people and institutions worldwide transform their lives, workplaces, and communities. He and his partner, Gail Straub, were the organizers of the first Earth Run, a global event in which a torch of peace was passed around the world as a gesture of unity that connected twenty-five million people in sixty-two countries at the height of the Cold War. His newest publication, *Low Carbon Diet*, is a practical manual for anyone who wants to reduce global warming step by step, day by day, starting now. Filled with charts for tracking and computing your carbon savings, it can help translate good intentions into demonstrable, measurable change.

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT: *How can any single individual make a difference in a problem as monumental and complex as global warming?*



DAVID GERSHON: Unlike the nuclear issue in the eighties in which it was really hard to create change because of political deadlock, with

global warming it's about our behavior, and so we actually have a big role to play. We can drive this one from the

grassroots very easily. If we know how to mobilize ourselves, I think we have a real chance to be effective.

WIE: *What is the single most important thing anyone can do to make a difference in global warming?*

GERSHON: The individual is a huge part of the problem and can be a huge part of the solution. One-third of the carbon footprint of the United States comes directly out of the residential sector, and the other two-thirds are influenced by our purchases. So individuals have a major role to play if we can get our act together. By far the most important thing is to reduce our carbon footprint. Americans are prof-

ligate in the use of natural resources—extremely, extremely wasteful. We have the ability as individuals to take personal responsibility and to go beyond what I call a green lifestyle.

I wrote a book on green living, and then I did my carbon footprint. The average American footprint is 55,000 pounds, and I found out that my footprint was 85,000 pounds. I was at the worst level. My wife and I were shocked. And the reason was because we travel a lot by plane. So-called green people will be in for a lot of surprises when they actually do their carbon footprint because it's not about how much you recycle. It's about how much fossil fuel you use.

U.S. Consumption Facts



If everyone living on the planet adopted the lifestyle of today's average American, we would need 5.3 planet Earths to sustain us.



Inhabitants of the United States comprise 5% of the world's population, consume 25% of its resources, and waste up to 75% of those resources through inefficiency and lack of awareness.



The average American household generates 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide each year. The typical Swedish household enjoys the same quality of life yet contributes only 15,000 pounds.



Every gallon of gasoline used releases approximately 20 pounds of CO₂. On average, Americans drive 10,000 miles each year.



The average U.S. household produces 4.5 pounds of solid waste per day, a third of which is packaging.

WIE: *How does this emphasis on individual responsibility differ from other approaches to social activism?*

GERSHON: Most social change models, such as command and control, creating of laws, taxation, etc., are designed around forcing someone to change. They are very appropriate in some situations and will always be in the mix. What I've been looking at is another kind of change tool, what I call voluntary behavior change—engaging people to voluntarily participate in an issue because there's something there that calls them or motivates them or inspires them. I've been working on compelling visions that show how we get from here to there by giving people a plan of action, giving them the tools to be successful, and having a feedback

system to show them how their individual drops are filling the bucket, so to speak.

Enlightened social action looks at a positive vision that attracts us rather than protesting against something that isn't working. It is a transformational process that takes us from where we are to a new place. Individuals are called from the inside to act rather than compelled from the outside out of fear or guilt or anger.

WIE: *How do we interest enough people to have a significant impact on global warming?*

GERSHON: You go to the people who are most receptive. This is a core design principle in everything I do, and it comes out of the natural world. A

social science researcher at Stanford, a guy named Everett Rogers, found that fifteen percent of a population will seek out the new and have a high tolerance for experimentation. He called them early adopters. He said that if you can get to them, then the innovation starts diffusing on its own momentum through word of mouth. It's like preaching to the choir, and if they sing loud enough, everyone will want to join in. That's what I'm trying to do with the climate change issue, to reach the people who want to engage and act on their good intention.



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