

The accidental ecologist

Christina Robert's resolution for 2006 is to lose a few pounds – of the tonnes of carbon dioxide we all contribute to the environment each year

My new year's resolutions are as follows: this year I will have more candlelit dinners and do less laundry. I will spend less time in my car, more time walking and I will cook healthy, delicious food made from the best seasonal ingredients. If you join me, we will not only be happier and healthier, we will also be leaders in the battle against global warming.

The above list of pleasures is all part of the new low-carbon lifestyle. Our addiction to oil is getting us nowhere, fast. Burning fossil fuels for energy is filling our air space with carbon dioxide gas (CO₂). In one year, each of us could easily emit ten tonnes of it on our own. CO₂ is the global warming gas that's accumulating in our atmosphere like a duvet in the sky. The thicker the duvet, the more biblical our weather conditions become – think hurricanes, floods, fires and droughts.

According to the International Task Force On Climate Change, we cannot afford to keep belching this stuff out. This is the year to begin cutting CO₂.

To help me get started, I met with Dave Hampton, known as The Carbon Coach. Dave has made a career out of helping the construction industry become more sustainable and now he is making his services available to those of us who want to know how to stop producing so much of our own greenhouse gas. A Cambridge graduate with a degree in engineering (and a father of four), Dave believes in the power of the individual. "If we each lose a portion of our 'carbon weight' we instantly become part of the solution to climate change," he says.

After running through my utility bills, petrol receipts, shopping habits and my annual air travel, it turns out my family's weight in CO₂ is 28 tonnes per year. Hello, Fat Fighters.

We can't see CO₂, which is the major reason we have been able to live in collective denial. Dave invited me to visualize a purple balloon, 1 metre in diameter – this is what 1kg of pure CO₂ looks like. According to Dave, driving my car produces eight tonnes of CO₂ per year. That's 8,000 big, purple balloons.

Now think of a purple balloon 10cm in diameter. Apparently, my car's exhaust would emit over 300 of these per kilometre. Now picture a whole motorway full of cars letting off purple balloons...

According to Dave, there are three ways to reduce CO₂ emissions. The first is by being more efficient. Every £150 spent on our electricity bill accounts for one tonne of CO₂. Turning off lights is easy, and energy efficient light bulbs come in all shapes and sizes now. One of these can save £60 of electricity over their lifetime. This is where my candlelit dinners come in.



Switch your electricity supplier to one that provides power from renewable sources

The other trick is to make less use of the machines we own. When I checked, one third of the clothes in my dirty laundry basket were not actually dirty. Turning down the thermostat by one degree will save a third of a tonne annually and ten per cent off the gas bill. Three degrees and we're talking money for a cashmere jumper.

Make fewer short trips in the car. It seems we walk 20 per cent less today than we did in 1985, according to a National Travel Survey. If we drove 2,500 fewer miles this year, we would save one tonne of CO₂ emissions. If you live in a city, getting food delivered helps. We can all make more effort to share the cars we have. I could lose at least half a tonne here by organising my school runs so they are more efficient.

With regard to groceries, every £10 per week we spend on



food that's grown locally (rather than flown in to the UK) will save around one tonne of CO₂ per year. I absolutely love this saving.

The second step in going on a carbon diet is to switch your electricity supplier to one that provides power

from renewable sources like wind and hydro. The two companies Dave likes are Ecotricity and Good Energy. You could drop up to four tonnes of CO₂ here with just one phone call.

Finally, the third way to lose carbon weight is to offset. We use offset when we have no other way to reduce emissions. Air travel – for example – is lethal with regard to the amount of greenhouse gas it produces. A one-way trip to New York produces one tonne of CO₂ per person. Companies like Climate Care will offset your emissions for you by planting trees. The cost is around £5 per tonne of CO₂. The truth is we need to take a hard look at the real cost of flying. Each tonne of CO₂ we produce is estimated to carry with it a cost of £500 for the negative impact it has on the Earth.

Spending time with The Carbon Coach has helped me see that what's good for the natural world is good for me. Let's make 2006 the year we unplug ourselves from mindless energy habits and get the future into shape.

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WHERE TO START

- A consultation with Dave Hampton, The Carbon Coach, costs £75. Call 07768 806451 or visit carboncoach.com
- Get energy-saving light bulbs from lightbulbs-direct.co.uk
- Switch to a renewable electricity supplier – try ecotricity.co.uk or good-energy.co.uk
- Offset your CO₂ emissions by calling 01865 207000 or visiting climatecare.org