

# Information Sheet

Want to do your bit to make the world a nicer place to live?

By Lucy Macken, [www.NEWS.com.au](http://www.NEWS.com.au) , 28 August 2005

---

## **Want to do your bit to make the world a nicer place to live?**

The worst drought in 100 years, heat waves in spring, freak hail storms - it seems Mother Nature is trying to tell us something. And if you haven't noticed the weather you'd have seen the headlines. Global warming is now a reality. And yet for many Australians, the most uncomfortable thing about it, so far, is the guilt.

After all, we are the world's largest per capita producers of greenhouse gas pollution, according to the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO), and our households alone are responsible for 20 per cent of that.

What's more, energy use has had an annual increase of 2.2 per cent, forcing governments to look at building more coal-fired power plants.

This despite a report to the Council of Australian Government in 2003 that shows we can potentially reduce our energy use by 30 per cent with simple conservation measures.

As Greenpeace energy campaigner Kristin Casper says: "It's a really powerful thing to think that you as an individual have the power to stop the government having to build yet another power plant." Here's how.

### **1. Get car smart**

Road transport uses more energy and emits more greenhouse gases than all other forms of transport put together, says president of the Australian Conservation Foundation and emeritus professor of science, technology and society at Griffith University, Ian Lowe.

Yet we drive more cars and cover more kilometres than ever before.

"The problem is that our cities are no longer modeled so people can walk or go short distances to get to work. Nowadays it's about commuting long distances, and increasingly that's in the car," says Lowe, author of recently published *Living In The Hothouse* (Scribe).

But research by the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria shows a car is far more fuel-efficient if your tyres are well inflated, you drive smoothly, don't speed and avoid using the air-conditioning, the latter of which increases fuel consumption by up to 10 per cent.

Furthermore, if you're idling the car for 30 seconds or more, you use less fuel to turn the car off and restart it.

### **2. Ditch plastic bags**

Australians go through approximately 6.9 billion plastic checkout bags every year, according to the Federal Department of Environment and Heritage.

And since it takes up to 1000 years for one bag to biodegrade, all those bags pose a serious threat to our living environment, not to mention straining our already limited landfill space.

According to Clean-Up Australia, 80 per cent of plastic bags are the high density polyethylene, which can be returned to supermarkets for recycling. (Only three per cent currently are returned.) Degradable plastic bags are becoming available, but because there are no standards to test their effectiveness you're better off opting for more durable bags which are readily available at all supermarkets and most large retailers.

### **3. Turn the tap off**

Recommendations to install a water saving showerhead are nothing new (and worth it given that you can save 52 litres in an 8-minute-long shower), but there are other ways to save water.

Greeniology (Allen & Unwin) author Tanya Ha says by turning the tap off while you brush your teeth, you can save 10 litres in just one minute.

Ha also advises checking for leaks to avoid unnecessary wastage, not to mention water costs. Simply write down the metre reading at night-time and before you use water again the next morning take another reading. The reading shouldn't have changed.

And if you don't already have a half-flush on your toilet, Ha says you can make your own by filling a plastic bottle and leaving it in the cistern.

And think you're saving the environment by spurning a dishwasher? Think again. "Water-smart" dishwashers (such as those from Miele and Asko) can use as little as 10 litres to wash a whole day's dishes, whereas a sink-full of water uses around 18 to 20 litres.

### **4. Get electricity smart**

Energy campaigner Kristin Casper's book Greenpeace's Switched On Guide To Clean Energy gives tips on using less energy.

As well as using white-goods with a five-star energy rating, the guide says switching off things such as the TV and computer instead of leaving them on stand-by will cut your electricity bill by 12 per cent.

Better yet, says Greeniology author Ha, switch to green energy - renewable energy sources such as wind, solar and hydro.

And buy compact fluorescent light bulbs. They use one quarter of the energy of conventional bulbs and last a lot longer.

### **5. Dump your air-conditioner**

Air-conditioning uses up a lot of energy!

"The fact that we are getting more frequent, extreme hot days is a direct incentive to have air-conditioning. And as more people install air-conditioners we then have more energy consumption, more greenhouse gas emission, and as the greenhouse effect gets worse, more extremely hot days when people will want air-conditioning," says Lowe. "Suddenly if it gets above 30 degrees everyone thinks air-conditioning is essential."

But it's not necessary, adds Lowe. "If houses are well designed and sensibly oriented, if you avoid having windows that face west, put insulation in the roof and windows on the right side of the house to catch a breeze, air-conditioning isn't needed in Australia."

### **6. Smart windows**

Up to 40 per cent of a home's energy for cooling or heating is lost or gained through your windows, so the AGO has launched the Window Energy Rating Scheme.

A five-star energy rated window can help keep the home cool 60 per cent better than a single-glazed window, based on the amount of energy required to cool a house. Likewise, a five-star rated window to keep you warm can improve the energy demands by 45 per cent compared with a single-glazed window.

### **7. Get a worm farm**

When it comes to rubbish, figures from the Environment Protection Authority reveal each household throws away almost one tonne of waste each year, 39 per cent of which is organic (think garden, food and wood scraps).

Given that Australians are the world's second biggest producers of waste; it's not surprising our capital cities will reach their present landfill capacity by 2010, according to Clean-Up Australia.

More importantly, food waste that breaks down with no fresh air (such as in a rubbish dump) generates up to four times more greenhouse gas than if it decays in the presence of air, such as in a worm farm.

### **8. Avoid the heat**

According to the AGO, water heating accounts for 25 per cent of the average Australian household's energy use, making it the second largest source of greenhouse gas emission after transport.

So opt for gas. Using electricity to heat water makes about four tonnes of greenhouse gas a year, compared with one tonne using gas.

Of course, says Lowe, the best option is solar hot water, which after the initial outlay costs nothing and is fairly viable in Australia. However, you will need a booster heater for when it's overcast or rainy.

### **Cloth nappies vs disposables**

New parents will need to consider their nappy options: plastic throwaways, cloth ones or hiring a nappy service.

It's a choice between excess water and energy use and stuffing our landfill space with plastic poo catchers.

While the argument is not that simple, at least from an environmental point of view, there is only one clear winner in terms of energy: cloth nappies. Better yet, cloth nappies through a nappy service.

And yet, says Tanya Ha, author of Greeniology, at a time when water restrictions are so important, there's no real option but to conserve water at the cost of landfill by using disposables.

Preliminary results from research currently being done at the University of Queensland show that cloth nappies use more water than disposables.

But even though a nappy wash service uses more than twice the water of home-washed nappies, they are more environmentally friendly because the economies of scale means overall they use less water to wash and less energy.

Beyond water restrictions though, cloth nappies win. For starters, according to the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, disposables use three and half times more energy to make than cloth nappies; they produce 60 times more solid waste for the landfill and use up to 30 times more land to make the raw materials to make the nappy.

### **Useful reference websites to visit:**

[www.greenvehicleguide.gov.au](http://www.greenvehicleguide.gov.au)

[www.neco.com.au](http://www.neco.com.au)

[www.greenfleet.com.au](http://www.greenfleet.com.au)

[www.planetark.com](http://www.planetark.com)

[www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)

[www.wers.net](http://www.wers.net)



*For further information about HOPE Toowoomba and its activities contact:  
Frank Ondrus, Convenor (Manager), PO Box 6118, Toowoomba West QLD  
4350, Australia. Phone from within Australia (07) 4639 2135 Phone from  
outside Australia 61 7 4639 2135; email: [HOPEqueensland@yahoo.com.au](mailto:HOPEqueensland@yahoo.com.au)  
website: <http://green.net.au/hope>*