

WP 3/ D3.1 Environmental citizens' guidelines

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How to be an environmentally aware citizen? Brief guidelines

Europe's future depends on a healthy planet. EU countries are committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050, delivering on the commitments under the Paris Agreement. The European Green Deal is the EU's strategy for reaching the 2050 goal (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/>).

The European Green Deal frames transformation into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy with no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. The Green Deal is implemented through revised EU Directives and Regulations which give EU Member States a series of mandatory targets from recycling to car emissions and share of green spaces in cities.

Background

Growing population of the planet depletes natural resources at a rate which is not sustainable. Since around 1970, we use ecological resources and generate waste at higher rates that Earth can regenerate. To illustrate the imbalance, the ecological footprint¹ is being calculated which currently shows that humanity uses ecological resources as if we lived on 1.75 Earths. This overuse is called ecological overshoot.²

Vast majority of the resource use and waste generation choices are made by powerful companies according to the rules set by the governments. To save the planet, strict global regulations are needed to for example reach carbon neutrality and zero pollution. While pushing big business and governments to act, individuals can and must also make conscious choices to reduce our impact on the environment. Indeed, among individuals, the wealthiest have a far bigger footprint than the poorer.³

¹ See <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/faq>

² See <https://www.overshootday.org/about>

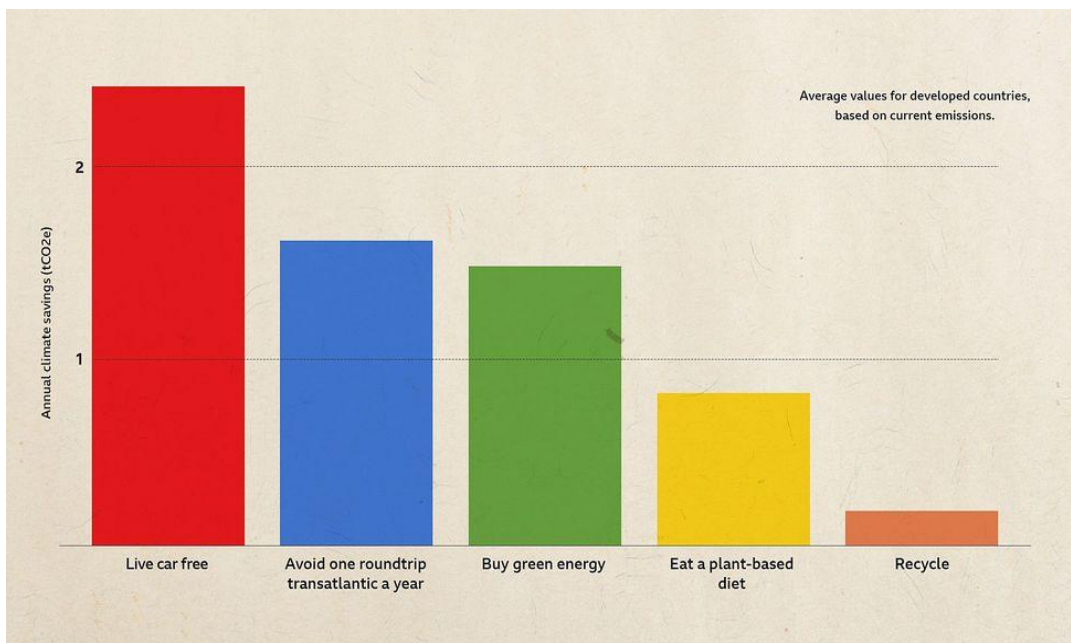
³ See <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/the-world-s-top-1-of-emitters-produce-over-1000-times-more-co2-than-the-bottom-1>

We all have smaller or bigger negative impact on the environment around us, it is unfortunately unavoidable. With daily conscious choices and changes in some habits, we can all contribute to the greener World. It needs shifts in certain individual lifestyle choices which can be difficult as our habits are surprisingly hard to change.

Personal guidelines how to be better environmental citizen

Limit your carbon footprint

People live behind ecological impact all the time by choosing what to eat, where to live and how to move around. Scientists have calculated that carbon emissions count for 60% of the global ecological footprint.⁴ It is therefore important that we all try to reduce carbon emissions which are generated from our own actions. In Europe, the average amount of carbon emissions per capita is around 7 tons a year. It has big positive impact if you can reduce your carbon emissions by 1 ton a year.



Source: Jocelyn Timperely / BBC, 2023. *What a 1.5C lifestyle actually looks like*
(<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230504-the-people-living-ultra-low-carbon-lifestyles>)

⁴ See <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-9276/7/3/58>

Mobility and travel

In Europe, our biggest impact to the environment is caused by the way we move around. From average 7 tons of annual carbon emissions per person, around 2 tons come from mobility. By far the worst negative personal impact on environment is from using a car. There are studies which show that negative impact from mobility increases in adulthood until age of 50-s.⁵ There are promising signs in many countries that for young people owning a car is not as important than it used to be for past generations. Living car free helps to save planet more than choices such as being vegetarian, saving water, installing solar panels and minimizing waste combined.⁶

If living completely car free can be difficult, other conscious steps such as switching to smaller or more energy efficient car or even using carpooling instead of car ownership have also big positive environmental impact.

For youth in numerous compact European cities, resisting being driven to school and instead using bike or public transport is a way to reduce your environmental and climate footprint significantly. Remember that even if a car is fully electric and drives on 100% renewable energy, it still occupies lot of physical space in cities and roads and it needs loads of rare minerals and other resources to be built.

Taking trains instead of short-haul flights in bigger countries and limiting overseas flights for holidays have also major positive impact on individual environmental footprint.

When planning your holidays, try to avoid air travel and check whether your favourite holiday experiences (diving, wellness, hiking etc.) can be experienced closer to home. Also, give preference to destinations that have demonstrated responsible practices (in areas such as human rights, environmental conservation records etc.).

When still choosing air –travelling light will reduce your carbon footprint by a surprisingly large amount. Reducing your luggage by 15kg could save between 100-200kg of CO₂ emissions on a return flight from, say, London, to Tenerife, Spain.

Holiday season

Between the Christmas lights, travel, wrapping, and excessive food, we create a lot of waste during a holiday season - tons of additional waste is created in the end of the year in Europe.

Opt for natural decorations, or reuse plastic decorations for many years. Real trees are more sustainable than artificial ones. Try to find a local tree grower or reuse an artificial tree for many years or just decorate a tree in your garden.

⁵ See Figure 3b in <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629618310314>

⁶ See <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541>

Fireworks may seem to just disappear with a puff of smoke and a shower of sparks, but aside from the physical remains left behind, they release tiny pieces of toxic metals into the air such as the copper and barium that are used for colour, as well as the titanium and antimony used to create crackles and sparkles. As they fall to the ground, these particles can end up in our soil or water systems too.

Loud fireworks can be scary to the kids, pets, wild animals and birds.

Food

Production of food has big impact on environment. Heavy use of different chemical substances like pesticides, mineral fertilisers and use of monocultures in agricultural lands decreases biodiversity, pollutes waters and reduces soil fertility.

Eating meat puts enormous pressure on planet. Livestock farming causes 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions⁷ and animal farming accounts for 78% of agricultural land worldwide.⁸ Eating less meat or switching entirely from meat to plant-based diet has therefore big positive environmental impact. Switching to vegan diet has bigger positive environmental impact than waste recycling, introducing of energy-saving lightbulbs at home and composting together.

Preferring items with different ecolabels when shopping helps to make right choices. However, labels don't show all environmental impacts of the goods. You may be aware and exemplary consumer by preferring 100% vegan ingredients but if these have been grown on the other side of the planet and have considerable negative transport footprint. Preferring local green products is always a smart choice.

Energy

The way our apartments and houses are heated and cooled cause roughly 1/3 of our personal carbon footprints in Europe.⁹ Choosing between ways our houses are heated is difficult and sometimes impossible, especially for apartment blocks in bigger cities. For private houses, reducing energy use via insulating of walls and installing double-glazed windows is good for environment and saves money in long run. If such choice is available, one shall prefer electricity company which provides electricity from renewable sources. Making quick fixes to save electricity such as installing LED lightbulbs and preferring energy-saving appliances are easy fixes.

⁷ See <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-eating-meat-bad-for-the-environment/a-63595148>

⁸ See <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/food-system-impacts-biodiversity-loss>

⁹ See <https://www.eea.europa.eu/ims/greenhouse-gas-emissions-from-energy>

Less and longer lasting stuff

Many people used to get satisfaction from buying new things, such as clothing. Switching to goods that last longer and discovering ways how to repair clothes, shoes and consumer products all help to reduce personal footprint.

Avoiding temptations to buy every season new clothes has a big impact– the fashion industry accounts for between 5% and 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Try to increase the amount of shared, reused and repaired goods (e.g. among friends and neighbours) or donate to a second-hand shops and why not to take part of initiatives such as the ‘Buy Nothing Day /Week’.

Annex 1.

How to organise environmental friendly (public) events

(Materials used: Tartu municipality: <https://tartu.ee/>; Tartu nature house: <https://www.tartuloodusmaja.ee/keskkonnasobralikud-avalikud-uritused/>)

There might be hundred of large conferences, festivals and public events in a single municipality in a year,. When organising and attending these events we expend resources and contribute to waste. Just one festival or a large public event can leave a very large ecological footprint, but with our choices we can minimise the effects on the environment extensively.

There are many fields in which we as an organiser can be more environmentally friendly. For example, location, transport (both attendees as well as organisers, speakers), catering, use of water and energy, different flyers, waste products. As the organiser, it is important to prioritise and make a judicious calculation in which areas it is feasible to make environmentally friendly decisions.

The question is not even WHY we should hold environmentally friendly public events, but rather WHEN to start and HOW. As of today, the biggest festivals in the world have made enormous efforts to minimise the economical footprint that comes with organising such an event. Soon this will become a normality and organisers who haven't caught up with the times will not be able to compete.

Materials and Purchases Minimum requirements:

-Visitors' badge holders or lanyards have to be reusable. The organisers should make the return and collection of these materials convenient and clear to visitors.

Paper materials (invitations, publications etc.) should be replaced with electronic alternatives as much as possible. Where possible, recycled paper and printing on scrap and recovered paper should be used.

-Give as few gifts and souvenirs as possible. If it is necessary, green services and donations/awards should be preferred. As regards physical gifts, local food and culinary experiences and practical items manufactured from environmentally friendly materials should be preferred

Decorations have to be reusable, avodiastic.

When selecting equipment for the event, ensure that it is as energy-efficient as possible

Catering and water use

Whenever possible, reusable cutlery, and serving solutions should always be preferred to those of single use.

If the use of single-use tableware cannot be avoided, compostable tableware should be preferred, provided that proper composting is guaranteed (e.g. palm leaf and wheat bran tableware etc)

Allow participants to bring their own reusable drinking bottles and tableware. Provide the opportunity to rinse dishes at the event.

Enable access to free and clean tap water at the events, place water stations near catering areas. Avoid serving bottled water.

In the selection of caterers and catering, ensure that, at least one vegan dish should be available.

Waste management

The obligation to collect waste by type applies to both participants, organisers and vendors.

At minimum, the types of waste collected: mixed waste, biowaste and deposit-subjected packaging and other packaging

Separately collected waste must be recycled according to type, by handing them over to the waste handler according to type, and then a report on the quantities must be required.

Establish clear and simple guidelines to explain environmental and waste management rules that reach target groups in time (e.g. vendors, participants at presentation areas)

Transport

Provide information to visitors about transport options as an alternative to coming alone in a car; provide information to foreign visitors about the options for compensating for the climate impact of air travel.

When choosing the event venue, take into account its accessibility by public transport and bicycle, if possible. Always inform participants on how they can come to the event by public transport and where the parking areas are in order to avoid traffic jams at events that take place in the city centre.

If possible, organise special buses or trains, carpool.

Taking into account the community

- Reduce light and sound pollution from the event that may disturb people living nearby and their pets (light installations should be preferred to fireworks wherever possible; do not leave full lights or music on at the venue for the whole night, etc.).
- When organising transportation/parking, make sure it disturbs local life to the minimal extent possible. Provide information of any temporary changes
- If possible, involve the local community in the organisation of the event/ volunteering; discounted admission, trading opportunities, etc.