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Greening Up With the Joneses

By Alex Williams

WHEN Megan Hess, a political fund-raiser living in Alexandria, Va., who never considered herself particularly "green," finally decided to take a stand against global warming, she figured the first step was obvious: ditch her sport utility vehicle.

The problem was, her four-wheel-drive Toyota 4Runner was her only car, and trains or buses were not an option. So as a half-measure, Ms. Hess, 30, decided last year to start car-pooling with a neighbor who also had an S.U.V.

Now, at least, they could feel guilty together.

On their 11-mile commute into Washington, they found themselves talking about trading their fume-spewing S.U.V.'s for hybrid cars, Ms. Hess said. But the solution wasn't that simple.

"I realized if I sold my S.U.V. it would just be bought by someone else who would almost certainly drive it a lot more than I would," said Ms. Hess, who drives less than 25 miles a day. "There still isn't one less S.U.V. on the planet," she said, with a hint of frustration.

Conservation is becoming a subject of recrimination and debate inside many American homes, perhaps to the greatest extent since the 1970's. Whether prompted (or shamed) by rising gas prices, a dependence on foreign oil or dire warnings about global warming, some Americans who have never allied themselves with the environmental movement are taking it upon themselves to drive less, consume less and recycle more, environmental organizers said.

Over the last two years, environmentalists say, they have been fielding more inquiries from people seeking practical solutions to combat global warming.

"I certainly see that the more mainstream, middle-class — really, all classes — are more aware of energy problems, including people who you wouldn't think of as environmentalists, but will acknowledge that their S.U.V.

is burning way more than it ought to," said Bob Schildgen, a columnist for Sierra magazine, published by the Sierra Club. "There is much broader concern than there was even two years ago."

But for many, it is not so easy to conserve within a culture of affluence whose environmentally costly components have almost become entitlements: the S.U.V.'s; the dream homes; the remodeled kitchens with double-ovens, double-dishwashers and thermoelectric wine chillers; the second homes (also remodeled); the plasma television sets and surround-sound home theater systems all plugged in and ready to go. Where to begin?



Anna Mia Davidson for The New York Times

Like the countertops? They're made from recycled paper. David and Kim Brotherton of Seattle spent a little extra to create a green kitchen.

David Brotherton, a communications consultant who lives in Seattle, said he and his wife, Kim, decided to maintain a markedly greener household over the last few years, prompted largely by dire warnings about climate change.

The trick, Mr. Brotherton said, was not to give up nice things, but to buy nice things that were ecologically sound. "I don't even pretend to be a hard-core environmentalist," Mr. Brotherton explained. "But I do aspire to be a 'light green' kind of guy — one who thinks carefully about the choices I make as a consumer and tries to tread as lightly on the planet as possible, within my chosen lifestyle."

The couple went ahead with remodeling the kitchen, for example, but ruled out a prefabricated kitchen from the local big-box retailer, believing it was constructed and packaged wastefully. Instead they paid a premium of about 15 percent to install a kitchen featuring "sustainably harvested" cork floors, recycled glass tiles, and sturdy countertops made — to the surprise of their friends — from recycled paper.

But Mr. Brotherton said the next hurdle could prove tougher for them: the issue of trading up in housing to keep up with their friends. "A lot of our peer group are buying bigger, more expensive homes," said Mr. Brotherton, who lives in a three-bedroom starter home

from the 1950's that he and Kim planned on living in for less than 10 years. "It would be nice to have a little nicer house than this, but we don't need that."

"What's enough?" he asked. "How much do we need to enjoy life and get by?"

Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, said that if the buzzword for traditional environmentalists is conservation, for the newest converts — the light greens — it's efficiency. "It's about getting better results from the same behavior," Mr. Pope said. So while these newly minted environmentalists are not overhauling their lives, many are trying to edit them.

Lucinda Holt, the chief executive of an online marketing company, the Pre-Commerce Group, in King of Prussia, Pa., said she considers herself a hard-driving "serial entrepreneur." Until recently, Ms. Holt, who lives in what she calls a 4,000-square-foot "McMansion" in an affluent suburban neighborhood, had never found time to make any pro-green gesture grander than putting out the recycling. But less than a year ago, she had an epiphany.

"I had read a statistic about projected sea level rises of as much as 12 feet," said Ms. Holt, referring to alarming reports about the effects of global warming. "I had just been to the Florida Keys and driven across that long bridge there and thought, man, that's gone. All the animals, everything. It all of a sudden got very tangible to me."

She traded her Volvo station wagon, itself once a symbol of ecoconsciousness, for a smaller car: a fuel-efficient, but still stylish Mini Cooper. She and her family endured last summer without running the air-conditioning. To save trees, which take in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, she forces herself to respond to each piece of junk mail, asking to be removed from all mailing lists.

"I actually tear each piece open, send them back with a note saying, 'Take me off your list, don't send me catalogs,'" she said. "It's a pain."

But anything less, she explained, now just seems "irresponsible."

Though many people may agree that trying to reduce their impact on the earth is something of a pain, the stakes of the new environmentalism appear grave, as detailed in a documentary on global warming featuring Al Gore, "An Inconvenient Truth," to be released on May 24. Mr. Gore, a longtime environmental advocate, presents scientific evidence that global warming could already be a factor in making recent hurricanes and droughts more deadly, and within decades could cause severe flooding in coastal cities from Shanghai to New York if rapidly increasing carbon dioxide emissions continue unchecked.

That message appears to be hitting home for many people who considered it enough to simply turn out the lights whenever they left a room, said Mr. Pope of the Sierra Club. Mr. Pope cites Palo Alto, Calif., as evidence of growing popular altruism. In that city, 14 percent of the households have signed up for the local utility's "green power" option — electricity generated by renewable sources like wind, not fossil fuels — even though it costs

about \$10 extra a month and provides the consumer no direct benefit.

Mr. Pope says it is time for environmental groups to spread not just anxiety, but useful information about how consumers should set priorities for their environmental efforts. He said, for example, that the Sierra Club continues to receive many inquiries from people who are confused about debates over issues like diaper services versus disposable diapers, or paper grocery bags versus plastic. These issues are less important than those involving "big-ticket" energy-consuming items, he said, like the size of the house you live in, and how well it is insulated, or the type of car you drive.

Although more households may be exploring the smartest strategies for going green, they don't always proceed as a united front.

Jasmin Chua, a magazine copy editor who lives in Jersey City, said she decided to become more environmentally conscious this year, after reading alarming reports in the news media and on blogs.

Before long, Ms. Chua, 27, was toting heavy canvas bags to the supermarket to carry her groceries, prompting "funny looks" from the checkout clerks, she said. She tried to buy as much locally grown produce as possible to reduce fuel burned in its transportation. An avid reader, she even put off buying books to save trees, and now borrows them from the library.

But her husband "took a lot of persuading" when it came to joining the crusade. "He's very resistant to change," Ms. Chua explained gingerly.

He was especially resistant when Ms. Chua asked him to pick up a new rolling pin, she said. He returned proudly with an expensive, attractive model — made of hardwood shipped all the way from the forests of Thailand.

"It led to a huge discussion," she recalled. "He said, 'I didn't ask to be married to a hippie.'"

Several people also said they found that, when they decided to go green, it soon became hard to know when to stop.

When Neeraj Desai, 24, moved from Texas recently to take a job as a banking executive in Charlotte, N.C., he vowed to live downtown in an apartment, largely for conservationist reasons. "Even though I grew up in an environmentally conscious household," he said, "I never really thought about my environmental footprint." A smaller home, he knew, would consume less energy, and living near the office would allow him to walk to work.

But soon enough, the question of limits arose. Mr. Desai has a car, but rarely drives it, relying on his sleek Vespa scooter for most trips beyond walking distance. But now even the Vespa seems a little suspect.

"It's Euro 2 compliant — the high European emission standard; it's pretty nonpolluting," Mr. Desai said. "But I always think, why can't I just take my bicycle the extra two miles and show up sweaty?"