

# EarthTalk™

From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

**Dear EarthTalk:** What does “carbon neutral” really mean? And is it really possible to live in such a manner without just resorting to buying carbon credits?

—Vera Hoffman, Seattle, WA

Carbon neutral is a term that has sprouted many definitions, and how to achieve it has spawned numerous interpretations, too. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, which made carbon neutral its 2006 “Word of the Year,” it involves “calculating your total climate-damaging carbon emissions, reducing them where possible, and then balancing your remaining emissions, often by purchasing a carbon offset.”

But the term is really so ‘06. Today’s term, “climate neutral,” complicates the issue. Tracking carbon is great, but carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) is only one of several greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming, says the 2008 publication, *Kick the Habit: A U.N. Guide to Climate Neutrality*, by the United Nations Environment Program.

CO<sub>2</sub> makes up some 80 percent of the world’s greenhouse gases, but five others—nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, sulphur hexafluoride and methane—also contribute. Limits on all six gases were called for by the Kyoto Protocol international climate treaty.

Semantics aside, whether a person can live in a climate-neutral manner is a question of lifestyle choices and making improvements over time. Start your climate neutral quest by calculating your energy usage.

Type “climate footprint” or “carbon footprint” into Google and try a couple of calculators that track use in different ways. One is Earthlab’s (<https://www.earthlab.com/createprofile/reg.aspx>); the University of California at Berkeley also offers one at: <http://bie.berkeley.edu/files/ConsumerFootprintCalc.swf>.

For a calculation, you’ll need information about your home energy use and your travel by car and public transit. Some calculators ask whether you’re vegetarian, how much you recycle and compost, and how much you spend buying goods and dining out.

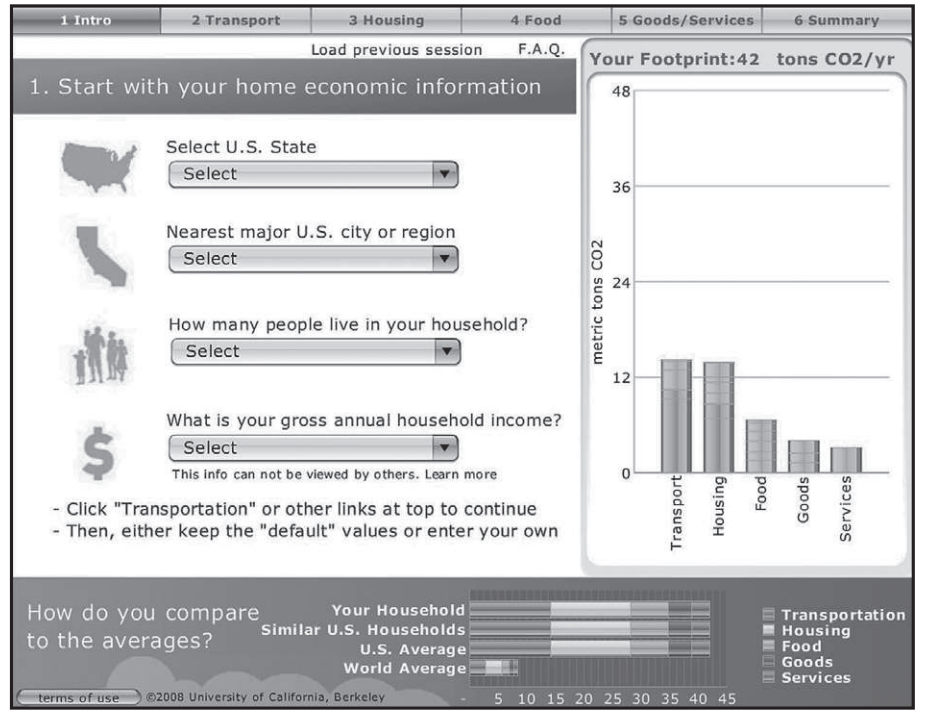
The equation can get involved. Record your information sources, and then revisit the calculator periodically with new numbers to see how you’re doing.

The final element involves a carbon offset, “an emission reduction credit from another organization’s project that results in less carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere than would otherwise occur,” says the David Suzuki Foundation, which promotes “ways for society to live in balance with the natural world.”

You can purchase credits from a renewable energy company, for instance, to offset the amount of carbon emissions you can’t eliminate through other measures. Will your efforts make a difference? *Kick the Habit* says that, for individuals, “less than 50 percent are direct emissions (such as driving a car or using a heater).”

About 20 percent are caused by the creation, use and disposal of products we use; 25 percent comes from powering workplaces; and 10 percent from maintaining public infrastructure. You can drive your car less and turn down the heat, but consider ways you can affect business and government policies that could tap into that other 50-plus percent.

“We are all part of the solution,” wrote



Track your carbon footprint via any number of web-based calculators. (Photo courtesy University of California at Berkeley)

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in the foreword to *Kick the Habit*. “Whether you are an individual, a business, an organization or a government, there are many steps you can take to reduce your climate footprint. It is a message

we must all take to heart.”

**CONTACT:** *Kick the Habit*, [www.unep.org/publications/ebooks/kick-the-habit](http://www.unep.org/publications/ebooks/kick-the-habit).

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### City of Portland Community Budget Hearing

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