

It Ain't Easy Being Green

Inconvenient truths about eco-tech

WORDS JEREMIAH J. SHAW

HYPOCRISY | We've spent countless slabs of pressed wood pulp praising the Gaia Unifying Theory that is recycling. We've babbled streams of anti-commuter rhetoric that coalesced into carpools. We've shared "simple" ideas on how to shrink your carbon footprint to that of a Qing Dynasty debutante. Now allow me to knock you from the lofty, solar-powered bird house in your little green soul and drag you back down into the murky brown haze of life in modern times. Because by the time we come up with clever and insightful answers to solve the headline-grabbing "eco crises," we've unwittingly created several more that you've yet to hear about. Al Gore, meet Sisyphus.

COLTAN

Coltan is a mineral found in the Congo that, due to its ability to store large amounts of electric charge, is used in the capacitors in most cell phones and laptops. The mining of coltan has caused rampant deforestation and has several African countries poised on the brink of war.

Why should I care?

"So what? It's Africa!," you say? "It's about time they had an export other than the 5 carat rock I had to buy my third wife!" Well first, we'd like to compliment you on that fossil fuel "power tie" you're wearing, and secondly, the deforestation associated with coltan mines is forcing several species of mountain gorillas out of their native habitat and driving them to extinction. It is a scientific fact that watching your average ape swing around in its natural habitat is infinitely more entertaining than watching you hang out in yours. Which, as far as we can tell, involves boasting about sexual conquests while drinking Michelob Ultra and playing Golden Tee.

What can I do?

We suppose you could stop carrying a cell phone? Yeah, us neither.

SPACE DEBRIS

You may not know this, but currently, there are more than 13,000 clumps of "space debris" orbiting the Earth. These pieces range from a few inches to old satellites weighing more than 5000 tons. Yes, we are not content to just overstuff our planet's junkyards and landfills—we also must fill the space around Earth with our galactic detritus.

Why should I care?

This will become an escalating issue as more and more of these wayward objects collide and smash apart in orbit. In time, something called the "Kessler Syndrome" will take effect, which basically means there will be an impenetrable cocoon of metal that will render escaping Earth's orbit impossible. So much for finding a new planet once we use this one up.

What can I do?

Unless you have the interstellar equivalent of a street sweeper parked in your garage, absolutely nothing.

LIGHT POLLUTION

As more housing is built along the coasts, the aquatic fauna that relies on darkness for their survival is dwindling. A local example is the Ridley Sea Turtle. Baby Ridelys hatch from their eggs in the middle of the night and rely on the moon's reflection on the water to find their way to the sea. But with all the development going up along the peninsula, the little guys are getting turned around and heading for people's porch lights rather than the ocean. If they aren't eaten by predators or squashed by automobiles, they'll plod around confused and helpless until they finally dehydrate.

Why should I care?

Well, if looking at a baby sea turtle doesn't cause you to emit an "awww..." and eschew the notion of killing him with your neon "party patio" lights, then we'd like to have you checked for a pulse. Or better yet, let's appeal to your wallet instead.

It's estimated that Americans waste approximately \$2 billion annually by leaving their lights on after dark. How much are you paying to light up the summer night?

What can I do?

Again, very little. There aren't any laws that require people to turn off their lights, and the proposal of such a law would undoubtedly meet resistance. (Rightfully so.) However, if you do happen to own property at the beach, please consider using "Turtle Safe" lighting, or simply shut off all your lights after dark during turtle hatching season, which extends from mid-July to early October.

BATTERIES

From the 9-volt that powers your electric shaver to the lithium ion setup within your laptop, batteries are a finite power source that eventually require disposal on your part.

Why should I care?

Batteries are filled with heavy metals—insert the requisite Iron Maiden joke here—that contaminate water supplies, kill wildlife and occasionally explode.

What can I do?

Actually, you can do something about this one. Once you upgrade to the new 32 gig, 3G network iPhone, just drop your old, passé 8 gig one off at any one of the recycling stations around the city, and they will happily dispose of the lithium polymer battery inside.

You know, the one that Apple so cleverly soldered to the phone's motherboard? For everything else, there are several options available online at batteryrecycling.com.

