HOW TO REDUCE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

Tips for interpreters

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The problem

I don't think there's any need for me to discuss climate change, or to give figures about CO_2 emissions. We're all aware of the problem.
Let's just say that interpreters tend to **travel a lot** (usually by plane), and this comes at an environmental cost - not solely related to transport; or if we don't travel, we're at home using **the Internet** all day.
I'll tackle these two issues separately.

When interpreters travel

Travelling to another city or country for an interpreting assignment inevitably has an environmental impact which goes beyond just the transport choice.
The main areas to be considered when travelling for work are:
- mode of transport (flight? train? car?)
- accommodation
- plastic waste
- paper
- Internet use

I'll consider these separately in the next few paragraphs.

One point to bear in mind is that the little, tangible changes that consumers are encouraged to make, such as reducing the thermostat by 1 degree or recycling, are not the ones that make the most impact, yet these are the changes consumers can relate to.

Bigger lifestyle changes give you more 'bang for your buck' because they lead to the greatest reductions in CO_2 emissions, but also because modelling eco-conscious behaviour can have a ripple effect, and because consumer choices can affect how businesses behave (thanks to consumer purchasing power).

Which changes make the most difference?

Meta-analyses of thousands of studies show that the changes that make the biggest impact are the following (more or less in descending order of impact):

- only having one child
- living without a car
- switching to an electric car
- flying less
- switching to green energy
- using public transport
- refurbishing your house to improve insulation
- switching to a vegan diet

Not everyone is able or willing to contemplate these lifestyle changes. For example, I live in the countryside, and can't get around at all without a car. I've also missed the boat on only having one child, as I have two!

The message is: if you're doing some of the 'smaller' things to help the environment, such as reducing the temperature at which you wash your clothes, **don't stop!**

But if you're able **to consider some of the bigger changes** outlined above, please do.

In the following paragraphs, you'll find a bit of both: big, aspirational changes that can be hard to achieve, and smaller, everyday gestures that are easier to implement, but inevitably have less impact.

Mode of transport

- **Avoid air travel if you can.** Per passenger km, CO_2 emissions are 2-3 x higher than rail transport, and that's not counting other harmful high altitude emissions. Obviously I realise that this is easier said than done; I live in northern England and have tried travelling to Brussels by train, but it's incredibly difficult to combine with getting home in time to look after my children the next day.
- **If you must travel by plane, travel economy.** Emissions in business or first class are twice as high, due to the extra seat space taken up in the aircraft.
- **Consider carbon offsets for your flights** - but do your research. There have been plenty of questionable schemes in the past.
- **If you can, choose the carrier based on their record;** some airlines have a more modern, fuel-efficient fleet, and emissions are considerably lower.
- **Wherever possible, use public transport or carpool at your destination (preferably in an electric car).** One good example is airport shuttles into town; there's usually a coach or train option, which has less impact than taking a taxi.

Accommodation

There are two things to consider here: your choice of accommodation, and how you behave when you're there.

When it comes to choosing your accommodation, have a look at the hotel website and see what the management has to say about sustainability. This needs to go beyond not laundering the towels every day.

- Do they have a member of staff responsible for sustainability?
- What are their policies on waste management, lighting, heating, water? One of the biggest sources of emissions in hotels is heat loss (through single glazed windows and overheating the bedrooms).

When you're there:

- Make sure you **hang up your bathroom towel so it isn't washed daily.**
- **Turn down the heating or aircon** in the bedroom: it doesn't need to be on all day!
- **Avoid the tiny plastic bottles of toiletries.** Bring your own! At the very least, if you open them, take them away with you and use the rest of the bottle.

Plastic waste

I've already mentioned the little plastic bottles of toiletries in hotels, but I find when I travel there are many other sources of plastic, most of them related to food and drink. Here are a few tips:

- **travel with a refillable water bottle.**
- **bring along a reusable coffee cup.** This may sound like a bore, but nowadays there are clever collapsible models, and they really don't take up much space.
- Eating out, or eating on the go, often involves a huge amount of plastic waste (little pots of salad, plastic cutlery...). **Eat in a canteen, restaurant or cafe with real plates and cutlery if you can**. If not, see if you can buy from somewhere that packs the food in paper bags, or that actually recycles the waste. I find it depressing, for example, to eat at Exki in Brussels, which prides itself on organic food but doesn't seem to properly sort its waste or provide recyclable, compostable packaging.
- If you're organised enough, **take a couple of plastic tubs with you when you travel.** I often take one or two small Tupperware containers, so I can carry snacks or a small meal without too much plastic packaging.

Paper

This is a short paragraph! I'm sure you've all worked out how to avoid printing off unnecessary travel documents by putting them on your smartphone instead.

The biggest source of paper waste from interpreters is...meeting documents.

Can you go paperless?

I haven't quite made that transition, but there are courses that can help you, for example techforword's 'Paperless preparation' (https://techforword.com/p/paperless-preparation).

When interpreters work from home

When you're working from home, either because you're doing Remote Simultaneous Interpreting or because you're in a quiet period between assignments, you don't need to worry so much about your carbon footprint from transport. There are still things you can do to be more sustainable, however.

Sustainability for the home worker is largely to do with energy efficiency. As I said, I'll be tackling the Internet separately, because it's relevant both when travelling and at home.

Here are some other ideas:

- **buy green energy.** This is among the top 5 changes that can have the most impact on your carbon footprint.
- **reduce your heating thermostat by 1 degree** in order to use less fuel.
- **research home energy assessments.** In some countries, these are free. They can help you cut your energy consumption (and bills!)
- **Replace your light bulbs with LEDs,** which last much longer and use less energy.
- And since you're at home and can choose what you're eating...**consider switching to a plant-based diet,** or at least reducing your meat consumption. Again, this is one of the most impactful changes you can make.

Reducing your Internet footprint

OK, this is a biggie!

We use the Internet more and more; some of us are connected for over 16 hours a day.

We like to think that this reduces our carbon footprint and use of the Earth's resources (for example, if we prepare our meeting with documents on an iPad, instead of on paper), but everything has an environmental cost.

Internet data is processed and stored in massive data centres which use a lot of energy and have to be powered 24/7. The Internet is estimated to be responsible for 3.7% of the world's greenhouse emissions (depending which source you consult - I checked the World Economic Forum). In any case, this is approximately the same impact as civil aviation, and is predicted to double by 2025!

I could list many many tips here. Some of them have a biggish impact, others have a tiny impact - but if millions of people implement them, collectively they will make a difference.

- **keep your devices for as long as possible.** It's not just Internet use that's the problem, it's the graveyard of devices that so many of us have, all of which contain metals, plastics, and rare earths. Don't change your PC, Smartphone, tablet etc. just because you can. Wait until you have to.
- **Adjust your power settings to sleep when unused.** Turn off your devices, monitor and printer completely when you can.
- **Dim the monitor** from 100% to 70%. According to some figures, this could save 20% of the energy use.
- **Reduce your streaming of videos, avoid HD, and reduce gaming.** Download videos instead, or just watch terrestrial TV!
- **Avoid using a search engine as a way to navigate to a website.** This uses energy every time you perform a search. Use your bookmarks instead, or the 'smart' address bar (i.e. auto complete) on browsers such as Firefox.

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Reducing your Internet footprint

- **block video autoplay** (you can use your browser settings to do this).
- **limit your emails.** Don't send emails to multiple recipients unnecessarily, use text rather than HTML emails, avoid attachments and signatures. Every email has its cost - and so do WhatsApp messages, for instance.
- **offset some of your energy usage with a search engine such as Ecosia**, which plants trees to make up for Internet users' energy consumption.
- **data storage is an interesting question.** In theory, local storage (i.e. on your own computer) is preferable to storing your data on the cloud, where energy is required every time to consult or retrieve your documents, photos, etc. However, several large providers have committed to powering their cloud storage from 100% renewable sources (Google, Apple, Facebook), so this may be less of an issue, depending what storage you use.

Conclusion

I hope this set of tips has given you some food for thought.

Although, as I said earlier, the smaller changes may have less impact on an individual basis, if everyone puts them into practice, they will still make a big difference. It's also important to remember that CO_2 emissions aren't the only issue; single use plastic for instance, apart from being wasteful of resources, often ends up in landfill or in the oceans, so it's well worth trying to reduce, reuse, recycle wherever possible.

Want to get in touch?

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