

Earth Day 2021 - We Can Make a Difference

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

A year ago we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. It is a huge topic of which a few hundred words can barely scratch the surface. One of the major changes since writing our article one year ago is that the United States has a president that believes in science. It is possible to do big things, such as in buildings, transportation, and agriculture, to help mitigate climate change. It is also possible for individuals to take personal responsibility, no matter how small the steps, to help dial back the greenhouse gas emissions that are wreaking havoc on our planet.

We have enormous computing power contained in the handheld devices we call smart phones. Our ability to gather information on demand is incredible. This ability to look things up nearly anywhere we happen to be, can be put to great use, with the thoughtful precaution of choosing reliable sources for our information. Be curious, and stay interested in learning new things. Did you know that our native prairie grasses sequester just as much (or more) carbon in their incredible root systems as trees?

Be aware of the processes by which consumer items are produced. We had heard that producing “distressed jeans” was ecologically questionable. A search on the internet brings up this interesting site, <https://goodonyou.eco/material-guide-ethical-denim/>, endorsed by actress Emma Watson. The site’s rating system “considers the most important social and environmental issues facing the fashion industry to assess a brand’s impact on people, the planet and animals.” We learned from this brief inquiry that it takes 3781 liters of water to produce a single pair of denim jeans. Growing cotton accounts for 16% of the pesticides used worldwide. Toxicity of the dyes is another concern.

Be aware of the sources of products. It is more sustainable to buy local, less transportation equals a smaller carbon footprint. What kind of packaging is used? Is it possible to substitute a product that uses less and/or more ecologically friendly packaging? Read the labels, and know the lingo.

Believe in possibilities, innovation, and science. Think long term. Be open to expertise from a broad range of sources of information. Not every expert needs a college degree if they have meaningful field experience, and no PhD is an expert in absolutely everything. A few resources we trust for information include RMI, Union of Concerned Scientists, and American Solar Energy Society (ASES).

Be open to failure, to being proven wrong, and learn from it. We recently received an email from a reader who expressed concerns about using hydrogen as an automobile fuel. His thoughtful, informed, empirical, and scientific insights into the design challenges of hydrogen use in automobiles are eye opening and welcome new data for us to process as we search for safe, sustainable renewable energy sources.

Local information can be obtained from a number of resources. The Estes Recycles Facebook Group shares lots of useful information and tips for the everyday practice of loving our planet. Judy Smith’s column “Eco Sense” published in the EP Trail Gazette shares great info about recycling in Estes Park and Colorado. The League of Women Voters of Estes Park website https://www.lwv-estespark.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=706933&module_id=385414 has plentiful information about what and where to recycle in the Estes Valley. Sandbox Solar (<https://sandboxsolar.com/>) is a Colorado company based in Fort Collins. For Earth Day, their newsletter lists numerous “Year-Round Sustainability Tips” such as not using disposable plastics, such as bottles, bags, and straws; using cloth towels; composting kitchen scraps; and, of course, getting solar!

If you are able, install the solar panels, which have dropped substantially in price over the past few years. Buy an Electric Vehicle (EV). Install an EV charger. Upgrade window AC units to mini-split heat pumps. (<https://www.energy.gov/energysaver/heat-pump-systems/ductless-mini-split-heat-pumps>) Switch to an electric heat pump water heater. Add insulation to your attic. Use all LED light bulbs. Add glass with “thin-film low-E” storm panels to windows to create triple pane windows, with higher ‘R’ values.

Our actions today can and will have an impact on tomorrow. Think and act wisely.

Beck, Thomas W. "Earth Day 2021 - We Can Make a Difference" *Estes Park Trail Gazette*, Friday April 23, 2021, <https://www.eptail.com/2021/04/22/earth-day-2021-we-can-make-a-difference/>