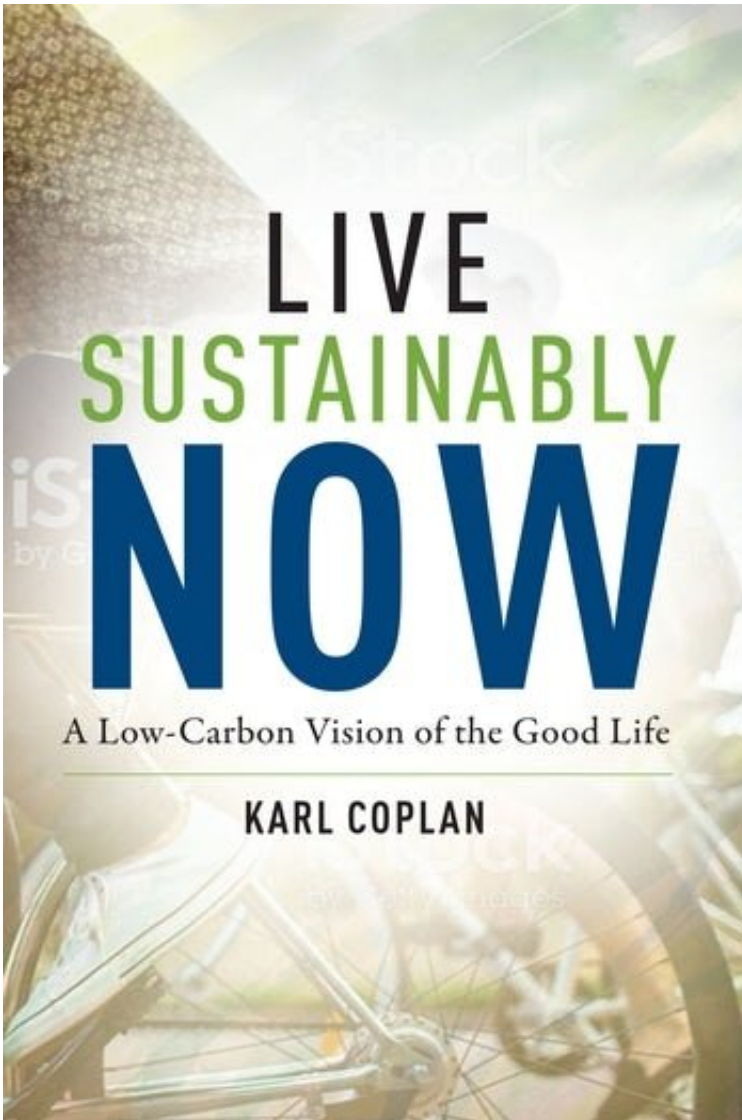


A guide to the good, low-carbon life

January 14 2020, by Kevin Krajick



Credit: Columbia University

For about the last 10 years, environmental law professor Karl Coplan has been trying to winnow down his direct carbon-dioxide emissions with the goal of reaching four tons per year—about 40 percent of the average American's. He has been successful, and has just published a book, "[Live Sustainably Now](#)," chronicling his efforts. Half treatise, half diary, it offers an entertaining guide for others.

Living in a house in the suburbs north of New York City, Coplan faces challenges in an area where cars rule and individual homes can gobble large amounts of energy. Nevertheless, he consistently comes in under budget. Some of his methods are obvious: buying an electric car, eating less red meat, cutting down on air travel. Some could be viewed as extreme, or at least not for everyone; on some days he gets to his job across the Hudson River by biking to the riverbank, kayaking across a heavily trafficked stretch of water, and picking up a second bike on the other side. But he does seem to have lots of fun, and you don't hear him complain about things he misses.

Coplan teaches at Pace University. His book is published by Columbia University Press. We spoke with him recently.

This is all about what one can do personally to cut down on carbon emissions. What do you say to people who say that individual actions don't matter against the vast challenges of climate change?

All greenhouse gas emissions cause harm, and cutting your own emissions by, say, 50 percent is a meaningful reduction in your own contribution to that harm. It is also true that globally significant mitigation will require collective action at every level—community, state, national, and international. I talk about the relationship between individual and political action, and we need both. But the kind of social

and economic changes needed to address climate change will not happen just by passing the right laws. The books are full of laws that failed in part because the political will did not exist to implement them.

Desegregation is one example. Prohibition is another. Look at it this way: If most voters cannot imagine an acceptable lifestyle without frequent air travel and cheap gasoline, will they ever vote for policies that make these lifestyles less abundant and more expensive? On the other hand, if enough people make changes in their own life, individual action becomes collective action, and that changes the culture enough to accomplish meaningful policy change. Someone has to take the first step. If climate-woke environmentalists don't make the first move, who will?

Much of the book is a month-by-month diary of your own efforts over the course of a year. What was the hardest adjustment for you?

Giving up air travel almost entirely. My wife, Robin, still travels a lot, so that means I can't join her on trips to some very interesting places.

What was the easiest?

Switching to a renewable energy electricity provider. All I had to do was go to the website for Green Mountain Power, enter my utility account information, and click on the "I agree" button. This instantly wiped several tons of [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from my household footprint.

What, if anything, surprised you when you tried out various stratagems?

I was surprised to find that driving my little electric car was much more

energy- and carbon-efficient than taking the bus or riding the Metro North train to New York City. I am a firm believer that [public transit](#) will be a major part of the climate solution, but there are real ridership and efficiency tradeoffs. In the long run, public transit powered by renewable electricity will be a zero-carbon transit option. But for now, driving an electric car can have lower greenhouse gas impacts than public transit.

You mentioned your wife, Robin Bell. She's a well-known polar scientist at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, and an outspoken public advocate for addressing climate change. Which one of you inspires the other in this relationship?

Hah! That's a loaded question. I'd say we inspire each other, and we have complementary personalities. I am more of the introvert. Robin has inspired and encouraged me to turn my thinking and experiences into a book, and push to get the message out. For my part, I think I have inspired her to come to grips with the scope of the policy problems. She can be so caught up with her love of solving the Earth's beautiful mysteries, and so confident that human beings will be intelligent enough to respond to the threat of climate change. So much so, she loses sight of the political challenges. One thing I have inspired Robin to do is to start tracking her own carbon footprint. That has made her turn down some international air travel.

You argue that a low-carbon lifestyle can be fulfilling and fun. Your evidence? By the way, do your kids or friends hate some of the stuff you do to cut your

footprint?

My evidence? I am having a lot of fun in life. I ski in the mountains in the winter, and lie on remote beaches in the summer. I still go to professional meetings, and take wilderness camping trips with my friends. I am lucky to be based in the Northeast, where the cultural attractions of New York City, the wilderness of the Adirondacks, and Atlantic beaches are all an easy day trip away. Since adopting my four-ton carbon budget, I have been to Europe, to Dakar, to the Caribbean, and to the iceberg-choked coast of Newfoundland. It helps that blue-water sailing is a hobby, but my carbon budget allows for maybe one flight per year. My children grew up in the household of a dedicated environmentalist, so they never really knew any better. I think they noticed the lack of cable television in our house more than anything else. They knew their parents would never give them a car to drive to school. Our daughter Beryl's response was to ask for a motor scooter instead. Our children have joined us on some of our low-carbon adventure travels, like sailing across the Atlantic. Beryl, who is in Vancouver now, kept asking me to come west to visit her. Which I finally managed to do this past year without flying. Occasionally friends, even friends in the environmental movement, tell me I need to lighten up about air travel. But they respect what I am doing.

Now that you have finished documenting your low-carbon year for the book, have you been backsliding? Tell the truth.

Not at all! The whole point of going on a carbon diet was to make a permanent commitment to a more sustainable level of consumption, not to engage in a 12-month publicity stunt. I still track my daily and monthly emissions. I just added up my direct footprint for 2019—utilities, transport, and beef/lamb consumption. It came out to

just about two metric tons, still well within my four-ton direct footprint goal. My total footprint, including hard-to-calculate indirect consumption is probably at least twice that much. It helps that I avoided air travel last year. But I got to see a large piece of this country—the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Northwest—by riding a bicycle to Oregon. I then took the bus to visit my daughter in Vancouver, and took the train back east.

Provided by Columbia University

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