

What's Your Carbon Footprint?

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photographed by Josh Norris

So you've started down the path of "green" living: You try to look for the recycling bins for your water bottles, and you've seen the value add up when watching your thermostat at home.

Now, try looking over your shoulder. What's that you're leaving behind for your children and grandchildren to possibly clean up? Could it be *your* carbon footprint?

"A carbon footprint is a measure of the greenhouse gas emissions caused by a person — or organization or entity — over time," said **Shelley Robbins**, project coordinator for Upstate Forever. "Greenhouse gases include water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and ozone. These are called greenhouse gases because they trap heat

in the Earth's atmosphere and prevent it from radiating back into space."

Over time, Robbins said, we see some of what seems to be happening right now: The atmosphere's temperature is warming at an increasing rate, changing plant and animal ecosystems, causing erratic weather patterns and melting the polar ice caps in quantifiable amounts.

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ABOVE: Shelley Robbins, project coordinator for Upstate Forever, regularly welcomes the public to see how the organization puts "green" into action.



LEFT: Biking to work or around town is a three-way win: it helps the environment, saves money, and gives you some heart-healthy exercise.



ABOVE: Did you know... paper products can be recycled as many as eight times before the fibers lose their strength.

"Beyond these changes, two major tipping points are when enough land and ocean ice melts, it changes the reflectivity of the earth's surface," she said. "The darker colors, being the ocean and land, absorb heat that the ice previously reflected, exacerbating the warming. Next, the frozen tundra has trapped tremendous amounts of methane. If the

tundra regions thaw, and they are indeed thawing, then methane is released rapidly. Methane is 25 times more powerful as a heat trapper than carbon dioxide."

While methane gas has several good qualities, too much of a good thing can throw the natural order of things out of balance. The result is the higher emissions that directly impact the air we breathe, wherever we live.

According to the South Carolina Climate, Energy and Commerce Advisory Committee's final report, the Climate, Energy, and Commerce Action Plan, the state's gross emissions of greenhouse gases grew by 39 percent between 1990 and 2005, twice the national average of 16 percent. South Carolina's emissions growth was driven by the growth of its population and many other factors.

"The Governor's Climate Committee projects a quantified amount of 120 million metric tons of CO₂, or carbon dioxide, being produced by all different sectors by 2020 if we don't do anything," said Erika

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Myers, manager of the renewable energy program in South Carolina's Energy Office. "By being proactive now and implementing the committee's strategies, some of which actually reduce costs for the state, our energy efficiency can improve and our produced CO2 levels can return to the 1990 levels of around 60 million metric tons."

Even for those who dispute the theory of global warming, it is hard to deny the good that comes from saving energy and paying closer attention to the green aspects of the products we all consume.

"Reducing one's carbon footprint

How does a carbon offset work?

As an individual, you've decided to take the steps to reduce your carbon footprint. What do you do if you have a business and you want to do more?

Individuals and businesses can purchase carbon offsets. According to the Stockholm Environment Institute, someone else is paid to absorb or avoid the release of a ton of CO2 elsewhere on the globe. The purchaser of a carbon offset can aim to compensate for, or in principle "offset," his or her own emissions. This is possible because climate change is a non-localized problem; greenhouse gases spread evenly throughout the atmosphere, so reducing them anywhere contributes to overall climate protection.

According to Shelley Robbins at Upstate Forever, "companies such as TerraPass (www.terrapass.com) take your money and invest it in technologies that reduce carbon emissions. We work to reduce our footprint ourselves as much as possible, then, if we want to "carbon neutral" a household or business, we purchase offsets for the remainder and this invests in green businesses, helping that sector of the economy grow."

encompasses a lot of things, especially where energy conservation and efficiency are concerned," Myers said. "You can carpool instead of driving your own vehicle, and regulate your home thermostat in the summer and the winter."

And starting March 31, South Carolina residents can add some green to their pockets. A total of \$3.9 million will be available in rebates for purchased appliances bearing the Energy Star label.

The rebates are first-come, first-served, so visiting www.appliancerebates.sc.gov is a priority for everyone's April to-do list.

Robbins added, "Everyone recycles now, I hope, and they are increasing the efficiency of their homes, from changing out light bulbs with compact fluorescents to giving serious thought to the most efficient replacement for the water heater, the HVAC and the windows. They also should be modifying their driving habits, which has been reinforced by rising gas prices, and changing their purchasing habits, which means supporting companies that are taking action to reduce carbon emissions on a corporate scale."

A key way to reduce your carbon footprint actually starts with the food that is — and isn't — on your plate. Robbins recommends going meatless for a meal or two each week. It can help to reduce the transportation costs incurred by factory farms with getting meat to the market. Also, consider buying from your local farmers' market or join a co-op or community-supported agriculture, or CSA.



RIGHT: "This is larger than a typical household rainbarrel," Robbins said of one of Upstate Forever's two rainbarrels. "It has pumps to irrigate the landscaping and the roof garden."

RIGHT: This SunPower solar reader measures stored energy from Upstate Forever's solar panels.



"This reduces the carbon footprint of your food *and* supports local farmers and jobs," she said. "Composting is another carbon-saver. Organic materials produce methane in landfills and even if a landfill converts methane to energy, the system fails to capture up to 75 percent of the 'fugitive emissions.' Composting keeps those organics out of the landfill, avoids the anaerobic digestion process that creates the methane and makes wonderful rich soil for your yard, so you can produce your own vegetables. These are just a few of my favorites.

"On my personal journey, I started with the small steps and gradually added more as I felt more confident. I'll confess, I was intimidated by the compost bin. Now I realize how easy it is. I just used \$5 worth of rabbit wire and I'm looking forward to my first batch of 'dirt.'" 🌱

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