

Lessons From Lifestyle Change Leaders: Survey Findings on Personal Responses to Global Environmental Challenges

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In response to fears of human-created global warming, a 53-year-old Colorado woman retrofitted her home to reduce fossil fuel use, started a garden, bought a fuel efficient car and reduced her driving, her favorite way to travel. “We need to move beyond thinking that we should do *whatever* we can to doing *everything* we can,” she said.

A 34-year-old man in the publishing business in Columbus, Ohio, sees a second great depression ahead. So he cut his spending on consumer products, learned survival skills and plans to build an off-grid home with a large garden. He faults himself for foot-dragging in making changes. “I’ve understood the possibility of future problems for five to six years and I’m only now making slow but significant changes,” he reported.

Worries over fossil fuel depletion and shortages led a 65-year-old woman in Amsterdam, Netherlands to get rid of her car, retrofit her home to save energy and, because of her limited finances, to barter goods and services with friends and neighbors. “I think the human species will survive the disintegration of civilization,” she said, “but it will be extremely difficult for survivors to adapt to an impoverished, depleted planet while the climate is ferociously unpredictable.”

“Our goal is to produce an example of what suburbanites must do to survive the collapse of our current system,” said a 40-year-old man from Pennsylvania, who helps his neighbors grow their own food. He said his experience has led to much personal growth and deeper relationships. “All obstacles must be overcome,” he said. “The selfishness and laziness of our generation does not offer a lot of hope but we can only control our response.”

These lifestyle change leaders were among 2,005 respondents who completed a 30-question online survey in September 2009 that began with the question: Have you changed your behavior/lifestyle as a response to global threats? Two-thirds of the survey's responses came from the e-mail addresses of people in contact with an Ohio nonprofit organization which promotes sustainable lifestyle changes in the face of impending resource scarcities and climate change.

More than 90 percent of those surveyed from around the world reported they had made lifestyle changes and were prompted to answer additional questions. These responses revealed:

- About 60 percent of respondents considered the imminent peak and decline of oil production, as well as depletion of other resources, as the major threat facing humanity. About half worried about climate change and slightly less than half about general environmental problems such as deforestation and species extinction.

- In response to these threats, more than two-thirds of survey takers said they cut purchases, bought more local goods and services, conserved energy in their homes and put in a garden. Driving less was the most difficult change to make, while changing one's diet was the easiest. About half began their efforts within the last 10 years.
- Not having enough money, difficulty breaking old habits and lack of support from family impeded good intentions to live more sustainably. But when the changes conferred other benefits, were convenient, or were cheaper, they were more easily accomplished.
- Half of all respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their progress at making lifestyle changes, while only 20 percent would call their changes "major." Nearly three quarters of the respondents thought lifestyle changes are very important in addressing global threats.
- Nearly three-quarters reported that they are hopeful or very hopeful that humanity will successfully deal with the environmental challenges of the 21st century.
- While 90 percent have tried to influence others to make similar changes in their lives, mostly through talking to them and being a role model, only a quarter believe with any certainty that they have been successful.
- Respondents reported greater happiness and satisfaction, personal growth and new skills since making lifestyles changes.

Some people in the survey were confident that a combination of government policies and technical innovations will solve looming global environmental crises and allow a transition toward a sustainable society. But most see it as critical for them, as well as others, to adopt new lifestyles voluntarily to address environmental problems.

These lifestyle leaders, with their diverse backgrounds, careers, communities and experiences, are responding to the assumed imminent crises in similar ways. Their achievements come in the face of significant barriers, such as a lack of efficient transportation options, scarce availability of local food sources and cultural pressures to consume, to name a few.

Survey Respondent Snapshot

- 95% from U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand
- Nearly 90% Caucasian
- Annual household income average of \$55,000
- Average age 50 years old
- Education, the most common career, then health care, nonprofit sector and unemployed/retired

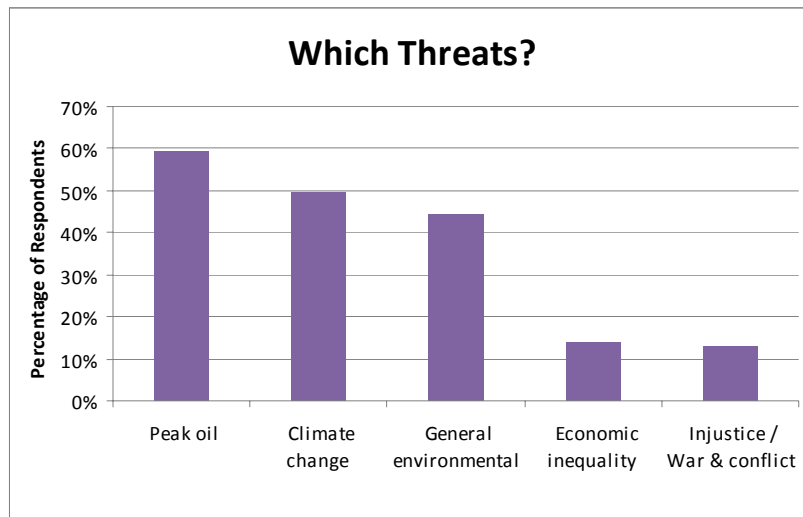
Citing these barriers, some respondents maintained that systemic changes are required before individual change can be truly effective. This would mean changing a system that has led to a high-energy, wasteful, over-consumptive lifestyle prevalent throughout the Western world, and aspired to by much of the rest of world. But this system is increasingly viewed as unsustainable and destructive to the planet by growing number of scientific bodies, and whether led by sociopolitical institutions or individuals, needs to change.

"Though I don't have much faith that we as a nation, or world, are willing to make the needed changes, I believe we must work toward those changes," commented a 59-year-old man from rural Kentucky, adding, "the only true way to fail is to not try."

The determination of this man and the experiences of other eco-pioneers (those adopting lifestyle changes well ahead of and in a deeper way than the majority of the population) may provide some answers to how quickly their more sustainable lifestyles may spread throughout the population as global environmental problems mount.

Motivations to Act

Respondents, as expected, were mainly motivated to make lifestyle changes by the threats of resource depletion (peak oil) and climate change – key issues of the Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions in Yellow Springs, Ohio which has on file the e-mails of most of these respondents.



After peak oil, climate change and a general concern for the environment, the 2,005 survey takers (who could choose up to two issues) were most provoked to action by economic inequality and injustice, war and conflict. Fewer listed agricultural and water problems, economic collapse, overpopulation, the opportunity to create a better world and, as a man from a small town in Massachusetts phrased it, “A love of nature and a hatred of thoughtlessness.”

Several respondents wrote that it is a combination of these crises that most threatens them. “It started as environmental concern for me – but every single aspect plays a factor,” said a 30-year-old man from rural New Hampshire, adding, “and it's the synergistic summation of them all is what strikes a chord in me.”

Being worried about the state of our planet doesn't necessarily equate with committing oneself to taking personal action, despite the apparent hypocrisy. To go beyond learning about the problems and begin actually making changes in their lives, this group of respondents was driven to act largely by a sense of right and wrong with encouragement and inspiration from books, movies, media programs and articles.

| Motivations to Take Action | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Conscience | 56% |
| Books, Movies | 35% |
| Media articles/Programs | 29% |
| Personal Experiences | 19% |
| Conversations | 19% |
| Role Models | 7% |

While the importance of educational resources affirms the work of environmental educators and writers, the overwhelming role of one's conscience emphasizes that a very personal process unfolds when people decide to live their values, one in which others may have little influence. Ultimately, it may be a moral decision more than anything else, the survey suggests.

Just a handful of respondents noted that other people making changes inspired them to take action even though they are now trying to convince others to do so. This may suggest that these respondents were early adopters and innovators and had no one to emulate.

Other survey findings:

- Personally experiencing the problems (which may manifest as suffering from local air pollution or struggling with high utility costs, for example), ranked much higher outside the developed world and in rural communities, as these areas may be bearing the brunt of environmental destruction.
- Women are more motivated to adopt lifestyle changes by their conscience and by conversations with others than men, who get more inspiration from the media and personal experiences.
- Younger respondents were motivated more by conversations and less by media, the opposite of what older respondents reported.

Steps to a Sustainable Life

The energy-saving actions this group took, which two-thirds identified as "incremental," reveals much. Changing buying habits by purchasing fewer consumer goods and more local products received the largest responses, not surprising considering that it's relatively easy compared to other tactics, and may have the added benefit of saving money. Additionally, it requires simply adjusting consuming habits, rather than radically transforming one's role as a consumer.

About three-quarters of respondents conserved energy in the home, not through building upgrades but through behavioral change. Participants reported turning off lights, lowering their thermostat in the winter, cutting back on appliance use, decreasing air conditioning, taking shorter showers, and otherwise reducing electricity and home heating fuel.

Gardening, a change that requires much more time, effort and skill compared to other lifestyle changes, is

Why Grow Food?

Gardening, which doesn't rely on oil-based tractors, petroleum-derived pesticides or gasoline-fueled delivery trucks, cuts down on the fossil fuels burned and carbon dioxide generated in growing. But the energy cost is little compared with the energy consumed to heat out homes or drive our cars. So why is it so important?

Growing one's own food makes one's household more resilient in the face of any possible disruption to the energy-intensive food production and distribution system, from fuel shortages, economic collapse or another emergency.

"After water, food is the most immediate dependency," said a 53-year old man from rural Ohio, who took the survey. "You cannot use your car or carpool, but without food people would be suffering," he said. He and his wife have gone on to learn permaculture -- an energy-saving way to produce local food -- as well as to garden and preserve their own food, and dedicate a portion of their land to Community Supported Agriculture.

| What Changes Made | % of Respondents |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Reduce purchases | 82% |
| Local goods and services | 81% |
| Conservation measures | 78% |
| Gardening | 68% |
| Organic purchasing | 66% |
| Walking/bicycling | 59% |
| Reduced vehicle miles | 56% |
| Reduced debt | 56% |
| Diet change | 54% |
| Preventative health | 51% |
| More efficient car | 39% |
| Storing emergency supplies | 36% |
| Learned survival skills | 35% |
| Small renovation | 30% |
| Bartering | 28% |
| CSA membership | 27% |
| Alternative investment | 26% |
| Mass transit | 26% |
| Relocate | 26% |
| Alternative energy | 22% |
| Share a car | 21% |
| Large renovation | 12% |
| No car | 12% |
| New home | 8% |

something that two-thirds of respondents are engaged in. They mentioned the tremendous benefits conferred by gardening, such as healthy, fresh food, exercise and saving money. In addition it was frequently described as “fun.” It is no surprise gardening is so popular among respondents.

The main transportation change, made by 59% of respondents, was walking and bicycling (which confer obvious health benefits). This was followed by cutting vehicle miles, which 56% of respondents have done. Yet fewer respondents reported making transportation changes than in they did in housing and food, not surprising considering the American dependency on personal vehicles, their relative convenience and comfort compared to other options, the lack of available public transportations and urban sprawl, among other factors.

Cost cannot be the biggest factor involved as arguably the cheapest transportation option – getting rid of one’s vehicle – is being put into practice by the fewest number of participants, just one in ten. Car sharing or ride sharing was also low on the list, a change which threatens the individualism and independence that personal vehicles provide. Surprisingly, women were almost twice as likely as men to share rides, despite the obvious safety concerns. Perhaps they are riding with friends and family members or other women.

More than half of all respondents reported reducing their household debt. While not directly related to a reduction in energy use, carbon dioxide generation, or another environmental impact, it is an important strategy for financial security. This may suggest most survey participants are concerned with the economic implications of peak oil and resource depletion, see other systemic challenges to the financial system, or are worried about the current economic uncertainty.

Sustainable Livelihoods

While only one-sixth of respondents reported a career change as part of their efforts to live more sustainably when done, it is a significant commitment and deserves some attention. The largest percentage, 13%, reported moving into farming, raising livestock or increasing the amount of time they spend on their home garden and “homesteading” (by quitting an old job or starting to work from home).

As a 30-year-old former pilot living in rural New Hampshire explained, “I’m still trying to find something else that will allow me to do all my gardening and taking care of livestock.” Many new farmers are combining their work with other fields – activism, teaching, writing, consulting, cheese-making, and community composting, to name a few.

While typically not a paying job, many respondents chose to emphasize that they have left their prior work, or retired, to become a full-time activist and volunteer to help others or their community make changes. They are local food activists, bicycle advocates, city council members and "transition town" coordinators, among others. A “facilitator of emergence within self-organizing systems,” is how one 32-year-old man from Oregon put it.

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| <p>Top Ten New Careers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Farming 2. Activism/volunteering 3. Renewable energy/energy auditing 4. Teaching 5. Small business 6. Permaculture design/teaching 7. Sustainability consulting 8. Non-profit 9. Alternative health 10. Energy-efficient building |
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| <p>In Their Own Words</p> <p>Living in suburban Texas, a 58-year-old man in the survey is troubled by peak oil and growing economic inequality. Motivated by a concern for his extended family’s future, a few years ago he re-insulated his home, got rid of one of his cars and reduced his debt.</p> <p>On his new job: “I am working on becoming a bicycle mechanic. On the darker side, I was once a gun collector, and haven't lost my gunsmithing skills, I'm just apprehensive of how (and by whom) they might be wanted in the future.”</p> <p>On his greatest challenge: “The utter aggressive ignorance I confront in even my most congenial attempts to wake people up – even family, friends, neighbors – to the urgency of what is confronting us all.”</p> <p>On our prospects for the future: “From the ecological point of view, you might say that most of what lives on Earth today, will eventually be, in some few tens of millions of years, the next age of fossil fuels. If whatever finds them has the wisdom to recognize that this is the way the earth locks away toxic materials to biotic life, good for them. We didn't, and it will probably be the end of us.”</p> |
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Many have switched to a career as a renewable energy engineer, consultant, developer or energy auditor. Also, a multitude of small business opportunities arose – selling garden tools, home-baked bread, organic fabric, mead made with local honey and bamboo crossbows. Teaching, sustainability consulting and permaculture design were also activities lifestyle changers pursued with their new skills. Alternative health practitioner was another new career, mostly for women.

One 49-year-old Boston woman described it as “healing through good food and local herbs, commonly known as weeds.”

One respondent joked that her new job is as a, “post apocalyptic prophetess of doom.” Others noted that creating a self-reliant community or eco-village was a full-time job, as was going back to school or getting trained in sustainable living skills. Switching from a corporate position to working for a non-profit seemed to be a common step that many have taken, though others took more drastic steps, as in the case of an accountant who went into farming and a truck driver who became a permaculture teacher.

Barriers to Change

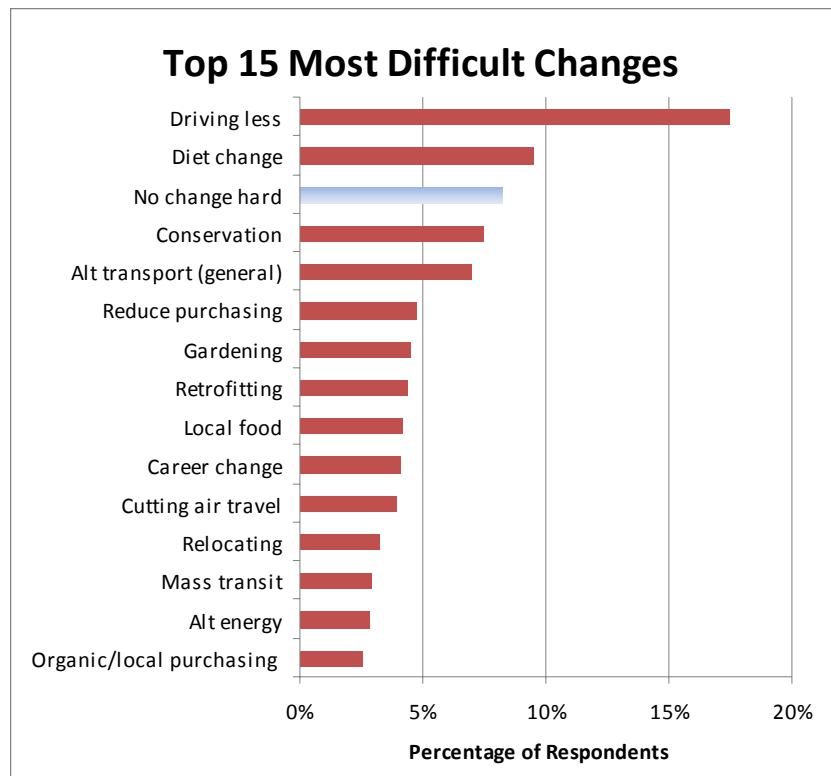
As anticipated, for a group of nonconformist energy conservers living in a consumer society, it has not been easy. A host of internal and external barriers to effective action have surfaced, requiring a determination that has resulted in success for some and frustration for others. Respondents identified which changes were the hardest and which were the easiest through an open text-field question.

Understanding what the barriers are that keep people from making meaningful changes is critical for designing any policy intervention or community-based program to disseminate or encourage sustainable behavior. This understanding may also help individuals who as of yet have been unable or unwilling to make changes to their lives to at least know what to expect and perhaps even be prepared themselves to prevail in such circumstances.

Take the case of a 38-year-old non-profit employee from Minnesota who gave up his car and started co-housing with friends. “I’m a professional with a reputation that’s important to maintain – I can’t be seen as a kook,” he wrote, referring to a common cultural perception that keeps many from attempting more visible behavior changes for fear society will not accept them.

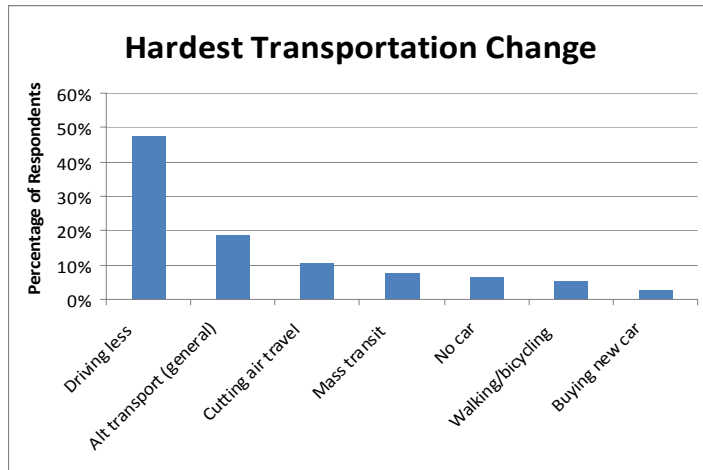
Some changes have presented more barriers than others. Transportation has been most challenging for this group, about a third of whom identified some transportation difficulties, particularly driving less. The biggest barriers to transportation change included needing a car to get to work and various amenities and to visit far flung family members.

Cutting air travel was also a problem. Said a 54-year-old Tokyo man: “I should tell my mother and family in the UK that



I can no longer fly back once a year to see them." But, he conceded, " I have not done this yet."

Unavailable or inconvenient mass transit was cited frequently, especially for those in rural areas. And mass transit can be unpleasant too, as explained by a 46-year-old who works in the computer field. "I tried taking the bus, but got caught in a rainstorm," she said, demonstrating how a bad experience can forestall good intentions from changing.



On the other hand, carpooling was initially difficult for a 59-year-old woman living in a small town in Vermont, yet its benefits helped her maintain the change. "I used to like the solitude of driving alone but find I love the company now," she said.

Changing food habits provided some interesting struggles. Dietary change was difficult, mostly because of entrenched eating habits and uncooperative family members, especially spouses and teenagers.

Many respondents cited the desire to eat meat, which takes much nonrenewable energy to produce and distribute and causes a lot of pollution.

For a 71-year-old Missouri woman reducing meat in her diet was particularly challenging because "others in our household want high protein diet and don't want to eat tofu every day." A 67-year-old educator from Maryland wrote about a "lifetime of wrong, unhealthy choices" that got in the way of his intention to switch to a low-energy diet of less meat and processed food.

In Their Own Words

A 31-year-old New York City man, who took the survey, decided a few years ago to do something about climate and environmental challenges. He started to walk and bicycle more and buy organic food, tried and gave up vegetarianism, and remains only somewhat satisfied with what he's accomplished so far.

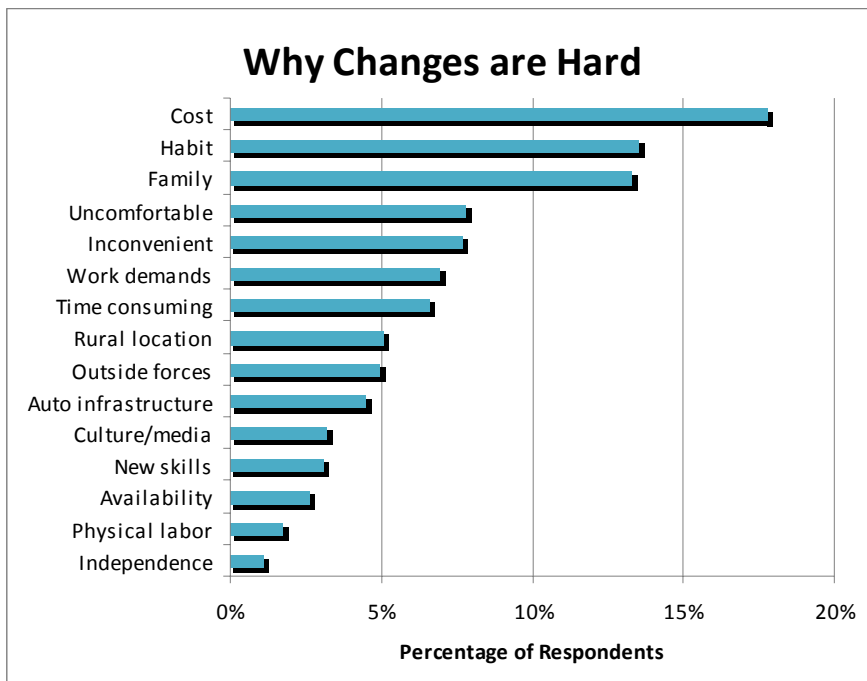
On his experience with vegetarianism: "I wanted to be much more of a Gandhi vegetarian than a liberal-hippy/yuppie vegetarian. I wanted to be in control, of myself and my environment...I learned about some of the bad things that are done to animals while they are being raised, and the thing that makes the strongest impression on me is that chickens are squished in coops with so little room that they can't even flap their wings...I don't feel like this was a failure, it was more of something that I tried and learned about and maybe I'll come back to someday or maybe not."

On the importance of individual action: "A lot of people I know think that the only way to deal with large-scale issues is by national politics. And that leads to a lot of feelings of impotence. I point to specifically Gandhi because he was someone who had a major impact on world politics without ever holding an elected office. That is something I think Americans have very much lost touch with."

On financial challenges: "I need to be more financially stable before I worry too much about environment...I basically came to the conclusion that I'm not going to be of any use to anyone else unless I take care of myself, and part of that is taking care of my financial needs."

The time, labor and new skills that gardening takes were also tricky, as was the additional cost and availability of local food. According to a 34-year-old man, a finance professional from Columbus, Ohio, “It requires thoughtfulness and planning to supply enough groceries for a family each week from what you can grow and buy from local farmers...and even then it's hard to resist the temptation of a fully-stocked big box grocer just down the street.”

Reducing home energy use was quite challenging, especially the financial burden of retrofitting and adjusting to lower thermostats in the winter and higher temperatures in the summer. Relocating was difficult when it meant moving away from friends and family. “It required giving up so many established relationships and resources,” according to a 33-year-old man from Oregon.



For others, relocating meant additional trials. It was difficult for a 48-year-old farmer in rural Ohio to give up the entertainment provided by the city where he once lived. “Rural life is often isolating, sometimes boring compared to the easy access to bad behavioral opportunities the city provides,” he wrote, affirming his decision to move away from the temptation to consume.

In fact, giving up consumerism and otherwise changing purchasing habits was another tough area. Some talked about it in terms of an addiction, noting the barrier of habits. “I’m still a sucker for a new pair of heels” is the way a 23-year-old woman, while others cited social and media pressure.

The most challenging for one respondent was “consuming less when others around you consume more.” The anonymous respondent continued, “We are social creatures who like to experience and share things with those around us.”

Changing careers and psychological difficulties of adjusting were the next highest rated challenges with less than 10 percent reporting that no change was difficult for them.

Leaving one's old career often came with a problematic pay cut, and learning the skills for a new one took additional time and effort. "It was a challenge to find an alternative situation and still afford the basics, like food," a 31-year-old Oregon woman said. She also cited the difficulties with "transferring the skills from office work to more meaningful work."

As for psychological challenges, participants used various concepts to describe problems – "changing thought patterns," "mental readjustment to the coming challenges," "deconstructing my programming," "removing the materialism mindset," and "making the paradigm shift."

Sharing information, being politically active and otherwise encouraging other people to take action, particularly one's own family, were other challenges, followed by reducing household debt and the trials of living in community which includes the difficulties of cooperation, shared ownership, co-housing, eco-village living, and more social interaction.

Not having enough money was the most frequently cited barrier to making lifestyle changes, as it was selected by 53% of respondents. "I have very little money and most renewable energy systems, more fuel efficient cars, and organic foods are cost prohibitive," according to a 92-year-old farmer in rural New York.

Hard Changes for Whom?

Age

- Those aged 34 and under had the hardest time with career change and teaching others, while household and transportation changes were less difficult for them.
- Psychological challenges and career changes were prominent for those in their 30s and 40s. This was also the age group with the least likelihood of saying that they experienced no difficulties with lifestyle change.
- From ages 45 to 74, household and food changes and community living were the most difficult while career and teaching others were less challenging.
- Psychological challenges drop off dramatically after age 64.

Gender

- Women had a harder time changing purchasing behaviors and food choices, while men more often cited career and psychological challenges.

Community Type

- Rural respondents reported fewer challenges associated with career and purchasing. Community living, teaching others and household changes were the most difficult.
- Urban residents had the hardest time with career, psychological changes and purchasing and were less likely to report difficulties with household changes or having no difficulties at all.
- For those living in a small town, community living was most challenging, while suburbanites did not mention this.

Breaking bad habits was another challenge in moving toward sustainability, such as "not jumping into a car every time I turned around," explained a 52-year-old man from a small town in Wisconsin. Respondents also mentioned other hurdles: a lack of support from family members – or being unable to convince them to make changes – experiencing personal discomfort and inconvenience, the requirements of one's work and a lack of sufficient time and information.

Other obstacles for these emerging lifestyle change leaders were a lack of community and societal support and rigid habits and attitudes, followed by a lack of family support and not enough information on how to make the changes.

| What Hinders Efforts | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Limited Finances | 53% |
| Lack of Community/Societal Support | 46% |
| Rigid Habits and Attitudes | 29% |
| Lack of Family Support | 14% |
| Not Enough Information | 11% |

But getting information on what to do, a large part of what activists and non-profit organizations provide, is apparently not as important for those who have already started making lifestyle changes. For them, it becomes more about getting outside support and overcoming personal obstacles to behavior change.

And there were respondent concerns about what are the most appropriate steps to take when making substantial changes -- such as changing careers, relocating, building a new home, spending large amounts of money on renewable energy systems and emergency supplies.

A 39-year-old man from Albany, New York said, “It’s hard to know for sure what my greatest impacts are to the environment.” He wondered, for example, whether he should heat his home with wood or do an extensive energy retrofit and whether he should read documents online to save paper or print them out.

Measuring Their Impact

When it comes to measuring their energy saving efforts, two-thirds of respondents have not even attempted to do so. “I assume that however large my footprint is, I need to do all I can to reduce it,” according to a 61-year-old woman from rural New York.

About a third of those who do not try to measure how much energy they were saving said it was not because the feedback was not necessary. “To me it's not so much about how much energy is saved, but starting a new culture,” said a 40-year-old man from a small town in North Carolina. Others said they did not have the right equipment and a smaller number reported that it was too time consuming and too difficult.

“There are far too many things that need to be done,” a 46-year-old man from India said, “so I would not want to start believing that what I have done is enough.” Others said that they plan to measure energy savings but have not gotten around to it yet, many not knowing where to begin.

Of those who have measured their environmental impact in some fashion, many have done so using an online calculator, most often a carbon footprint analysis. More than a third did their own calculations from utilities bills, gasoline usage and other measures and just a few percent had hired a professional to complete a home energy audit, arguably one of the most accurate but also expensive methods.

“Measurements usually turn into competition,” a 47-year-old from Wisconsin said, while a 35-year-old business man from rural Canada said he is “not doing it for bragging rights.”

Still, about one-sixth of respondents noted that receiving feedback on the positive impact of any changes helped them continue to make them.

Helpful Factors and Easy Changes

Yet this feedback was not nearly as important as the support of family and friends, setting goals, and the support from the local community. Participants also specified a variety of websites, books, organizations, internet forums and a moral and financial imperative to act.

| What Helps Efforts | |
|--|-----|
| Support of Family and Friends | 39% |
| Setting Goals | 37% |
| Support of Local Community | 21% |
| Receiving Feedback on Impact of Change | 17% |

“Environmental reasons were the first reasons I wanted to make these changes, but economic reasons were the driving force behind it,” according to one participant. “I just simply can't afford to buy food anymore, so I am growing it myself.”

According to a 47-year-old man from Adelaide in Australia, who works in the aviation/automotive industry, “Peak oil is a logical and inevitable scenario...If you understand the simple concepts, and they are simple, it is not rocket science, then what else can you do but react.

Conviction, commitment, determination, making the decision, knowing that it is the right thing to do, finding like-minded people to work with and being inspired by and a feeling of personal satisfaction were also helpful. One respondent commented, “I finally threw up my hands and said, I have to do *something*, even if it's not the best option.”

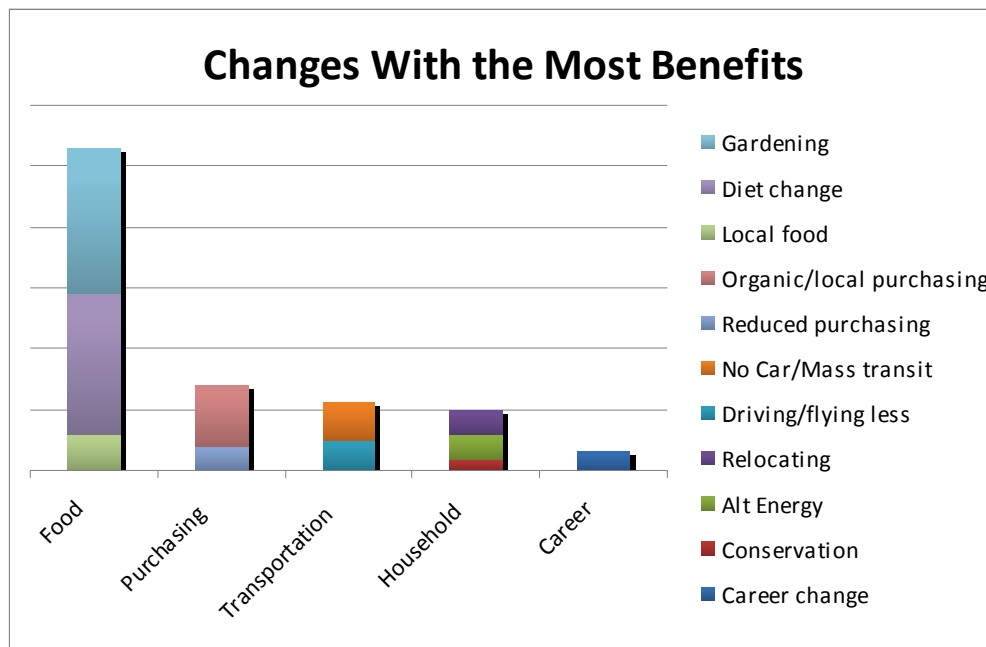
More than a third of respondents observed the usefulness of setting goals, which makes seemingly difficult targets easier to approach and accomplish over time. While respondents did not specify, goals can include taking specific steps by a particular time or reaching a certain threshold of energy use or carbon dioxide generation.

Still the support of friends and family was chosen as the most helpful factor in making such lifestyle changes, according to one-third of survey participants. Combined with the support of one's local community, getting help from others accounted for more than half of all responses. Independent of age, gender and community type (urban, rural, suburban or small town), the only factor that affected what helped people the most was income level, with those making less than \$25,000 per year seeming to require more support from their local community.

But it has not been all hard times for this group of early adopters. In fact, many of the behavioral changes were easy, particularly when they conferred other benefits.

While for some survey takers diet change was the most difficult change, it was also selected as the easiest, particularly because of the health benefits and because food now tastes better. Gardening was a close second because of the fresh food produced and because it was fun, rewarding and challenging. Eating locally was also high on the list, as long as local food was available and convenient to access.

Cutting home energy and water use was also easy for many respondents. “Use less energy, use compost toilet, learn skills,” was how a 41-year-old man from a small town in Belgium responded, explaining, “because there is a sense of achievement in that, it is fun to do, the benefits are clear and it is easy and quick to do.”



Consuming less was also easy for many respondents, while so difficult for others. A 58-year-old health care worker in Missouri reduced her purchases and reported that “living without a lot of stuff is simpler.” She continued, “Stuff is a hassle and very little is truly needed.”

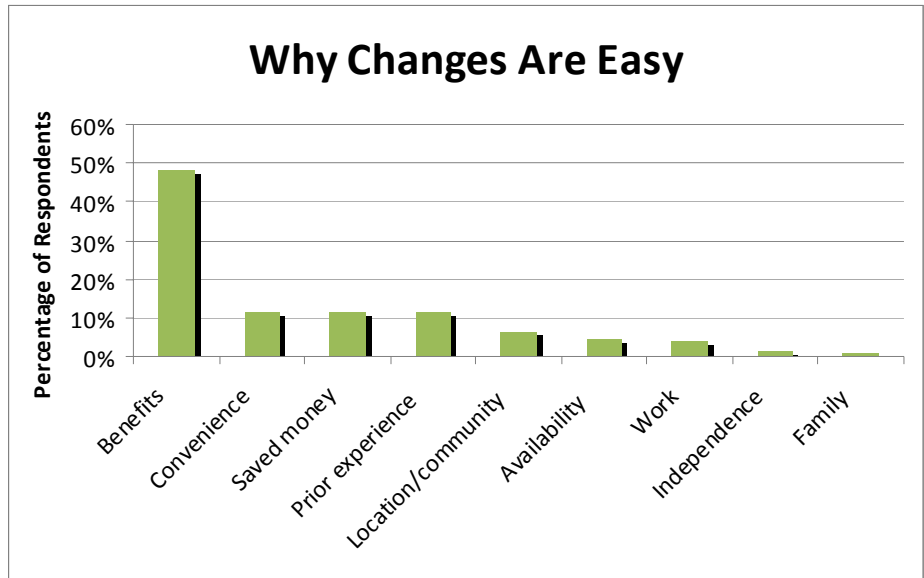
Walking and bicycling were easy because it is fun, healthy and more enjoyable, driving less reduced the hassle and allowed more time at home and getting rid of one's personal vehicle saved money and provided one respondent from New Zealand “true freedom.”

Switching incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents and recycling were top responses, as the effort and cost is minimal compared to other adaptations. On the other hand, reducing debt, cutting air travel, and teaching others were not highly rated as easy to do.

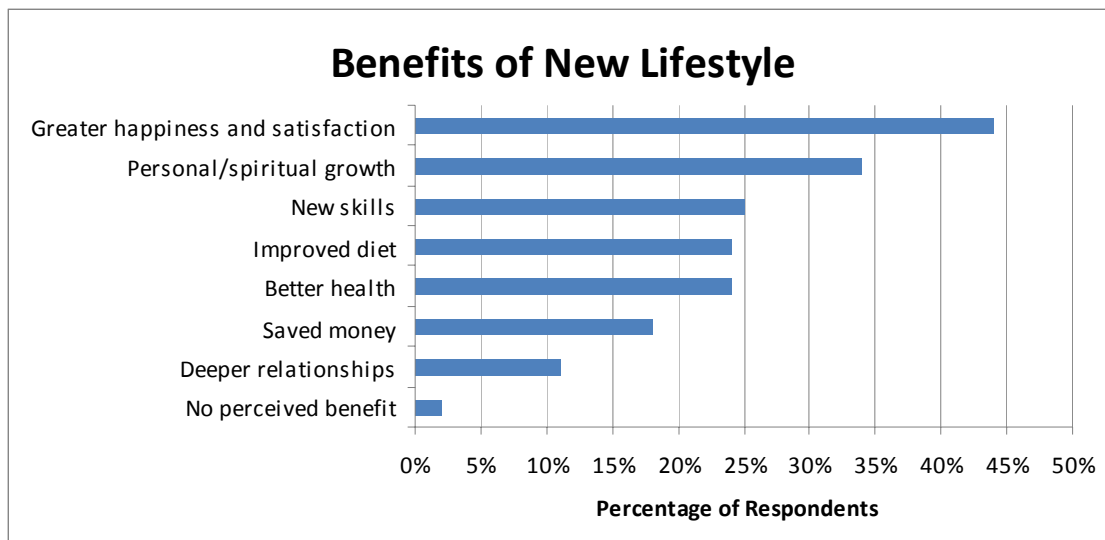
Nearly half of all respondents explained that a particular conservation measure was easy because of the benefits that it provides. With gardening, diet change, walking and bicycling and organic

purchasing leading the list of benefit-providing changes, clearly health and fitness are paramount, as is enjoying the activity.

Convenience, cost and having previous experience with the action were the next factors that made certain steps easier than others. Perhaps sustainability advocates should emphasize that in addition to saving carbon, fuel and money, a low-energy lifestyle can be healthy and fun.



In fact, in a question on the benefits experienced from lifestyle changes, nearly half of respondents noted that they have experienced greater happiness and satisfaction in their lives. A third reported personal growth, while one-quarter said they have learned new skills. Taken together they clearly demonstrate that such changes have bettered them as individuals.



Improved health and diet combined were reported by half of respondents. Saving money was reported less frequently than is often assumed by policy-makers and advocates. It may be that this group of energy conservers is not motivated by financial savings or simply views the impact on their personal lives as more important than saving money. Surely this fact could be used to communicate with those reticent to make changes that they will be better off for it, receiving

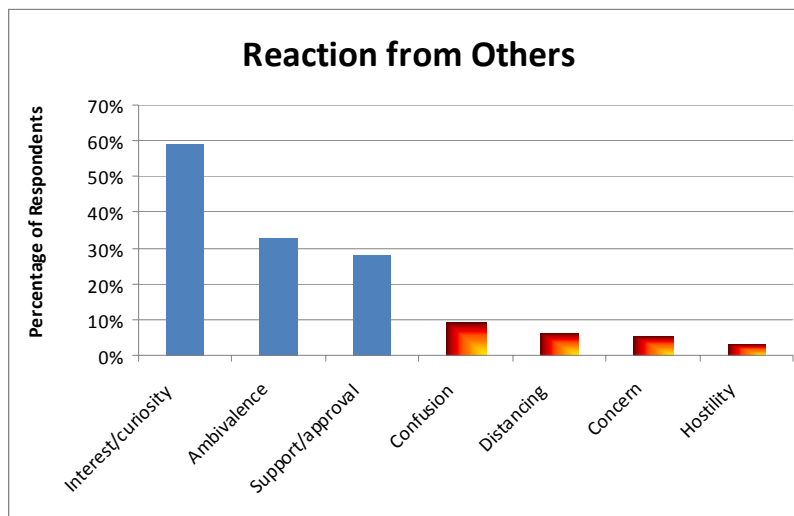
many intangible benefits that they might not even consider before taking action. Less than 2 percent of respondents reported that there has been no perceived benefit in their lives from making lifestyle changes.

Other findings:

- Only one in ten have reported deeper relationships since beginning lifestyle changes. This group was twice as likely to be engaged in bartering and also more likely to garden and be a member of a Community Supported Agriculture farm, which often can be cooperative activities.
- For those under 34 years old, diet and health benefits were not as often listed as learning new skills and experiencing greater satisfaction. Respondents over 75 years old more often selected deeper relationships.
- Women were more likely to report deepening relationships and personal/spiritual growth, while men were more likely to choose better health and learning new skills.

In the Eyes of Others

As these individuals in the survey have embarked on a transformation of their lifestyles, they have done so within a social context, where their actions have not gone unnoticed. While the people in their lives have had very different reactions to their behavior changes, it has been mostly positive, according to the survey.



More than half of respondents said that interest and curiosity were the main reactions of friends and family. One-third reported ambivalence about what they were doing. Support and approval, arguably the most positive response, was chosen by one-third of respondents. About one quarter selected a negative reaction, including confusion, distancing, concern or outright hostility.

Multiple respondents chose the following words to describe how others have responded – admiration, approval, appreciation, amusement, disbelief, disinterest, encouragement, guilt, indifference, pride and ridicule. Others reported getting blank stares or being laughed at, and being viewed as an outsider, oddball, or eccentric.

In Their Own Words

A 32-year-old man living in Madrid, who took the survey, decided to move to the north of Spain, leaving his job at a telecommunications company to work initially as a green energy teacher and now as a manager of a farm-school. He had always been worried about the environment and before becoming aware of peak oil became unsatisfied with city living, with the stress, competition and unhappiness.

On the move: "I had to make a decision. What do I want? Do I want to stay with my friends, stay in Madrid, and leave my future in the hands of luck? Or, do I want to move to another city or village, to begin to prepare for the consequences of peak oil and climate change, and to make new friends, more close to my new life?...I was looking for the 'real life,' but I'm not sure what I meant with it."

On trying to reach friends: "Only one friend is nowadays worried about it...The rest of my friends did not believe me, or they trust more in politician, technologic and the 'business as usual' way to save us from ourselves."

On the future: "For me is really sad to think that, in the future, maybe, things will go really bad in Madrid, people killing, people dying, people starving to death. Friends and family having hard times."

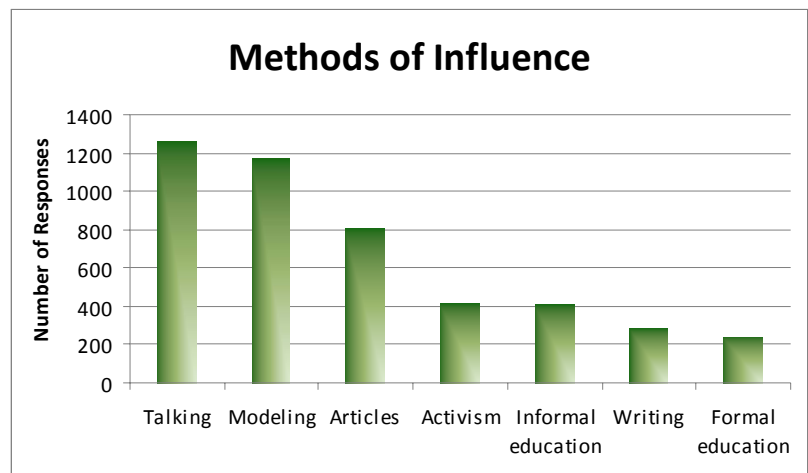
One anonymous respondent said, "My family quit talking to me about it because they think I'm a judgmental environmental zealot. I cooled my jets and they are more receptive now." A 55-year-old man from North Carolina wrote, "Nobody outside my immediate family asks *why*, but within my inner circle, all are supportive and helpful," he said.

A 72-year-old woman from California observed, "What caused 'eyeball rolling' even 10 years ago, now is mainstream. People are more frequently seeking advice."

Reaching Out

Most respondents have tried to influence others to make similar changes in their lives. In fact, nine out of ten have attempted to do so, with varying success.

Conversation was the main method of influence, reported by more than three quarters of respondents, followed by being a role model. About half have sent articles to people while a quarter have participated in activist efforts and informal education. Smaller numbers have done writing and blogging on the issue and formal teaching.



Many other methods were used by respondents to get their message across, from respectful communication to bar fights. A sampling of strategies includes:

- Give books as gifts
- Build gardens for people
- Organize public events (lectures, film screenings, etc.)
- Model a healthy and vital, not deprived, life
- Lobby for policy change
- Perform songs
- Counter bogus claims made in public venues
- Remove recyclables from other's garbage
- Start non-profits and websites
- Write letters to the editor
- Make films
- Encourage others' small efforts

One respondent, a 40-year-old California man working in retail, agreed on encouraging small efforts. "As a social awakening/movement we need to quickly get away from the old/tired way of making people feel ashamed about their unsustainable habits and behaviors. Instead, we educate, model and welcome *any* changes that are in the right direction," he wrote.

A 54-year-old man from Virginia recommends, "Building 'pictures' of the positive possibilities, and suggesting details on how people can collaborate on positive, doable steps which will illuminate other positive and doable steps."

When judging whether they perceive their efforts as having been successful, respondents' answers were mixed. Only a quarter could definitely say yes, while two-thirds answered that they had been somewhat successful, or just did not have any idea as to their level of success. One in ten did not think they have had any success.

"Here there is a great groundswell of interest in living a sustainable, healthy and intelligent way of life from many areas of the community while others totally ignore the issues, and this seems very polarized," wrote a 46-year-old woman from northern California. "I'm not sure how we can bridge that gap," she said.

Most of this small subgroup of respondents figured that they have not been successful in some cases because people's attitudes and beliefs are rigid, or they do not want to be told what to do, or they are in denial, or are ignorant or apathetic. Some respondents felt uncomfortable with what might be construed by others as "preaching," are afraid of a hostile reaction, or simply

Eleven reasons why others cannot be influenced, according to one respondent, a man from Spain:

1. They just think I'm a doomster.
2. They don't think the situation is so bad.
3. They don't think the science is solid.
4. They believe scientist and governments will solve any problem.
5. They don't want to listen to bad news.
6. They don't want to change their way of life and consumption.
7. They think they have more important problems to take care of.
8. They are not well informed at all.
9. They don't care about getting well informed.
10. They think economy is more important than environment.
11. They think there is nothing can be done.

do not know the best way to approach others.

“I feel nurturing my relationships with people is less judgmental and more effective in the long term,” said a 25-year-old woman in Vancouver, Canada. “I simply inform people of my choices and let them ask if the interest is there,” she said. A 55-year-old woman in construction in rural Pennsylvania, said, “I believe that as a result of my story, some people are intrigued to explore assumptions regarding their lifestyle and use of resources.”

Abstaining from Change?

While the survey was not designed for those who have not make changes to their lifestyle due to an environmental or energy concerns, some interesting results emerged from the few questions that this group, less than 10 percent of total respondents, were asked to answer.

More than half of them have not changed simply because they were already living a low impact lifestyle. “I have always lived sustainably,” said a 60-year-old government worker from Madison, Wisconsin. “I have never owned a car, ride my bicycle year-round, keep my heat at 58 degrees when I'm home and up, and 53 at night,” he said, adding, “for an American, I have a very small footprint.”

Many credited being raised with this consciousness. Others said they were motivated by reasons other than environmental threats. A 43-year-old scientist from Iowa said, “I always have aspired to a low level of impact” and that the “recognized threats just validate the concerns I have. I would still practice the same behaviors exclusive of any recognized threat.”

One-quarter of this group did not recognize the need to change their lifestyle, explaining that individual change is not required or that climate change is not happening, is a manufactured crisis or cannot be fixed. Others noted that they would like to but either have not begun yet or are being prevented from taking action by some outside factor, such as being poor or living in a city. “The big corporations and companies need to change their way of doing business,” said a 65-year-old woman from a small town in British Columbia. “They have a much greater effect on global threats than I do.”

More than half of this subgroup of respondents thought that lifestyles changes were not at all important to addressing global threats, with a lower number suggesting they are very important or important. This is compared with the more than 90 percent of the total survey participants who thought such changes are very important or important.

Though few lifestyle change abstainers were very hopeful about the future, they were generally more hopeful than those who had made lifestyle changes. Also those who are making changes were twice as likely to have no hope at all. This may seem backwards, but if people are not concerned enough about a problem to make significant changes in their lives, they may perceive the problem as less serious or threatening than someone who is committed to making a difference.

Next Steps

Nine out of ten people who have made changes in their lives as a response to global challenges plan to make additional changes. More than anything else, they hope to start or expand a garden, install a renewable energy system in their home and get more involved in their local community.

A 68-year-old retiree from a small town in Michigan plans to “retrofit the house we have recently bought, grow more of our yearly food supply in our larger yard, and shift more of our savings to local and family investments.”

Some also specified composting, preserving food, building a greenhouse, putting in a rooftop garden, raising rabbits and chickens and setting up a butchering facility. Several respondents intend to relocate to a place where more land can be dedicated to growing food. Many are going further, like a 34-year-old non-profit employee living in a small town in Colorado, who wrote that he wants to “start our own urbanish CSA using the yards available in our neighborhood. We’ve talked to our neighbors and they’re interested in it too.”

Also a high priority for many respondents was moving to alternative energy sources – solar hot water systems, solar photovoltaic panels, wood burning stoves, wind turbines, air source heat pumps, geothermal systems and solar ovens and dryers. But since they cost more than other adaptations, such as conservation measures and home weatherization, it is not surprising that these respondents have not yet gotten around to purchasing a renewable energy system.

Many of the respondents started with making changes in their own lives, and now seem ready to share their work with others in their community and push for more systemic changes. Perhaps they have been more inclined to work alone first or simply wanted to gain the knowledge, experience and credibility in sustainable living. For whatever reason, a large percentage of respondents say they now intend to do more to spread awareness and action locally.

Next Steps Checklist

For a 63-year-old woman from Philadelphia working for a non-profit organization –

1. Move into our new community
2. Retrofit our house
3. Install renewable energy sources
4. Garden, garden, garden
5. Retire
6. Write & teach about the changes we've made so that other ordinary people can do likewise
7. Volunteer my professional services to an organization that's working hard on these issues, like New Society Publishers.

Some had broad and ambitious goals, such as a 60-year-old woman from Minneapolis, who wants to, “convince others to make a social revolution and get rid of capitalism which is destroying the planet.” Or a 41-year-old man from suburban Ontario who wrote that he has plans to “inculcate children into value of local food production.”

Others were more specific, as in a 53-year-old man from rural Canada, who plans to set up a car-sharing co-op using old, salvaged diesel vehicles and his own biodiesel made from restaurant

waste. Or a 36-year-old consultant from Denmark, who wrote that he will “make short films about exciting projects around the world to inspire people to make lifestyle changes.”

Retrofitting an existing home or building a new home were the next steps and are also large financial commitments. Retrofitting strategies were mainly focused on adding insulation, especially in the attic, and plugging air leaks, with a small number adding windows and replacing furnaces.

The planned new homes were described variously as downsized, off-the-grid, zero-energy, energy-efficient, straw bale, with alternative energy generation and a large garden in back. Many survey takers also emphasized relocating to a more rural area or moving to a cooperative sustainable community, such as an eco-village.

A few respondents have no plans except to wait for the inevitable. “Learn how to accept death without being hopeless,” is how one explained it. “Dying before we run out of potable water,” was the hope for a 30-year-old from Columbia, Missouri.

Final Thoughts

In the face of looming energy, climate and environmental crises, efforts to radically cut fossil fuel energy use, reduce carbon dioxide generation and lessen environmental impact have been extremely slow.

In 2008, the International Energy Agency stated that global oil production will soon begin to decrease and might do so at a rate of seven to ten percent per year. Last year NASA scientist James Hansen warned, “If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, paleo-climate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO₂ [in the atmosphere] will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm [parts per million] to at most 350 ppm.”

For Americans, this requires a 90 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050, or about a 4 percent per year per capita cut. Meanwhile, carbon dioxide emissions have been rising, dependence on coal, oil and natural gas has been increasing and the depletion of soil and freshwater resources has been continuing, among other indicators.

Those lifestyle change leaders making the more significant reductions in fossil fuel use are pioneering a new way to live on this planet that everyone will eventually have to adopt to preserve climate stability and survive the end of the fossil fuel age. This survey revealed how the experiences of these leaders can aid in disseminating sustainable living skills and actions. Here are some of the survey's findings that may help those working to accelerate awareness and action:

- Emphasizing the positive consequences of particular lifestyle changes, and focusing on health and wellness benefits and a simpler, more satisfying life may be more effective ways to encourage change than promoting financial savings.
- Resources such as books, films and articles can be powerful motivations to take action and likely assist in aiming people in the right direction. However, the lack of support

from one's community and family and lack of assistance with overcoming unhelpful personal habits and attitudes are more significant roadblocks to effective response.

- Growing one's own food is a popular and transformative way to begin living a more sustainable lifestyle, and may lead to a new career opportunity and the development of more community support.
- Most people do not feel they need to measure the impact of their lifestyle changes, but some think the feedback would motivate and assist them with doing more. Setting goals, even without measurement, is extremely helpful.
- Generally, these lifestyle leaders have had support and interest from those around them, even while they've been unable to convince many to change themselves.
- While most people were alarmed and spurred into action by recent news of converging global threats, many others had begun making changes years ago, for a multitude of reasons, such as realizing that it is simply a better way to live.

As more individuals change their energy-intensive lifestyles, they will need help in overcoming social and personal barriers as well as support from communities and organizations which promote the benefits of this new way of life. This support may make the transition from wasteful to sustainable lifestyles more effortless and hopefully, more successful.

While these brave individuals may not speak from a podium, appear on the evening news, write a book or star in a film, they may be the key to the rapid spread of a new, necessary and ultimately, better way to live.