

Macalester EcoHouse Discussion Guide

A collection of thought-provoking articles and projects for EcoHouse residents



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Introduction

Taking down posters of EcoHouse skill shares and workshops, packing Tupperware that had held farmers' market summer corn, and filling my suitcase with the long johns and wool socks I'd worn around the house, I realized that while my housemates and I had done much to live sustainably while in the EcoHouse, much still remained unexplored. As I prepared to leave, ideas for projects and discussion began going through my mind. Although we had bought bananas by the dozen, I realized we'd never discussed the ethics of their growing conditions. Although our mailbox was always exploding with junk mail, getting off mailing lists had never crossed our minds. While we'd been conscious to unplug appliances, we'd never talked over the problems of energy usage and the controversies of climate change. Most importantly, we'd never asked if our sustainable choices really made a meaningful difference towards solving the enormity of environmental problems. So many conversations had been left unspoken.

This reading guide, I hope, will provide a space and a starting point for such discussions. Divided into ten units—ranging in topic from communal living to water to the critiques of sustainable living—this guide provides short articles and projects that have been picked for interest, length, and relevance for those living in the house. Some readings remain long, but are marked as having an **Optional** section, for readers interested in learning more. Additionally, if crunched for time, residents can divide the reading load and summarize the readings for each other. Although the guide is geared specifically towards residents of the Macalester EcoHouse, many of the readings would be of interest to members of other sustainability and environmental houses, especially those in the Twin Cities and Minnesota. Some projects are season specific—like winterizing and food preservation— but most of the units can be read in any order throughout a semester or year. That being said, I recommend beginning with the Communal Living unit, since learning to live together is the basis of success for any ecohouse. As a whole, I hope this guide will provide you with the resources that will help make your journey into communal sustainable living an active, meaningful experience.

Discussion Topics

Communal Living

Energy

Transportation

Waste

Food and Diet

Water

Cleaning Supplies

Personal Care Products and Cosmetics

Ecology of the EcoHouse

Is Living Sustainably a Solution?

Communal Living

As Geoph Kozeny defines it, “an ‘intentional community’ is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values.” Thus, at its basis, living in the EcoHouse is committing to an intentional community. Setting the stage for your own explorations in creating an intentional community, Scott Russell Sanders muses about the meaning of community and the value it has in “The Common Life.”

Continuing on this theme, Kozeny puts ecohouses in their historical and national context, describing briefly the history and types of intentional communities. The final two selections provide guidance on the challenges of living together. From explaining the importance of being upfront about money to building trust and communicating effectively, Elizabeth Barrette hits the key points for learning to effectively live together in “Householding: Communal Living on a Small Scale.” The unit will conclude with a look at the best practices for running meetings with a short article on “Consensus Ingredients.”

Readings

*Excerpt from “The Common Life” by Scott Russell Sanders, pages 83-85
Discussion Course on Choices for Sustainable Living, Northwest Earth Institute: 2009, Print.*

*Excerpts from “[Intentional Communities: Lifestyles based on Ideals](#)” by Geoph Kozeny
Fellowship for Intentional Communities, www.ic.org 1996. Online.*

*“[Householding: Communal Living on a Small Scale](#)” by Elizabeth Barrette
Communities magazine, communities.ic.org, Fall 2009, Online.*

*“[Consensus Ingredients](#)” by Caroline Estes
Fellowship for Intentional Communities, www.ic.org 1996. Online.*

Discussion Starters

- Tell a story about a time that you valued community.
- Which types and aspects of intentional communities most resonated with you?
- Kozeny describes intentional communities as experiments in solving problems with society that, in turn, “introduce new dynamics that become tomorrow’s problems.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Does Barrette cover any aspect of communal living that we haven’t discussed?
- What is valuable about making decisions by consensus? What are the shortfalls?

- Which tips in the “Consensus Ingredients” are valuable and how should we incorporate them into our meetings?

Energy

Instead of debating whether or not climate change is “liberal hoax” like mainstream America, we’ll dive right into understand the science and the implications of global warming. Starting with “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math,” Bill McKibben will break down climate change into the three most important numbers for understanding the problem. Next, in “How Rural America Got Fracked” we’ll take a look at the frac-sand industry—a mining industry that supports our ever expanding need for fossil fuels— and the destruction it causes to farmlands and water supplies. A link to excel’s online monitoring system, an explanation of an “energy diary,” along with an article on winterizing windows for the winter, will be the concluding projects of the section.

Readings

“[Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math](#)” by Bill McKibben
Rolling Stones, August 2012, Online.

“[How Rural America Got Fracked](#)” by Ellen Cantarow
The Nation, 21 May 2012, Online.

[EcoHouse Metering Online](#)

Tracer Summit, URL: 141.140.251.30. Username: “eco” Password: “house.”

“Energy Diary by Stephen and Rebekah Hren
The Carbon-Free Home: 36 Remodeling Project to Help Kick the Fossil Fuel Habit,
Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont: 2008, Print.

“[How to Winterize Your Home](#)” by Elizabeth Gehrman
The Boston Globe, October 21, 2012, Online.

Discussion Starters

- What are the most alarming aspects of climate change?
- Companies, governments and citizens all play a crucial role in “How Rural America Got Fracked.” Describe the power dynamics of the emerging frac-sand mining industry.
- After reading McKibben’s and Cantarow’s articles, what do you think are the best ways to mitigate climate change? Do you agree with Bill McKibben that attacking energy companies is the solution?

- How can we use energy diaries and the energy monitoring system to reduce our energy consumption?
- What other steps can we take to reduce energy usage as house?

Transportation

In a culture where getting a drivers license (and sometimes a car) is a rite of passage and the convenience of private transportation is expected by most, spending twice as long to commute by bus or bundling up to bike in the cold can feel like a hassle. While saving energy, is it worth it? In this section, we will explore the effects of rethinking American's reliance on cars on communities abroad and at home. Beginning with Bill McKibben's "If you Build it, Will They Change?" we'll take a look at the effects public transportation has on the sense of community in Curitiba, Brazil. Next we'll read a brief article on the potential for segregation in the Twin Cities expanding lightrail system. We'll end with some biking and public transportation resource and the steps for changing a flat tire on a bike.

Readings and Projects

"If You Build it, Will They Change?" by Bill McKibben

Discussion Course on Choices for Sustainable Living, Northwest Earth Institute, Portland: 2009. Print.

["U Lawyer Raises New Worries for Light-rail Line: Segregation"](#) by Frederick Melo

Pioneer Press, www.twincities.com 26 January 2013. Online.

["Bike and Walk"](#) Online

Smart Trips, www.smart-trips.org/bikewalk

["How to Fix a Flat Tire on Your Bike"](#) By Steve Tischler

REI, http://www.rei.com, 2012 Online.

Discussion Starters

- What challenges does America face in creating a transportation system like that of Curitiba?
- Considering the concerns regarding segregation from the expanding lightrail system, what do you think the Twin Cities should be doing to create an alternative to the standard car-oriented city?
- What are some the challenges we individually face when it comes to using alternative transportation?

Consumption and Waste

In the Twin Cities, we produce an average of six pounds of waste each day, for a total of 2000 pounds each year! Why so much waste and how can reduce it? The following readings and activities dig into these questions. We'll begin with a look at the roots of consumption and its relationship to happiness in David Myer's "The Secret to Happiness." Next, we'll continue on to examine the many ways in which waste is part of our lives through Camille Erickson's case study on waste reduction in EcoHouse. We'll conclude with resources on thrifts store and donation centers, tips for reducing junk mail, and the how-to's of composting.

Readings and Projects

["Secret to Happiness"](#) by David Myers
YES! Magazine, 18 June 2004. Online.

["EcoHouse Zero Waste Independent Study"](#) by Camille Erickson
Macalester College, 2012. Online.

["Reuse and Donation: Guide to Charities, Non-Profits and Consignment Stores"](#)
Ramsey County. ramsey.mn.us, 2012. Online.

["Hold the Mail"](#)
Hennepin County Environmental Services, doitgreen.org 1 November 2011 Online.

"Compost Basics" by Scott Kellog and Stacy Pettigrew, pages 114-121
Toolbox for Sustainable City Living, South End Press, Cambridge: 2008. Print.

Discussion Starters

- Do you agree with David Myer's premise that consumption often gets in the way of achieving happiness?
- What are some ways you have reduced or wish to reduce your consumption?
- As a household, how can we build off of Camille Erickson's zero waste study and incorporate her work into our lifestyle?
- What tips on composting should we incorporate into our daily routine?
- Do we want pursue reducing junk mail as a house project?

Food and Diet

The EcoHouse Kitchen, with its large counter space and chest freezer in the basement, provides the perfect location to explore sustainable eating. But what exactly does eating sustainability entail? The following selections will detail several topics to help answer the question, "What

should I eat?” Starting with Pollan’s “What’s Eating America,” we’ll delve into the history of fixing nitrogen and industrial agriculture’s reliance on fossil fuels. Next, turning to eating meat, we’ll read a short article by Peter Singer on the ethics of meat consumption, followed by Environmental Working Group’s summary of the climate change implications and health effects of a meat based diet. Following this article, we’ll examine the connection between environmental sustainability and social justice, looking at a case study of the banana industry by Ed Hammer. We’ll end with Fromartz’s musing on alternatives to this industrial food system, as well as a short how-to on canning and freezing.

Readings and Projects

“[What’s Eating America](#)” by Michael Pollan
Smithsonian, 15 June 2006, Online.

“[Meat Production Today is Not Just Inhumane, Its Inefficient](#)” by Peter Singer
The Guardian, 11 July 2006, Online.

Excerpt from “[Meat Eater’s Guide to Climate Change and Health](#)” page 3
Environmental Working Group, www.ewg.org, 2011, Online.

“Bananas” by Ed Hammer
Discussion Course on Menu for Sustainable Future, Northwest Earth Institute, Portland: 2009. Print.

“Home Food Preservation” by Jane Grimsbo Jewett
Do it Green! Minnesota: Live Simply Live Green, Do it Green Minnesota, Minneapolis: 2010. Print.

“[Local or Organic: A False Choice](#)” by Samuel Fromartz
Edible Communities Publications, April 2006, Online.

Discussion Starters

- What parts of “What’s eating America?” stood out? What surprised you?
- Do you agree with Singer’s position on the ethics of eating meat? What are the shortfalls of his argument? How do the health and environmental implications of producing meat shape your view?
- Describe some of the worst aspects of the banana industry. Do you know of other foods that are produced in equally unjust and hazardous conditions?
- Do you agree with Fromartz, that both local and organic are good options? In terms of improving the food system, where do you think we should focus our energy?
- What kinds of dietary commitments do you personally make, or wish to make?

Water

From showering to growing our food to nourishing wildlife, water plays a crucial role in our lives and the wellbeing of our ecosystem. The following selections provide some context for this crucial resource and suggestions for reducing consumption at the household level. We'll begin with a brief read on the effects of the 2012 drought, followed by an article on the connections between climate change and severe weather. Afterwards, we'll examine water issues more locally using "Minnesota's Environment and Energy Report Card," to take look at the water usage and quality in the state. We'll end with a few how-to's for reducing water consumption in the home.

Readings and Projects

["Drought \(U.S. Drought of 2012\)"](#)

New York Times, 7 December 2012, Online.

["Global Warming and the Science of Extreme Weather"](#) by John Carey

Scientific American, 29 June 2011, Online.

["Minnesota's Environment and Energy Report Card: Water"](#) page 2-5

Environmental Quality Board, www.eqb.state.mn.us, 2012 Online.

["Using Water Wisely: Why Not Start Right Now?"](#) by Tara Wesely

Do it Green! Magazine, www.doitgreen.org, 1 November 2011 Online.

Discussion Starters: Water

- Describe a few of the worst aspects of the drought. What should we be doing about it?
- What evidence is being used to make connections between climate change and severe weather? Do you think these connections will convince climate deniers that climate change is occurring? Why or why not?
- According to the Environmental Quality Board report, what are the central issues regarding water usage in the state?
- Which water reduction tips are we following? Which others should we begin to implement?

Cleaning Supplies

What's in your laundry detergent? What do you use to clean the sink? In this section we'll take a look at the hazards of standard cleaning supplies. Beginning with an introduction to the health hazards of cleaning supplies by the Environmental Working Group, we'll take a look at a case

study of a consumer rebellion against environmentally-friendly detergents in “The Dirty Truth: They’re Smuggling Soap in Spokane.” We’ll end with a link to the Environmental Working Group’s data base of safe cleaning supplies and an overview of nonhazardous household cleaners by Melissa Lewis for the *National Geographic*.

Readings and Projects

“[Cleaning Supplies and Your Health](#)” section I
Environmental Working Group, 2013, Online.

“[The Dirty Truth: They’re Smuggling Soap in Spokane](#)” by Kim Murphy
Los Angeles Times. 6 December 2009 Online.

“[Guide to Healthy Cleaning](#)” Online
Environmental Working Group, www.ewg.org/guides/cleaners, 2012.

“[Natural Do- it-Yourself Cleaning Solutions](#)” by Melissa Lewis
National Geographic, greenliving.nationalgeographic.com, 2013 Online.

Discussions Starters

- What concerns do you have about the health hazards of cleaning supplies?
- Considering the case study on soap smuggling in Spokane, what do you think are the main barriers preventing alternative cleaners from becoming more mainstream?
- What kinds of action are you doing to use less hazardous cleaning supplies?
- As a household, do we want to further explore the use of alternative cleaners? In what ways?

Cosmetics and Personal Care Products

As the Environmental Working Group reports, the average American uses nine different personal care products daily. Filled with 10,500 different chemicals, many of them have large environmental and health consequences. What are the effects of these products? What should we use instead? To answer these questions, we’ll take a look at an overview of cosmetics and personal care products in an introduction by the Environmental Working Group, then move on to a case study on the nail polish and manicure industry. Following these articles, I’ve included a link to the EWG’s list of safe personal care products, an introduction to sustainable feminine hygiene products, and a few recipes for do-it-yourself personal care.

Readings and Projects

“[Why this Matters—Cosmetics and Your Health](#)”

Environmental Working Group www.ewg.org/skindeep, 2013, Online.

“[The High Price of Beauty](#)” by Virginia Sole-Smith

The Nation, 20 September 2007. Online.

“[Skin Deep: Cosmetic Data Base](#)” Online

Environmental Working Group, <http://www.ewg.org/skindeep>, 2013.

“[Seven Ways to Green That Time of the Month](#)” by Christine Lepisto

Treehugger.com, 9 October 2008 Online.

Excerpts from “[Do-It-Yourself Recipes](#)”

Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, safecosmetics.org 2010 Online.

Discussion Starters

- What aspects of the hazards of personal care products stood out most?
- What are the worst aspects of the nail polish industry? Do you know of any similar cases regarding hazardous personal care products?
- What do you do, or wish to do, to use more sustainable or healthy personal care products?
- What are the barriers preventing individuals from using more sustainable products?
- As a house, should we make any commitments regarding personal care?

Ecology of the EcoHouse

Apart from the occasional rabbit darting through the yard or the bitter cold that make biking a pain, it can be easy to forget about the EcoHouse’s place in the natural environment of Minnesota. While no longer visible from the EcoHouse window, a broadleaf deciduous forest mixed with prairie used to make up the Twin Cities. While this natural environment only exists in few areas, other natural features also tie the EcoHouse to its natural environment. With the Mississippi River just a couple miles away, the EcoHouse resides near the Mississippi flyway, the migration pathway of billions of birds. Beneath this ecology, lies a unique geography. Mostly sandstone and limestone, several sites near the EcoHouse are prime locations for the searching fossils left from the Ordovician. As the following readings and resources illustrate, many opportunities exist for exploring the nature of this region that are often just a bike ride away. Not only does these nature preserves provide respite for the city life and reminder of what Minnesota used to be, they also offer a basis for an alternative future, as Janine Benyus will explain in “Mother Nature’s School of Design.”

Readings and Projects

“Field Guide: Big Woods, Big Rivers” by Andrea Lorek Straus et al.
Master Naturalist, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2010 Print.

“Wildlife in and Around the Twin Cities” by Carol L. Henderson et al
Traveler’s Guide to Wildlife in Minnesota
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, St. Paul: 1997. Print

“[Minnesota at a Glance: Fossil Collecting in the Twin Cities](#)”
University of Minnesota, Minnesota Geological Survey: 1995. Online.

“[Flight of the Fall](#)” by Michael D. Faw
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, www.dnr.state.mn.us, 2013 Online.

“[Mother Nature’s School of Design](#)” by Janine Benyus
YES! Magazine, 30 September 2001 Online.

Discussion Starters

- Which aspects of the Twin Cities ecology and geology most interest you?
- As a house, are we interested in taking any trips to these natural areas listed?
- Which of Janine Benyus’ examples of biomimicry resonated with you the most?
- Do you agree that a sustainable future lies in mimicking natural systems? What are the challenges we face in creating Benyus’ vision?

Is Living Sustainability a Solution?

As an environmentalist, I’m often struck by the enormity of environmental problems and the lack of adequate solutions. In the large scheme of things, does it really matter, that I’ve turned my thermostat down three degrees? How much of the industry am I really changing by shopping at farmers’ markets? And, if a sustainable lifestyle is so important, what does that say about who don’t have the time and resources to live sustainably? In this final selection of readings, I hope you can explore these types of questions. We’ll begin with Michael F. Maniates’ “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World,” and examining how personal responsibility solutions are inadequate to solve global environmental problems. Following this analysis, we’ll continue with an interview of David Jones who reflects on the white middle-upper class nature of the environmentalism. We’ll conclude this group of readings, with a little optimism, closing with Michael Pollan’s “Why Bother?” As Pollan explains, “sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it will.”

Readings and Projects

Excerpt from “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World,”
by Michael F. Maniates pages 31-38
Global Environmental Politics 1:3, MIT: August 2001. Print.

Excerpt from “[Bridging the Green Divide](#)” by David Kupfer, pages 1-3 (first 2 questions)
The Sun, March 2008 Online.

“[Why Bother?](#)” by Michael Pollan
New York Times, 20 April 2008 Online.

Discussion Starters

- According to Maniates, what are the main problems with an individualized solution to environmental change? What are the shortfalls of Maniates’ argument?
- Why are the demographics of the current environmental movement troubling? How should the environmental movement better cater to the working class and minority groups?
- Where should the environmental movement be focusing its energy?
- Do you agree with Pollan? Is it worthwhile to “act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it will?”

