The Osborne's Green Journey, Part 2

This time around, the Osborne family measures its ecological footprint - and is surprised by the findings.

by Donald Fraser

Busy shopping for school supplies, packing knapsacks and looking for locally-grown snacks that the kids won't wrinkle their noses at, the last thing Michelle Osborne wanted to think about was homework. With her oldest child, Kylie, just starting her first week of Grade 1, she figured it would be at least a week until she had to sharpen her pencil and start working. That is, until I came knocking at her door.

"Homework!" she exclaimed when I told her that the first big step in greening up her life would include researching her ecological footprint. "On the first week of school?" I reminded Michelle that she'd be hearing the exact same words come out of Kylie's mouth for a good many years to come.

And then I set her to work.

In the previous issue of ***Peterborough Kids***, we were introduced to the Osborne family. Parents, Jerry and Michelle, had decided that they wanted to make their lives more ecologically sustainable in hopes of providing a healthier environment in which to bring up their three children. ***Peterborough Kids*** is tracking their progress.

This time around, the Osbornes went under the microscope as Michelle sat down to calculate just how environmentally friendly the family actually is. Using what is called an ecological footprint calculator, she tried to figure out how big an impact her family had on the earth.

Some footprint calculators project approximately how many hectares of land would actually be needed if everyone used the same amount of resources as the person taking the test. Others give estimates of how much carbon dioxide – one of the leading causes of global climate change – an individual produces. The calculators provide a rough estimate of a person's resource use and compare it to what is actually available for use.

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The first calculator Michelle tried at www.myfootprint.org put things into perspective pretty quickly. The Canadian calculator, which looked at her house size, transportation choices, and waste generated, had Michelle using 8.8 hectares of the earth, quite above the 1.8 biologically productive global hectares available per person.

And the news got worse when Michelle realized she was only calculating her own footprint and not her family's. "Do I really have to multiply it by 5?" she asked. Probably not, as kids don't use as many resources, but factoring in Jerry's share, the numbers still began to add up.

The alarming part isn't Michelle's score on this test, but the fact that the average worldwide score, according to www.myfootprint.com, is 8.8 hectares. This means we are all using a lot more than we should. It also means that we are facing some big environmental troubles in the near future.

"At least I'm not above average," Michelle sighed.

The second test Michelle tried was one that she could do online with Kylie. "The Zerofootprint calculator was pretty cool," she reported. "It has big, kid-friendly fonts, and is worded at a level that Kylie can understand – with a bit of help from Jerry or me."(See www.zerofootprintkids.com/kids_home.aspx).

Kylie learned that she produced slightly less carbon dioxide (CO_2) than the average kid.

"I think that she really understood that things like taking the school bus gave her a better score than getting a drive each day," explained Michelle. "It is definitely a neat teaching tool."

Impressed with the results, Michelle tried the grownup version at www.zerofootprint.net/calculators. This calculator measured particular aspects of day-to-day life, such as the amount of CO_2 produced by a trip by airplane, the amount produced per driving distances (per year), and the amount produced through household kilowatt hours.

"So, in this calculator, I found out that my 1998 Toyota Tercel, driven roughly 20,000 kilometres per year, creates roughly 3.3 tonnes of CO_2 per year – slightly less than average." Michelle also found that her monthly electricity and gas consumption added up to roughly 5.9 tonnes of CO_2 per year. "Or right about average," she said, rather disappointed.

Hot Off the Press

By the time this article gets in your hand, www.zerofootprint.com will have launched its brand new interactive carbon offset calculator. The new program will allow you to create a profile, interact with other people – both in your community and around the world – and track changes and improvements in your own quest to reduce your impact.

The system will not only give tips for reduction, but will assign a dollar value to the amount of carbon dioxide (CO_2) you create and give you the opportunity to invest this money in a reforestation project in British Columbia to offset your CO_2 production. You will be able to join as an individual or group.

Within the next few months, Zerofootprint, in partnership with Peterborough Green-Up, will be launching Zerofootprint Peterborough, a site tailored to the community. Zerofootprint Peterborough will be setting up local carbon offset programs and will act as a forum for local community members to work together to cut emissions. The service will also have a posting board for local events and for groups to meet. Working together, we can have a tremendous impact!

Calculators

For a list of ecological footprint calculators, go to www.peterboroughkids.com and click on "Resources".

"It's an eye-opener, for sure," noted Michelle. "It makes you want to try even harder to make meaningful change."

When asked on various tests about eating animal-based products, Michelle answered that they often eat meat – usually daily, "which, apparently, is the second worst answer you can give," says Michelle.

Meat production requires far more water than grain production, while consuming roughly 90% of the soy crop, 80% of the corn crop, and 70% of the grain crop of North America. Globally, the agriculture sector produces between 50-75% of all human-derived methane and nitrous oxide emissions respectively, and about five percent of human-derived CO_2.

Michelle says she has since started looking for veggie-friendly recipes in order to lessen her impact. "And I'm looking into some local organic vegetable sources as well."

By composting, recycling, and refusing to purchase products with extra packaging, the Osbornes generally scored well on sections dealing with waste.

Energy consumption, however, was a different story altogether.

"Having a fair-sized house in Canada has its ecological drawbacks," Michelle explained. "I mean, our three-bedroom house isn't that big for Canada,

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but on a world-wide scale, it is." And because they have not yet done much to make their home energy-efficient, this affected their overall score. "But I aim to change that," promised Michelle.

In fact, she has already booked a home energy audit through Peterborough Green-Up, a non-profit environmental group that offers home assessments in Peterborough and Northumberland. As the service provider for the new ecoENERGY program, Green-Up can help homeowners get rebates for energy upgrades. "And when you are on a family budget that means a lot," says Michelle. "We'll end up getting a lot of the work we do paid for."

In the sections dealing with transportation, Michelle, once again, found some room for improvement. "Even though we try to restrict our car use, I think we still probably use too much fuel," she admits. "I have a fairly long commute, with no public transportation option, so it can be difficult. That being said, one of my colleagues lives fairly close by, so I could be car-pooling more. That will bring my score down some."

Asked if she had any final thoughts on using ecological footprint calculators, Michelle was quick to respond: "Even if you can't find one that is completely accurate, I still think it's important to take the test. The questions will make you think about the simple changes you can make in your own life. And the score will make you realize just how much we, as Canadians, consume."

In the next edition of ***Peterborough Kids***, we'll follow Green-Up home energy advisors as they do an assessment of the Osborne house. "Then we'll see some changes," vows Michelle.

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