

Free Savings! Spend Less! Eco-nomics and the credit crunch

Messages about saving money through simpler and smarter living have always been part of the eco-communicator's kitbag. Penny Walker looks at how the economic downturn is being reflected in attempts to engage people around the micro and the macro of sustainable development.

Grabbed your attention, didn't it? Our eyes are drawn to the possibility of saving money.

Environmentalists have always used this incentive as one of the main arguments when trying to get people to change their behaviour. Back in the 70s the UK Government's Save It campaign was prompted by rising oil prices and urged conservation – switching things off. In the 80s 3M's pollution prevention pays programme was busily saving tonnes of toxic releases and shedloads of money. And in the 90s, publications like Friends of the Earth's 'Take the Heat off the Planet' highlighted financial savings alongside now-familiar energy efficiency advice, at about the same time that the Energy Saving Trust was being set up by the Government.

So what's new?

Are the messages and their impact any different today, as credit crunch seems to be sliding into economic crisis?



The handy book 'Save Cash and Save the Planet' is back on Friends of the Earth's home page, alongside an interview with a pensioner who has insulated his home and cut his bills.

The Centre for Alternative Technology is selling facsimile reproductions of 'Make Do and Mend' – official wartime information for housewives on how to stretch scant resources, particularly clothing – prompting reviewers to highlight the topicality of a more frugal approach to life. And Green Fibres (eco goods and garments by mail order) not only sells a darning mushroom, but has an instructional video on its website for those whose sewing skills



Traditional cleaning methods are back in vogue

need brushing up. Transition Town Totnes recently held a sock darning workshop as part of its 'great reskilling' approach to helping us rely less on shopping and more on ourselves.

People's expectations have changed hugely over the past few decades. Unlike our wartime grandmothers, we wouldn't consider making our own underwear out of old sheets. The idea of darning socks is, at best, a little eccentric. During the 1970s, around half of UK citizens agreed or strongly agreed that "it is not generally necessary to heat bedrooms". If anyone dared to offer that advice today, they would be accused of gross insensitivity towards the fuel poor and vulnerable.

One of the famous wartime advisory posters advised: Better potluck with Churchill today than humble pie under Hitler tomorrow – Don't waste food! Fearful

of being accused of wanting to revert to a duller, colder time, and without the urgency of a war, today's campaigns against wasting food take a jollier approach. Love Food Hate Waste reminds us that "we're all happier when food gets eaten" and offers five 'sure fire' ways to save money on your food bills. People have been swapping recipe and storage tips via the website, and can use the portion calculator or two-week meal planner to help them shop and cook in a less wasteful way.

Practical impacts

So much for the professional communicators. What about the practical impacts? A survey released in September found that more and more US car buyers are interested in the fuel economy of their vehicles. In the same month, the AA published research showing that more

UK drivers are prepared to consider car-sharing as a response to higher fuel costs, confirming research from earlier in the year which showed that over half the AA's members have cut back on car journeys for similar reasons.

Ironically, sales of organic fruit and veg from home delivery services fell more than usual over the summer, as more customers were growing their own. Also on the food front, and less encouragingly, whereas thefts from allotments used to focus on spades and rotavators, it's the spuds and rhubarb which are now being stolen.

Back at home, the Energy Savings Trust reports that calls to its advice line quadrupled following the Government's announcement of a £910 million energy efficiency package for householders.

The impact on conversations about the economic system has also been interesting.

Green Jobs

Green sectors are likely to be growth sectors, at least in eco-efficiency and renewables. On the day he was made Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband said: "We will do all we can to ensure affordable fuel bills for people, put Britain at the forefront of creating green jobs and play our part in ensuring every country meets the climate change challenge."

Creating 'green jobs' was also on the minds of tens of thousands of US citizens who attended rallies and events across the US earlier that same week, calling on their leaders to "Repower America with clean, green jobs".

Whole system change

Other voices are speculating about whether we are in the midst of a disruptive

transition of our entire economic system. Might the credit crunch lead us to consider seriously a no interest system, such as that espoused by Islamic finance? Corporate Responsibility expert and Associate Professor at Griffith Business School Jem Bendell sees this approach as "potentially a more environmentally sustainable one". His blog explains: because interest creates an obligation to grow the enterprise (so that a sum greater than the original loan can be repaid) it leads, so the argument goes, to inevitable problems as the unstoppable force of growth meets the immovable object of physical limits like the fertility of soil, the availability of water and the capacity of our planet to cycle carbon.

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Other kinds of whole-system change are also being talked about in the blogosphere. Forum for the Future's Peter Madden, while acknowledging that 'environment' will drop down the priority list for many, also reminds us that: "Our economic woes have been driven by a combination of rising prices for things like energy and food and the credit crunch." Higher prices for key resources have strengthened the case of eco-efficiency, and this is seen as a new paradigm rather than a blip. Madden reports that many of the companies who work with Forum for the Future "...do not

think we will return again to a world of low commodity prices and [recognise] that they will have to adjust their business models".

He continues: "There is also a growing acceptance of the need to rein in the excesses of the financial market, to think about how we plan for resilience and manage risk. Once financial decision makers see that they can be hit hard by external factors, they may begin to take the biggest external threat of all – climate change – more seriously."

So it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. In years to come, might we look back on 2008 as the year the big changes really got underway? ■

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To follow up some of the ideas here, and join the discussions, see these websites:

Friends of the Earth, www.foe.co.uk

*Centre for Alternative Technology,
www.cat.org.uk*

Green Fibres, www.greenfibres.com

*Transition Town Totnes,
totnes.transitionnetwork.org*

*Love Food Hate Waste,
www.lovefoodhatewaste.com*

The AA, www.theaa.com

Repower America, www.wecansolveit.org

Jem Bendell, www.jembendell.com

Peter Madden,

www.forumforthefuture.org/blog

IEMA members can get a 20 per cent discount on 'Save Cash and Save the Planet' and by quoting **ENVNOV08** at www.foe.co.uk/shop

Clarity?

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