

# A Look at Pollution by the Numbers

Adria Saracino | April 16, 2012



When I was a kid, the newspapers were full of reports about acid rain. I remember learning about the hole in the ozone. I remember watching cartoons on Saturday mornings and Woodsy Owl imploring that we “Give a hoot, don’t pollute.”

I think the idealist in me believed that I was growing up in a world that was recognizing the damage it had done to the earth. I thought that by the time I reached adulthood these issues would be addressed, we’d heal our earth,

and we’d live in harmony with nature. Obviously, I was wrong.

As Earth Day 2012 approaches, let’s take a moment to reflect on some statistics on pollution and some tips for how we can all start pitching in more.

## Air Pollution

While we’ve successfully managed to cut back on some environmental pollutants in our air, air quality and pollution is becoming an increasing problem. With hugely populated countries like China and India industrializing rapidly, the air quality is looking to get worse before it gets better.

- In the United States, exhaust from vehicles make up approximately *60 percent of all carbon monoxide* emissions countrywide. Furthermore, each tank of gas the *average sedan consumes adds 330 pounds of carbon dioxide* to the pollution.

- International Wildlife magazine reports that in since 1987, U.S. factories have been releasing over *1.2 million tons of toxic chemicals* directly into our atmosphere.

- Worldwatch State of the World Report estimates that, in the U.S. alone, air pollution is the leading factor in almost *\$40 billion in health care expenditures* and lost time from work.

So what can we do? First, try to rely on public transportation, bicycling, and walking as much as possible. Even just parking the car one day a week can have a huge impact on your carbon footprint.

Next, consolidate the number of trips you’ll need to utilize your vehicle for. Instead of running to the store once or twice a day, try to dedicate one day to running errands and get as much of it done as possible.

Finally, don’t let your car idle. After 10 seconds of idling, you are actually using more gas than if you turned the engine off and restarted.

## Soil Pollution

Our soil is being polluted in a variety of ways. Studies have shown that *our soil contains up to 100 pathogens and toxins*, and more recently, we're even finding evidence of trace amounts of antibiotics, such as hormones from birth control pills, in wildlife.

- One of our largest sources of soil pollution is the agricultural industry. The EPA reports that fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation systems, large factory farms, grazing, and plowing are all adding pollutants into our soil and damaging animal habitats and stream channels. In the U.S. alone, *40 percent of pesticides are used on corn crops*.
- Coal burning power plants contribute *54 percent of our energy consumption*. Not only does the burn off contaminate our air, but also coal ash from the plants is toxic and oftentimes ends up in our ground soil.
- Landfills are another source of soil contamination. Byproducts and toxins leech out from them and, through the groundwater supply, end up in soil samples all over the country. Scientists have found evidence that these harsh toxins are making their way into the food chain, which is endangering many of our native animal populations.

So what's the solution? It's clear that **we need to start relying on more sustainable methods for agriculture**. You can help by trying to buy organic as much as possible. Supporting small, local farmers can also go a long way on cutting back on the amount of pollution.

In the summer, try growing as many of your own vegetables as you can. Even in urban areas, many people are creatively utilizing small spaces to grow a hefty amount of their own produce.

Also, reduce your usage of electricity. Be vigilant in turning off lights, unplugging appliances, and reducing the amount of energy expended towards air conditioning and heat.

## Water Pollution

Worldwide, it's becoming increasingly difficult for people to access clean drinking water. The U.N. reports that about half of the world's population is subject to polluted drinking waters, which results in as many as 6 to 10 million deaths annually. We're dealing with a *floating island of trash* in the Pacific ocean, and, on top of that, we are seeing entire ocean ecosystems, like corals which are essential for ocean well-being, floundering. Here's what water pollution looks like here in the U.S.

- Every year the Mississippi River, which carries about *2/5ths* of our groundwater out to sea, dumps a *million and a half metric tons of nitrogen waste* into the Gulf of Mexico each summer.
- A large percentage of *what we throw away actually ends up in the sea*. It's estimated that about 80 percent of what we throw away can actually be recycled.
- According to Carl Jaeckel of the law firm [Atlanta Injury Lawyers](#), the number of injury claims brought against municipalities for polluted groundwater is on the rise. In these economic times, these cases can pose a huge tax burden on residents and cities.
- More than *70 types of pesticides have been discovered in groundwater*, which is our source for drinking water.
- The EPA estimates that *over 40 percent of our lakes, rivers, and streams are too polluted* for swimming, drinking, and fishing.

So how can we stop this? Again, we need to think about sustainable practices. The old adage “reduce, reuse, recycle” is just as important now as when it was coined. Make certain that you are thoroughly recycling your trash. It’s probably a good idea to check with your city to see what you can recycle, as recent advances in recycling are making it easier to recycle more types of plastics and papers. If your city doesn’t have a decent recycling program, talk to your local city counsel about pushing forward new initiatives.

Buy foods that are unwrapped as often as possible. And finally, we all know that we live in a consumerist society. However, if things break, consider fixing them instead of chucking them out. Buy as much as you can secondhand and always remember that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Utilize resources such as Craigslist and Freecycle to give your old possessions a new home.

We have a long way to go to restore Earth to the state it was before Industrialization, and we all need to do our part to start this world down that path. Of course, the biggest factor in cleaning up this world will be legislation. So as we do our part in our home lives, we also need to focus on electing folks who see fighting pollution as a front-burner issue and we need to keep our politicians accountable.

Read more: <http://www.care2.com/greenliving/a-look-at-pollution-by-the-numbers.html#ixzz1sKOIOKjk>