

 [click to print](#)

 [close window](#)



## No Impact Man

By: [Kathleen J. King](#) ( [View Profile](#))

We all talk about lowering our impact on the environment, but few of us radically change our lives to do it. Colin Beavan, a husband and father in NYC, decided to conduct a year-long experiment to see if he and his family could truly live a no-impact lifestyle.

In case you're wondering what the "year-long plan" involved, Colin challenged himself and his family to develop a "no net impact" lifestyle or roughly: Negative Impact + Positive Impact = Zero. Colin, his wife Michelle, then two-year-old daughter Isabella, and dog Frankie set out to be "eco-effective" versus "eco-efficient." In addition to restricting consumption, they also changed what they consumed in the first place. In addition to offsetting their ecological footprint, they took specific actions that have positive environmental impacts: cleaning up garbage on the beach and working on a reforestation projects to help plant trees.

Colin and his family left the conveniences behind, forgoing air conditioners even in extreme heat, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, making a compost pile right in their apartment, biking instead of taking the subway, reducing packaging and plastics of all kinds, consuming less, and abolishing their reliance on electronics like television.

Living a low-impact lifestyle in NYC may be easier to do than in other areas of the country, but in some ways, cities also create the most environmental damage. As Colin puts it in his blog: "True, a city like New York does have the environmental advantage of economy of scale—people share transport, buildings, and resources—but cities are also responsible for the production and concentration of pollutants in massive amounts. Thanks to car and truck exhaust alone, which makes for 90 percent of Manhattan's air pollution, the island's residents face the highest risk in the country of developing cancer from chemicals in the air."

Over the past year, Colin and his family shopped much less. They swore off most purchases, except for things like socks, underwear, and some personal items—and bought second-hand whenever possible. (No small feat in a city with so many material temptations!) Colin and his family spent about half of the money they spent the previous year. The experiment also forced them to slow down as a family: Instead of take-out and packaged

meals, they made homemade meals, relying on local food whenever possible. Instead of jumping into a cab, they walked or biked. As a result, they also found themselves spending more quality time as a family and with their friends. They began to eat better, got more exercise, and felt happier.

Colin is now working on a book about the experiment, appropriately titled, *No Impact Man* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux), which chronicles his family's adventures. Although it's his third book, it's the first time his work has truly aligned with his political and personal values.

What was the most challenging part of it all? In an email exchange Colin said: "The most challenging thing is that trying to live sustainably isn't supported by our culture. So many of our products are sold with the idea that they will be thrown away after a few uses. This suits the producers because it means they can sell us the same products over and over again, but how ridiculous is it that we have to work so hard to earn a living to buy the same things? And obviously, the planet can't sustain it either."


One wonders if a sustainable lifestyle is the true key to happiness. Colin responded: "Living sustainably both as individuals and as a culture would make us happier, healthier, and more secure. It turns out that what's good for the planet is good for the people."

First published March 2008

Find this article at:

<http://www.divinecaroline.com/article/49535/45612-no-impact>

 [click to print](#)

 [close window](#)