

4A Eco-guilt

1 READING

- a Read the article and choose the right answer.

How can Americans reduce their carbon footprints?

- A By taking only two or three long airplane trips a year.
- B By buying a lot of small products instead of a few big products.
- C By reducing taxes on food, housing, and transportation.
- D By spending less money on goods and services.

- b Read the article again and choose a, b, or c.

- 1 The average American's carbon footprint is...
 - a approximately eight times more than the global average carbon footprint per person.
 - b approximately five times more than the global average carbon footprint per person.
 - c approximately double the global average carbon footprint per person.
- 2 Americans with the lowest carbon footprints are usually...
 - a people who have nowhere to live or eat.
 - b people who serve as soldiers.
 - c people who are unemployed.
- 3 A person who lives a simple lifestyle in the US has a high carbon footprint because...
 - a he or she can't pay a tax to offset his or her carbon footprint.
 - b the CO₂ footprint calculation is not divided equally among all US citizens.
 - c he or she has access to public services paid for by the government.
- 4 The "rebound effect" ...
 - a has a negative impact on an individual's carbon footprint.
 - b has a positive impact on an individual's carbon footprint.
 - c has no impact on an individual's carbon footprint.
- 5 The writer's conclusion is that...
 - a paying a carbon footprint tax is an easy solution.
 - b finding a way to reduce the average US citizen's carbon footprint is more important than anything else to all Americans.
 - c reducing the US carbon footprint is almost impossible.

Can We Make Our Carbon Footprints Smaller?

Our carbon footprint is the estimated amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) given off as we go about our daily lives. While the global average carbon footprint is about 4 metric tons per person each year, Americans contribute approximately 20 metric tons of greenhouse gas per person each year. Compared to other countries, even those who use the least amount of energy in the US – for example, a person who lives off the grid – still contribute double the carbon emissions than the global average per person. And, not surprisingly, a person's carbon footprint increases in size as his or her income increases. So, the less you spend, the more environmentally friendly you are.

How is it possible that people in the US who live simple lifestyles, e.g., children or the homeless, make such large contributions to greenhouse gas emissions? The answer is simple: Each US citizen has access to various basic government services such as firefighting and police departments, road and bridge repair, libraries, jails and prisons, the military, etc. When these public services are divided equally among the entire US population, it significantly raises the carbon footprint per person. In fact, according to a study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the lowest carbon footprint that can be calculated for a person living in the US is 8.5 metric tons. And shockingly, this carbon footprint corresponds to a homeless person who sleeps in public shelters and eats in soup kitchens.

While it is admirable to make changes in lifestyle to reduce a carbon footprint, in reality, it is very difficult to do. The MIT study revealed that a "rebound effect" occurred when someone made an effort to reduce his or her carbon footprint. Take the example of a person who made the deliberate choice to buy a hybrid car instead of a large SUV to save money on gas costs. Very often that person would use the money he or she saved to do something else, e.g., take a long airplane trip. In this case, just one long airplane trip produces more CO₂ emissions than driving the large SUV for a year. This ends up having a negative impact on a person's carbon footprint by making it bigger!

Can Americans reduce their carbon footprints? According to the study, it IS possible, but it would require lifestyle changes such as giving up long-distance travel and buying fewer smartphones, tablets, and MP3 players that have large energy costs to produce and deliver. The most drastic way to lower the average American's US carbon footprint is to add a CO₂ tax on food, housing, and transportation, and most Americans don't want their taxes raised. Unless we can find a way to reduce our carbon footprints, the price we may ultimately have to pay is much higher than the amount Americans will ever have to pay in taxes.

