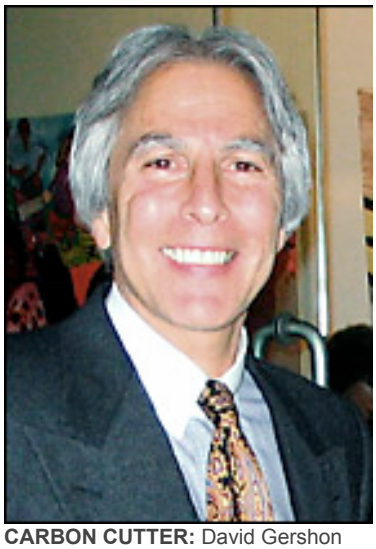
THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR csmonitor.com

from the December 28, 2006 edition - http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1228/p14s01-sten.html

A grass-roots push for a 'low carbon diet'

David Gershon's book guides readers through a series of behavioral changes to reduce their 'carbon footprint.'
By Moises Velasquez-Manoff | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor



CARBON CUTTER: David Gershon has written a step-by-step program to lower one's carbon footprint.

Last June, David Gershon saw Al Gore's global warming documentary "An Inconvenient Truth." The time was ripe, he realized, to finish an old project.

In 2000, Mr. Gershon created a step-by-step program, à la Weight Watchers, designed to reduce a person's carbon footprint. The idea received positive reviews after a pilot program was run in Portland, Ore., but it eventually fell by the wayside for lack of interest. "The world wasn't ready," says Gershon, who heads the Empowerment Institute in Woodstock, N.Y., a consulting organization that specializes in changing group behavior.

But since then, Americans witnessed the catastrophic fury of hurricane Katrina, which, if nothing else, showed them what a major city looks like underwater. A substantial body of evidence supporting the idea of human-induced global warming accumulated. And, of course, Mr. Gore made his movie. Attitudes toward global warming had shifted considerably. (Indeed, a recent poll by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that nearly half of Americans cited global warming as the No. 1 environmental concern; in 2003, only one-fifth considered it that critical.)

Gershon put his nose to the grindstone, and a slim workbook titled "Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5,000 Pounds" was the result. Replete with checklists and illustrations, the user-friendly guide is a serious attempt at changing American energy-consumption behavior.

Although representing 4.5 percent of the world's population, the United States contributes an estimated 25 percent of its greenhouse gases. Faced with this fact and news reports of spring arriving earlier, winter arriving later, and the Arctic melting, the subject of climate change has gone from an abstract issue debated among scientists to something with apparently measurable effects in daily life.

This is where Gershon's book comes in. The book guides participants through a month-long process of behavioral change. Each participant calculates his or her footprint - the average US household emits 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually, the book says - and then browses a list of emissions-lowering actions. The goal is to reduce that amount bit by bit. Replacing an incandescent bulb with a fluorescent, for example, counts for a 100-pound annual reduction. Purchasing an energy-efficient furnace counts for 2,400 pounds. Just tuning up your existing furnace reduces your carbon emissions by 300 pounds while insulating your warm air ducts lowers them by 800 pounds.

But the key to the program's success, say those who've participated, is in forming a support group. People have good intentions, says Gershon, but alone, they often lack the will to follow through. Like Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous, the formation of a group encourages follow-through by socially reinforcing the new, desired behavior.

"I think it's essential," says Nathaniel Charny, a New York lawyer who participated in the recently completed testing phase of "Low Carbon Diet." "Everybody's reinforcing the goals, and you're having frank discussions about things."

And as Gershon sensed, the timing for a book offering day-to-day solutions to an overwhelming global problem couldn't be better. Gore's group, The Climate Project, which recently began training 1,000 volunteers to give Gore's now-famous slide show, is handing out 600 copies of the book at the end of the session.

Meanwhile, a handful of environmental and religious groups are recommending the book to its members. The Regeneration Project, a San Francisco-based interfaith ministry, has linked to the book on its main page. So have Climate Solutions, a nonprofit group in Olympia, Wash., and the Vermont chapter of Interfaith Power and Light (IPL), a nationwide organization dedicated to "greening" congregations.

Tellingly, before the advent of Gershon's book, several congregations around the country spontaneously embarked on carbon-reduction programs of their own. The Michigan IPL worked out a deal with suppliers to sell compact fluorescents to members at a lower price, and the Georgia IPL came up with a program called "preparing for a new light" whereby for each candle lit during holidays such as Hanukkah or Christmas Eve, participants change one incandescent bulb in their home for a compact fluorescent. And three congregants at St. Luke's in Cedar Falls, Iowa, started a comprehensive, step-by-step program like Gershon's called "cool congregations."

This growing interest in measurably reducing one's footprint is a textbook case of how new ideas spread throughout society, say sociologists, and how new movements are born. In the abstract, if a problem is to be acted upon, it has to be recognized as a problem, says Christopher Henke, assistant professor of sociology at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. Generally speaking, problems are not recognized by a group until the leaders of that group acknowledge them as such. In this sense, a problem matures and grows up, says Mr. Henke, citing examples such as the civil rights movement in the 1960s and more recent antismoking campaigns. "It becomes something that we take on as our own set of beliefs, our own moral issue," he says, "and then it becomes a reality."

In the case of global warming and faith networks, the past year has seen some important steps in this regard. In February, evangelical leaders around the country broke with the Bush administration and, in an open letter called the Evangelical Climate Initiative, said something had to be done. In August, Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson said that, because of the summer heat wave, he was a "convert" to the idea of human-driven global warming.

Once important figures in social groups adopt an idea, others in the group are much more likely to follow along. Then, movements spread and grow along pre-existing social networks, says Bogdan Vasi, an assistant professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. "People join a movement because their friends and relatives are involved," he says. "If you hear that your friend is buying wind energy, you're more likely to buy wind energy as well."

Indeed, preceding and perhaps contributing to the apparent demand for "Low Carbon Diet" is a remarkable prior effort by The Regeneration Project and the IPL. During October, the organizations showed "An Inconvenient Truth" to 4,000 congregations nationwide, reaching an estimated 500,000 people. "Those were people who would not pay to see that movie," says the Rev. Sally Bingham, executive director of the Regeneration Project. "But they got to go see it for free." And the movie seems to have catalyzed the audience, she says. After seeing the movie, audience members around the country asked what, exactly, they could do about global warming.

"There's kind of a critical mass now around global warming," says Wes Sanders, vice chair of the Vermont IPL, which has already begun forming teams around Gershon's book. "It's suddenly become sexy, so to speak."

Although it's unclear whether the book is a beneficiary of, or a contributor to, a grass-roots movement, how ideas spread through groups is one of Gershon's central preoccupations. He ascribes to a classic theory by sociologist Everett Rogers on how innovations diffuse throughout a community. New ideas begin with a small group of innovators and move on to early adopters. They then pass on to an early majority followed by a late majority. Finally, the most hardheaded - the laggards - adopt the new idea. Contrary to the oft-leveled criticism in environmental circles that by preaching to the choir nothing gets accomplished, Gershon argues that one should direct efforts at the group that's most receptive.

"Preach to the choir," says Gershon. "They'll sing loud enough to get everyone to go into the church, or synagogue, or mosque."

A few footprint shrinkers

U.S. homes account for 8 percent of the world's emissions, with the average household contributing 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually, according to author David Gershon. His "Low Carbon Diet" workbook makes dozens of suggestions for reducing one's carbon footprint. Here are a few of his book's recommendations and how much carbon he says participants can subtract from their footprints by following through:

• Together, washers and dryers generate five pounds of carbon dioxide per cycle. In warm or hot water loads, 90 percent of the required energy goes to heat the water. Using cold water saves two pounds per load. Front-loading washing machines cut the amount of water used in half. Drying clothes on a clothesline further diminishes emissions. All in all, using cold water once per week shrinks your carbon footprint by 275 pounds each year; not using the dryer once a week gets you another 200. Replacing an old machine with an Energy Star front-loading washer saves 500 pounds a year.

• A 10-minute shower generates up to four pounds of CO2. A 5-minute shower cuts that in half and a low-flow showerhead drops it further. In a household, each person who reduces their shower to five minutes cuts emissions by 175 pounds per year. A low-flow showerhead saves you another 250.

• Request to be removed from junk mail lists, which needlessly contribute to waste. If you can reduce your weekly waste by one 60-gallon waste container, credit yourself with 2,650 pounds yearly.

Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links