



## SUSTAINABILITY AT HOME: A TOOLKIT Decision-making help for your everyday choices

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# SUSTAINABILITY AT HOME: A Toolkit For Your Co-op

Decision-making help for your everyday choices

Sustainability –  
what’s all the fuss?

How can this help me  
make decisions in  
my co-op?

Tips that take you  
through your co-op and  
through your unit room-  
by-room

What about renovations  
and upgrades?

What else?

Resources and links

Log-in to Co-op Talk and share your co-op’s experience in the sustainability forum.



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## Sustainable living, the co-operative way

### Co-ops have green roots

Because co-ops provide affordable homes and members work together to keep it affordable, you live in a co-op, you have already taken a step closer to a sustainable lifestyle and take a load off the planet. And because your co-op and co-op members do use water, energy, building materials, food, transportation and many other things that depend on natural or human-made resources. This means you have a powerful opportunity to make change by altering decisions you make in your everyday activity.

### You can help change the headlines about climate change

By making small informed and simple changes, we can all do more to lessen our impact. For example, when you need to paint a room, choose non-toxic and eco-certified materials. By maybe spending a little more, you get rid of potential health risks, you support an emerging industry that values social and ecological factors not just economic ones and you lower the costs to the environment and future generations. And there are other changes that will help you save money too. Right now – today – your co-op and co-op members can make choices that will help your co-op become more sustainable. And your choices can help change the headlines and stories you read and hear about every day: about climate change, concerns around water supply, even rising rates of homelessness in our cities.



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## Why should I care about sustainability?

### Here are some benefits to making your co-op more sustainable:

- Save money over the short-and long-term by making your co-op more energy-efficient
- Increase the value of your co-op, which in turn improves your ability to obtain financing when you need it, and to maintain your co-op well into the future
- Help make co-operative living a leader in sustainable living
- Become more comfortable in your co-op as you create a healthier, more energy efficient space
- Contribute to the preservation of natural landscapes and natural resources by minimizing your impact on them
- Help reduce the effects of climate change

You hear the word “sustainability” thrown around all the time and it seems to be related to a number of different topics. Sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”\*\* While the word “sustainability” is associated with a variety of topics, they are in fact, all part of the same story, much of which is about supply and demand.

### We have increasing:

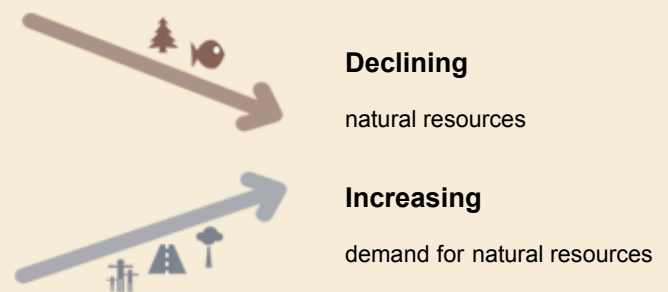
- Water consumption • Population growth • Demand for housing

### And decreasing:

- Available freshwater • Air quality • Affordable housing

Growth in population and human industry increases demand on natural resources and the services that natural systems provide us (such as water filtration, flood control, climate regulation and soil stabilization). Our industrial system as it currently operates is leading to less pure water, farmland, air forests and natural

### If we draw the current situation, it looks like a funnel



We need to look at the demands we make on nature and natural systems and ensure that people’s needs – both this generation and future ones - can still be met. Thinking about the long term means we have to consider how our actions affect not just ourselves, but our co-op, our children and grandchildren, our neighbours, our economy and our environment.

But it doesn’t have to be difficult. With a thoughtful approach to how and why we make our household decisions we can do it. If we look at how our co-op’s household decisions can promote sustainability, we need to first look at the big picture.

To be sustainable, we have to make sure that future generations can meet their needs. A group of international scientists have come up with four root causes of how we (humans) are working against the earth’s ability to sustain human society and the ability of future generations to meet their needs. By thinking about these four root causes of “un-sustainability” we can make strategic decisions toward sustainability – decisions that enrich our quality of life, reduce financial risk and support smart changes.

### Imagine what will happen if these two trends converge

diversity.

\*\* World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987

So, we need to look at the demands we make on nature and natural systems and ensure that people's needs – both this generation and future ones - can still be met. Thinking about the long term means we have to consider how our actions affect not just ourselves, but our co-op, our children and grandchildren, our neighbours, our economy and our environment.

But it doesn't have to be difficult. We can start this process right here at home with a thoughtful approach to how and why we make our household decisions. To look at how our co-op's household decisions can promote sustainability, first we have to take a look at the big picture.

If we want to be sustainable, we have to ensure that future generations can meet their needs. A group of international scientists have determined the four root causes of how we negatively impact the earth's ability to sustain human society and the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Hundreds of leading corporations and organizations around the world are using these same four root causes of "unsustainability" to help them make strategic decisions toward sustainability – decisions that enrich our quality of life, reduce financial risk and support smart changes.



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### Four root causes

Based on scientific consensus, these are the four root causes of the ways in which we compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. These are the basic ways in which we are un-sustainable:

**1**

We dig stuff (like heavy metals and fossil fuels) out of the Earth's crust and allow it to build up faster than nature can cope with it.

**2**

We create man-made compounds and chemicals (like pesticides and fire retardants in carpets etc.) and allow them to build up faster than nature can cope with them.

**3**

We continuously damage natural systems and the free services they provide (including climate regulation and water filtration) by physical means (for example over-harvesting and paving wetlands).

**4**

We live in and create societies in which many people cannot meet their basic needs (for example, finding affordable housing).

(To learn more about the four root causes of un-sustainability and the science behind them, please visit [www.naturalstep.ca](http://www.naturalstep.ca))



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## Everyday household decisions that make a difference

Here are general areas of our household management in which we make decisions every day.



**Utilities** are a basic service, things like water, electricity and gas, or anything that fuels, heats or cools our home.

### Relationship to the four root causes:

Production of our utilities, for example coal-fired electricity, often contributes to the overload of materials that we dig out of the Earth’s crust, and can lead to a progressive physical impact on natural systems. That means utility use can impact on two of the root causes of un-sustainability.

**Opportunity:** Make different choices about the kinds of utilities we use (for example, use renewable energy). If you can’t change how your utilities are provided, you can decide to use less (for example, by using energy efficient appliances).

### Before you use your utilities ask yourself:

#### Can I reduce my use of this utility?

When you reduce your use of water, gas or electricity, you reduce the impacts: from burning of fossil fuels, to the introduction of harmful compounds into natural systems and physical destruction of nature – that come from producing and delivering the energy. Just turning off the tap while you brush your teeth can help.

#### Can I get the same utility service another way?

Many services – particularly electricity – can be supplied from renewable resources. Some utility companies now offer power from renewable sources. Ask your local provider what they can do for you.

#### Can I be more efficient in the way I use my utilities?

There are lots of different options now to help you make better use of energy. From simple, cheaper technologies like low-flow showerheads or low-flush toilets, that help you reduce water usage, to bigger investments like re-insulating your co-op.

**Get more sustainability ideas: Look for the ‘check out’ icon!**



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**Mobility** includes all the ways that we move ourselves from place to place – driving, walking, cycling, taking the bus, train, plane or boat, or any other mode of transport.

### Relationship to the four root causes:

Transportation often depends on the burning of fossil fuels. This relates to the overload of materials we dig from the Earth's crust. And, when we burn fossil fuels, things like sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides are released. As these build up, they can harm natural systems and human health.

**Opportunity:** To reduce our dependence on the burning of fossil fuels, we can choose other modes of transport such as car sharing (join a car-share or car co-op as a group), car pooling, public transport, cycling, walking and more efficient personal vehicles like hybrid cars. You can also try to reduce the amount you travel too.

## Before you travel ask yourself:

### Do I really need to go?

Sounds obvious, but it's worth asking. Many of us are used to hopping in our car and going somewhere at the drop of a hat. Consider planning your journeys with an eye to efficiency, and make one trip instead of several. If you do have to go, ask yourself:

### Can I go somewhere local?

Is there somewhere close by where you can purchase what you need, like a local grocery or hardware store? Maybe what you need is closer to home than you thought.

### Do I have to drive?

If you have to go somewhere, can you find another way to get there that is not in your car? Is there a bus or train that goes where you want to? If you do have to drive, consider partnering up with other co-op members or friends and **carpool**. More people per litre of fossil fuel burned means greater efficiency and fewer emissions. You could also invest in your own fitness and cycle or walk to those close-by places.

**Don't forget, in the following pages we walk room-by-room through your co-op and co-op unit and show the benefits you'll enjoy from making new decisions.**





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**Shopping** is everything that we buy, including food, furniture, clothes, appliances and personal care products.

### Relationship to the four root causes:

Things we buy are often made from or contain stuff from the Earth's crust and also human-made compounds that are foreign to nature. Both of these can build up faster than nature can cope. Also, the ways in which our purchases are produced may use unsafe or unfair working conditions which can make it difficult for the workers to meet their needs.

**Opportunity:** Choose what we buy with a careful eye to what our purchases support. We can also be aware of what products may or may not build up in nature. Here are some [more environmental choices](#).

### Before shopping ask yourself:

#### Do I really need this product?

- Can you re-use something you already have?
- If you only need the product for a short time, can you borrow or rent it?
- If you have to buy it, can you share the cost and responsibility of owning with others?

- As a co-op member, you can partner up and choose to purchase items the whole co-op can use, things like: power tools and other items that can be shared.
- Members can also chip in to make bulk purchases of items like food and paper supplies. This saves money for members and cuts down on the fossil fuels needed to bring items from the store and reduces the amount of packaging added to the landfill.

#### How was this item produced?

If you don't know the answer, ask. If your vendor doesn't know, ask them to find out. This will help you understand where your dollars are going and what you are supporting. **Consider also:**

#### How does this product affect my health?

Huge numbers of products on the market today contain chemicals that are either known to be harmful to human health or which have never been tested for human safety. Get to know about the risky ingredients of your purchases. You might be surprised how many there are. Consider too that children can be more vulnerable than adults to exposure to harmful chemicals.

#### What will I do with this when I no longer need it?

Before you buy, consider what the ultimate fate of your product will be. Are you buying something that can be recycled? If you are making a large purchase like an appliance, will the manufacturer take it back when you are done with it to recycle and/or reuse parts, or will it just go to the landfill?

**Answering these questions can help guide members shopping for the co-op and themselves to make more sustainable decisions.**



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**Waste** is everything we throw away. Waste can come from things that we buy (shopping), inefficiencies in how we use energy (utilities) and emissions produced from transporting ourselves (mobility).

### Relationship to the four root causes:

When we put things into the landfill, we add to an ongoing demand for more land to handle our waste (landfills). This contributes to a root cause of un-sustainability, because natural systems may be damaged by new landfills. It can also mean that our waste can possibly leach harmful chemicals and compounds into the land, air and water.

**Opportunity:** To be careful about the amount and type of waste we create. We can also be careful with the waste we do produce by reusing, recycling and even reducing our overall consumption.

### Before throwing something away ask yourself:

#### Can I reuse this?

Save time and money by reusing a product , or, fixing it, to stop something from heading to the landfill?

#### If I can't use this, can someone else?

One person's trash is another's treasure. Consider having a co-op exchange of clothing or other household items. Or hold a community garage sale, take things to your local thrift store or advertise to sell or giveaway things your co-op cannot use. Check out Freecycle in your area.

#### Can I recycle this?

It is amazing how many things can be recycled; even electronics and tires. Instead of putting something in the landfill, you may well be able to recycle all or part of your waste, creating value as your garbage becomes something new.

#### Even if I've already produced it, can I still reduce my waste?

Do you have a compost bin? You can process many food scraps, cardboard and even some fabrics in your co-op compost or patio worm composter. This diverts waste from the landfill, reduces greenhouse gas emissions associated with decomposing waste and creates free fertilizer for your flowers and vegetables. Find out how to compost.

### What happens when you use these questions and change your co-op's household decisions? Let's take a walk through your co-op and see...

**Check out the Composting Council of Canada for more information and directions on how to get started.**



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# Kitchen

Can I reduce my use?



### Check it out!

If you switch your furnace to a high-efficiency combination boiler and hot water tank - it runs around 93% more efficiently.

### Be a star

Using Energy Star appliances can increase your efficiency. Look for the ENERGY STAR symbol (even on furnaces); products must meet or exceed technical specifications that ensure they are among the most energy efficient on the market.

### Did you know?

If your co-op can't get low-flush toilets just yet, adjust the float-valves in your toilet tanks so they use less water, or even fill a 2L empty plastic pop bottle with water, put the lid on and drop it in your cistern.

### Be well

Choose detergents that are free from hazardous chemicals and reduce the harmful chemicals and compounds your family is exposed to and also those that you flush into the watercourse.

### Support the home team

Whenever possible, support your local farmers and neighbours by buying locally produced seasonal and organic foods. It's good for the economy and it cuts down on fossil fuel use needed to transport food.





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# Bathroom



### Check out!

If you switch your furnace to a high-efficiency combination boiler and hot water tank - and it runs around 93% more efficiently (need to check stats)

### Stem the flow

A five-minute shower uses about half the amount of water a bath does, saving money and reducing the pressure on natural systems.



### Did you know?

If your co-op can't get low-flush toilets just yet, adjust the float-valves in your toilet tanks so they use less water, or even fill a 2L empty plastic pop bottle with water, put the lid on and drop it in your cistern.

### Keep it clean

Don't flush expired medications down the toilet or throw them in the garbage – they will end up in streams, rivers, the ocean or landfills. Take expired medications to your pharmacy where they can be disposed of safely.

### Get healthier

Many personal care products can be hazardous to your health. Make sure you know what's in them and use care products that are safe for you and your family. You'll also reduce the amount of chemicals you flush into natural systems. Check out: [www.cosmeticdatabase.com](http://www.cosmeticdatabase.com)







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# Bedroom

Can I reduce my use?



Utilities

### Go with the grain

If you can use wood products such as beds made from certified sustainable wood. This reduces the impact on nature, with wood from well-managed ecosystems.



Shopping

### Did you know?

"In Canada, there are over 23,000 chemicals registered for production and use, and the majority have not been tested for their impacts on human health, wildlife or the environment." – Toxic Nation. Find out more at: [environmental defense](#).

### Save your health

Use only natural paints and finishes, or water-based paints with low volatile organic compound (VOC) content. Most paints and varnishes release harmful chemicals and compounds into natural systems. They can also be absorbed into our bodies.



Shopping

### Sleep in

If you can, buy organic bedding and clothing. It helps reduce the exposure to agro-chemicals for workers in the developing world.



Shopping



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# Common rooms



### Check it out!

In both your household living areas and your co-op common rooms, you can make co-operative choices that help make a sustainable difference. Find more ways to go green.

### Did you know?

Screen savers do not save energy. In fact, they consume almost as much energy as a computer in use (most power consumption comes from the monitor). Turning off your computer monitor saves much more money and energy.

### Give it away now

Electronics contain dangerous materials such as lead and mercury. Recycle your old televisions, computer monitors, etc., and keep hazardous compounds and chemicals out of the water and landfill. Try [Freecycle](#) for electronic recycling info.

### Sit pretty

Consider buying second-hand furniture. If you do buy new furniture, look for pieces that are made from natural materials or recycled content.



Shopping

### Magic carpets

Before you buy a new rug, find out where it was made. Ask your furniture vendor under what conditions your carpets were produced, and consider buying floor-coverings from vendors that can prove safe and equitable working conditions for their workers.



Waste



Shopping







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## Indoors



### Check out!

More ideas about how you can plug into green and reduce your energy use.

How was this item produced?



Can I reduce my use of this utility?



What will I do with this when I no longer need it?



### Did you know?

Depending where you are in Canada you can support the production of green power being added to “the grid” where you live. Check this Green Power guide to see what’s available in your area.





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## Parking garage





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## Resources

Find out more about the root causes of un-sustainability and the science behind them at The Natural Step Canada.

### Energy efficiency and utility use:

- Canadian EcoENERGY grants
- Energy efficient upgrade suggestions, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- ENERGY STAR products
- Light House Sustainable Building Centre

### Healthy homes:

- Information on chemicals commonly found in your home
- Information on personal care products and their potential to harm human health
- Tips and ideas for becoming generally more sustainable around the home
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (type 'healthy homes' in the search box)

### Building materials and recycling:

- Online materials exchange

### Gardens and landscaping:

- Composting Council of Canada
- Native plants directory

### Ask a question:

- The Light House Sustainable Building Centre
- Grist.org

### Other:

- ECO labelled products

- Hail a hybrid
- Carpooling

### **Global examples:**

- *Christie Walk* - A home built with straw bale construction, a community garden and other features to make for a livable, sustainable environment in Adelaide Australia
- *Grand House Co-op* built by architecture students at the University of Waterloo
- *Hugh Garner Housing Co-operative* – a co-op with a green roof in Toronto
- *Conservation Housing Co-op* in Ottawa – a co-op built with sustainability in mind
- *Guelph Campus Co-op's Accessible Student Housing* – energy efficient and built with solar heating and rainwater collection.

### **Your Ideas**

Got a great idea or resource you think we should add here? [Let us know.](#)