

ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

I've been aware for a long time of the environmental impact of what I do. I make it a practice to keep a light footprint.

When I'm cutting poles, for instance, I make it a practice just to thin out the stands. Most of the area around my place has grown up with spruce trees, quite close together. A few of them die out as they get bigger. In order to hurry that process, I cut them selectively, so that I let in a little more light around the others. They soon branch out more. You have fewer trees, but you still have the same amount of foliage.

I don't burn brush. Anything that's big enough to burn, I put in the stove. The small stuff, I just drag off into a stand of trees. Pretty quick the moss is growing around it, and before too long it has rotted away.

Part of the wood has a chance to decay or become buried in the ground. There's not a lot of organic material in the soil up north—and not just on the tundra. Even back in the trees there is just a little bit of topsoil under the moss.

You probably understand better than I do what's going on there, but when you let the wood rot, it's oxidizing. That's not quite like burning it, but I suspect that over the long run, it amounts to the same thing [in terms of CO₂ output]. However, it's very gradual.

Tell me more about your footprint.¹

I have a big unheated cache and a small, well-insulated house that I can keep warm without burning a whole lot of wood. There are two motivations for that. One is that I'm lazy. I don't like cutting wood just to burn it. Two, I don't like to be rejoining the carbon and the oxygen and returning them to the air.

I got firewood for our sod iglus with just a 42" bow saw. I noticed that chainsaws enabled people to make houses that were way too big.

It's been many years since I had a chainsaw. I find that I don't have any trouble keeping up with my woodcutting without it.

Before I went to Alaska, I was using a chainsaw about every day, falling and bucking trees. At Ambler, when I was running the store, I had the dealership for chain saws. I sold them, and also serviced some of them. But even there, I did a lot of my woodcutting just with a bow saw. The main use I had for the chainsaw was as a sawmill.

Did your boys help cut wood?

Oh yes, of course.

What about our global footprint?

That's something that's simple in theory, but not in the working out of it.

We have existence. We can continue to exist, or we can cut our existence short, but we're not given any choice about that fact. It's just a given.

I think that that has a lot to do with responsibility. When we make a footprint, we are doing something that we are responsible for.

In order to be responsible—or in a different way, to have life—certain requirements are necessary. The first is that we have existence, but that's not enough. We have to have awareness, more than an animal.

The next important requirement is freedom. We are not predetermined. We determine ourselves to a large extent. In order to do that, we have to be free from intimidation. If the power, the Creator, was overwhelmingly present, we would be intimidated.

We also need alternatives to choose between. If we didn't have any choice, we would be determined, and not self-determined.

So the two main two requirements, beyond existence, are an awareness of good and evil, so that we have a choice, and freedom from intimidation. As we grow up and learn appreciations, as we have experiences that give us feelings of what good and bad are all about, we then have a basis for choice. When we have a choice, we are individuals in our own right.

I think that is very important to the understanding of our footprint. We have to have those basic conditions before we can be responsible for our footprint. Does that make sense?

With those fundamentals out of the way, the question comes up: Why have we gotten into this situation we're in, and why don't we do more about it?

It's been obvious for some time now that global warming definitely has the potential for spoiling the earth for man to live, and yet we don't take it seriously enough to do what seems to be necessary to deal with that condition, so that we change it and leave the earth as it is—or at least not harm the planet any more than we already have.

I think that I said that appreciations of good and bad are essential to making a choice. It seems to me that that same mechanism probably explains a lot of why we don't do more to meet the challenge of leaving a footprint that's not going to harm the earth or the environment.

We're born into a culture. We're accustomed to living a certain way. We can change, and we will change if we're hurting. But if we're not hurting, it's difficult for us to change and realize the need to change.

We know about global warming, but since it isn't pinching our individual feet enough to make us hobble right now, it's just real easy not to take our individual responsibility seriously enough to make the necessary changes.

Global warming is a result of the industrial revolution. It affects just about every phase of our life now. If we're going to do what needs to be done, then we're going to have to

cut way back on the advantages or what we feel are the advantages of the industrial revolution. But since the shoe isn't pinching us enough as individuals, it's easy to ignore it, so we don't act.

It's a matter of responsibility. Anybody who is aware of what's happening has a responsibility for their share in it. But we're not used to taking responsibility on that level, especially in our socialistic country. We depend on somebody else to make up for what we can't handle as individuals, or don't handle even if we could.

As far as I can tell, we've just been piddling around. To a large extent, that's due to the attitude of our leaders—such as President Bush's delay in even recognizing the fact of global warming.

Our political system is also to blame. People in office have to keep the people that vote for them happy. Politicians will get voted out of office if they require too much of the voters. So, we've got a number of strikes against us.

Also, we've grown up with a set of values. One of those is that our industrial revolution has really provided us with a lot of good, and we're still looking forward to it, to make that good more available across the earth. People don't seem to realize that if you make that good available to more people, you're enabling more people to contribute more to global warming.

The only answer is not to bring other people up to our standards, but to bring our standards or lifestyle down lower than what they are now.

Of course that's like cutting our arm off. We see ourselves as people who are part of this industrial age. That's just a part of our sense of being. So we try to do some little things about it, without having to sacrifice that sense of being. That's not enough, and that's what makes the situation so hopeless.

If you don't have a government that's going to enforce drastic changes, people aren't going to make them. But how are you going to get government to enforce drastic changes when that's going to destroy their chances of staying in office? It's a difficult situation.

I know I'm not telling you anything, but I'm just making my comments. You asked for my thoughts about a more global perspective on our footprint.

How do you consciously reduce your own footprint?

Part of the reason, in fact the main reason, I took up my homesite at the lake was in order to have a place where I could be more responsible for my footprint. In order to have what's necessary to live in a city, like I am right now [*convalescing in Oregon*], you've got to deal with a system that provides those necessities in a way that is not very responsible.

From my point of view, responsibility is twofold. Our guide for living responsibly is to treat our neighbors as ourselves, and if we're destroying the environment that they need and that we want to preserve, we're not acting responsibly. But even beyond that, we have a Creator who has set up the world to work in a certain way, and we as individuals living our ordinary everyday lifestyles must not exceed the conditions that are sustainable without harming the environment.

Therefore when I have a piece of property with some trees on it, I am very selective. Those trees are growing much too close together. They need to be thinned so that they can spread their foliage out. In doing that, even though there are fewer trees, the forest environment as a whole is maintained, or even made better. That's always in the back of my mind whenever I am cutting green trees.

Animals are the same way. I can't stay there unless I protect myself from the natural instincts of many animals, but at the same time I don't want to completely destroy all the animal life. I just want to keep it at a level that I can live with. I feel that by trying to do those things, I'm not violating what the Creator is trying to do.

That brings us to another section of the whole idea. In my opinion at least, the Creator is a social being. One of the first things we're told in the scriptures is that we're made in the image of the Creator, and that one of our predominant characteristics is that we are social beings, wanting friends.

Love is wanting what's best for other people, but that's a means to an end. When we have that attitude, we will try to live with other people in such a way that they can trust us and we can trust them. That gives us a basis for friendship.

Friendship and love are two different things. Love is something you do that makes friendship possible. You can give love to anybody if you are disciplined enough to do it.

To repeat, love is something we do and that we give, but friendship is something we share. Friendship always involves a reciprocal relationship, so that you can love anybody, but you can't have friendship with everybody. You can only be friends with people you trust and appreciate.

Friendship is based on mutual trust. That's a little different from love. We have to give love, and in the cultural situation we live in, we don't always expect to have it reciprocated. As a result, we end up making friends with those people that we trust and appreciate. And of course since the Creator has made us in such a way that we can be friends with Him, that's the immediate goal, as far as I'm concerned.

I don't know why or how the Creator exists, or what our future with Him will be if we qualify as the type of people that can be trusted with the welfare of other people. That's just something we go on philosophically. We need something like that to complete our existence.

That is right at the root of making a footprint that bears lightly on the earth. In my case, I've already covered that. I use as many local natural resources as I can, and I use those resources wisely. I built a house that's very efficient, and I used discarded materials to make a good stove and other equipment.

I avoid burning brush piles that add a smidgen of smoke back into the environment. Of course a plant separates oxygen and carbon as it grows, but when you burn it, you recombine them. If you allow that type of plant life to decay, instead of burning it, at least you slow down the process.

I realize that what little wood I burn and what fires I have on my place are not even a drop in the bucket compared to what happens when we have a forest fire. Sometimes those fires are caused by human carelessness, but for the most part by lightning. They're

part of the natural system of things. Lightning itself provides a certain fallout that is good for the growth of plants. I'm sure you're more aware of those things than I am. But anyway, that gives you some idea of what my sense of responsibility is, and how I try to discharge it.

Carrying that back to the statement that the Creator is a social being, we're given birth here on the earth, and we're given a chance to share in all of the possibilities that are necessary for us to be responsible beings. The ultimate goal is for us to learn to be friendly people, and by becoming friendly with other people like ourselves, the Creator can trust us to become his friend also.

So as the next step, I see that the Creator is designing a culture, a society of people. Call it a town if you want to. If we qualify for living into that next age as citizens of that larger community, then we're helping to build it, because the Creator can't just create friendly personalities, and they're essential as part of a friendly group of people who can live a sustainable lifestyle.

I guess that says it, maybe.

What are some other examples of how you consciously reduce your footprint?

Transportation is one way—in fact, it's a very big way out in the Bush.

If I have a pilot make extra trips to bring me 100 or 150 pounds of supplies at a time, even though I could get what I need by having a whole planeload of materials brought out at once, that's not acting very responsibly. So by organizing my needs or wants for things that I can't provide locally, and then ordering enough to fill the plane, I am acting as responsibly as I can in that situation.

Of course I suppose it would be possible to go into town myself by dog team, but it's a long way—a little over 200 miles, one way. By the time you figure the cost of maintaining the dog team and the number of times you would make that trip each year, it seems that using an airplane is justified.

Then there's the matter of clothing. In the process of providing myself with meat, I have skins available, primarily moose hide and caribou skins. I use both. I can make any item of clothing—it's just a matter of learning how, and taking the time to do it.

I know how to sew with sinew. I know how to butcher the animals in such a way that I can salvage the skins, the sinew, and even the bones, which are useful as sinkers for fish nets, on and on.

So I try to utilize those things to the fullest, instead of buying a commercial lead line with commercial sinkers on it and so forth. It's not practical to make the rope, but I can make the sinkers and the floats and other things that go into it. Those are items that, once made, can be used over and over, so it's not overly burdensome to make them.

The same thing goes for clothing. I have a sewing machine, so I can patch clothes that are getting worn out, and wear them much longer than they would otherwise be the case. If I can make a pair of jeans last twice the life of an ordinary pair, then I have saved the burden on the environment of making another pair of jeans.

The same thing also goes for tools. A lot of tools and other things we buy nowadays are throwaway items, not intended for use year after year. Bow saw blades are one example. Nowadays they're made with hardened tips, so you can't ordinarily sharpen them the way you would have a few years ago. But I've worked out a way to do that, so now I can cut my whole winter's supply of wood with a single blade.

By learning how to do a little crude blacksmithing, I can make a hand axe or a chisel or a *tuuq* [pole-mounted chisel] for making ice holes out of materials that wouldn't be used otherwise.

People could buy a book on making wood stoves by Ole Wik. That's a very good instruction in how to use salvageable material like old barrels and so forth to make very vital items, like stoves and even stovepipes. Even if it's out of print, they could order it from used bookstores, Yahoo, or whoever. It can probably be found.²



Wood Stoves: How to Make and Use Them by Ole Wik (Oct 1977)

★★★★★ (2 customer reviews)

Formats	Price	New	Used
Paperback		\$53.00	\$30.89

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It's doing better than that little booklet by Elmer Kreps. I think they cost less than fifty cents.



Camp and Trail Methods by Elmer Harry Kreps (Jun 1940)

★★★★★ (2 customer reviews)

Formats	Price	New	Used
Paperback		\$132.38	\$4.23
Hardcover			\$91.16

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=elmer+kreps
 [These snapshots were taken on January 18, 2013]

When I was a teenager during the Depression, I worked 10 hours a day for two meals and one dollar. That was the going rate for an adult, and they were glad to get it.

I'd like to say something, but don't know just what. You have to be out and in close contact with Nature for some time before you can get a feeling for the progression of what's happening out there. You pick cranberries in one place for two or three years, and then the patch changes and is not good picking. The same thing goes with other berries, and patches of greens and chives. Then you begin to get a feeling for it.

It's the same with gathering willows. If you gather too many from one bush, it takes several years for that bush to come back again. You're dependent on that country, and

you finally learn to do like the deer. I've watched deer walking around and nibbling a little here, a little there. As far as I could see, there was still plenty of food right there, and there was no reason for them to move. I think it was just instinct.

Caribou are the same way. If they overgraze an area, it might take 10 or 11 years to come back. They learn right away and don't go back there, or if they do, they don't stop.

Quite often that happens in hilly country, where the wind blows the snow off the tops and they don't have to dig so far to find the moss. If we get a hard winter and maybe snow that has a lot of crust on it, they depend more on those high areas. Then you wonder if there are caribou up there again, and there are none there even though they have come through the same area.

Tell me more about your thoughts on seasonality.

That is where stewardship comes in. When you have those experiences, you learn the impact of what you are doing on the country.

I've had similar experiences snaring rabbits, for instance. There are a few main rabbit trails around my place. The rabbits seem to prefer to stay back in the timber most of the time. They would go out to feed in a brushy area near the burn, but I expect that was more exposed to eagles and hawks.

You can set a snare on one of their main trails. When there are lots of them, you can get a rabbit about every day for two weeks, but then it dries up and there are no more around. You have drained that area.

Does it take a long time for them to come back?

No. The next year they are back, unless the rabbit cycle has changed. After the cycle changes, the rabbits don't seem to be local, right around where I live. It's more likely that they're building up too much in some other area, spreading out from there, and moving into the area where I am.

You can get rabbits in the summertime too. Ptarmigan and spruce hens aren't always around. I don't like to bother spruce hens in the spring, because they're going to have or are having a brood, and they may just be off the nest when you see them.

Tell me more about stewardship.

The only other thing is, don't waste. We're getting on shaky ground here. People that aren't used to living out and depending on local resources might have an entirely different idea of what it means to waste something. But whenever I kill anything, I feel I've taken on the obligation to use that as fully as I can. It might be easier to kill another animal and take the choice parts, or the parts that are easier to deal with, but that's not responsible. Why take another life and leave some edible food lying around because you don't want to bother with it?

And I'm not so sure but what the animal kingdom knows about that sort of thing too. If you're being responsible, there is something other than just immediate effects. Nature somehow knows you. If you're careful, you're more likely to continue to get animals, if there are animals around at all.

There was a wildlife biologist stationed in Kotzebue. The northwestern Arctic herd was huge, something over 400,000 animals. He was encouraging the native people to kill animals, and just use them as bait for setting traps. I wonder how much those people he was influencing understood that he was worried that the herd was getting too big, and he was trying to keep it from collapsing.

And the people took his advice too far?

The native people have lived there for centuries, and have got used to the idea that the caribou come and go anyway. There were times when there were no caribou in the Ambler Valley, and they had to go over to the Noatak. Then the population built up again. When it builds too much in one area, the area can't support them and they have to go someplace else for a few years.

For me, stewardship is not only a practical thing—it's a spiritual thing as well. It's a matter of living, or trying to live, in such a way that I'm not undoing what the Creator has provided for everybody. With global warming, that's obvious—much more obvious than it is with the local situation with the animals. But even then, I take my relationship to the Creator seriously, and try not to run counter to the way He's got things set up.

I think we've said what there is to be said about overusing the resources of a limited area.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) **My book on how to make and use wood stoves was inspired by Oliver.**