

Recently I was asked a most interesting question; is it possible to be both rich and green? Now, there's a thought - could it ever be possible to reconcile the ethics of conservation with a lifestyle of consumption? It got me thinking ... more alarming still, have Ireland's wealthy even *noticed* the change in climate?

For the unenlightened, being rich may very simply help avoid some of the worst effects of environmental damage, at least for a while, and the gated communities popping up in affluent suburbs across the western world are a signifier of the way things are going for many wealthy people (out of sight, out of mind). But living in Canute Crescent will only keep them safe for a while, and there will come a point when none of us can buy our way out of trouble. And another paradox looms; the wealthy are both the people who contribute most, per capita, to global warming and the people who are in the best position, at least individually, to do something about it. It would be just lovely if the thousands they can spend on solar panels cancelled out their levels of consumption.

Rich people tend to have big feet. Or at least they have big footprints of the carbon variety. Excluding a few misers, the very wealthy tend to celebrate their accumulations by consuming more than the rest of us, otherwise, what's the point? Enormous cars, boats, private jets, beach-front homes - none comes with either a small price tag, or a green one. So maybe it's just as well, once their environmental conscience is roused, that the very wealthy can also afford to spring for solar panels, heat pumps and quadruple glazing. Of course, the small matter of how many hydrocarbons were pumped into the air in order to amass all that wealth may also become a little more pressing as the heat rises.

It's surprisingly difficult to find someone in Ireland who'll admit to being both rich and green. Of course, maybe they're just a little bashful, or too busy sailing around the Med on a gentle, emissions-free sirocco. It may be that they're just fashionably

ahead of the stealth wealth curve which, as it slopes upward, means it will become increasingly *déclassé* to be ostentatiously wealthy. As the relationship between wealth and one's carbon footprint becomes more widely exposed, will the rich adopt conscientious consumerism?

I tried looking further afield to find a rich green to ask, and came across eco-activist Zac Goldsmith, who is resolutely green (he edits *The Ecologist* magazine) and undeniably rich, thanks to the 300 million left to him by his financier father, James. Being so green and so very, very rich means you must also be very, very busy as, when I rang his office to talk to him, his PA sweetly informed me that Zac was delighted to hear from me and would make sure to return the call "within the next two months". Maybe he was working on his latest campaign, which adds a blue tinge to his green credentials - he will be standing for the Conservative Party in the next general election. Which pretty much answers the question I wanted to ask him.

While few of us can match the size of Zac's wallet there are, at least for the ethically untroubled, some great financial opportunities around from being green-ish. From the feeding frenzy on the stock exchange whenever there's a report of oil scarcity to the growth industry of greenwashing, which allows large companies to continue pillaging-as-usual behind a veneer of eco-friendly advertising, there are plenty of greenbacks to be made. But that's another story entirely.

Which of us is truly green? I cycle and recycle, I turn things off when I'm not using them, I have a corduroy jacket, a beard and two pairs of Birkenstocks but I can't in all conscience describe myself as green (or, tragically, as rich). I've also read enough earnest, preachy articles about the environment to know that we are living, as the old Chinese curse says, in interesting times, and to know that I never want to write an earnest, preachy article about the environment. That said, two topics I usually find pretty interesting are money and staying alive. So I warmed to the

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THE FILTHY RICH

So you buy energy-saving lightbulbs and eco-friendly detergent - but does any of that matter if you're still driving a gas-guzzling car and flying to Mustique for your holidays?

CONOR HORGAN asks whether it's possible to be both rich and green - and wonders what we really need to do to save the planet



Like RECOVERING ADDICTS, we can move beyond our OVERWHELMING DEPENDENCE on fossil fuels.

subject, and kept on looking for answers.

It seems pretty obvious that already you need to be rich if you want to be green – at my local supermarket, Ecover’s eco-friendly washing products cost three times more than the unfriendly equivalent. And, in the Cultivate Centre in Temple Bar, there is a low-energy light bulb on sale for the eye-watering price of €23. It promises a cure for Seasonal Affective Disorder but, for that kind of money, I’d want it to light my path to the celestial abode, or at least make me look ten years younger. Never mind being rich, I’d need to be pretty green to buy one of those babies.

Though possibly not the best place to find rich people, the recent Green Party conference in Galway looked like a good place to find an eco-friendly response to the question. Cruising through the Midlands in my 1992 Mercedes, a ridiculous contraption with lowered suspension and a huge bass speaker in the boot that frightens small children and livestock at a range of 100 paces, two thoughts occurred; if I had to walk this, it would probably take me about four days, and I wonder what kind of reception I’ll get when I show up in this gigantic, smoke-belching sofa-on-wheels?

The Greens are a varied bunch, ranging from the expected German hippies to troops of besuited, ambitious young men and women who look like they’d just escaped from a Young Fine Gael meeting. They know what’s coming, and are busy preparing themselves for their moment at centre stage after the next election. It wasn’t all slick, however, there were a few endearingly daft stunts such as the local election candidate who stood up on stage and promoted his council’s biofuel initiative by drinking from a bottle of biodiesel. We all held our breath as he gulped it down and tried so very, very hard to keep smiling. For a moment, it looked like party leader Trevor Sargent would be addressing the nation that evening from a vomit-stained podium.

There was no sign of a militant wing of the Green Party, so I needn’t have worried about the car. Anyway, most of them were too busy dealing with the huge influx of new members and their recent evolution into a credible political party to pay attention to who was driving what. I also did some research and was thrilled to find something that went towards mitigating my eco-guilt; it turns out that to take such an ancient and thirsty beast and drive it into the ground is relatively eco-friendly compared with buying a new car, due to the massive amount of carbon emissions it takes to manufacture them.

At the conference I met Davie Philip, a cheerful, energetic Scot who helps run the aforementioned Cultivate Centre for Sustainable Living. Refreshingly, for someone whose job involves telling people it’s the end of the world as we know it, he appears to feel absolutely fine. He readily agreed that you need to be rich in order to be green and, after biting my lip, I decided not to mar his sunny disposition with a hard-hitting discussion about the price of lightbulbs. He went on to talk about George Bush’s metaphor that we are “addicted to oil” and that “people are now applying the principles of recovery from addiction to our attitudes to our oil consumption”. Just as recovering addicts find a new way of life that isn’t predicated on the one thing they thought they couldn’t live without, we can move beyond our overwhelming dependence on fossil fuels.

His big thing is energy descent planning – a practical approach to living in a world in which we will by necessity use less fossil fuels. Because fossil fuels are a double-edged sword – on the one hand, we use far too much of them, leading to global warming and, on the other, we are rapidly approaching the peak of oil production, meaning that demand for oil will quickly outstrip supply. This Zen-like conundrum of simultaneously having both too much and not enough of the same thing would be a fine place to be, if only each side of the equation neatly cancelled out the other. Unfortunately, life is not quite so simple, so we lollop merrily along like smokers who haven’t yet seen the dark shadow on the x-ray, telling ourselves we’ll change as soon as we have to, but not before. As Philip pointed out, “this is the first time in history that we need to campaign for less economic freedom, not more”. Which, unfortunately, is pretty much the definition of a hard sell. In the Western world, we have all become relatively rich from burning up the earth’s resources, and it’s quite a turnaround to concentrate on not squandering but saving what’s left of them. Taking out a planetary SSIA, if you will.

He finished by saying “hope is a renewable resource” – quite a wonderful thought. But then I thought about it, and said that surely hope without action is the same as denial. He agreed, saying “if we don’t take action, then we have no right to hope”. Damn – I knew there had to be a catch.

Looking around the packed Green conference, I realised something – these are the people who shell out for all those Ecover products. It did feel good to be surrounded by people who are willing to acknowledge the problems and look for solutions. Then another thought occurred – what if they’re wrong?

It’s rather difficult to find a climate-change sceptic in the Irish scientific community. I cheered up considerably when Dr John Simmie of the Environmental Change Institute in Galway told me that concern about climate change was “nonsensical” as the climate will continue to change no matter what we do. My relief was short-lived, however, as he went on to acknowledge

that global warming was indeed a pressing problem. It seemed his objections to ‘climate change’ are more about the semantics of the term than about the process. When I asked him directly about global warming, he told me at this stage it’s not open to dispute – it’s happening. His argument is simple – “We got a terrible deal in the Kyoto agreement and, as we contribute so little to global warming, relative to the US, China and India, restrictions on emissions in Ireland are daft”. He thinks that any corrections we can make at this stage are trivial so we should plough ahead until we have a comparable standard of living to the US. Given the choice, he’d prefer us to be a rich country to a green one.

Although not a climate-change sceptic, IBEC’s Danny McCoy has the distinction of being the only speaker who was hissed at the Green conference, though he didn’t seem to take it personally. After I returned to Dublin, I rang him to find out if he thought it was possible to be rich and green. “All societies degrade the environment until they reach a certain level of wealth,” he said, “at which point they start to become concerned about the degraded environment.” In other words, you have to be rich first, then green.

He’s very keen on “expressing green values” and feels that this is very compatible with being rich. When I asked him if he feels there are enough sustainable resources to base all this wealth on, he told me he’s techno-centric, which is another way of saying oh, they’re bound to come up with something. Climate-change activist and blogger Rob Hopkins calls this the IGUS syndrome, or Irrational Grasping at Unfeasible Solutions. This is part of his semi-serious diagnosis of Post Petroleum Stress Disorder, based on Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s Five Stages Of Grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – and we’re all at one of those stages when it comes to global warming. Actually, they were originally called the Five Stages of Receiving Catastrophic News, which seems scarily appropriate.

Anyway, back to McCoy – when I quoted the Stern report to him, which says that global warming is the greatest-ever failure of the market system, his faith in markets remained unshakeable. He suggested that “the problem doesn’t lie in the existing markets, it’s that we don’t have enough of them”. He proposes creating a whole new market, based on giving businesses the ability to buy the right to pollute, much like a company Kyoto policy. Ultimately, he believes we need to “embrace individualistic type solutions” which he told me, without irony, has led to him being called ‘Thatcherite’. I can’t help thinking that if we keep careering down our present path, Thatcher may yet be proved right when she said “there is no such thing as society”, although in a very different way from how she meant it. And what about the carbon footprint of the rich? “In this world,” McCoy said “getting rich means getting dirty.” As I put down the phone I fancied, I could smell a whiff of sulphur ... or it might have been some other greenhouse gas.

But the uncomfortable fact is that Danny McCoy is right – most wealth in the world is amassed by deeply eco-unfriendly activities. If in doubt, ask your local property developer or golf course owner how environmentally friendly their businesses are. So it seems that, at best, it’s only possible to be rich and appear green.

At the end of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, a ticker tape of solutions wafts across the bottom of the screen, offering scant comfort after the catalogue of doom-laden images. One of the main suggestions is to buy a hybrid car, if you can. For your information, one of the few options available is a Lexus hybrid, costing just under €85,000. If that’s a little rich for your blood, you could pick up a Prius instead, for just over €20,000. For the record, my elderly behemoth of a Merc cost a fraction of that – and, to paraphrase Wilde, sorry for having such a big car, but I couldn’t afford a smaller one. If you don’t want to go the whole hog, but would still like the word Eco on your tailgate, go for the Yaris Eco, which automatically switches itself off when stationary. Toyota’s bumf spells it out for us, boasting that “The Yaris Linea Eco is emissions free (when stopped in traffic)”.

There is already a long list of well-known rich and green faces who drive eco-friendly cars, led by George Clooney, who’s often seen zipping around Los Angeles in a Tango, an oddly squeezed-looking electric two-seater that can reach 150mph and costs the same as a Porsche. Of course, to have a more realistic idea of George’s emissions total (all those private jets to press junkets), just picture a flunkey in the seat behind him, chucking a kilo bag of charcoal out the window every 20 miles or so.

Ireland is actually at the forefront of finding some more realistic solutions for the environmental crisis. Colin Campbell, one of the world’s leading geologists and experts on Peak Oil, lives in Cork, not far from Kinsale, which is currently transforming itself into one of Europe’s first oil-independent towns. Another leading light of the climate-change movement is renowned economist Richard Douthwaite, who, if there were a Pope of economics, would have long since been branded a heretic for suggesting that the current world economy is utterly unsustainable. He lives in Sligo so I thought it better to phone him than to take the beast out for another run across the country.

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Douthwaite established Feasta (which means ‘in the future’ in Irish), a foundation for the economics of sustainability. Their definition of sustainability is a system through which people can reasonably expect their needs to be met into the future. Note, by the way, it says needs – not wants. To my surprise, he informed me that, by rearranging how we use our resources, it would actually be possible to move the original 15 EU member states to a non-fossil fuel-dependent, non nuclear-powered economy, with the same standard of living that Germany presently enjoys. Which is effectively being green and relatively rich. There is one small catch, however. No more economic growth. Ah.

Economic growth is the basis of how the world currently works. It is The American Dream, that each generation has more than the one before it. And relentless growth is not so much an elephant in the parlour as a shark in the fishpond. Sharks have two defining characteristics; they need to keep moving forward or they’ll drown and, if one bites you, you’ll know all about it.

Then he drew some interesting parallels between wealth and happiness. As we have become wealthier, all the social indications of happiness have gone down – the levels of suicide and addiction are increasing and numbers of friends we have and the amount of voluntary work we do is decreasing. I have some anecdotal evidence of this myself – I made a film about happiness last year, in which I asked 300 people from all around Ireland what made them happy. Very few said money, and almost everyone said friends and family. It seems clear that, as we have become richer, our levels of isolation, dissatisfaction and selfishness have increased.

Douthwaite outlined for me the kind of place a sustainable world could be – low energy, localised production of food, with each of us getting more involved with our community and actually doing something useful for ourselves. He suggested that important skills, like knitting, vegetable gardening, and brewing homebrew, are being lost and we would do well to take them up again.

He went on to say that in this future, we would need to get used to spending a larger proportion of our income on food. Those of us who frequent farmers’ markets are already painfully aware of this, though there are other benefits; it’s been shown that people are much more likely to strike up a conversation at a farmer’s market than in a supermarket.

We’ll need to be brave to achieve this new world, as it involves substantially changing our systems. Douthwaite proposes a system of personal carbon allowances, which are widely seen as the most workable solution to global warming. He also suggests taking the world’s resources out of the hands of governments and placing

them in the care of trusts, as politicians tend to work in electoral cycles and therefore can’t really deal with long-term solutions.

In fact, under the present system, offering up a workable solution is political suicide. Which means that, no matter how plausible Bertie’s recent name-checking of the importance of environmental issues may sound, rest assured that he’s not going to do anything that would cast himself or his party in an unfavourable light with the electorate. By definition, any measure he offers won’t go far enough.

If this all sounds a little daunting, take comfort from the following; the changed public attitude to speeding, paying for plastic bags, the smoking ban, the ozone layer. These curtailments of our freedom have all brought obvious benefits. In 1807, there was panic in Britain at the idea that a widely-used resource would be banned, and many people were convinced that without it the economy would collapse. As it turned out, the economy continued just fine after the British Empire abolished slavery.

Ten years ago, I sat on an interview panel to appoint a new photography lecturer in Dun Laoghaire College of Art. One of the candidates was less flashy than the others, less obviously artistic, but a whole page in his resumé was devoted to a simple thought

that helped secure him the position. It was an arresting slogan, and I tore the page out of the resumé and pinned it to my office wall, where it’s been ever since. It was only as I finished writing this article that

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I thought to Google it, and discovered it was coined by Harald Zindler, a founder member of Greenpeace, which makes it an even more appropriate maxim to share with you: The optimism of the action is better than the pessimism of the thought. So, although I promised not to preach, I hope you will indulge me when I say this: may you be optimistic.

I also take great comfort from the Darwinian principle that it’s not the strongest or most intelligent organisms that prosper – it’s the most adaptable. And I find it inspiring to consider that the necessary changes may bring an even better world than the one we have now. As Richard Douthwaite told me, “The future will not be a glossy one – people are going to have to get their hands dirty. But I think once they get over the shock, they’re probably going to enjoy it.”

Ultimately, our lives are all about the choices we make – and we have to choose between being rich or green. We can choose to be rich, as long as we’re prepared to pay the price that comes with that kind of life. And, if we choose to be green, our lives will be all the richer for it. ■

www.sustainable.ie/cultivate www.feasta.org

www.transitionculture.org www.peakoil.ie