



downshifting



what is it?

It's possibly the most important but least understood concept in sustainability. It's about earning and consuming less, and so mainly (but not exclusively) applies to people in developed, wealthy countries like the UK.

Human activity is causing ecological damage. Global population is beginning to stabilise, but all governments are still chasing economic growth. But it's not possible to live in harmony with nature *and* have perpetual economic growth. Sustainable growth is an oxymoron, and downshifting is steady-state economics in microcosm. We can't tackle economic growth if the majority just want more and more.

Downshifting is essential because, paradoxically, measures to reduce consumption of a resource by increasing efficiency usually end up increasing consumption, as people use more of it because it's cheaper. This is the 'Jevons Paradox' (Wikipedia it). There's one way round it - reduce earnings in line with the savings you make. So if you install insulation that saves £250 a year, work a bit less and reduce your income by £250, otherwise you'll spend it or invest it in the growth economy, which will end up using as much (or more) energy than you saved with the insulation. Wealth and sustainability are no more compatible than economic growth and sustainability. Even if you only spend your money on locally-produced, environmentally-friendly goods, money still moves around the economy, and will eventually be used for more damaging things.

what are the benefits?

- Ecology: less 'stuff' consumed or required, so fewer factories, fewer materials used, less waste generated, less fuel burnt for distribution etc.
- Time: less time spent earning money will free up more time for socializing, being with loved ones, relaxing, reading, growing food, exercising, sleeping – all the things you know you don't do enough of, but will almost definitely have a positive effect on health and happiness.
- Children: they need our time – but we give them things instead.
- Materialism is the opposite of spiritual development. This is part of all religious teaching, but is largely ignored today; whatever your religious or spiritual persuasion, rejecting materialism is a given, surely?
- Employment: downshifting won't 'destroy jobs', as consuming less is balanced by working less. Following the logic of the 'destroys jobs' position, then growing your own food or building your own home would be negative things because they would take jobs from supermarket workers and construction workers – but if you think that growing your own food or building your own house are bad things, you're definitely on the wrong site.
- An economy based on small businesses, smallholdings, community-based initiatives and self-employment is more labour-intensive, and so a move towards part-time work in the local economy would create more jobs. It's crazy that we have the longest work hours in Europe, but at the same time millions unemployed.



- Certainly downshifting wouldn't be good for jobs in the corporate, banking or advertising sector, but hey, we'll find a way to get by without those jobs somehow.



what can I do?

Work, earn and spend less

- Save money by learning how to grow food, keep bees or chickens, install renewables, DIY, make furniture, bake bread, knit, make soaps and bodycare products - Lowimpact.org has lots of ideas.
- Buy durable stuff, and think about whether you need the latest fad; do you need to replace clothes or furniture when they're still functional?
- Use second-hand shops / exchange websites.
- Self-sufficiency isn't essential - just a like-minded community, for exchanging things.
- Smaller house with a smaller mortgage / rent? An extreme example of 'downsizing' is Simon Dale's £3000 house - not easy, but not impossible; a big house can't be green.
- Cut up your credit card.
- TV is a route into our living rooms for corporate advertising; try giving up your telly for a few weeks and see how it feels.
- You could reduce your hours at work. See direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/Employees/Flexibleworking/DG_10029491 for your rights regarding flexible working.
- Try sharing (e.g.) a lawn mower with a neighbour, instead of having one each.

Don't believe the hype

- Absolute needs have to be met for us to thrive, and they have a limit. Relative needs (or 'keeping up with the Joneses') have no limit. Ignore corporate advertising that stimulates our relative needs.
- Advertisers will up the ante, with websites following your every click, 'spontaneous' public events, social media campaigns, product placement in films and subtle 'guerilla marketing'. But you can thwart them if you:
- Don't give your money to big advertisers; find small, local alternatives, which might cost slightly more. This may seem paradoxical, but if you reduce costs elsewhere, you can afford it, and you're not feeding the corporate / financial beast - the engine of growth and consumerism.
- In fact, you could use TV, magazine and billboard advertising to decide what not to buy.
- It's more difficult for kids, who can be bullied for not having the right trainers; but we have to break the cycle somewhere, and you'll be doing them a big favour by helping them not to

become corporate/credit card slaves. Sweden banned adverts aimed at kids; if only UK politicians had the balls to do the same.

- Downshifting is the only thing that can't be co-opted and sold back to us. Ageing punk rockers now advertise insurance. Hippy culture, Buddhism and environmental concerns have all been used to sell corporate products.

Help change attitudes and aspirations

- Working for corporations and using credit cards issued by banks to give money to corporations is a mug's game - talk to friends and family; see what they think; suggest alternatives.
- Understand the concepts - don't let people think you're doing it because you're lazy (although if you are, it will have the same effect).
- If your peers judge you by your income or your brands, it might be worth finding different peers: to meet like-minded people, join an environmental organisation and go to meetings, conferences, events and festivals; attend courses; go to your local transition meetings, or set one up; go WWOOFing; get an allotment.
- People who take more than their fair share of resources are called successful; we can start to change that – and call them selfish.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/downshifting for more info and books, inc:
- Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Free*
- Piper Terrett, *the Frugal Life*
- John Harrison, *Low-cost Living*
- adbusters.org – anti-advertising
- slowmovement.com – addressing 'time poverty'
- thedownshifter.co.uk - advice for downshifters



Do you really want to be in credit card debt to large banks so that you can give money to large corporations?

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 230+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

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