

Six Months in the (Un)Sustainable Life of Captain SUBRIM (B.A. London, Ph.D. London)

Captain SUBRIM sees himself as a ‘sustainable’ sort of chap. He cycles to work when many people would drive – 3.5 miles each way. He only uses his small car for the odd weekend walk or shopping trip and tries to use public transport as much as possible, after all Reading West station is just around the corner from his house and he lives only a mile from Reading town centre. He is a proud member of Friends of the Earth – it has even been said that he votes Green in the odd election. He gives lectures to students on ‘being sustainable’ and spends his time highlighting all the flaws in the ways that the capitalist system works and how it treats the environment as a commodity to be bought and sold and exploited. He works on research projects which seek to ‘establish best environmental practice’ in urban development for practitioners and communities. He tries to buy organic food and he is always careful about the consumption of energy in his household. He recycles his glass bottles (even if he sometimes drives to the re-cycle centre)

What a truly sustainable person he is!

Some accuse people like Captain SUBRIM of being smug so he thought he’d use this opportunity to share with you all just how sustainable he has been over the last six months. He’d like to knock on the head the preposterous criticisms that are sometimes made of academics like him – namely the absurd suggestion that they preach to others that *they* need to change *their* lifestyles and what *they* do whilst following unsustainable lifestyles themselves. Utterly ridiculous, I’m sure you’d agree.

So let’s have a look at what the captain’s been up to and see what lessons others can learn.

A Sustainable Christmas

Captain SUBRIM had a most sustainable Christmas. He took the usual care and attention to keep wrapping to a minimum and did not do much out of the ordinary. OK so there

were some unsustainable practices. He thought it would be nice to visit friends in Holland for Christmas. Seemed like a good opportunity to take in some of Holland and Belgium. No problem, take the train! Go to Brussels then onto Amsterdam, wouldn't take that long. But wait a moment Captain and Mrs SUBRIM (who is also a captain) decided it would be better to travel by car – after all they needed some cheap Christmas ale and how many bottles can you carry on the train? Don't forget Captain SUBRIM is sustainable, one little car trip of 1,000 miles isn't going to do any harm. After all the average family in the UK generates 4.4 tonnes of carbon dioxide from their car every year¹. Why shouldn't Captain SUBRIM be allowed to use up his quota? Aren't countries and governments good at buying and selling their quotas of CO2? Oh yes, and there's Christmas shopping for food. He could walk into town but I ask you how much can you realistically carry back on the bus? Captain SUBRIM likes his out of season New Zealand coxes and other air-freighted products (it is estimated that the average Christmas lunch has been transported over 26,000 CO2 emitting miles²). I know Captain SUBRIM could use the bus and local shops but it is so trying and he doesn't have time, what with that research project to do. Because of the supermarkets there aren't many local shops anyway – the Captain reminds himself that over 70% of food is sold through 4 retailers in the UK and over £14.5 billion was spent on non-food items in supermarkets in 2000 destroying the social and economic sustainability of urban communities, but still it was cold and wet and the supermarket is so easy to get to by car.

February and Captain SUBRIM decides to use his sabbatical to visit bella Italia and do some research and catch up with some of the family. A return flight for £40, what fantastic value – although Captain SUBRIM is a little anxious about the failure of the price of the ticket to cover the environmental damage created by his flight – but why worry about that when somebody else is going pick up the tab! Doesn't everybody in the Developed World spend their whole time creating externalities and costs that are then picked up by others. Once there of course he needs a car, he's in Tuscany and his relatives live in Liguria (150 miles away) and he wants to get around, oh yes and he's

¹ Wothington, B. (2004) A good idea takes off?, *Earthmatters*, 58, pp.20-21.

² Goldsmith, Z. (2003) Why I hate supermarkets – the true costs of shopping at the supermarket, *Earthmatters*, 56, p.18.

staying in a wee farmhouse. So he clocks up another 1,000 miles. After all people keep on telling him there's loads of oil out there, at least enough for another, oh 40 years, maybe more³. Why not burn it up now? If you don't somebody else in China or somewhere will only do so anyway, it is a global world now, we all have to be realistic what else could he possibly do?

March and Captain SUBRIM has to attend a conference in the USA to talk about 'sustainable development' (some unfairly accuse the Captain of being a conference surfer, with all that implies for his levels of CO2 release – ridiculous). The planes going out and coming back were both half empty and the Captain reflected on the fact that both flights combined released approximately 2.8 tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere – all to get those important people such as himself to Philadelphia and back⁴. But not to worry. All that discussion with other SUBRIM-sympathetic academics from all over the world contributed significantly to our body of knowledge on how to be sustainable. Captain SUBRIM concluded that it was worth all that CO2. Once in the US the Captain thought he'd have a drive around – over 1,000 miles in five days, had a fantastic time. There's no other way to see the US and what's the harm in just one more car trip?

April to June and it is back to the normal routine. Thousands of miles travelled by various means; the purchase of new consumer goods, including a new fridge-freezer (not sure where the old one ends up but not to worry, somebody else's problem); a new dishwasher to improve his quality of life (whilst freeing up more research time); and all the other uses of energy that go with an academic's highly pressured lifestyle.

But wait, Captain SUBRIM suddenly feels a pang of guilt. How many fossils worth of energy has he burnt up? Just think of all those little creatures swimming in the sea millions of years ago, how many died so that he might live his (un)sustainable life? How

³ BBC Radio 4 Business Today, 'when the oil runs out', May 9 2004.

⁴ Wothington, B. (2004) A good idea takes off?, *Earthmatters*, 58, pp.20-21. The government's own Sustainable Development Commission warned the government in June 2004 that the government's plans for tackling climate change will be 'impossible' if it allows forecast airport expansion to go ahead. The government argues that there will be 'naturally' be an incessant, growing demand for air travel, so much so that as many as half a billion passengers may pass through Britain's airports by 2050 (see Friends of the Earth Online, 2004).

much CO₂ has he been *directly* responsible for emitting into the atmosphere? The average per person in the UK is 9 tonnes per year. Surely not this much. After all, his awareness of (and preaching about) sustainability issues must have had a direct impact on *his* own lifestyle and *his* use of the earth's resources?

Captain SUBRIM stops thinking and crosses his fingers. Maybe all those environmentalists don't know what they are talking about after all. Even if there's some truth in what they say, he comforts himself with the thought that *his* trips are very important. It is other people who waste the earth's resources. And then he thinks back to that research project he's working on and realises that he is a good, sustainable global citizen after all. His diary proves it. He is sure that all the other members of this consortium could produce a similar diary that would show them an equally sustainable light. Why bother to think about our demands for energy when we can use the environment as resource and a sink? Why consider other possibilities for development when there are all those lovely brownfields waiting to be exploited for profit? Perhaps Captain SUBRIM should use his research to argue *against* nasty development, but there again he has his next research grant to think about, his next holiday, his next trip to see the relatives, his next conference....