

Examining Our Collective Carbon Footprint

Cynthia Peters

A “footprint” calls to mind the action of a single person. When you calculate your *carbon footprint* (see p. 28), you learn about the *carbon emissions* you are individually responsible for. Often, you can find ways to reduce your carbon footprint so that you are having a smaller impact on the planet. But what if we could look beyond individuals – at the carbon footprint of larger groups or institutions? What if we could look at *how we do things as a community* or as a country and consider reducing our *collective* carbon footprint?

When you think about how we do things collectively, you are thinking about the institutions or systems that shape our everyday lives. Often these things are hard to name because they are part of the background. Here are some examples:

- Our government subsidizes big industrial farms (rather than small local farms), so most food has to be transported long distances.
- There are few laws governing the quality of the things we buy. The things we buy often break and we have to buy new ones.
- Public transportation is not adequate, so people need cars.
- The U.S. supports the biggest military in the world (see box on this page).

It's not hard to think of ways to reduce our individual carbon footprint. We can turn down the thermostat or recycle more. It takes more creativity to reduce our collective carbon footprint. Try creating a more complete list of the *ways we do things as a community*. And then think about what we might do to have an effect on our *collective* carbon footprint. What are the advantages and disadvantages of changing some of these *ways we do things*?

Cynthia Peters is editor of The Change Agent.

Some Facts about the “Footprint” of the U.S. Military

- ⇒ The U.S. military is present in 156 countries.
- ⇒ The U.S. military has bases in 63 countries.
- ⇒ The U.S. owns about 737 bases in foreign lands.
- ⇒ The U.S. military uses approximately 30 million acres of land for these bases.
- ⇒ Including domestic and international bases, the Pentagon controls 5,440,755 acres (about the size of New Jersey).
- ⇒ The Pentagon reports that it burns through 365,000 **barrels** of oil every day. That number is equivalent to the daily consumption of the entire nation of Portugal.
- ⇒ Some experts estimate that the military really uses closer to 500,000 barrels per day, which is more than Portugal and Peru combined.



GET OUT YOUR CALCULATOR: A barrel of oil contains 42 gallons. Depending on how it is refined, a barrel of oil will make about 20 gallons of gas. Calculate the number of gallons of gas that could be made from 365,000 barrels of oil. How about 500,000 barrels?

PUZZLE OVER THIS: Imagine you could reduce your own carbon footprint by 50%, and you could reduce the military's carbon footprint by only 5%. Which would have a bigger impact?

Sources: “The Military-Petroleum Complex,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Nick Turse, March 24, 2008, <<http://auto.howstuffworks.com/question417.htm>>; <www.eia.doe.gov>; <www.globalresearch.ca>. Photo used with permission of the U.S. Army.