

GENERATIONS FOR CHANGE

The data now supports it and the message has been made clear to Americans – we gobble up a disproportionate amount of the world's energy by supporting a lifestyle that is viewed even by ourselves as hedonistic. In so doing we have become the primary contributors to global warming which threatens not only our own way of life but that of the rest of the world.

We all agree on one thing, that we must take the necessary steps to stem the warming of the earth and adopt a sustainable way of life. Many feel it is our obligation to take a global leadership role, however deep down inside I believe that many of us question our ability to do even our own part. Just how much are we willing to curtail the lifestyle we have all come to enjoy so that generations that follow will have a livable earth and the resources they need and deserve?

For the moment let's assume that as a nation we can make the commitment to reverse the harm that we have done. Personally I am not so focused on how we will accomplish the feat, I am fairly confident we will develop the technologies necessary. Nor am I so concerned about the timing, the 50 year window we hear about seems like enough time, after all we went from Kitty Hawk to the moon in just 66 years.

What I do wonder about however, is just who is going to get this monumental task done? I don't believe that a handful of scientists will solve the problem with a singular solution. It is a complex problem and like it or not it will require Americans to change their lifestyle. But lumping all Americans into one pool is not a good way of estimating our chances. I believe a generational approach is needed.

A high percentage of those who are involved in this issue are without doubt those of the Baby Boom Generation. It is has been during our life time (and I use "our" because the the writer and I suspect the bulk of the readers of this article are Baby Boomers) that this problem has come to the forefront. One could also argue that we have been the biggest contributors to the problem. Can we then make the life style changes that will be necessary? My answer is no!

Baby Boomers are a spoiled bunch. My parents and grandparents had a term for the behavior we often see them exhibit - *sfacciato*. It's an Italian word that means arrogant, bold, even rude. There is a pervasive attitude that we are owed everything we want. And it is easy to see why, our parents did everything they could to give us all the things they didn't have. So will the Baby Boomers be the agents of change to a sustainable future? I don't think so. Switching to a hybrid SUV is about as far as most Baby Boomers are willing to go.

Speaking of our parents, let's look at their generation, referred to as the Great or Silent Generation. This is the most admired generation still living. They of course will have little or no impact or responsibility on the greening of America but they were a model of stewardship. They lived within their means, wasted little, and took pride in the entire society they were part of. If they only knew the long term effects of the industrialization they were part of I think it would be a different America today.

But they can do little about it now. And since I don't think that Baby Boomers will make a significant difference, it pretty much leaves our children to shoulder the responsibility. Can Generation X and Y (also called the Millennials) get the job done? And do they even want to? I believe the answer to both questions is an emphatic yes.

It seems to me that recent generations have tended to reject and even reverse certain situations or behaviors of their ancestors. Perhaps this is human nature. The Great Generation was very conservative, the Baby Boomers rebelled with their counter-culture revolution. The Millennials have swung back to the conservative side. This pendulum effect appears to be ringing true with sustainability issues. The Great Generation had a respect for conservation, whereas Baby Boomers' have consumed since they emerged from the womb. And while the Millennials are materialistic to a point, they have developed a keen interest in living the right way, especially when it comes to sustainability. They were the first generation that was educated from birth to "reduce - reuse - recycle" and they are living it.

As they now begin entering the labor force employers are finding that selling their company as green is the biggest recruiting tool they have. This generation asks employers what they are doing to be green, they are joining environmental organizations in greater numbers than previous generations, they buy green

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whenever the price differential is not too great, and they are stubbornly conservative in their life style. They have a vision of how they want to live (green) and have the drive and more importantly the tools at hand to do it. They multi-task, are dedicated to achieving their goals, and take working under stress in stride. They want their world the way they want it and are not afraid to work for it.

Marketers have spent a great deal of time and money studying this group. Based on their findings I am very optimistic that they will create their own more holistic life style quite foreign and much greener than their parents'. We won't be around to see it but when they turn things over to the next generation (whatever that one might be called) I'm betting the planet will be much, much healthier.

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Resources:

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The Echo Boomers / Generation Y by Ali Raza; *Green & White*; April 7, 2008; <http://greenwhite.org/2008/04/07/the-echo-boomers-generation-y/>

The Gig by Nadira A. Hira; *Fortune*; April 25, 2008; <http://thegig.blogs.fortune.cnn.com/2008/04/25/gen-y-forces-the-green-issue-without-even-trying/>