



THE INSTITUTE FOR HUMANE EDUCATION
P.O. BOX 260
SURRY, MAINE 04684
207.667.1025
info@HumaneEducation.org
www.HumaneEducation.org

LEAVE ONLY FOOTPRINTS: EXPLORING OUR ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

Grades: 6 and up

Time: 45 minutes

Materials: 20-30 8 ½" x 11" sheets of colored paper with clipart footprints on them (see below) for each participant; facts and information about ecological footprints

Relevant Subjects: Social Studies, Language Arts, Environmental Science, Mathematics, and Economics

1. Ask: "How many of you have heard the phrase 'Take only memories (or pictures), leave only footprints?' What do you think that means? What is it trying to say? (Acknowledge answers.) So, it's basically reminding us to try to have as little negative impact as possible on the earth.

Not only do we have our physical footprints, but each of us has what's called an ecological footprint. An ecological footprint has to do with how much land and how many resources it takes to sustain the way we live. Let's try to get an idea of what our ecological footprint is...."

2. Give each participant 20-30 sheets of colored paper with big footprints on them (see below). No one stands next to someone with the same color of paper. Participants stand in a large circle facing inward. The presenter also participates. (Depending on the size of the class, you may have several observers.)

3. Ask participants a series of questions (see below). The choices for each question are weighted, loosely based on their ecological impact. After the first question is read, participants put down a certain number of sheets horizontally in front of them, depending on which option most accurately reflects their current lifestyle. Participants then stand on that row of papers. Ask the next question, and have participants lay down the next row of footprints in front — according to their choice for the next question -- so that their footprints move toward the center of the circle.

4. Continue asking questions until the circle is too tight to move forward further, and/or participants have run out of paper footprints.

Pertinent Information: Below are sample questions that you might ask; the numbers in parentheses represent the number of sheets of paper that should be placed in front of participants, based on their answer. Depending on the group, the questions can vary in number, depth and difficulty. (Please note that the weights of the footprints are loosely based on actual statistics and are not designed to be completely accurate.)

Which describes your house?

- A. Multi-family dwelling (apartment/condo) (1)
- B. Freestanding house on small lot (2)
- C. Freestanding house with large lot covered with lawn (3)

How big is your house?

- A. Small (0-800 sq ft) (2)
- B. Medium (up to 2,000 sq ft) (4)
- C. Large (bigger than 2,000 sq ft) (6)

Do you use lots of energy conservation at your house (lights, water, etc)?

- A. Yes (1)
- B. No (2)

What's your primary mode of transportation?

- A. Walk/ bicycle (2)
- B. Bus/ public transportation (4)
- C. Car (6)

What kind of car does your family drive?

- A. Compact (2)
- B. Family-sized (4)
- C. SUV (6)

How much trash does your family generate?

- A. Not much (maybe one small bag a week) (1)
- B. Some (1 30 gal. bag a week) (2)
- C. Lots (more than 1 30 gal. bag a week) (3)

How often do you eat animal-based foods (meat, dairy, eggs, etc)?

- A. Never (2)
- B. Sometimes (4)
- C. Always (6)

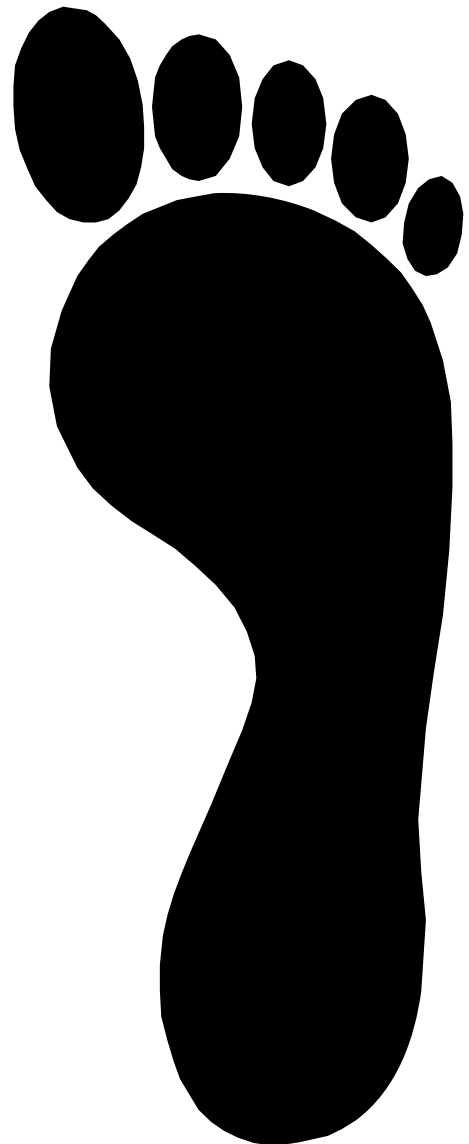
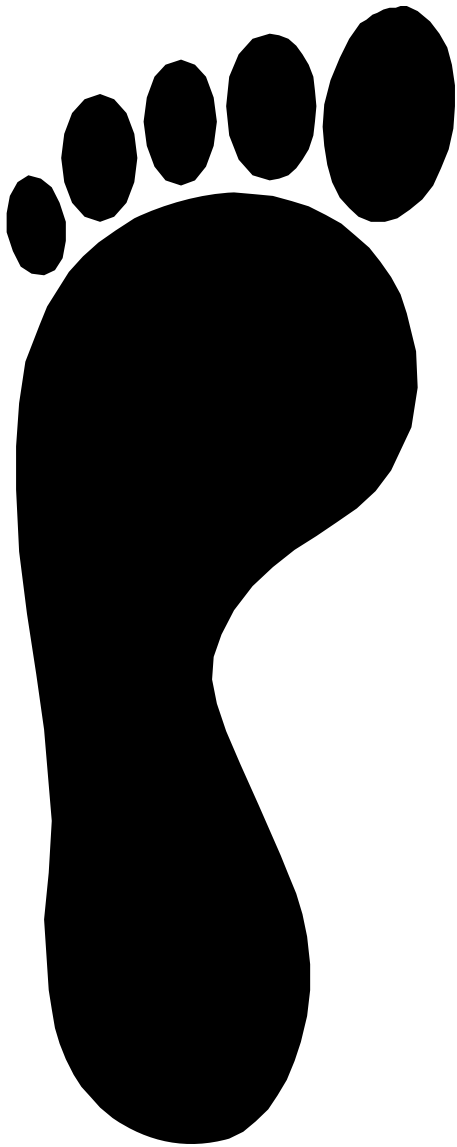
How much fresh and locally grown (within 250 miles) food do you eat?

- A. Most of what I eat (1)
- B. About half (2)
- C. Very little (3)

As you can imagine, the result is that everyone's footprints begin overlapping and filling the space, and some participants run out of footprints. There are numerous possibilities for follow up and discussion on the impact our life choices have on others, and the possibilities for reducing our ecological footprint.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. Have participants use the Ecological Footprint quiz (www.myfootprint.org) to calculate their own ecological footprint, and then compare it with that of others in the room, then in the U.S., then around the world. Discuss the results. What did you learn? Does what you've discovered change your views in any way?
2. According to Redefining Progress (www.rprogress.org), the average ecological footprint for an American is 24 acres per person. Discuss whether or not it is a good idea to reduce our footprint on the Earth. Why/why not? What choices can we make to reduce our footprint?
3. According to the Ecological Footprint quiz, humans share the planet with more than 10 million other species. Some conservation biologists believe that "it may require 30-70% of the biosphere simply to maintain biodiversity — nature's complex web of interdependent life forms." Currently about 3% of land is set aside as parks or reserves. Discuss what percentage of the earth's biosphere should be set aside for the 10 million other species. What changes, if any, might such an action cause in our own lives? Our community? The global community?



Activity by Marsha Rakestraw (HECP Graduate)