Crying into my sustainably sourced coffee

As Earth Day came and went last week, I've been doing a lot of thinking and reading on what some call the "hypocrisy of environmentalism". The idea being that if you aren't living 100% 'green' then you're no environmentalist, that being environmentally conscious is an all or nothing proposition. This notion is often perpetuated by the climate contrarians and anti-environmentalists (for lack of a better word) who delight in pointing out instances where someone's actions where less than eco-friendly. I think that attitude is absolute BS. That said, I do fall into this trap and get discouraged. I know, logically, that every one of us cannot have zero carbon footprint. (Curious about your carbon footprint? Check out http://www.nature.org/greenliving/carboncalculator/.) But I do want to do better, really walk the talk. I drive way more than I want to and more than once on my morning commute I've cried as I look at the brown cloud of pollution hanging over Denver – look at that, look at what I've done, it's ALL MY FAULT. Nothing like a little hyperbole first thing in the morning, yeah? Does that mean I'm not environmentally conscious? I *am* contributing to problem. I keep my car well tuned and my tires properly inflated but it still farts plenty of greenhouse gases (GHGs) out that tailpipe. And (as an aside), this commute takes me to work at a company who recognized Earth Day by printing up 100+ 11x7 full color flyers reminding people not to print unnecessarily and to recycle. Sigh.

In the US, and particularly the western part, driving a car can be an uncomfortable fact of life for many of us. I don't like it, but I drive for convenience. Not only do I drive to go play in my beloved mountains but my workday commute takes 30-40 minutes by car. It would take over 2 hours (one way!) by public transportation. I'm not willing to give up that time. So, if I'm contributing so much to GHGs, do I say 'what the hell' and make my carbon footprint as big as I want? No. What I do is try to mitigate it with other aspects of my lifestyle. Adjusting my apartment's thermostat to not overuse the heat or the AC. Yep, sometimes in the summer, I get a little warmer than comfortable but I've gotten used to it and I've watched my utility bill drop. I've almost completely cut meat out of my diet. While I know this might be hard for some folks, it's been pretty easy for me because I'm not much of a carnivore. When I do buy meat I definitely try to go the grass-fed, free-range route and by not buying much the increased cost is negligible. And, lucky for me, beans and cornbread is one of my absolute favorite meals! I buy responsibly sourced coffee, you know, the brands that have the little Rainforest Alliance frog stamped on them. It's more expensive but cheap coffee gives me gut rot anyway. But wait. Maybe the coffee plantation didn't cut down trees but how do they treat their workers? What pesticides/herbicides might they be using? Ahhh! And some would argue that a monocrop of beans that need irrigation is less environmentally friendly than short grass prairie raised beef. It's oh so easy to fall into that well of despair.

And still, there are some folks that love to point their finger and shout about how hypocritical I am to promote environmental conservation and sustainability. You DROVE to the conservation meeting! OMG, you ate a cheeseburger! But I'll remind them (and myself) that I alone didn't create climate change and I alone cannot fix it. Other authors have made this point more eloquently than I, but I truly believe it is important to keep in mind that big environmental issues are often the culmination of many small problems. Fixing environmental issues will be the culmination of many small changes by many of us.

While I'm on this soapbox (and I promise I'll get back to hiking and fly fishing stories next article!), I read a great article the other day about how the image of an environmentalist has become one of this twee well-off white woman, perusing farmer's markets with her fair trade hand-made basket and hemp (but stylish!) shoes. This perception aggravates me to no end and not just because I don't own any stylish hemp shoes or a cute basket. You don't have to be rich to be an environmentalist. In fact, being frugal and environmentally conscious can go hand in hand. Yes, organic fruit and veg are more expensive than conventionally grown produce but when you are at the farmer's market, ask around. There are a lot of farms that are 'organic' but haven't gone through the trouble and expense to get the certification. Beans are cheaper than beef and you know the old nugget – beans, beans good for the heart. I don't suppose there are any data on the greenhouse gas emissions that tend to come after eating them?

The upshot here is, when naysayers bluster about not being 100% green, ignore them. Pick your battles. The little things can make a difference if enough of us are doing them. My carbon footprint is lower than the national average and I'm trying hard to cut way down on driving. I know I can't/won't cut it out completely but now that warmer weather is on it's way, I'll do more biking or walking for errands and I'm trying to find a new job with a more reasonable commute. You want to have that cheeseburger? Go ahead, but maybe think about cutting out one car trip this week or insulating your hot water heater, you might even save a little cash.

There are quite a few articles floating around on this topic, a particularly good one here: http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/apr/05/environmentally-friendly-green-living-ideas