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Live simply, but don't be smug about it, says radical environmentalist

by Rich Heffern

NCR Today

Let the water run. Throw those recyclable milk jugs in the trash. And drive that 15-year-old gas-guzzling truck all over town.

Not interested? That's okay but just don't go feeling superior about it.

A biting essay in *Orion* (July-Aug. 2009), written by Derrick Jensen, rails against "simple living as a political act." The radical environmentalist argues that focusing on our personal choices as a salve for eco-destruction is not only misguided, but also ineffective.

"Would any sane person think Dumpster diving would have stopped Hitler, or that composting would have ended slavery or brought about the eight-hour workday . . . or that dancing naked around a fire would have helped put in place the voting rights act of 1957 or the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Then why now, with all the world at stake, do so many people retreat into these entirely personal "solutions"?"

To support his argument, Jensen shows how agriculture and industry are responsible for the bulk of water and energy use, as well as the majority of emissions and waste, a reality often overlooked on those ubiquitous "10 steps to be greener" lists, which include mostly tips for individuals: shorter showers, lighter dishwasher settings, canvas bags for the grocery store, installing compact fluorescent lightbulbs. Jensen says, live simply if you want to. But to pretend that doing so is "a powerful political act" lures citizens away from confronting the larger consequences of an environmentally destructive industrial economy. It also prevents people from becoming true stewards of the earth, relying instead on "the flawed notion that humans inevitably harm their landbase."

?Simple living as a political act consists solely of harm reduction, ignoring the fact that humans can help the earth as well as harm it,? Jensen writes. ?We can rehabilitate streams, we can get rid of noxious invasives, we can remove dams, we can disrupt a political system tilted toward the rich as well as an extractive economic system, we can destroy the industrial economy that is destroying the real, physical earth.?

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