

About the Personal Environmental Impact Statement

by Mevlannen Beshderen and Judy Harrow

Pagans worship the Goddess, Mother Earth. We might call our spiritual path Earth religion, or nature mysticism, or geocentric spirituality, as well as calling it neo-Paganism. All of these terms have been used. Our core spiritual practice is applied Immanence, seeking the Sacred, the source of ultimate meaning and value, in this life, in these bodies, on this Earth, here and now. If religion means re-connection, restoring the linkage between belief and behavior, then surely Nature religion must involve living in a loving and reverent relationship with the Earth.

Practicing what you preach literally brings your belief system to life. Any ritual or worship is a meaningless exercise unless we also walk our talk. Our Mother Earth, who is in a life-threatening crisis, needs our authenticity. So to make our love and worship real, we work for Her protection and healing, as our own best talents lead us. How can we do less? We are, after all, Her children, and we know that our lives are entirely dependent on Hers.

Thinking things through

Effective work requires understanding. For this reason, our group's training program includes a dose of plain old nature study. Moreover, if we are acting in a religious way, acting in full congruence with our geocentric values, we can't engage in activism or public advocacy, in trying to tell others what to do, until we have cleaned up our own acts first. Only when we have understood, and taken responsibility for our own direct impact on the Earth, will our words ring true on all levels.

What we learn about our own effects on the Earth from this exercise in self assessment will help guide us as we reduce, reuse, recycle and, most basic of all, rethink.

The [*Rede*](#) requires us to think through the expected, and unexpected-yet-possible, consequences of our actions, and as much as possible to avoid doing what would predictably cause harm. Of course we know that no one can completely and absolutely avoid doing harm to something, somewhere, by any of our actions. We do the best we can to foresee the probabilities, and yet there is always some unexpected side-effect of our best-intentioned actions. There are also those terrible times when the best we can hope to do is still just the lesser evil. Of course, we are responsible for even the unintended consequences of our actions, in the sense of being obliged to do whatever we can to set things right. We are also responsible for making our extrapolations as accurate as possible.

Personal environmental impact analysis

One of our geocentric training exercises is for each of us to do a personal environmental impact analysis, to explore our own impact on the Earth and to identify some feasible and sustainable ways in which we might lighten that impact. This exercise is personal because the only thing we can actually control is our own behavior; it is also truly collective because no human stands alone on the Earth. All the ways we affect the Earth, for good and for ill, happen in interaction with other people. We are also responsible for the indirect results of our choices. Although we may never even have seen a strip mine, if we roast the Thanksgiving turkey in a disposable aluminum roaster, we support them.

Creating a personal environmental impact statement may seem at first to be a daunting task. We can make it much more approachable if we break it up into chunks and first look at each chunk separately. Later, we can combine these chunks to get a sense of the total impact.

A good choice for the first chunk is to examine how our rites themselves effect the environment. If ever we should cherish and protect the Mother, it's during those rituals in which we profess to worship Her. So, both as an example of how to look at any part of our lives, and because of the symbolic importance of this part, let's look together at the nitty-gritty practical effects of our rites on Mother Earth.

Environmental audits for your rituals

Consider the paths by which your ritual consumables came to you -- the candles from the oil refinery and cotton mill, the charcoal from the sawmill, the salt from an underground mine or a seaside bittern pond, the cakes and wine from a wheatfield and vineyard.

Candles and charcoals are a good example, since most of us are acutely aware of how often they need to be replaced. Mevlannen reminisces:

Back when my first group was starting out, we used second-hand candles from the nearby Catholic parish, whose janitor sold them to us for a dollar a bag. We were always amazed that our Catholic neighbours tossed out their candles after one morning's use: there were still many hours' burning left in them. So long as we were getting our candles so cheaply (at less than five cents apiece) we were happy to burn lots of them. After all, the Lady had Herself told us that She liked candles, lots of candles.

But when we moved to Vancouver, our handy source of candles was no more, and we soon realized that we were going through several dollars worth of candles in an evening -- and this was in the days when we could get good candles at five-for-a-dollar. In our new, smaller covenstead we also noticed that the candles (and our altar charcoal) made our ritual room perceptibly warmer, and we greeted the end of our Circles with great anticipation since that meant we could open the windows and breathe sweet, oxygen-rich, fresh air. So, although we were doing the Lady's bidding by burning candles in Her honour, we were also replacing oxygen with carbon dioxide at a fair clip.

As we found out, a more efficient means of obtaining a steady illuminating flame in Circle is the oil lamp. The efficiency comes partly from the fact that the fuel in a lamp, being a liquid, does not need to be melted before it can be burned (thus increasing the productive ratio of light to heat), and the larger diameter of lamp-wick as compared with candle-wick reduces the amount of convective cooling of the luminous flame, thus increasing overall light production per unit of fuel consumed. As an environmental fringe benefit, lamps can be set up to burn vegetable oil (from a renewable, botanical source) as well as the more usual mineral oil (from a non-renewable, geological source).

Now, what is the charcoal made of? What does burning it take from the air and what does it release?

Consider the environmental costs

Do you know exactly what was entailed in the production and transport of your altar tools? Your athame probably started out as iron ore from an open-pit iron mine in Australia or Labrador, then after a long journey by train and ship it went to a blast furnace and a rolling mill, and then on to a foundry or possibly a machine shop. In the course of that journey from the mine to the store where you bought it, the athame (if made from rolled steel) probably required the use of 900 times its own volume in cooling water alone, and twice its volume in raw iron ore, three times its volume in limestone and twice its volume in coal. An athame made of silver or some other exotic material would have required even greater amounts of raw material, some of which -- like the cooling water -- could be recycled, and some of which like the coal and limestone, was lost forever as carbon dioxide and slag. You can perform this sort of analysis of benefits and environmental costs for each of your magical tools and consumables.

Consider what sort of trade-offs you'd be willing to make

Perhaps you have your heart set on candles instead of lamps for the Quarters and Center -- but have you considered using candle lanterns, which reduce wax consumption by shielding the candle flame from draughts? Beeswax candles are more expensive, but they are not made from irreplaceable petroleum. How do you feel about the use of highly-machined brass castings, with their attendant manufacturing waste, in your candle lanterns?

Having done your analysis of the environmental impacts of your Circles, you might wish to move on to consider your other magical work. Do you do a lot of record keeping or write rituals for your group? If you do, are you using recycled paper? Do you recycle the paper you use for drafts? Consider keeping a stock of high-quality scratch paper by your printer or copier, and using the back sides of the sheets for running out drafts.

Another thing we do a lot of is travel to attend gatherings or Circles. It never fails to amaze us how many people come alone in their own automobiles, when they could just as readily be car-pooling. If you use a car, did you shop for energy efficiency and pollution control, as well as for safety? Do you maintain it well-tuned? When you change the oil, where does the old oil go? Better yet, work towards holding gatherings and public rites at a place which can be reached by train or bus. The Earth will thank you, and so will your fellow-travelers.

Now, having taken stock of the impacts of your religious activity, consider the other areas of your life.

Some simple questions to ask yourself

- What do I pour down my toilet or into a storm-drain?
- What is the effect on the body of water (usually a stream or lake) that receives that drainage?
- Did I need to use, and then dispose of, that liquid in the first instance?
If you need to use paint thinner, for example, consider using turpentine (which comes from trees, and is therefore potentially a renewable resource as well as being readily biodegradable thanks to its botanical origin).
- What about energy?
 - Do you know how the energy you use is produced?

- Are you careful in how you use it?
- Is your home well-insulated, and your refrigerator regularly defrosted?
- If you use battery-operated equipment, what do you do with the highly-toxic dead batteries?

These are just a few examples of the way in which you can look at things in your life, and assess their environmental impact.

Now, probe further

- What do you buy, and why?
- What are the side-effects of its use?
- What happens when you throw it away (must you, really?), or try to re-use or re-cycle it?
- If you have any investments, are they in Earth-friendly industries or technologies?
- Even more important, how do you think you can realistically and sustainably reduce your personal impact on the environment?
- What can you realistically and sustainably do that would actively contribute to Her well-being?
 - In the suburbs, can you compost your kitchen trash?
 - In the City, could you commit to the care of one street tree or turn out for a community "clean the park" day?
 - Can you join (or start) an environmental club or committee in your area, where neighbors work together to protect and heal their own part of Mother Earth?
 - Can you write letters to your legislators in support of strong environmental laws?
- If you have children, are you giving them opportunities to learn about nature?
- Above all, are you consistently acting from love and care for the Earth, so your children can learn from your example?

Your personal environmental impact statement belongs in your [developmental journal](#). It's an exercise you should probably repeat every few years, to monitor your own progress. If you're in a group, you may want to try writing up your findings in the form of a chart or diagram and sharing it at a meeting. We can all learn from each others' good ideas.

Remember this: we profess an Earth religion; we should therefore concern ourselves with the well-being of the Earth. A personal environmental impact statement is one tool that can help us focus that concern into practical, immediate action. By understanding Her better, we can serve Her better. By serving Her, we make our love real.

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