

**All New! Updated for  
the 21st Century**



# **50 SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SAVE THE EARTH**

**John Javna, Sophie Javna,  
and Jesse Javna**

# 50 SIMPLE THINGS® YOU CAN DO TO SAVE THE EARTH

John Javna,  
Sophie Javna, and Jesse Javna

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NEW YORK



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FIRST EDITION

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We've provided a great deal of information about practices, products, and different organizations in our book. In most cases, we've relied on advice, recommendations, and research by others whose judgments we consider accurate and free from bias. However, we can't and don't guarantee the results. This book offers you a start. The responsibility for using it ultimately rests with you.

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# CONTENTS

---

A Simple Story: John.....	7
Sophie's Voice .....	12
A Matter of Security: Jesse .....	14
How to Use This Book .....	16

## 50 SIMPLE THINGS

1. Bring Back the Electric Car (Friends of the Earth) .....	20
2. Go Organic (National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture) .....	22
3. Here Comes the Sun (American Solar Energy Society) .....	24
4. Support Sustainable Forestry (Rainforest Alliance) .....	26
5. Save the Coral Reefs (Seacology) .....	28
6. An Invisible Threat (Earthjustice) .....	30
7. Vote for the Earth (League of Conservation Voters) .....	32
8. The Law of Nature (Endangered Species Coalition).....	34
9. The Right Tree in the Right Place (TreePeople) .....	36
10. The Cool Cities Campaign (Sierra Club).....	38
11. They Paved Paradise . . . (Waterkeeper Alliance) .....	40
12. Save Your Energy! (Alliance to Save Energy) .....	42
13. Think Globally, Eat Locally (Food Routes Conservancy) .....	44
14. God's Green Earth (Interfaith Power and Light).....	46



<b>15. Up the Creek...</b>	
(Izaak Walton League of America) .....	48
<b>16. Growing Warmer</b>	
(National Wildlife Federation) .....	50
<b>17. Grow a Green Marketplace</b> (Co-op America) .....	52
<b>18. Park It Here</b> (Trust for Public Land) .....	54
<b>19. Save the Whales...Again</b>	
(Earth Island Institute's International Marine Mammal Project) .....	56
<b>20. Too Much Gas!</b>	
(Natural Resources Defense Council) .....	58
<b>21. Support Fair Trade</b> (TransFair USA) .....	60
<b>22. Clean Up the Mines</b> (Earthworks) .....	62
<b>23. Drop by Drop</b> (American Rivers) .....	64
<b>24. Build It Green</b> (U.S. Green Building Council) .....	66
<b>25. Born to be Wild</b> (The Wilderness Society) .....	68
<b>26. Down the Drain</b> (Food & Water Watch) .....	70
<b>27. For the Birds</b>	
(National Audubon Society) .....	72
<b>28. Teach Your Children</b>	
(Green Flag Program for Environmental Leadership) .....	74
<b>29. Make New Dirt</b> (Eco-Cycle) .....	76
<b>30. Consider the Alternatives</b>	
(Union of Concerned Scientists) .....	78
<b>31. It's a Plastic World</b>	
(Institute for Local Self-Reliance) .....	80
<b>32. Home on the Refuge</b>	
(Defenders of Wildlife) .....	82
<b>33. All Aboard!</b>	
(Environmental Law and Policy Center) .....	84



<b>34. Save the Wetlands</b> (Environmental Concern) .....	86
<b>35. We've Got Chemistry</b> (Environmental Working Group) .....	88
<b>36. What's Bugging You?</b> (Pesticide Action Network) .....	90
<b>37. Save the Living Rivers</b> (WildEarth Guardians) .....	92
<b>38. Greener by the Dozen</b> (Center for a New American Dream's Responsible Purchasing Network) .....	94
<b>39. Over the Top</b> (Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition) .....	96
<b>40. The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea</b> (Greenpeace) .....	98
<b>41. "It's Alive!"</b> (True Food Network) .....	100
<b>42. Hook, Line &amp; Sinker</b> (Oceana) .....	102
<b>43. Going, Going...</b> (Center for Biological Diversity) .....	104
<b>44. A New Threat to Rainforests</b> (Rainforest Action Network) .....	106
<b>45. Do Your Share(s)</b> (As You Sow) .....	108
<b>46. Welcome to Solar City</b> (Vote Solar) .....	110
<b>47. When, Where, and How Many?</b> (Population Connection) .....	112
<b>48. Turn Up the Heat</b> (1Sky) .....	114
<b>49. Target: Zero Waste</b> (GrassRoots Recycling Network) .....	116
<b>50. Green-Collar Jobs</b> (Green for All) .....	118
<b>Meet Your Partners</b> .....	120
<b>50SimpleThings.com</b> .....	128

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FIRST EDITION

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We've provided a great deal of information about practices, products, and different organizations in our book. In most cases, we've relied on advice, recommendations, and research by others whose judgments we consider accurate and free from bias. However, we can't and don't guarantee the results. This book offers you a start. The responsibility for using it ultimately rests with you.

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# THANK YOU

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advice and assistance made this book possible.*

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# CONTENTS

---

A Simple Story: John .....	7
Sophie's Voice .....	12
A Matter of Security: Jesse .....	14
How to Use This Book .....	16

## 50 SIMPLE THINGS

1. Bring Back the Electric Car (Friends of the Earth) .....	20
2. Go Organic (National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture) .....	22
3. Here Comes the Sun (American Solar Energy Society) .....	24
4. Support Sustainable Forestry (Rainforest Alliance) .....	26
5. Save the Coral Reefs (Seacology) .....	28
6. An Invisible Threat (Earthjustice) .....	30
7. Vote for the Earth (League of Conservation Voters) .....	32
8. The Law of Nature (Endangered Species Coalition) .....	34
9. The Right Tree in the Right Place (TreePeople) .....	36
10. The Cool Cities Campaign (Sierra Club) .....	38
11. They Paved Paradise . . . (Waterkeeper Alliance) .....	40
12. Save Your Energy! (Alliance to Save Energy) .....	42
13. Think Globally, Eat Locally (Food Routes Conservancy) .....	44
14. God's Green Earth (Interfaith Power and Light) .....	46



<b>15. Up the Creek...</b>	
(Izaak Walton League of America) .....	48
<b>16. Growing Warmer</b>	
(National Wildlife Federation) .....	50
<b>17. Grow a Green Marketplace</b> (Co-op America) .....	52
<b>18. Park It Here</b> (Trust for Public Land) .....	54
<b>19. Save the Whales...Again</b>	
(Earth Island Institute's International Marine Mammal Project) .....	56
<b>20. Too Much Gas!</b>	
(Natural Resources Defense Council) .....	58
<b>21. Support Fair Trade</b> (TransFair USA) .....	60
<b>22. Clean Up the Mines</b> (Earthworks) .....	62
<b>23. Drop by Drop</b> (American Rivers) .....	64
<b>24. Build It Green</b> (U.S. Green Building Council) .....	66
<b>25. Born to be Wild</b> (The Wilderness Society) .....	68
<b>26. Down the Drain</b> (Food & Water Watch) .....	70
<b>27. For the Birds</b>	
(National Audubon Society) .....	72
<b>28. Teach Your Children</b>	
(Green Flag Program for Environmental Leadership) .....	74
<b>29. Make New Dirt</b> (Eco-Cycle) .....	76
<b>30. Consider the Alternatives</b>	
(Union of Concerned Scientists) .....	78
<b>31. It's a Plastic World</b>	
(Institute for Local Self-Reliance) .....	80
<b>32. Home on the Refuge</b>	
(Defenders of Wildlife) .....	82
<b>33. All Aboard!</b>	
(Environmental Law and Policy Center) .....	84



<b>34. Save the Wetlands</b> (Environmental Concern) .....	86
<b>35. We've Got Chemistry</b> (Environmental Working Group) .....	88
<b>36. What's Bugging You?</b> (Pesticide Action Network) .....	90
<b>37. Save the Living Rivers</b> (WildEarth Guardians) .....	92
<b>38. Greener by the Dozen</b> (Center for a New American Dream's Responsible Purchasing Network) .....	94
<b>39. Over the Top</b> (Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition) .....	96
<b>40. The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea</b> (Greenpeace) .....	98
<b>41. "It's Alive!"</b> (True Food Network) .....	100
<b>42. Hook, Line &amp; Sinker</b> (Oceana) .....	102
<b>43. Going, Going...</b> (Center for Biological Diversity) .....	104
<b>44. A New Threat to Rainforests</b> (Rainforest Action Network) .....	106
<b>45. Do Your Share(s)</b> (As You Sow) .....	108
<b>46. Welcome to Solar City</b> (Vote Solar) .....	110
<b>47. When, Where, and How Many?</b> (Population Connection) .....	112
<b>48. Turn Up the Heat</b> (1Sky) .....	114
<b>49. Target: Zero Waste</b> (GrassRoots Recycling Network) .....	116
<b>50. Green-Collar Jobs</b> (Green for All) .....	118
<b>Meet Your Partners</b> .....	120
<b>50SimpleThings.com</b> .....	128



# A SIMPLE STORY: JOHN

If you were a fan of the original *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* in the 1990s, you may be in for a surprise. This isn't an updated version of the original—it's an entirely new book.

Why did we change it? After all, it was one of the bestselling environmental books ever printed—more than 5 million copies were sold in 23 languages.

To tell the truth, it's because ultimately the book's approach didn't work.

I should say at the outset that I'm proud of the original *50 Simple Things*, and have always been honored that so many people found inspiration in it. But I've also been frustrated by its limitations—because while “simple things” like installing low-flow showerheads and taking cloth bags to a store can be a little piece of the solution to our environmental problems, they're not *the* solution. Eco-tips alone can never have a significant impact on “saving the earth.” They're baby steps—and if they don't lead to something bigger, then we're in a world of trouble. Literally.

In retrospect, I can see that *50 Simple Things* didn't really educate people about the nature and extent of the environmental problems themselves. As a result, many people believed that if they took a cloth bag to the supermarket instead of asking for a paper one, they were actually solving the problem of deforestation. Or if they snipped six-pack rings, they were preserving ocean fisheries. It created a false sense of complacency that these problems were being solved . . . when they weren't.

When I realized this in 1995, I decided to take the book out of print rather than update it. It hasn't been available for 12 years, but its influence lives on. For more than a decade, the public has been fed a steady diet of recycled *50 Simple Things*-style eco-tips, telling us how to use less paper, save energy at home, travel smarter, and so on.



As I've said, these suggestions have real value—in fact, you'll find some of them in this edition too—and people who practice them deserve credit for their efforts. But let's be realistic: After 17 years, where have the eco-tips taken us? They haven't taken mercury out of the air, or brought back songbird habitats. They haven't stopped polluted runoff from flowing into our waterways or coal companies from blowing the tops off mountains.

More important, while we've been focused on changing a few personal habits, the world's life-support system has shown increasing signs of collapse. Chances are, you're feeling overwhelmed by these developments. I feel it too, and this book is an effort to do something about it.

## A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Many Americans are reluctant to become more involved with environmental issues because they're not "experts." Or they feel they're just not familiar enough with the facts to take action. I can tell you from experience that this doesn't have to be an impediment. I didn't write the original *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* because I was an experienced environmentalist. Quite the contrary—I knew practically nothing about the environment except what I read in the newspapers. In the early winter of 1989, all I could tell was that everything seemed to be falling apart. There were front-page stories about acid rain, the ozone hole, global warming, and a host of other ecological problems that seemed to spell doom.

I became obsessed wondering if there was anything I could do about it. This was before the Internet, and there was no easy access to the collective knowledge of the culture. Instead, I went looking for a book that might guide me. I couldn't find one. The best I could find was a few lists put together by random groups, with suggestions for things like "Dance—it makes the earth a better place." It was a good idea, but I wanted slightly more practical advice.

I was almost 40, and was looking for a way to make my mark in the world. So I decided to write the environmental book I'd been looking for—a guide to the things any individual could do to save the Earth. I'd been an author for about 10 years by then, but none of my books were what you'd call serious. My bestsellers were *The TV Theme Song Singalong Songbook* and *Uncle John's Bathroom*



*Reader.* You can imagine how my idea was received by publishers. The nicest response I got was “Huh?”

So I did what many determined authors do: I borrowed money and published it myself. I was going to call it *100 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, but I chickened out. What if there weren't 100 things? I cut it to 50.

## THE FACTS OF LIFE

The book was released without fanfare in the fall of 1989, and I wasn't at all prepared for what happened next. People—apparently hungry for a hopeful, concrete approach to environmental problems—started snapping it up all over the country. Seemingly out of nowhere, millions of copies were sold, and within a few months the book had appeared in all the major media, including the *New York Times* bestseller list—where it debuted at #1.

It was an exciting time for me—particularly because the green wave sweeping America in the spring of 1990 convinced me that we were going to change the world. I thought the 20th anniversary of Earth Day—in which millions of people participated—and the success of *50 Simple Things* were part of a grassroots revolution: Now that we knew how important it was, we'd all rush out to buy recycled products and faucet aerators, and transform the economy into a green machine. But we didn't. Earth Day came and went, and the media shifted its focus. Gradually, over the next few years, public enthusiasm waned—depressed by clever greenwash campaigns staged by plastics, chemical, and oil companies, that confused people just enough to slow down the movement's momentum.

By the time a book called *Simple Things Won't Save the Earth* came out in 1994, I was inclined to agree with the author. I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but I'd become pretty cynical. I had a case of “green fatigue”—I'd had one eco-tip too many. The cynicism didn't come from not caring, it came from feeling that no matter how many tips I tried, the problems were so big that I could never make a dent in them. What did it matter if I recycled paper, if the ancient forests were still being chopped down? Who cared if I celebrated “no car day” when 80% of the cars on the road had one person in them? There was mercury in the air, and tons of waste was being dumped in the ocean daily. Every time I looked in the garbage and saw a pile of aluminum cans, I felt like giving up. And then,



like a lot of disillusioned and overwhelmed Americans, I *did* give up. I moved to rural Oregon and focused on raising my family.

## TWELVE YEARS LATER

In 2006, my 13-year-old daughter, Sophie, started to become environmentally aware. She began asking why we didn't compost anymore . . . and why I didn't bring cloth bags to the supermarket. One day, I started to tell her why it didn't matter—why all the well-meaning recycling in the universe wouldn't stop global warming. But I stopped in mid-sentence. It was weird—I found myself staring, literally, into the eyes of the next generation, the person I had written my book for years before she'd been born. It dawned on me that I couldn't afford to be cynical—I had to keep trying to make the world better—because I love my son and daughter, and because I love this planet.

That epiphany was the genesis of the book you're holding in your hands. It's a father's effort to reclaim the Earth for his children, and yours.

## INVENTING A NEW BOOK

With my newly discovered enthusiasm, I decided that the most effective thing I could do as an activist was to bring back *50 Simple Things*. But the only part of the original I wanted to retain was its simplicity, its user-friendliness. The rest had to be reinvented. My co-authors and I wrote with these four guiding principles in mind:

- 1) The actions in this book need to be framed in terms of issues. No random, piecemeal actions. There are problems to solve; we need to know what our goals are, and how to get there.
- 2) The individual efforts that really make a difference on behalf of the Earth are sustained, committed ones. Random acts of environmental kindness are fine, but we're out to turn things around. That means finding ways to make a long-term commitment comfortably—without turning ourselves into green monks.
- 3) Individual action needs to be combined with community action. People are strongest and most effective when we join forces with our neighbors, especially on big issues—and this is the biggest issue any of us will ever face.





And finally,

4) We need to help focus readers' efforts. Environmental problems are so overwhelming, and there's so much to do, that it's hard to know where to start. It's our job to provide the entry point.

The question was, could a "tips" book like *50 Simple Things* really accomplish this? My co-writers and I put a lot of thought into it, and finally came up with something no one's ever tried before: We turned our book into an interactive partnership between individual readers, environmental organizations, and us. The new *50 Simple Things* is not just a book, but a doorway into a community of experts and grassroots activists who can help you accomplish more than you could possibly hope to do on your own. And to support it, we've created a vibrant, new online community. Our new Web site, [www.50simplethings.com](http://www.50simplethings.com), is designed to be an ongoing source of information about what you can do—an opportunity to learn, ask questions, and share what you've learned. We've done our best to make sure this book lives up to its goals. Now it's up to you.

## THE CONNECTION

One day, after we'd started working on this book, Sophie asked if the issues we'd included were big enough. "I know if I was going to pick one thing to work on," she said, "it would be the biggest, most important thing possible." I thought for a minute, and said to her what I'd like to share with you now: The "big things" we have to tackle, like global warming or habitat loss, aren't "things." They're effects—the results of a lot of little, destructive actions. The only way to deal with them is to undo them one at a time, the way we created them.

And truthfully, it doesn't matter which issues we choose to work on—big or small—because they're all connected. If, for example, we reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, we also help clean waterways; if we help clean waterways, we improve wildlife habitats; to improve wildlife habitats, we need to set aside wilderness; and in setting aside wilderness, we protect trees. When we have more trees, we clean the air. And better air means less climate change. It's the circle of life, and it holds us all. Just pick a spot and jump in.