

PROFILES



What Is the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle?

by Sheri Radford / Sep 1, 2021

The author of Living the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle wants you to reduce your carbon footprint—and live a more fulfilling life at the same time

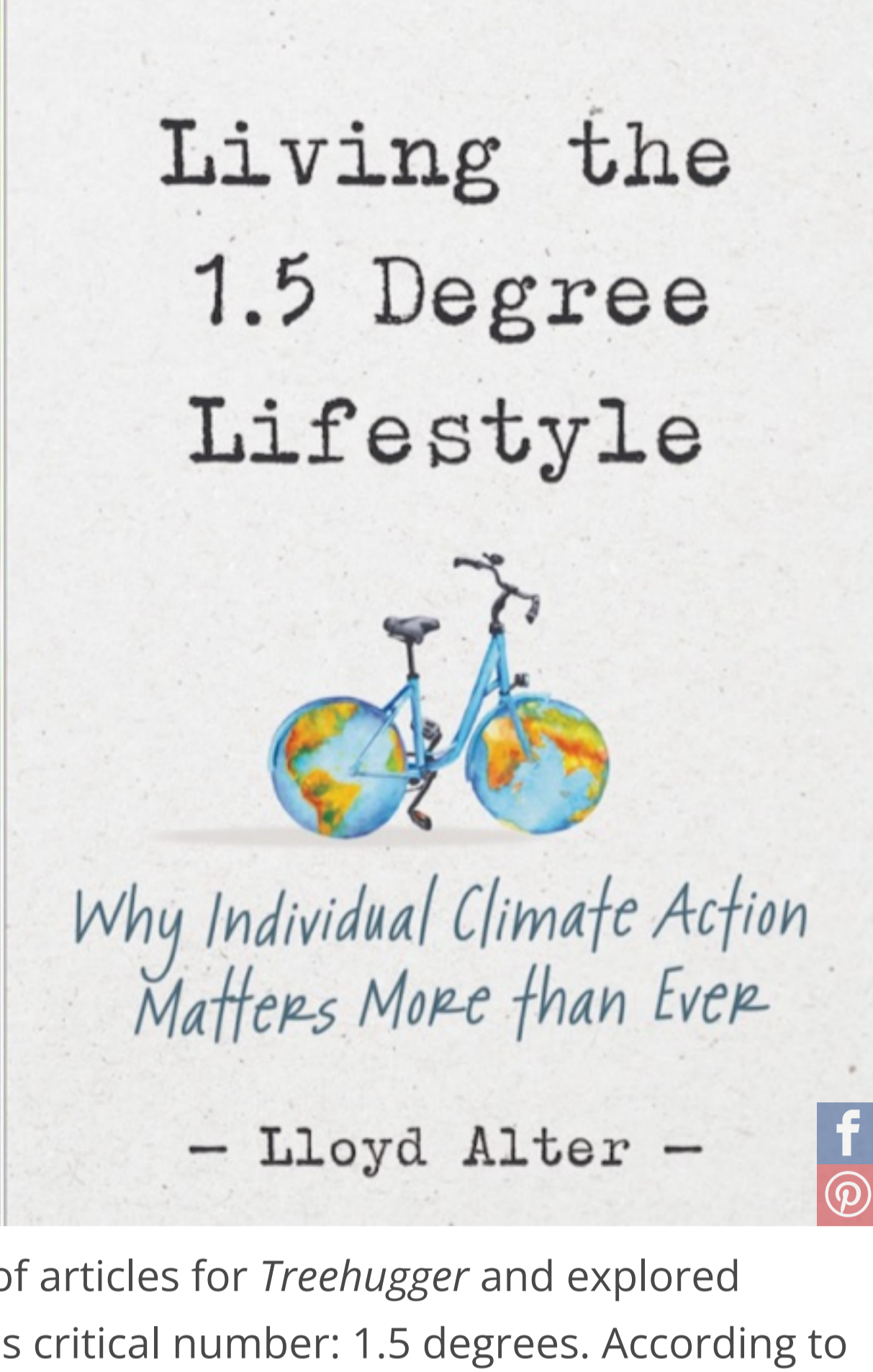
Lloyd Alter never planned to become an environmentalist, or a writer, or an adjunct professor.

The Toronto resident started out as an architect. "When I practiced architecture, nothing I did was particularly environmental," he says. "But when I gave up architecture and went into real estate development, and I started seeing how everything was built, I became obsessed with how badly we do everything. I got into the prefab business because I thought this would be a better way to build."

He began selling small eco-friendly prefabricated housing units. In 2001, he set up a website for his fledgling business and updated it every day with articles about green construction—in essence, creating a blog long before blogs were commonplace.

After Alter stumbled upon Treehugger, soon he was sending the site environmental stories that didn't fit the scope of his own blog. It wasn't long before they offered him a full-time writing job. "I learned that I was a better writer than I was a prefab salesman," he says. "So that's how I became a writer: totally by coincidence."

A few years later, the chair of the Ryerson School of Interior Design saw Alter speak on a panel and was impressed. The school invited him to teach sustainable design. "After becoming a writer by chance, I became a professor by chance," he says. "I was trained as an architect, so I understood green building quite well and concentrated on that, but my interests just consistently broadened."



Over the years, Alter has written thousands of articles for Treehugger and explored countless environmental topics, including this critical number: 1.5 degrees. According to scientists worldwide, including in a recent special report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we must limit global warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels or else face global catastrophe. This means cutting our annual carbon footprint to 2.5 tons per person by 2030, and even further by 2050, to just 1 ton per person.

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Alter asked himself, "Okay, what is the carbon of everything that I do? How does one get to below 2.5 tons, which is the 1.5 degree lifestyle?" He spoke to London activist Rosalind Readhead, who was blogging about her experience trying to reduce her annual carbon consumption to 1 ton. That goal seemed "almost impossible" to Alter, given the constraints of our present-day society, but 2.5 tons seemed doable to him. He started building a spreadsheet to figure out his own carbon footprint.

"It's very hard to get really accurate readings of what the carbon footprints of different things are. It varies wildly," he says. "I tried to do a really detailed breakdown of ordering a Swiss Chalet chicken." He analyzed everything—the oven the chicken was cooked in, the distance the delivery person had to drive, the disposable packaging—and made a surprising discovery: "Three-quarters of all of the emissions came from the delivery. A little less than a quarter came from cooking the chicken." He adds, "And the plastic amounted to nothing, a couple of grams of carbon."

This exercise demonstrated an inescapable truth when calculating any carbon footprint: Transportation is often the largest component.

According to Alter, "75 percent of the trips in North America are less than six miles. Six miles on an e-bike, it's a snap. On an e-cargo bike, it's a snap. E-bikes, I think, are the great levellers." He predicts that e-bikes are "going to be a transportation revolution." They allow older people and those who aren't as fit to enjoy all the benefits of cycling, such as getting regular exercise, while eliminating hassles about parking and traffic.

But Alter is less enthusiastic about the current push for electric cars. "When you think about the embodied carbon that goes into making them, it's huge. It's about 15 percent more than a regular car," he says. "If I had a Tesla Model Three and I was driving from my cottage to the city, it would still blow my carbon budget for the day."

Once he started tracking carbon, Alter says some other facts quickly became clear to him, especially about food. "Every time you eat red meat or dairy products, it goes through the roof because red meat has an incredibly high carbon footprint," he says. "And dairy is almost as bad."

He continues, "A vegetarian diet—if you eat dairy, if you eat eggs and you eat cheese and you drink milk—is no better than a regular diet." Even a vegan diet can be problematic: "Hothouse tomatoes have a higher carbon footprint per 1,000 calories than pork and chicken." This means that "a vegan diet doesn't really work if you're eating anything that's not local, that's flown in or trucked in or grown in a hothouse."

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Alter started to follow what is increasingly being referred to as a climatarian diet, which focuses on local food and occasionally includes chicken or pork. "Suddenly you're telling people you don't have to save the world by going vegan or even going vegetarian. You just have to make minor changes in your diet."

It wasn't just food that Alter started to view differently. He found himself analyzing everything, from how far and how often he drove to the type of smartphone and laptop he purchased. "It changes the way you think," he says. "Suddenly you're looking at everything in your life in terms of: How much did it take to make it? How long can I keep it? Which one is the best for longevity?"

Plus he examined his leisure activities. Years ago, he belonged to a ski club: "I would drive two hours with the kids to get electrically winched up, to go down artificial snow. Just the carbon footprint of that was so ridiculous."

In contrast, one day this past winter he strapped his skis to his e-bike and cycled to a ravine a few kilometres away for some cross-country skiing. "It was free, it was close, it was fun. And when you start thinking about things that way, you have just as good a time," he says. "It becomes an attitudinal change."

Alter decided to write a book about his year-long experiment in following the 1.5 degree lifestyle. He wanted to "walk the walk" and "set an example for having the lowest carbon footprint you can," to show people that the lifestyle is achievable without sacrificing too much. "I'm living a comfortable lifestyle that happens to be based on making low-carbon choices," he says.

When asked to give some general advice about living more sustainably, Alter is clear about one key factor: "The most important thing is to choose where you live carefully." He recommends getting a small apartment near good public transportation in an area with clean energy, such as hydroelectric power. And if you opt to live in a house, he says to "do the simple and obvious steps first," such as installing proper insulation and using a caulking gun to seal leaks.

Equally important is transportation: Drive less and fly less, if at all. "I flew once in the whole year," Alter says. "And I blew through a month's carbon in a 30-hour trip, just flying."

Measuring one's footprint over the course of a year means that high-carbon days (or months) can be balanced with low-carbon ones. "You can spend a little more. You can have a burger occasionally. You can visit friends in your car," he says. "It's a much more flexible way of looking at things, instead of being an absolute doctrinaire: 'I've got to sell my car and go vegetarian. And I have to live in a yurt.'"

The lifestyle also yields benefits far beyond the environmental ones. "You'll be healthier for it, because you're eating less rotten stuff. You'll be fitter, because you might go walking instead of driving," Alter says, adding, "You save a lot of money in this lifestyle, when you're not buying as much stuff."

And, as it turns out, the things you do give up are the less valuable things. Alter cites a report he read recently that asked people what truly made them happy. "They're going to say family and friends and relatively simple things that are universal. Not that many are going to say, 'Oh, it's getting on my ATV and roaring down the forest trails.' When you ask people what's really important to them, the toys aren't."

Though the scientists' 2030 deadline is approaching fast, Alter remains optimistic about the future and our ability to make the necessary changes in time. "More and more people are interested in this stuff, younger people in particular," he says. "I always have hope."

Living the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle: Why Individual Climate Action Matters More Than Ever by Lloyd Alter is being released by New Society Publishers in September 2021. The book looks at the carbon emissions of everything from internet usage to take-out meals and focuses on the role of individuals in halting climate change.

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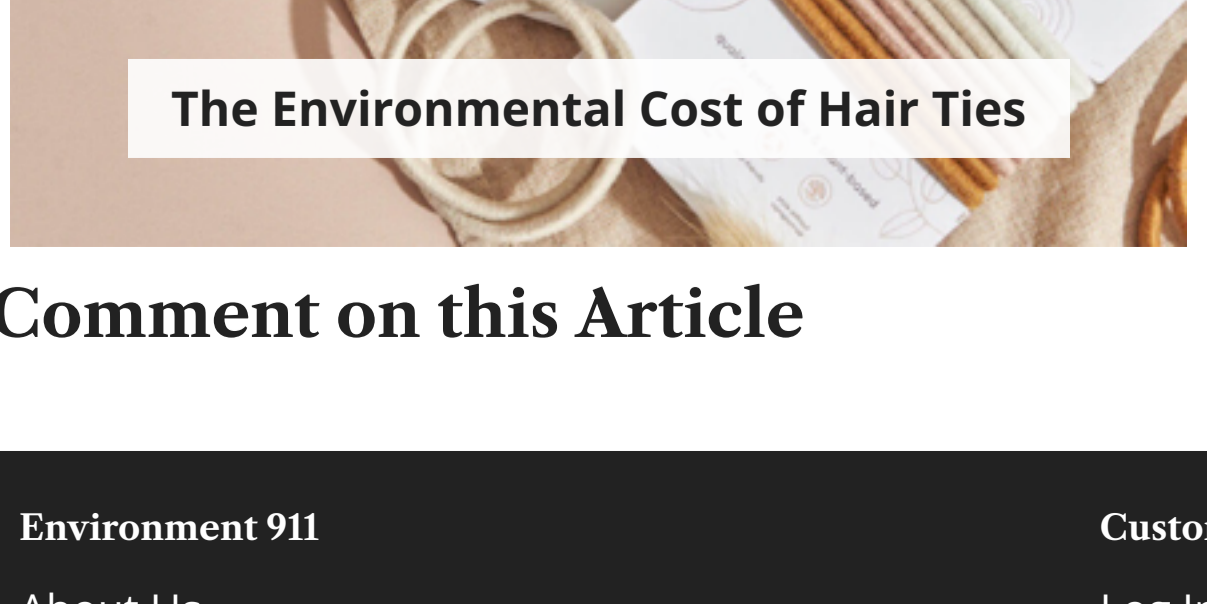
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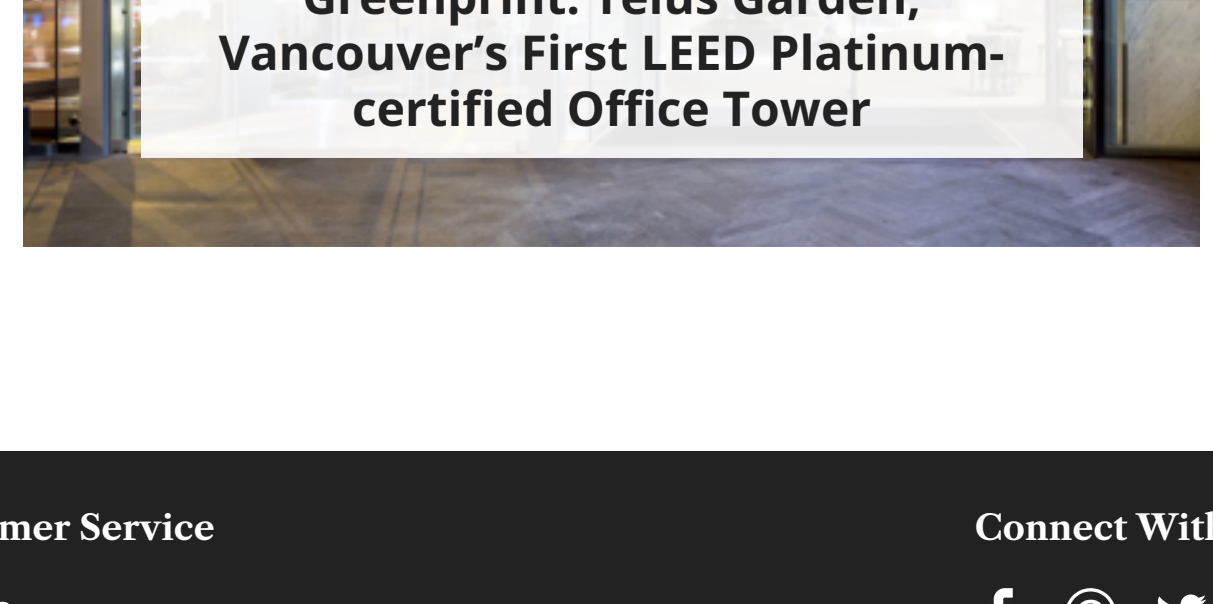
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