



The Big Green Apple - Ben Jervey

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□ *Ben Jervey, Author of [The Big Green Apple](#)*

Earlier this week I had a chance to sit down and talk to Ben Jervey, author of [The Big Green Apple](#). I met Ben at Earth Day a few weeks ago and we had an hour long chat at [Solar 1](#), which is an organization that promotes Green Energy, Arts and Education as part of an environmentally friendly lifestyle. The building they occupy is 100% powered by solar PV cells. Ben hardly looks the part of the media version of a hippy environmentalist, which is one of the points that Ben made repeatedly in our conversation: "You don't have to try hard or make big changes to live a green lifestyle." Changing a few light bulbs to compact fluorescent, shopping at a local Greenmarket, riding a bike are all ways he points out that individuals can make a tangible difference in the environment that don't require a big effort - and can actually be fun, healthy and interesting.

In fact, he agrees that New Yorkers are actually unconsciously living some of the greenest lifestyles in the country because their heavy use of mass transit and small apartments in multi-unit buildings conserves energy. But, in a relaxed and non-judgmental tone, Ben thinks we can do much better. And his book is a combination of a personal how-to manual and Yellow pages (err Green pages) for resources to help lead a green life personally and advocate for green policy changes.

Ben grew up in small town Massachusetts, surrounded by lush greenery, open spaces, farms and firmly connected to the great outdoors everyday. From what he describes, this direct connection to the natural world and all of its interdependent systems was a fascination as far back as he can remember. But it wasn't until he started his major in [Environmental Studies and Geography at Middlebury College](#) in Vermont that he came to as he stated, "The geo-political realization of the importance of cities in sustainable development". This is where he started to separate the romantic Walden-esque vision of nature and the environment. Instead he started to contemplate the realities of environmental sustainability and the importance of dense urban cities.

So he left college for a while to live in [Curbita, Brazil - a model of sustainable urban development](#). He describes how during the 1970s, they had a progressive mayor who planned for growth which all cities were experiencing as rural areas depopulated. They developed along mass transit corridors, preserved parkland in the inner city, set-up recycling stations where people could reuse stuff that others had thrown away. Ben describes how they even got little things right "They even made the recycling cans larger than the ordinary trash cans to provide the visual queue for people to recycle more." He then returned to college and finished his degree at Middlebury, luckily convincing school administrators to award him life experience credits for some of the work he did with local governmental officials he connected with in Curbita.

Ben views cities as organisms that consume resources from the environment and release waste back into the environment. Because modern cities are more efficient than suburban areas in that

process, Ben thinks dense urban cities will become even more important in making the world more environmentally sustainable. He argues that if we can make cities even more sustainable - consuming less and reducing waste streams - then we can preserve more open space for vegetation & wildlife, reduce the emissions contributing to global warming and still maintain a high quality of life.

Ben described the current big environmental battles in three words:

1. Transportation (distance, mode, fuel efficiency)
2. Home (appliances/lighting/heating/cooling)
3. Food (production method & distance from consumer)

And Ben agrees with the idea (that any regular TOD reader has probably concluded by now) that energy production and consumption patterns at the heart of all of these issues. That's not saying that protecting endangered species wildlife habitats, cleaning-up toxic waste sites and other traditional environmental causes are not important. Rather, his attitude suggested those issues are really reactions to the visible symptoms of our impact on the environment, rather than taking on the causes of those impacts at their source - the lifestyle choices we make everyday that add up to vastly different levels of environmental impact depending on what we choose.

After college Ben worked for a while in Vermont as a carpenter, reclaiming wood from old barns to use on other projects. Then about two years ago he moved to NYC to learn more about the nation's most populous and dense urban environments. It took him a while to learn all the local issues, city agencies and organizations working on urban environmentalism in NYC. Eventually it took Ben almost a year of passively observing the scene and then 4 months of actively writing to finish his book.

Ben says that he would be "really impressed if some people do everything" laid out in his book. The point is to "show people all the options" that are out there, letting them pick which they want to do without being "preachy or judgmental".

Another aspect of the book is a fairly comprehensive listing of all the local environmental organizations in NYC. Urban environmental service and advocacy organizations in New York City are as diverse as its population and neighborhoods. Depending on what issue you care about, what way you want to make a difference, what neighborhood you live in, there is probably an organization that you can plug-in to. However, there is no one organization that pulls together all these neighborhood and issue specific organizations, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But having all of these organizations side-by-side by category in the book weaves all of these together for handy reference to the reader.

Ben said he really couldn't judge if the book was really selling well or not. Most of the interest he knows about has been from local media people already involved in NYC environmental scene. Personally, I use the book as a handy resource on a range of topics with a list of organizations, phone numbers, emails and website addresses to learn more and connect with people involved in that area.

Ben is now working at [Solar 1's](#) compact, but very utilitarian space on East 23rd Street and the East River as a part-time development (fundraising) associate. The money he raises will be used for programs they put on every year like the 3 CitySol fairs they will have this Summer to showcase environmentally friendly businesses. They also have art and music events aimed at a mainstream audience to reach out to new people about local environmental issues. Eventually, they will build a [new structure](#) to house an even more elaborate setting for their work.

Then I asked what he thinks is possible within the next 5 years for NYC and here were some of his thoughts:

* All the efforts to "reclaim Post-industrial areas" around the city are a chance for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers to "reconnect with the natural landscape" and build many more parks.

- * Incandescent light bulbs simply won't make sense any more and yield to much more common CFL and LED lighting.
- * Bike lanes and greenways will be more common and better connected, to which he added that [Transportation Alternatives](#) is a "great organization with great people".
- * Bloomberg will eventually "drop a bomb" with regard to congestion pricing and perhaps propose some other big transportation policy improvement
- * More community gardens will dot the city and rooftop gardens will compete with solar panels over vacant sun drenched rooftop.

Toward the end of our conversation I asked Ben about his thoughts on Peak Oil. He's aware of it, but hopes that people will be more proactive about making lifestyle changes ahead of the time when it simply becomes too financially painful to continue unsustainable lifestyles. He does think that persistent \$3 gas prices are currently "catalyzing change" throughout society, but in a more resigned tone he said "If people are reactive, they will resist as long as possible" and avoid investment in alternatives.

I highly recommend to anyone living in NYC to pick up [The Big Green Apple](#) at a local book store. Whether you are someone looking for a few quick tips and tricks to alter your lifestyle or are looking to go as eco-friendly as possible, this book should have something for you. And if you're looking to get more involved in local environmental issues, it has an excellent reference section in the back. I hope to see more books like this pop-up across the country.



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