

On this Earth Day, April 22, 2018, it is difficult to know where to put one's focus. Should we simply appreciate this lovely spring day, the first we have had this year in our part of Michigan? Should we concentrate on thinking about the beautiful places that still remain on this planet? Might we better try to figure out ways to reverse the trends that have been so catastrophic for Earth—unchecked greed, unchecked population growth, and ignorance?

Instead, on my mind today is the belief that people with good intentions, congratulating themselves on what they do for the environment, sometimes miss the point. I am not excluding myself from this group, either. We, as individuals, tend to feel that we are doing all we can to protect the planet, and if others would just do as well, things might be better.

But, we Americans, in particular, have a big problem with the distinction between “wants” and “needs.” So, when we do something positive, we often attach much more importance to that action than is justified, and we let other changes in our own behavior fall by the wayside.

The perfect example is “recycling.” How many times have I heard people say, “We recycle everything we possibly can.” That is undoubtedly a positive action, though some research indicates that recycling some substances is more effective than redoing others. Still, for most of us who don't have a great deal of expertise in the matter, recycling whatever we can—given that there are facilities that are near enough to our locations to make it a plus environmentally—makes a lot of sense.

But, going back to the fuzzy line between “wants” and “needs,” we Americans just plain use too much. Instead of praising ourselves on how virtuous it is to recycle, we should concentrate our efforts equally on using less to begin with. It would be interesting—and enlightening—to know what percentage of our recycling involves packaging for items we didn't much need in the first place.

Attachment to “things” is hard to control. I admit to a fondness for books that goes beyond my need to own so many. Even though we use area libraries regularly and borrow copiously from them, we still buy way too many books. Do I “need” these books? Or, do I merely “want” them? In many cases, “want” has overcome “need.” In the case of books we use for our work on the farm or for the work I do with the natural fibers we raise, I would categorize the books as “needs.” But, do I “need” to own every book of essays by Sam Pickering? Do we have to have all of John McPhee's writings? I could get most of these books to read through interlibrary loan programs. The same could be said for other books we own.

Beyond books, though, we try to limit our emotional need for “stuff.” Anyone who has watched or participated after a family has cleaned out a house after someone has died has an appreciation for how futile and unnecessary the accumulation of goods is. And, if we all would control our propensity for acquiring things a little and assessing whether a purchase fulfills a “need” or a “want” before buying it, we would benefit in several ways—environmentally, financially, and ethically. Maybe that is a worthwhile goal for which to work in the coming year, with an assessment of our success on the next Earth Day.