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Shades of green



Just exactly what does being green mean? Fundamentally, it is reducing the consumption of finite resources by using renewable energy or through recycling materials, for example, and also controlling the generation of so-called greenhouse gases – CO₂, water vapour, methane and ozone – specifically the man-made element, although there is a large non-man-made element.

The current high oil prices are causing people to use their cars less, so environmentalists will be celebrating – at least until they have to pay the bills that themselves will be driven up either directly or indirectly. And that's after higher food bills, which have already been hit by the switch to environmentally friendly bio-fuels, of course.

Work from home, remotely, then? Don't use any oil or bio-fuels to power your journey. Good green idea, you might think. Use modern technology to be green. Indeed, Work Wise, with its Work From Home Days, suggests just that, although not only to help the environment but also to reduce time lost in traffic and stress.

But things really aren't that simple. Increasingly we see that separating positive action from negative, or avoiding unintended consequence in the green game really is rather difficult.

Indeed, an item in Siemens' Spring 2008 *Pictures of The Future* publication highlighted the negative consequences of avoiding car use and instead working remotely over the Internet. Bad news, I am afraid – "Internet usage plays a significant role in global CO₂ emissions", goes the standfirst in its 'Low-Carbon Surfing' item.

Altogether, there are now more than 30 million servers in the world, taking the equivalent of 14 by 1,000 MW power plants to power them, it is offered. Just in Germany the power used to keep all data centres running is put as being enough to run 2.5 million households and responsible for 6 million tonnes of CO₂ per year. And as Internet usage grows, as it inevitably will, so will the associated power consumption.

Of course, scientists and technologists at Siemens, and no doubt elsewhere, are working on lower power consumption IT and smart cooling, but in the meantime another seemingly green option has been slightly tainted.

It ain't easy being green, as Diana Ross sang some years back, although not in the environmental context, of course...□

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