



# What's Your Eco Footprint?

*Instruction Manual*



New England  
Aquarium

*Protecting the blue planet*

# What's Your Eco Footprint?

This activity is designed for adults, families, or kids ages 9 and up with their families. Younger children can help place the blocks, but will probably not be active participants in the discussion.

## Materials

Balance scale (grey upright, metal balance arm, two metal bowls)

Colored blocks in their cups  
(**FOOD**, **SHELTER**,  
**TRANSPORTATION**)

iPad

Whiteboard and marker (optional)

## Setup

1. Put together the balance scale. With the scales empty, check that they are aligned. If not, add paperclips to the hook on one side until the scale is calibrated.
2. Put the cups with the blocks on the visitors' side of the cart.
3. (Optional) Set up the whiteboard so that visitors can see it.
4. Get the iPad from the Magic Planet cart. Open the program "GoodReader." If the Eco Footprint activity is not showing, touch the center of the screen and touch "My Documents" in the upper left-hand corner. Select the Eco Footprint document. Touch the center of the screen to get rid of the borders. Set it up so that visitors can see it.

## Doing the activity

1. After talking a little about Eco Footprints, ask visitors whether they would like to play "against" another visitor (if one is available – not a member of their household), you (if you are comfortable) or the average Aquarium employee (information on the cheat sheet.)
2. Guide them through the questions, having them place the blocks on their side of the scale. Offer no judgment or commentary at this time, but listen for comments from the visitor as they react to the activity.
3. Once they have completed the activity, ask for their reaction. Some questions to ask might be:
  - a. Were any of the questions surprising?
  - b. In which categories do they feel they can make a change?
  - c. Which impacts are beyond their control? (public transport, farmers' markets, etc.)
4. At this point, offer the visitor the option to remove a few blocks for positive actions they are doing that weren't covered by the questions we asked. (Optional) Make a running list of these actions on a white board.

## Things to think about

### *The point of this activity is not to leave our visitors feeling horrible.*

Guilt is not actually a helpful emotion in this case—according to some research, it can actually backfire and reduce people’s tendency to take on environmentally friendly behaviors. In order to approach this from a different angle, ask visitors about:

- a. Where they can make a different choice: carpooling more, trying to find local and organic foods, etc. Involve both kids and adults in this discussion.
- b. Aspects that are outside their direct control, such as access to public transportation or safe walking and biking routes. What can be done about this?
- c. Factors that might keep them from making certain changes. This is not necessarily asked in order to get them to change, but to merely THINK about it.

### *Keep the conversation upbeat.*

This is not to say that you should re-direct the conversation if the visitor begins asking challenging questions. The intention here is to get the visitor (and you) to have an engaging dialogue and to think about their daily activities as a part of a collective impact. Move toward helping visitors find their own solutions and connections between their lives and their carbon footprint. Stay away from words like “bad” or “wrong.”

### *Talk about what environmentally friendly things visitors do that were NOT included in the footprint quiz.*

Have a whiteboard and marker, and make a running list of answers to this question. Try to move beyond recycling, not littering and turning out lights—but those should also be listed! By allowing visitors to remove a block or two from their side of the scale as the final step in the activity, we recognize some of these behaviors and leave people with more positive feelings about how their actions can make a difference. However, try not to spend so much time on positive actions that you miss places where visitors (and others) can make changes—there are always places to make changes.

### *This survey is not scientific.*

The purpose of this activity is to start a conversation. A block does not equal a unit of carbon dioxide, or anything measurable. The scale is also not the same from one category to another. The activity is meant as a metaphor to help visualize the impact of our behaviors on the climate and the environment at large. If visitors are interested, you can suggest that they visit online carbon footprint calculators such as [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) and [www.footprintnetwork.org](http://www.footprintnetwork.org). These calculators include more detailed information, such as watts of electricity used per year. They also have a lot of solutions to reduce your footprint.