

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Are Smart Phones Green?

Dear EcoGirl: Are smart phones and MP3 players good or bad for the earth?
Signed, On the Go

Dear On the Go: Thanks for your question — and the chance to talk about one of the fascinating forces shaping our culture today. I do have to confess my personal bias here: I recently bought an iPod Touch (aka iTouch) and love what it can do. (The iTouch has the iPhone's interface, apps, web access, and music capacity, without its phone contract.)

But do these tools meet my eco-values? I'll answer that by walking through my assessment process as an example.

The Material World

With all the glitz, excitement, and peer pressure, it's easy to forget that mobile devices are consumer products with eco-costs throughout their lifecycle, from resource extraction, manufacturing, energy use, and waste. (For an engaging video about consumerism's connection to eco-harm, see www.storyofstuff.com.)

Therefore, there's really no 100% green product; the best we can do is choose greener approaches. This first means buying only what we need, making full use of it, and discarding it responsibly, including never putting electronics in the trash. (For more on this topic, see "Greening Your Techno-Tools" at www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl2j.html.)

In my case, I knew that the iTouch would be useful for me and that, while not eco-perfect, it does well on criteria such as avoiding toxics. I also only got a few accessories (a protective case and screen film). Note that there are cool eco-cases, solar chargers, and more. (See www.iphoneness.com/iphone-accessories/best-green-iphone-accessories.)

Resources Saved

And then there are the apps (software applications) — literally hundreds of thousands of them! Whatever your hobby, interest, question, even

unasked question — yup, there's an app for it — all easily downloaded and ready to go.

One hidden eco-benefit of apps is that they often replace physical objects, including books, CDs, calendars, maps, guidebooks, etc. Thus, this tool doesn't just *use* resources; it can also *save* them.

Of course, these e-replacements aren't appropriate in all situations; other formats still have value. Plus, this technology does use energy, and there are health concerns about cell phones and wi-fi, so it's prudent to be modest in one's exposure. Still, I see a net eco-benefit here.

Eco-Apps

But what's really gotten me excited are the eco-apps. This includes tools that help us buy eco-products, manage home energy use, garden organically, find local recycling, access public transit, share rides, plan safe bike routes, take walking tours, learn about nature's creatures, calculate our eco-footprint, green our home and office, and much more.

Certainly, app quality varies, but I've already discovered some (free!) eco-apps that I like, including: **GoodGuide** (scan a product barcode for a quick eco-assessment), **FishPhone** (scroll by fish name to buy non-threatened species), **California Farmers' Market Finder** (search by town or county), **Golden Gate Park Field Guide** (explore its museums, gardens, wildlife, and more), **Skeptical Science** (handy fact-based responses to arguments made by climate change "skeptics"), and **Environment Cartoons** (for a little truth-telling humor). If you have a favorite eco-app, please let me know!

Downside Dynamics

I do also want to note some less-beneficial tendencies of these devices.

1) Truncated information. The small screens and keyboards can reinforce

our culture's Twitter-length attention span that skims people and information based on image, and rewards superficial cleverness and convenient cynicism.

2) Passive consumerism. The urge for only immediate pleasure without addressing challenging realities is part of what allows so much harm to continue.

3) Earbud disconnection. The joy of personalized music can cut us off from interacting with people in our travels.

To counteract these risks, we can:

1) Read quality information that encourages the competent thinking needed to solve today's community crises.

2) Join with allies who are also taking constructive action for a better world.

3) Step outside of techno-world regularly, to connect with nature's vitality, community's serendipity, and each person's uniqueness. This self-nurturing also reminds us that the earth isn't just another consumer option but the foundation supporting all other activities.

With this wise balancing, I think mobile tech can fit well into a green life.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of [The Organic Guides](#), and Editor and Lead Writer for [The Next STEP](#) newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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Published in the *Sonoma County Gazette*, February 2011.

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