



LIVING  
DOWNSTREAM

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AT HOME

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"Beyond the Bomb Shelter" © 2013 by Sandra Steingraber, adapted from "The Myth of Living Safely in a Toxic World" (© 2001 by Sandra Steingraber and published by *In These Times*) and "Household Tips from Warrior Mom!" (© 2011 by Sandra Steingraber and published in *Orion*).

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There was once a village along a river.  
The people who lived there were very kind.

These residents, according to parable,  
began noticing increasing numbers of drowning people  
caught in the river's swift current.

And so they went to work  
devising ever more elaborate technologies to resuscitate them.  
So preoccupied were these heroic villagers with rescue and treatment  
that they never thought to look upstream to see who was pushing the victims in.

**THIS IS A WALK UP THAT RIVER.**



# CONTENTS



FROM THE FILMMAKER.....	1
<i>BEYOND THE BOMB SHELTER</i> BY SANDRA STEINGRABER.....	3
TALK IT OUT.....	9
TAKE ACTION.....	11
SHARE THE FILM.....	17
KEEP LEARNING.....	19



## FROM THE FILMMAKER

As the credits roll at the end of *Living Downstream*, you may feel a mix of emotions. Some viewers feel overwhelmed and sad, while others feel hopeful and inspired. You might experience some—or all—of these things too. This is where we all begin.

Along with these emotions can come a number of questions. For many of us, two shout louder than all the others: How can I protect myself? And what can I do to change the way things are? These questions are deeply personal—and the answers will be different for everyone. The following pages are a starting point for finding your way.

**“I originally set out to make a film about the life and work of one extraordinary woman. But what I learned along the way is that we can all be extraordinary.”**

Deciding how to react is not easy. The best advice I’ve heard is from Sandra Steingraber, who says that we should be guided by our own passions and interests. Do you like to entertain? Throw an organic dinner party to educate your friends about environmental health. Do you work in a hospital? Talk with the administration about phasing out the use of

medical supplies that contain toxic materials. There are many ways for you to play a role in making things better.

I originally set out to make a film about the life and work of one extraordinary woman. But what I learned along the way is that we can all be extraordinary. Whatever path you choose, I know you will do extraordinary things.



Chanda Chevannes  
Filmmaker of *Living Downstream*



## BEYOND THE BOMB SHELTER

BY SANDRA STEINGRABER

In the spring of 1997, after four years of research and writing, I published *Living Downstream*, a book that explored the relationship between human cancer and environmental contamination. Soon after, I was sent by my publisher on a two-week book tour that lasted a year and a half. It finally ended in September 1998 when I gave my last phone interview while sitting on a towel: I was in labor with my first child, and my water had just broken.

The eighteen months I spent on the road with *Living Downstream* was an odyssey that took me not only to bookstores, radio studios, and the sets of Hollywood talk shows, but to medical schools, college campuses, public libraries, church basements, union meeting halls, the floors of various state legislatures, and the headquarters of the Environmental Protection

**“The hard fact is that as individuals we cannot really protect ourselves from our toxic world . . . The inspiring truth is that collectively we can take heroic action to eliminate society’s dependency on toxic chemicals.”**

Agency. I met with university presidents and elected officials—but mostly I talked with a lot of plain, ordinary folks. I spoke with mothers of children with brain tumors who lived near Superfund sites, Montana wheat farmers worried that herbicides had something to do with their high rates of lymphoma, student athletes curious about the pesticides used on the fields where they practiced, native women in Alaska who live near old military installations that leak PCBs, Canadian autoworkers wondering about their occupational exposures, and sheep farmers in Ireland who suspected that insecticides were poisoning their drinking water.

In all these conversations, public and private, I became impressed by how deeply citizens were concerned with the connection between human health and the health of our planet. On the other hand, I was surprised by how many people were seeking ways to individually protect themselves from toxic assault while believing it impossible to end the production, use, and disposal of toxic chemicals. Among those who *did* feel it possible, few could imagine how they themselves might play a role in making this happen. It was as though the presence of harmful chemicals in our air, food, water, and bodies was an immutable fact of the human condition. “It’s just all so depressing,” many would sigh as I signed their books.

I didn’t know how to rescue my audiences from their own fatalistic thinking. But slowly, I began to see the obstacle that was preventing my readers from taking action. I call it the myth of living safely in a toxic world.

It works like this. Environmental education tends to focus on individual actions. From Earth Day pamphlets to college environmental science textbooks, we are exhorted to recycle, compost our food scraps, turn off the tap while brushing our teeth, and insulate our attics. If we are interested in protecting our own health against a toxic onslaught, we might be advised, say, to air out our freshly dry-cleaned suits before hanging them in the closet, or give up dry-cleaning altogether. We are not told how we might collectively persuade the dry-cleaning industry to switch over to nontoxic, wet-cleaning technology. (The dry-cleaning solvent perchloroethylene is a suspected bladder carcinogen and a common contaminant of drinking water. It made occasional appearances in the drinking water in my hometown during my childhood. I was diagnosed with bladder cancer at the age of twenty.)

This relentless attention to individual sacrifices seems almost unique to environmental issues. Other human troubles—shootings in schools, intoxicated drivers on the highway, cigarette addiction among teenagers—are widely understood as political problems requiring political solutions. Thus, a million moms march on Washington to demand changes in handgun regulations, Mothers Against Drunk Driving pushes for lower legal limits on blood alcohol levels, and tobacco advertising is restricted. We somehow understand that inviting individual citizens to just say no to firearms, liquor, and cigarettes isn’t the total solution.

Yet when we return our attention to the environment, we hope we can live safely in a toxic world if we just give up enough stuff: stop eating meat, stop eating fish, stop drinking tap water, stop swimming in chlorinated

pools, stop microwaving in plastic, swear off dairy products, remove shoes at the door so as not to track lawn chemicals into the living room, hand-wash silk blouses rather than drop them off at the dry-cleaners. Or worse yet, we pretend we can shop our way out of the environmental crisis: buy air filters, buy water filters, buy bottled water, buy pesticide-removing soaps for our vegetables, buy vitamin pills loaded with antioxidants to undo whatever damage we can't avoid.

It is sometimes believed that buying toxic-free products is a stepping stone to becoming an environmental health activist. But it is my distinct impression that just the opposite is happening: when people believe they can avoid harm through acts of individual self-protection, they feel *less* urgency about eliminating those threats by pushing for environmental reform. This observation, as it turns out, is backed by data. In his 2007 book, *Shopping Our Way to Safety*, sociologist Andrew Szasz demonstrates how the desire for personal security actually undermines the goal of environmental protection.

Szasz traces the fantasy of the toxic-free pod back to 1961, when this nation was gripped in a frenzy of fallout shelter construction. In hindsight, faith in the family bomb shelter was delusional. Stocked with canned goods and Band-Aids, it was useless against radiation exposure. Worse, the shelter's soothing promise of protection actually *increased* the risk of nuclear hostilities. Religious leaders, peace activists, and scientists argued this at the time, pointing out that the construction of shelters was a distraction from the urgent task of defusing the crisis. Eventually, their message won out.

*Stop digging. Disarm.* This is my message, too. In a time of environmental calamity, let's stop buying blueprints for bomb shelters.

Fortunately, like bomb shelters, few lifestyle sacrifices actually offer much real protection. The reason I think this is good news is that the sooner we quit trying to turn our bodies and homes into fortresses against toxic invasions, the sooner we'll realize that we have no choice but to rise up and demand an end to the invasion.

Consider drinking water. You might think you can save yourself from exposures to carcinogens in tap water by purchasing bottled water. But the industry is unregulated, and there is no telling what's actually in the bottle. Moreover, it turns out that breathing, not drinking, constitutes our main route of exposure to volatile pollutants in tap water. As soon as the toilet is flushed or the faucet turned on, these contaminants leave the water and enter the air.

Or consider breast milk, that most perfect form of infant nutrition, with its unsurpassed powers to boost IQ; fend off infectious diseases; encourage the development of the immune system; and prevent diabetes, allergies, and obesity. Because it exists at the top of the human food chain, mothers' milk has become the most chemically contaminated of all human foods. We cannot ask newborns to become vegetarians. We could encourage their mothers to make such changes in their diet, but it turns out that the lifestyle approach to cleaning up breast milk is not very effective. On the other hand, political action works great to purify breast milk. I am pleased to report that average concentrations of certain key breast milk

contaminants—DDT, PCBs, and dioxins—have declined dramatically since the '70s. This improvement is a direct consequence of bans, tighter regulations, incinerator closings, emission reductions, permit denials, right-to-know laws, and tougher environmental enforcement. Nursing mothers owe a great debt to thousands of anonymous citizens from all around the world who worked to stop toxic pollution at its source.

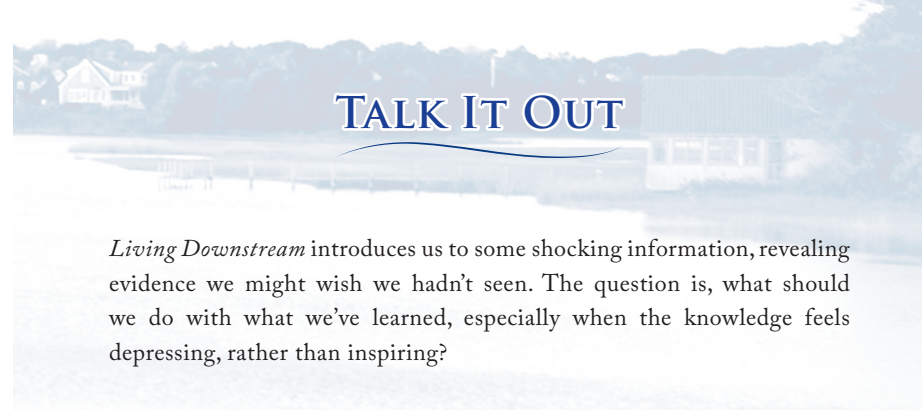
The way we repay this debt—and continue the process of detoxification—is to stop distracting ourselves with individual sacrifices and to get involved with the political struggle.

The hard fact is that as individuals we cannot really protect ourselves from our toxic world; we cannot opt out of the water cycle or the food chain. The inspiring truth is that collectively we can take heroic action to eliminate our society's dependency on toxic chemicals. This is a big job. It means working together to redesign our energy and materials economy. It means changing our laws to match our values and to preserve our health. It means leaving the bomb shelter and aspiring to be like the heroes of our other social movements.

It means starting now.

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Ecologist, author, and cancer survivor Sandra Steingraber is an internationally recognized authority on the environmental links to cancer and human health. This essay is an adaptation of “The Myth of Living Safely in a Toxic World,” first published in 2001 by *In These Times* at [www.InTheseTimes.com](http://www.InTheseTimes.com), and features adapted excerpts from “Household Tips from Warrior Mom!” published in the September/October 2011 issue of *Orion* magazine.



## TALK IT OUT

*Living Downstream* introduces us to some shocking information, revealing evidence we might wish we hadn't seen. The question is, what should we do with what we've learned, especially when the knowledge feels depressing, rather than inspiring?

We should talk.

Conversations open doors. They remind us that we are not alone, and they connect us with allies. They reveal the questions we need answered and the answers to our questions. They help us build the confidence and vocabulary for talking more. They generate the energy and creativity needed for becoming part of the solution.

So much comes from just talking it out, with people we trust, with people working on the issues, and with people who would care—if only they knew.

### Talking Tips

- Practice on people who support your commitment to environmental health issues.
- Speak from the heart about why these issues matter to you personally.



- Make it a two-way conversation. Listen deeply to what others are saying, and discuss differing perspectives by acknowledging common values (such as protecting the health and safety of our families).
- When friends and family are not open to talking, don't push it. Your discussion will be more fruitful when they are ready to engage.
- When people wholly disagree with you, respect their opinion. But don't let that stop you from speaking out and joining with others who share your perspective.
- Avoid confrontation in personal conversations, but use nonviolent confrontation for political advocacy, public protest, civil disobedience, and other public actions.



## TAKE ACTION

Sandra writes, “I believe we are musicians in a human orchestra. It is time now to play the Save the World Symphony. It is a vast orchestral piece, and you are but one musician. You are not required to play a solo, but you are required to figure out what instrument you hold and play it as well as you can.”<sup>1</sup>

But how do you find the instrument that's right for you? Sandra always suggests that you begin with your own interests and passions, choosing one thing to work on and doing it as well as you can. For example, an athlete may choose to address the use of pesticides on playing fields, whereas a parent may advocate for the purchase of nontoxic products by schools.

Sandra also says that working in the public sphere is essential. Many of us are comfortable making changes in our personal lives, but are less comfortable working for change in the outside world. This is natural. But solving this problem means making *both* kinds of change.

The charts that follow have some ideas for getting started. They give examples of both personal and public actions for some common issues of concern. If you have never seen yourself as someone who might take

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream: An Ecologist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*, 2nd ed., Da Capo, 2010, p. 289.

a public action—like starting a farmer’s market or writing a letter to the government—now is the perfect time to try. Start small. Or start big. Spend time thinking quietly by yourself. Talk with others. Join a group. Work independently. Explore. Experiment. Have fun. Find your role.

## FOOD

Encouraging organic agriculture reduces the levels of pesticides in our bodies and in the wider environment.

### PERSONAL ACTION

Support local organic farmers:

- Buy fresh, local, organic food for your family whenever possible.
- Learn about some of the pesticides used on your food and their potential health effects. See the PAN Pesticide Database for toxicity and regulatory information at [www.pesticideinfo.org](http://www.pesticideinfo.org).

### PUBLIC ACTION

Increase everyone’s access to fresh, local, organic food:

- Start a local farmer’s market or community vegetable garden in your neighborhood.
- Petition the institutions in your community (hospitals, schools, supermarkets, restaurants) to make organic food readily available.
- Ask your elected representatives to support organic farmers with legislation that puts them on equal footing with conventional farmers (subsidies, food safety regulations).

## WATER

Identifying, valuing, and protecting our water sources reduces the contaminants in our drinking water.

### PERSONAL ACTION

Get to know your tap water:

- Test your tap water for contaminants or ask your water utility for information on contaminant levels.
- Choose not to buy bottled water. Learn about the problems with bottled water at the Polaris Institute’s Inside the Bottle website at [www.insidethebottle.org](http://www.insidethebottle.org).

### PUBLIC ACTION

Protect drinking water for everyone:

- Work with a local conservation group to monitor and reduce the contamination levels of a river, stream, or lake in your community.
- Work with your local government and organizations in your community (movie theaters, concert halls, hospitals, schools) to ban sales of bottled water and increase access to tap water through water fountains and filling stations for reusable bottles.
- Tell your government—and all national governments—that access to safe water should be a recognized and enforced human right.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

Reducing the use of fossil fuels greatly reduces our exposure to toxic chemicals.\*

\*This is because (1) synthetic chemicals are often created from petroleum, coal, and natural gas, and (2) more than a quarter of the toxic pollutants released in North America come from the U.S. petroleum, coal, and natural gas industries.

### PERSONAL ACTION

Reduce your personal carbon footprint as much as possible:

- Walk, bike, or take public transit whenever you can.
- Conserve energy at home and divert your electrical fees to a green energy producer.
- Learn more about the science behind the climate crisis and the global grassroots movement working for solutions at [www.350.org](http://www.350.org).

### PUBLIC ACTION

Move your community off the fossil fuel treadmill:

- Join or begin a transition initiative in your community through the Transition Network ([www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)), an organization that helps communities move away from a dependency on fossil fuels.
- Write letters, make phone calls, and join protests and civil disobedience actions that call on your elected representatives to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies, implement carbon taxes, and invest in green energy.

## LAWN, FIELD, AND GARDEN CARE

Eliminating the use of pesticides on lawns, playing fields, and gardens will reduce our exposure to these poisons, many of which have been linked to cancer.

### PERSONAL ACTION

Practice nontoxic pest control methods:

- Care for your lawn, garden, and home using organic products and techniques.
- Learn about the pesticide bylaws that many provinces and municipalities in Canada have put into place on the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment website at [www.cape.ca/toxics/pesticides.html](http://www.cape.ca/toxics/pesticides.html).

### PUBLIC ACTION

Work to stop the cosmetic use of pesticides in your community:

- Hold town-hall meetings to discuss the health risks of pesticides with your neighbors.
- Work with groups and institutions in your community (community centers, local sports teams, gardening clubs, neighborhood associations, schools, or churches) to implement voluntary moratoriums on pesticide use.
- Advocate to your local representatives for a community-wide ban by writing letters, collecting signatures on a petition, and attending meetings.



## SHARE THE FILM

Many creative works are also tools for social change. In making *Living Downstream*, the goal was to create an engaging film that would also inspire audiences to think deeply about the issue of environmental health. If the film has inspired you, consider sharing it—and its message—with others. Below are some ideas for how to do this.

### Get Social

- Hold a house-party screening, learn how at [www.livingdownstream.com/hold\\_screening](http://www.livingdownstream.com/hold_screening).
- Lend your DVD or buy one as a gift at [www.livingdownstream.com/dvd](http://www.livingdownstream.com/dvd).
- Choose the book *Living Downstream* for your book club and meet for a private screening of the film.

### Spread the Word

- Email, post, or embed a link to the film's trailer, found at [www.livingdownstream.com/trailer](http://www.livingdownstream.com/trailer).
- Email or print sections of this guide to distribute to friends and neighbors.

- Reproduce Sandra Steingraber’s environmental health essays in your professional newsletter or link to them on your personal website, blog, or Facebook page, found at [www.livingdownstream.com/essays](http://www.livingdownstream.com/essays).

### Recommend Its Use

- Ask your public library to purchase a copy of the DVD.
- Send a copy of the film to your elected officials, explaining how it represents your environmental health concerns. Bulk copies are available for a discounted price at [www.livingdownstream.com/dvd](http://www.livingdownstream.com/dvd).
- Speak with teachers and nonprofit organizations about using the *Living Downstream* Educational DVD in their work, and tell them about the written guides. Find more information at [www.livingdownstream.com/use\\_guides](http://www.livingdownstream.com/use_guides).

### Log Your Action

- When you have shared the film, please let us know. Big or small, every step counts. Logging your action will help us track the numbers of individuals reached and provide us with valuable information on how the film is being used. Log your action at [www.livingdownstream.com/logyouraction](http://www.livingdownstream.com/logyouraction).



## KEEP LEARNING

*Living Downstream* | [www.livingdownstream.com](http://www.livingdownstream.com)

An interactive website for individuals, families, and organizations who want to learn more about the film, Sandra’s work, and the issue of environmental health.

*Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*

By Sandra Steingraber | Da Capo Press | 2010

The book that inspired the film, focusing on the growing body of evidence linking cancer to environmental contamination.

Sandra Steingraber | <http://steingraber.com>

Official website of biologist and author Sandra Steingraber, Ph.D.

Sandra’s Weekly Essays | [www.livingdownstream.com/essays](http://www.livingdownstream.com/essays)

Essays by Sandra about environmental health, available for republication free of charge provided credit is given.

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The descriptions in this section use wording that has been drawn in large part from the organizations’ websites.

**350.org** | [www.350.org](http://www.350.org)

A global, cutting-edge movement that aims to solve the climate crisis by inspiring individuals and groups to engage in large-scale grassroots activism.

**BlueGreen Alliance** | [www.bluegreenalliance.org](http://www.bluegreenalliance.org)

A national strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental organizations dedicated to expanding the number and quality of jobs in the green economy.

**Breast Cancer Action** | [www.bcaction.org](http://www.bcaction.org)

A membership-based organization that works to end the breast cancer epidemic by providing information, organizing people, and advocating for policy changes.

**Breast Cancer Fund** | [www.breastcancerfund.org](http://www.breastcancerfund.org)

A prevention-based organization that responds to the public health crisis of breast cancer by identifying—and advocating for the elimination of—the environmental and other preventable causes of the disease.

**Campaign for Safe Cosmetics** | [www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org)

A coalition that seeks to secure the corporate, regulatory, and legislative reforms necessary to eliminate dangerous chemicals from cosmetics and personal care products.

**Canadians for a Safe Learning Environment** | [www.casle.ca](http://www.casle.ca)

A registered charity that creates healthy schools by working with staff, parents, students, and school boards to implement environmentally healthy practices.

**Center for Health, Environment and Justice** | <http://chej.org>

An organization that aims to prevent harm to human health by providing technical and organizational support to individuals and communities facing a toxic hazard.

**CHE Toxicant and Disease Database** |

[www.database.healthandenvironment.org](http://www.database.healthandenvironment.org)

A database maintained by the Collaborative on Health and the Environment that summarizes links between chemical contaminants and 180 human diseases.

**Council of Canadians** | [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org)

Canada's largest citizens' organization, working to promote progressive policies on fair trade, clean water, energy security, public health care, and other issues of social and economic concern to Canadians.

**EWG's Skin Deep Cosmetics Database** | [www.cosmeticsdatabase.org](http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.org)

A searchable database created by the Environmental Working Group, providing information and online safety assessments for almost 75,000 personal care products.

**Food & Water Watch** | [www.foodandwaterwatch.org](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org)

A nonprofit organization that advocates for common-sense policies that will result in healthy, safe food and access to safe and affordable drinking water.

**Healthy Child Healthy World** | [www.healthychild.org](http://www.healthychild.org)

An organization working to inspire parents to protect young children from harmful chemicals.

**The National Pollutant Release Inventory** | [www.ec.gc.ca/inrp-npri](http://www.ec.gc.ca/inrp-npri)

Canada's publicly accessible inventory of pollutant releases to air, water, and land.

**New Yorkers Against Fracking** | [www.nyagainstfracking.org](http://www.nyagainstfracking.org)

A coalition of New York State residents calling for a ban on the dangerous and polluting practice of fracking. The coalition was convened by Sandra Steingraber with seed money from her 2011 Heinz Award.

**Pesticide Action Network North America** | [www.panna.org](http://www.panna.org)

A nonprofit organization that works to replace the use of hazardous pesticides with ecologically sound and socially just alternatives. The organization also maintains the PAN Pesticide Database at [www.pesticideinfo.org](http://www.pesticideinfo.org), which provides information on pesticide toxicity and regulation.

**Planned Parenthood Federation of America** |

[www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)

A health-care provider that promotes respect for each individual's right to make informed, independent decisions about health, sex, and family planning and advocates for protection from reproductive toxicants.

**Prevent Cancer Now** | [www.preventcancer.org](http://www.preventcancer.org)

A Canadian organization working to eliminate the preventable causes of cancer by promoting legislative and policy reforms and educating the public.

**Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families** | [www.saferchemicals.org](http://www.saferchemicals.org)

A U.S.-wide effort to pass federal policies that protect families from toxic chemicals.

**The Story of Stuff Project** | [www.storyofstuff.org](http://www.storyofstuff.org)

An organization, inspired by the response to the viral online video *The Story of Stuff*, that creates short, easily shareable online movies, including *The Story of Change*, about whether shopping can save the world.

**Toxic Free Canada** | [www.toxicfreecanada.ca](http://www.toxicfreecanada.ca)

An organization that brings workers and environmentalists together in cooperative projects for toxics reduction and a green economy.

### Toxics Release Inventory | [www.epa.gov/tri](http://www.epa.gov/tri)

A database administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, containing data on disposal or other releases of over 650 toxic chemicals, searchable by chemical, facility, or ZIP code.

### Women's Healthy Environments Network | [www.womenshealthyenvironments.ca](http://www.womenshealthyenvironments.ca)

A Canadian nonprofit organization whose mission is to connect women to the information and tools necessary for taking preventative action.

**At The People's Picture Company, we are conscious that everything we create has an impact on the environment.** As such, we have been working to lessen these impacts throughout our production processes. Our strategy is to work with local suppliers and manufacturers committed to making their processes as sustainable as possible, and to purchase environmentally friendly supplies at every opportunity.

Some highlights of our efforts include the following:

- When filming, we used local equipment suppliers and crew members whenever possible to reduce the impact of our travel. We also ate local, organic food when it was available to us. While filming in central Illinois, we were especially fortunate to have our food provided by Henry Brockman of Henry's Farm ([www.henrysfarm.com](http://www.henrysfarm.com)) and cooked for us by Joel Smith, the Midwest Regional Governor for Slow Food.
- All publicity materials have been made available for download for paperless dissemination. Hard copies of select materials have been printed using vegetable-based inks on FSC-certified recycled paper.
- The Educational DVD is housed in an alternative case, called a *digipak*, made of 100% unbleached, recycled cardboard. The plastic trays are made from 100% recycled plastic and are designed to hold discs firmly in place in high-volume-use environments such as libraries. The Home Video DVD is contained within a non-plastic DVD wallet, made from 100% Green Forestry Practices stock. All printing used vegetable-based inks and whenever possible the cases have not been shrink-wrapped.
- We are actively encouraging electronic use of the educational guides to reduce the impact created by the printing and shipping of printed materials. As such, *Living Downstream ~ In the Community and Living Downstream ~ In the Classroom* (written guides available to all purchasers of the Educational DVD) and this booklet are available in PDF for electronic download from [www.livingdownstream.com](http://www.livingdownstream.com).
- When purchasers of the Educational DVD require a hard copy of a guide, it is printed on FSC-certified paper that has been manufactured from 100% recycled material and without the use of chlorine.



Produced by



With the generous support of



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