

# The Peg Theory of Sustainability

Sustainability outcomes are usually about personal choice.

What we eat, how we wash, how we travel, and how we clean and dry our clothes are just some of the personal choices that effect our environmental footprint.

To me, clothes pegs are an indicative product which embodies many of the issues around 'sustainability' decisions. They represent a microcosm of larger environmental choices.

The photo on this page shows a range of common pegs, arranged in order from left to right, starting at a totally natural peg - the wooden dolly peg - to a high-tech stainless-steel peg.

This order could also represent a timescale of the development (or not) of the clothes peg.

So which peg should I buy to meet the demands of a sustainable lifestyle?

Should I go with the wooden dolly peg, a peg that is 100% natural timber, able to be 100% absorbed by the environment at the end of life? In practice, this peg stretches and stains some clothes and needs relatively frequent replacement as it lacks durability. Does this frequent replacement, involving resources of timber and embedded energy in processing and transport, justify the natural material it's made of?

Or should I buy the improved wooden peg with the metal spring? It's far more versatile than the dolly peg, and at the end of life the timber naturally composts and the steel rusts away in a relatively benign manner. But again, it can stain my clothes and needs relatively frequent replacement.

What about the plastic pegs?

There are very cheap ones with a metal spring which rapidly deteriorate in sunlight. A total waste by any assessment.

Then there's the plastic peg without a metal spring. It's not as versatile but probably has less embedded energy, being a one-piece unit without metal.



Where does your lifestyle choices sit on the Peg Scale; left or right?

Then there's the Australian Reva plastic peg. An improvement on previous plastic pegs with its unique spring design and better-quality plastic that resists degradation in sunlight. But what about the end of life? It is plastic and isn't that bad for the environment? What's the better plastic anyway? Is it one that lasts a long time and doesn't degrade or one that rapidly degrades?

'Single Use' plastics are on the out, so does that mean we should be replacing these with more durable plastics, or is that just a cop-out?

Then we have the stainless-steel peg. It likely has a high embedded energy, but it could be used by generations, so isn't that OK? At the end of life, it has a value with existing recycling systems. Even if it is discarded or lost, its corrosion resistance means it won't break down in the environment to become chemically or physically toxic like micro-plastics. Is this a good thing?

For those wanting to live a more sustainable lifestyle, the choice often tends towards the 'all natural' dolly peg. But, in practice, we opt for one of the other pegs.

My observation of the environmental movement over the last 30+ years is a trend from left to right on the peg 'scale'.

30 years ago, the trend was to build your own solar hot water system, mix your own mud-bricks, dig your own composting toilet, build your own windmill etc.

But in recent times, the trend has shifted to un-natural high-tech solutions such as heat-pump hot water, lithium batteries

for house and car, smart houses with sensors and automatic switches.

Has the environmental movement from 30 years ago surrendered itself by abandoning *au naturel* to be replaced by high-tech solutions? Has this movement simply been hijacked by the same consumerism that the movement rallied against decades ago?

For me, as my older clothes pegs degrade, I've chosen to replace them with the high-tech stainless-steel pegs because I believe they are better for the environment over the life of the peg in both material choice and embedded energy. But I also choose other low-tech solutions such as living in a rural area, heating my house with locally-sourced firewood, and showering under water collected on my roof and heated from the sun with basic solar-thermal panels.

In 30 years' time, it'll be interesting to see if the 'environmentally friendly' technologies of today are viewed in a similar way to today's cheap-quality plastic pegs.

Where are you on the peg scale? Perhaps you have no clothes and therefore no need for pegs. Or perhaps you just use an electric clothes dryer and justify such use with a massive high-tech solar photovoltaic array.

The Peg Scale: something to consider next time you're wanting to buy an appliance, vehicle, or undertake a house renovation.

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