

Consumerism and climate change

We have little direct control many factors which contribute to many negative effects of climate change but one area over which we have direct control is 'consumerism'. Here we are all in the driving seat.

Americans and Western Europeans have indulged in unsustainable over- consumption for decades. But now developing countries are catching up rapidly, to the detriment of the environment, health, and happiness, according to the Worldwatch Institute in its annual report some years ago.

Approximately 1.7 billion people worldwide now belong to the "consumer class"—the group of people characterized by diets of highly processed food, desire for bigger houses, more and bigger cars, higher levels of debt, and lifestyles devoted to the accumulation of non-essential goods. Today nearly half of global consumers reside in developing countries, including 240 million in China and 120 million in India—markets with the most potential for expansion. Rising consumption has helped meet basic needs and create jobs.

Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch Institute said in a statement to the press. "But as we enter a new century, this unprecedented consumer appetite is undermining the natural systems we all depend on, and making it even harder for the world's poor to meet their basic needs."

The report addresses the devastating toll on the Earth's water supplies, natural resources, and ecosystems exacted by a plethora of disposable cameras, plastic garbage bags, and other cheaply made goods with built in product-obsolence, and cheaply made manufactured goods that lead to a "throw away" mentality.

"Most of the environmental issues we see today can be linked to consumption," said Gary Gardner, director of research for Worldwatch. "As just one small example, there was a story in the newspaper just the other day saying that 37 percent of species could become extinct due to climate change, which is very directly related to consumption."

From Luxuries to Necessities

Globalization is a driving factor in making goods and services previously out of reach in developing countries much more available. Items that at one point in time were considered luxuries—televisions, cell phones, computers, air conditioning—are now viewed as necessities.

Increased reliance on automobiles means more pollution, more traffic, more use of fossil fuels. Cars and other forms of transportation account or nearly 30 percent of world energy use and 95 percent of global oil consumption.

Increased consumerism evidently comes at a steep price.

People are incurring debt and working longer hours to pay for the high-consumption lifestyle, consequently spending less time with family, friends, and community organizations.

Diets of highly processed food and the sedentary lifestyle that goes with heavy reliance on automobiles have led to a worldwide epidemic of obesity. In the United States, an estimated 65 percent of adults are overweight or obese, and the country has the highest rate of obesity among teenagers in the world. Soaring rates of heart disease and diabetes, surging health care costs, and a lower quality of day-to-day life are the result.

Some aspects of rampant consumerism have resulted in startling anomalies. Worldwatch reports that worldwide annual expenditures for cosmetics total U.S. \$18 billion; the estimate for annual expenditures required to eliminate hunger and malnutrition is \$19 billion. Expenditures on **pet food** in the United States and Europe total **\$17 billion a year**; the estimated cost of immunizing every child, providing clean drinking water for all, and achieving universal literacy is **\$16.3 billion.** It shows where our priorities lie.

St Vincent's Sheffield