

## Consumerism and the Environment

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It is an established fact that we as human beings consume an incredible amount, and this excessive consumption has a negative effect on our planet. Studies indicate that North Americans consume their average body weight each day in the form of raw materials. This places a heavy demand on our natural resources and affects the world's climate. Industrialized countries, approximately 20% of the population of the planet, consume 70% of the world's paper, and when doing so, contribute to the rising amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere ("Causes of Climate Change").

### Did you know?

Because of human demand for food, fresh water, timber, fibre and fuel, more land has been claimed for agriculture in the last 60 years than in the 18th and 19th centuries combined.

Source: The Guardian

It has been suggested that places that traditionally would not be described as industrialized countries—such as Brazil, Eastern Europe, and Thailand—are beginning to place demands on their environments similar to those of the "West." Our level of consumption, then, seems to be unsustainable (Kaza). It is imperative that young people be aware of this, as they have the power to bring consumption back to realistic levels.

If it is well-documented that North American consumption levels make a sustainable future an



impossibility, then why is consumption not being curbed? Why, instead, are more countries emulating Northern, industrialized countries? Of course, theories abound, some suggesting that despite the dangers of over-consuming, people by nature are short-sighted, and adopting a

rich, North American lifestyle is more important than ensuring the planet's sustainability. With the proliferation of American media throughout the world, this lifestyle is highly visible and desirable (Wilk).

**Did you know?**

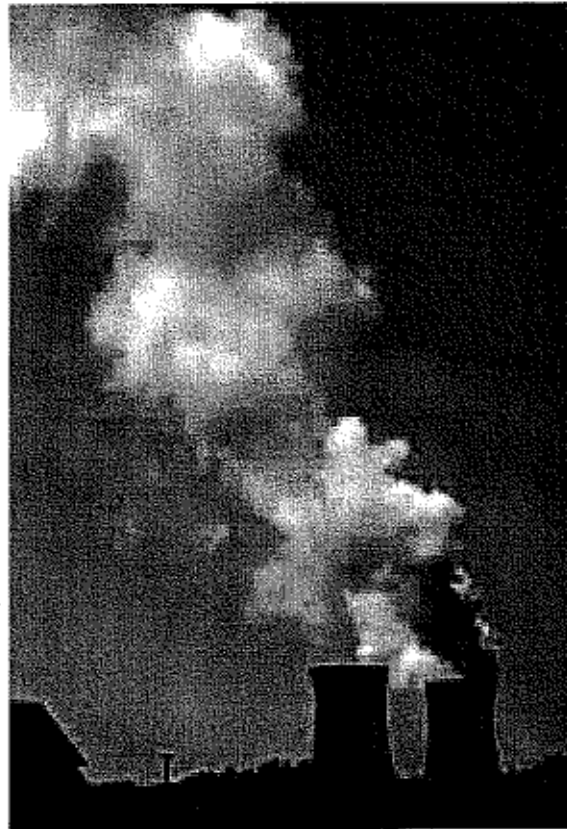
If present rates of emissions of carbon dioxide continue, the Earth will experience a 1C (1.8F) warming by 2030 at the latest, and a 3C (5.4F) increase in temperature before the end of the next century. This amounts to a warming rate 10 to 100 times more rapid than the fastest warming period in the last 10,000 years.

Source: Rainforest Action Movement

It is not only the amount of consumption, but the nature of the products being consumed, that is cause for alarm. In "The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products," Edwin Datschefski explores the idea of environmentally safe products, but generally concludes that very few products are designed with sustainability in mind: only one in 10,000 products are designed with the environment in mind (qtd. in

Driver).

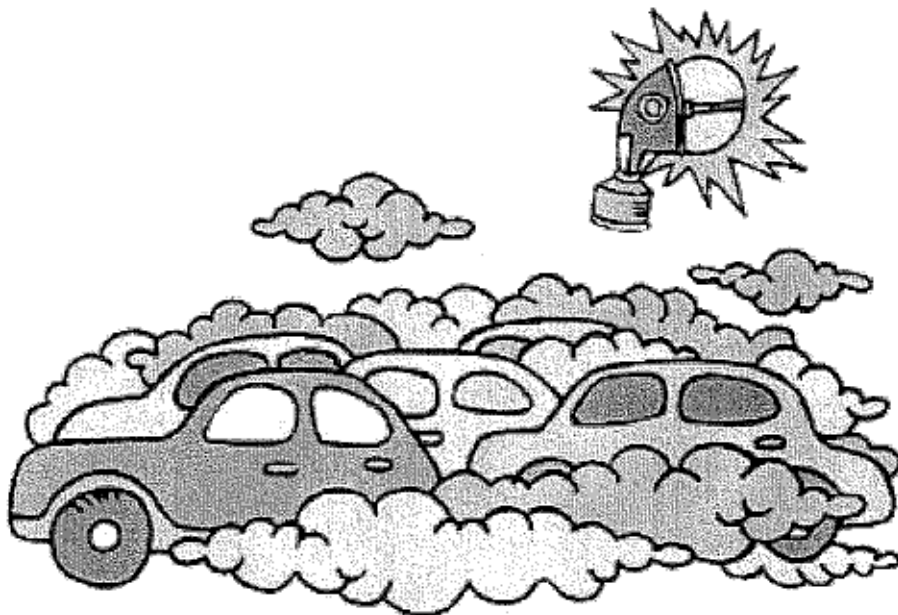
Although it is a gross simplification to suggest that the root of this problem is that the world does not have its priorities in order, the evidence seems to suggest just that. According to *Consumerism: Volunteer*



*Now!*, more money is being spent on ensuring the world has access to ice cream, cigarettes, pet food, and perfume than access to clean water. There is no shortage of activists and experts who are passionately urging governments to encourage more responsible consumption, but their efforts seem to be falling on deaf ears. Teens, however, may be able to employ different tactics in order to get the message through. With their media savvy and technological expertise, they have the potential to succeed where powerful organizations such as the United Nations seem to be failing.

The following is a quote from a UN HumanDevelopment Report (1998). Despite apparently solid scholarship, a dry, officious document such as this will be unlikely to reach young people:

Today's consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities. And the dynamics of the consumption-poverty-inequality-environment nexus are accelerating. If the trends continue without change - not redistributing from high-income to low-income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods

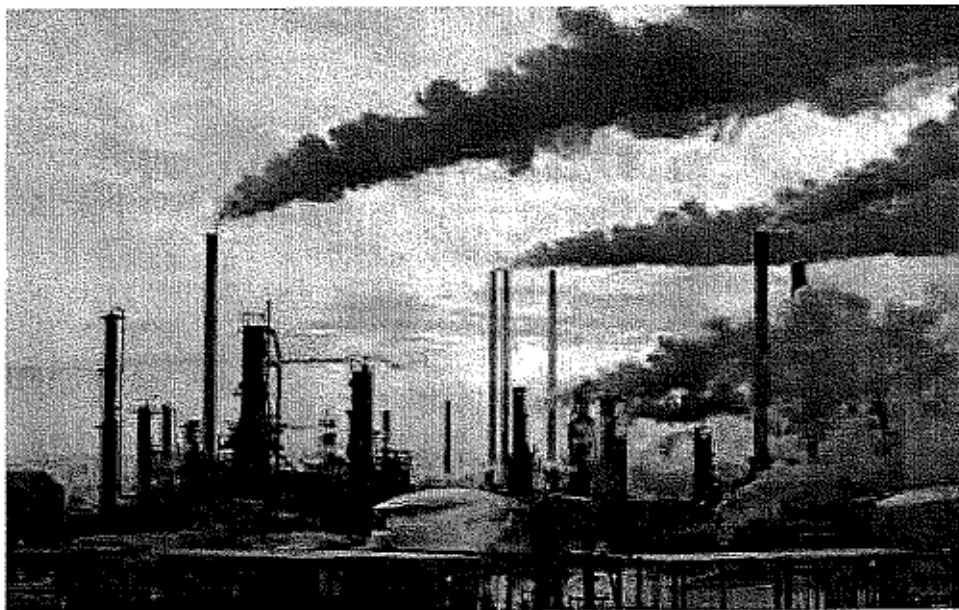


and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs - today's problems of consumption and human development will worsen.

Other initiatives, such as International Buy Nothing Day, are more relevant to teens. This event, although not designed to shake the foundations of consumer culture by boycotting consumption for one day of the year, is meant to put overconsumption into the spotlight and encourage discussion.

The greatest damage done to our planet comes from those on the extremes of the wealth spectrum; the gap between the rich and poor is enormous, and is growing. The

richest 20% of the world's population is earning approximately 83% of global income and spends recklessly, ravaging the world's natural resources. On the other side of the spectrum, the world's poorest people are motivated almost exclusively by the desire to merely survive, and pay little heed to the environmental consequences of their actions. Therefore, the root of this environmental crisis is a much bigger issue: the global disparity in wealth ("Resource Racket"). A major part of the problem of overconsumption can be combatted by aggressive campaigns against decadent consumerism. The most important group to inform of the issues is youth, as this is the group that can begin to reverse this trend.



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## Recommended Websites

### Consumers International

The website of an international organization dedicated to the rights of consumers. It is concerned with many issues, including food, health, environment, and corporate responsibility. In its Environment section, it includes external links to many documents about sustainable consumption.

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

### Global Issues That Affect Everyone

A website created and maintained by Anup Shah. Although Shah's background is in computer science, she is concerned with global issues and has created this ambitious project out of interest. As the title of the site suggests, it covers a wide range of topics, including trade, geopolitics, human rights, and environmental issues. Her focus is on the United States, because of its influence and involvement in many global issues.

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

### One World.net

OneWorld.net is an international network of sites that focuses on human rights awareness and poverty. It is published in 11 languages and spans the globe, providing news and in-depth features with a different focus than the mainstream media. It is organized thematically and geographically, and is fully searchable. OneWorld.net features an extensive Environmental Activism Guide.

[www.oneworld.net](http://www.oneworld.net)

### Global Issues/The World Revolution

This is a progressive website that examines "in a definitive and comprehensive manner the major social problems of our world and our era". It is concerned with a variety of issues, one of which is the state of the environment. In its Environment section, it provides links to news stories from independent and mainstream media sources, as well as links to NGOs.

<http://www.globalissues.net/>