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# How Much Is Enough?

By Alan Durning

The wildfire spread of the consumer life-style around the world marks the most rapid and fundamental change in day-to-day existence the human species has ever experienced. Over a few short generations we have become car drivers, television watchers, mall shoppers, and throw-away buyers. The tragic irony of this momentous transition is that the historic rise of the consumer society has been quite effective in harming the environment, but not in providing the people with a fulfilling life....

Measured in constant dollars, the world's people have consumed as many goods and services since 1950 as all previous generations put together. Since 1940, Americans alone have used up as large a share of the earth's mineral resources as did everyone before them combined....

The average resident of an industrial country consumes 3 times as much fresh water, 10 times as much energy, and 19 times as much aluminum as someone in a developing country. The ecological impacts of our consumption even reach into the local environments of the poor. Our appetite for wood and minerals, for example, motivates the road builders who open tropical rain forests to poor settlers, resulting in the slash-and-burn forest clearing that is condemning countless species to extinction.

High consumption translates into huge impacts. In industrial countries, the fuels burned release perhaps three-fourths of the sulfur and nitrogen oxides that cause acid rain. Industrial countries' factories generate most of the world's hazardous chemical wastes. Their military facilities have built more than 99 percent of the world's nuclear warheads. Their atomic power plants have generated more than 96 percent of the world's radioactive waste. And their air conditioners, aerosol sprays, and factories release almost 90 percent of the chlorofluorocarbons that destroy the earth's protective ozone layer....

Only population growth rivals high consumption as a cause of ecological decline, and at least population growth is now viewed as a problem by many governments and citizens of the world. Consumption, in contrast, is almost universally seen as good—indeed, increasing it is the primary goal of national economic policy....

José Goldemberg of the University of São Paulo and an international team of researchers conducted a careful study of the potential to cut fossil fuel consumption through maximizing efficiency and making full use of renewable energy. The entire world

population, they concluded, could live at roughly the level of West Europeans in the mid-seventies — with things like modest but comfortable homes, refrigeration for food, clothes washers, a moderate amount of hot water, and ready access to public transit, augmented by limited auto use.

The study's implicit conclusion, however, is that the entire world could not live in the style of Americans, with their larger homes, more numerous electrical gadgets, and auto-centered transportation. Goldemberg's scenario, furthermore, may be too generous. It would not reduce global carbon emissions by anything like the 60-80 percent that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change believes necessary to stabilize the world's climate....

Of course, the opposite of overconsumption — destitution — is no solution to either environmental or human problems. It is infinitely worse for people and bad for the natural world, too. Dispossessed peasants slash-and-burn their way into the rain forests of Latin America, hungry nomads turn their herds out onto fragile African rangeland, reducing it to desert, and small farmers in India and the Philippines cultivate steep slopes, exposing them to the erosive powers of rain. Perhaps half the world's billion-plus absolute poor are caught in a downward spiral of ecological and economic impoverishment. In desperation, they knowingly abuse the land, salvaging the present by savaging the future....

## Redefining Our Needs

If environmental destruction results when people have either too little or too much, we are left to wonder, How much is enough? What level of consumption can the earth support? When does having more cease to add appreciably to human satisfaction? Is it possible for all the world's people to live comfortably without bringing on the decline of the planet's natural health? Is there a level of living above poverty and subsistence but below the consumer life-style — a level of sufficiency? Could all the world's people have central heating? Refrigerators? Clothes dryers? Automobiles? Air conditioning?

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Many of these questions cannot be answered definitively, but for each of us in the consumer society, asking is essential nonetheless. Unless we see that more is not always better, our efforts to forestall ecological decline will be overwhelmed by our appetites. Unless we ask, we will likely fail to see the forces around us that stimulate those appetites, such as relentless advertising, proliferating shopping centers, and social pressures to "keep up with the Joneses." We may overlook forces that make consumption more destructive than it need be, such as subsidies to mines, paper mills, and other industries with high environmental impacts. And we may not act on opportunities to improve our lives while consuming less, such as working fewer hours to spend more time with family and friends.

Still, the difficulty of transforming the consumer society into a sustainable one can scarcely be overestimated. We consumers enjoy a life-style that almost everybody else aspires to, and why shouldn't they? Who would just as soon not have an automobile, a big house on a big lot, and complete control over indoor temperature throughout the year? The momentum of centuries of economic history and the material cravings of 5.5 billion people lie on the side of increasing consumption.

We may be, therefore, in a conundrum — a problem admitting of no satisfactory solution. Limiting the consumer life-style to those who have already attained it is not politically possible, morally defensible, or ecologically sufficient. And extending that life-style to all would simply hasten the ruin of the biosphere. The global environment cannot support 1.1 billion of us living like American consumers, much less 5.5 billion people, or a future population of at least 8 billion. On the other hand, reducing the consumption levels of the consumer society and tempering material aspirations elsewhere, though morally acceptable, is a quixotic proposal. It bucks the trend of centuries. Yet it may be the only option.

If the life-supporting ecosystems of the planet are to survive for future generations, the consumer society will have to dramatically curtail its use of resources — partly by shifting to high-quality, low-input durable goods and partly by seeking fulfillment through leisure, human relationships, and other nonmaterial avenues. We in the consumer society will have to live a technologically sophisticated version of the life-style currently practiced lower on the economic ladder. Scientific advances, better laws, restructured industries, new treaties, environmental taxes, grassroots campaigns — all can help us get there. But ultimately, sustaining the environment that sustains humanity will require that we change our values....

Some guidance is thus needed on what

combination of technical changes and value changes would make a comfortable — if nonconsumer — life-style possible for all without endangering the biosphere. From a purely ecological perspective the crucial categories are energy, materials, and ecosystems, but such categories are abstract. For a more tangible approach, [we must] focus on three aspects of daily life: what we eat and drink, how we get around, and the things we buy and use. In each case, the world's people are distributed unevenly over a vast range, with those at the bottom consuming too little for their own good—and those at the top consuming too much for the earth's good....

### **Searching for Sufficiency**

The supply lines that feed the consumer class encircle the globe. From large urban supermarkets, they fan out to Philippine plantations, American grain fields, African rangeland, and Indian spice farms. North Europeans eat lettuce trucked from Greece. Japanese dine on Australian ostrich meat by the ton and American cherries by the airplane-load. One-fourth of the grapes Americans eat come from 7,000 kilometers away, in Chile, and half the orange juice they drink comes from Brazil. Europeans get fruit from as far away as Australia and New Zealand....

These global supply lines leave indelible marks on the terrestrial ecosystems they traverse. Malaysian planters spray lindane and aldrin — chemicals forbidden in the United States — on the cocoa that turns into sweets for the consumer class. Cattle ranching for export to American, European, and Middle Eastern consumers is one motive behind the clearing of millions of hectares of South and Central American rain forests, while commercial ranches in Botswana that produce beef for Europe have decimated the nation's herds of migrating wildebeests.

Coastal ecosystems are affected as well. Banana plantations on Saint Lucia in the Caribbean have taken over much of the island's tropical forestland and driven small farmers into the hills, where their slash-and-burn crop cultivation allows soil to wash downstream, choking coastal seagrass ecosystems with silt. Sugar plantations on Fiji that supply the European Community have taken over 4,000 hectares of mangrove forest — despite the low agricultural yields of converted mangrove soils....

If all the world's people nourished themselves with the consumer class's regimen of meat, heavily packaged and processed foods and drinks and specialties transported great distances, we would use more energy just for food and drinks than we currently do for all purposes — along with other natural resources in equally mammoth quantities. The ultimate goal of reforming food and beverage systems worldwide, then, should not be to raise the poor and middle income into the consumer class but to bring about a convergence of the three groups. From the

middle-income class would come the basic menu of an abundance of locally grown produce and clean drinking water. From the consumer class would come technologies such as small, super-efficient refrigerators, advanced cooking stoves, and hot water for washing. The result of such convergence would be healthier people and a healthier planet....

### **Taming Consumerism**

The world economy is currently organized to furnish 1.1 billion people with a consumer life-style long on things but short on time. The prospect of restructuring that economy is daunting, but the consume-or-decline argument, which holds high consumption indispensable for employing workers and combating deprivation, is ungrounded. High consumption is a precondition to neither full employment nor the end of poverty....

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If our grandchildren are to inherit a planet as bounteous and beautiful as we have enjoyed, we in the consumer class must — without surrendering the quest for advanced, clean technology — eat, travel, and use energy and materials more like those on the middle rung of the world's economic ladder. If we can learn to do so, we might find ourselves happier as well, for in the consumer society, affluence has brought us to a strange pass. Who would have predicted a century ago that the richest civilizations in history would be made up of polluted tracts of suburban development dominated by the private automobile, shopping malls, and a throwaway economy? Surely, this is not the ultimate fulfillment of our destiny.

In the final analysis, accepting and living by sufficiency rather than excess offers a return to what is, culturally speaking, the human home: to the ancient order of family, community, good work, and good life; to a reverence for skill, creativity and creation; to a daily cadence slow enough to let us watch the sunset and stroll by the water's edge; to communities worth spending a lifetime in; and to local places pregnant with the memories of generations. Perhaps Henry David Thoreau had it right when he scribbled in his notebook beside Walden Pond, "A man is rich in proportion to the things he can afford to let alone." ■