

"The average North American consumes five times more than a Mexican, ten times more than a Chinese person, and thirty times more than a person from India. (Burp!) We are the most voracious consumers in the world, a world that could die because of the way we North Americans live. Give it a rest. November 26th is Buy Nothing Day."

~ Advertisement, Adbusters Foundation

"If every human being on this planet wanted to live as we do in Toronto, we'd need five more planets. So there is no way our lifestyle can be enjoyed by everybody on Earth, but everyone wants to be like us."

~ David Suzuki

## State of the World 2004, Worldwatch Institute

The world is consuming goods and services at an unsustainable pace, with serious consequences for the well-being of people and the planet, reports the Worldwatch Institute in its annual report, *State of the World 2004*.

More than a quarter of the world's population—around 1.7 billion people—are now part of the "consumer class," with the same lifestyles that were once limited to the rich nations of Europe, North America, and Japan. In China alone, 240 million people have joined the ranks of consumers. The "consumer class" is defined as people who use televisions, telephones, and the Internet, and adopt a culture of consumerism in their eating, transportation, and buying habits. Today, almost half of the world's consumers live in developing countries, which also are the most populated and fastest growing countries.

"Rising consumption has helped meet basic needs and create jobs," says the Worldwatch report. "But as we enter a new century, this extraordinary 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."

"Higher levels of obesity and personal debt, lack of leisure time, and a degraded environment are all signs that excessive consumption is diminishing the quality of life for many people. Governments, businesses, and citizens need to shift their focus away from the unrestrained accumulation of goods in order to find ways to ensure a better life for all."

### ***Inequalities***

The report observes that sharp inequalities exist in the world today. While the consumer class has more than it needs, many other people do not have their most basic needs met.

- The 12% of the world's people living in North America and Western Europe account for 60% of global consumption, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa account for only 3.2%.
- While consumers across the globe spend an estimated \$35 billion a year on bottled water, an estimated 1.1 billion people, or 1 person in 5, still lack reasonable access to safe drinking water.

- While as many as 2.8 billion people on the planet struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day, in 2002, 1.12 billion households—about three-quarters of the world's people—owned at least one television set.
- Today, the world's richest people use on average 25 times more energy than the world's poorest. The United States, with just 4.5% of the world's population, releases 25% of global carbon dioxide emissions.
- Worldwide, water demands roughly tripled. The number of large dams climbed from 5,000 in 1950 to more than 45,000 today.

### *The health costs of consumerism*

Uncontrolled consumerism also has a negative impact on the health of the consumer class. The report suggests that having more is just as dangerous as not having enough. For instance:

- Smoking contributes to around 5 million deaths worldwide each year. In 1999, tobacco-related medical expenditures and productivity losses cost the United States more than \$150 billion.
- In the United States, an estimated 65% of adults are overweight or obese, leading to an annual loss of 300,000 lives and at least \$117 billion in health care costs in 1999.
- A study of more than 200,000 people in the U.S. found that those living in low-density suburban communities spent less time walking and weighed 6 pounds more on average than those living in densely populated areas. Suburbanites were also found to be more subject to high blood pressure. The average U.S. adult now spends 72 minutes a day behind the wheel, often alone.
- Time pressures are often linked to the need to work long hours to support consumption habits, and to take care of possessions. Americans are among the most overworked people in the industrial world, putting in 350 hours more on the job each year than the average European.

### *Ice cream vs. immunization*

One section of the report compares personal spending on luxury items with the amounts needed to meet urgent basic needs. For instance, providing adequate food, clean water, and basic education for the world's poorest would cost less than the amount people spend annually on makeup, ice cream, and pet food.

- The annual expenditure on makeup is \$18 billion, far less than the \$12 billion it would cost to provide health care for all women.
- The goal of wiping out global hunger and malnutrition would need an annual investment of \$19 billion, just \$2 billion more than Europeans and Americans spend per year on pet food.
- The bill for immunizing every child would come to \$1.3 billion, slightly over one-tenth the amount Europeans spend on ice cream each year, \$11 billion.

In the U.S. today, there are more private vehicles on the road than people licensed to drive them, the Worldwatch report points out. The average size of refrigerators in U.S. households increased by 10% between 1972 and 2001, and the number per home rose as well.

New houses in the U.S. were 38% bigger in 2000 than in 1975, despite having fewer people in each household on average.

Yet increased consumption has not brought Americans happiness. About a third of Americans report being "very happy," the same share as in 1957, when Americans were only half as wealthy.

### ***Environmental effects of consumption***

This rising consumption in the U.S., other rich nations, and many developing ones is more than the planet can bear, reports *State of the World 2004*. Forests, wetlands, and other natural places are shrinking to make way for people and their homes, farms, malls, and factories. Despite the existence of alternative sources, more than 90% of paper still comes from trees—eating up about one-fifth of the total wood harvest worldwide. An estimated 75% of global fish stocks are now fished at or beyond their sustainable limit. And even though technology allows for greater fuel efficiency than ever before, cars and other forms of transportation account for nearly 30% of world energy use and 95% of global oil consumption.

### ***What to do?***

At the same time, many people and groups are working on creative solutions to help people maintain a good quality of life while reducing consumption. The *State of the World 2004* report suggests a variety of opportunities that are already available to governments, businesses, and consumers to control consumption:

- ***Ecological tax reform:*** By shifting taxes so that manufacturers have to pay for the harm they do to the environment, and by introducing production standards and other regulatory tools, governments can help reduce negative impacts on natural resources.
- ***Take-back laws:*** Now being adopted by a growing number of governments around the world, these laws require companies to "take back" products at the end of their useful lives, and ban the landfilling and incineration of these products.
- ***Durability:*** Industries can take shared responsibility for their ecological impacts by finding ways to reduce the amount of raw material needed to create products and by making goods more durable and easy to repair and upgrade.
- ***Personal responsibility:*** Changes in consumption practices will also require millions of individual decisions that start at the grassroots—about everything from our use of energy and water to our consumption of food.

The report concludes, "In the long run, meeting basic human needs, improving human health, and supporting a natural world that can sustain us will require that we control consumption, rather than allow consumption to control us."

One World, InfoChange News & Features, *The World Is Richer, Fatter, and Not Much Happier*, January 2004:

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