



# As Consumerism Spreads, Earth Suffers, Study Says

About 1.7 billion people belong to the global "consumer class."

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Americans and Western Europeans have had a lock on 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, *State of the World 2004*.

Perfectly timed after the excesses of the holiday season, the report put out by the Washington, D.C.-based research organization focuses this year on consumerism run amuck.

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-obsolescence, 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.

China provides a snapshot of changing realities. For years, the streets of China's major cities were characterized by a virtual sea of people on bicycles, and 25 years ago there were barely any private cars in China. By 2000, 5 million cars moved people and goods; the number is expected to reach 24 million by the end of next year.

In the United States, there are more cars on the road than licensed drivers.

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

Changing diet, with a growing emphasis on meat, illustrates the environmental and societal toll exacted by unbridled consumption.

To provide enough beef, chicken, and pork to meet the demand, the livestock industry has moved to factory farming. Producing eight ounces of beef requires 6,600 gallons (25,000 liters) of water; 95 percent of world soybean crops are consumed by farm animals, and 16 percent of the world's methane, a destructive greenhouse gas, is produced by belching, flatulent livestock. The enormous quantities of manure produced at factory farms becomes toxic waste rather than fertilizer, and runoff threatens nearby streams, bays, and estuaries.

Chickens at a typical farm are kept in cages with about nine square inches (about 60 square centimeters) of space per bird. To force them to lay more eggs, they are often starved. Chickens slaughtered for meat are first fattened up with hormones, sometimes to the point where their legs can no longer support their weight.

Crowded conditions can lead to the rapid spread of disease among the animals. To prevent this, antibiotics are included in their feed. The World Health Organization reports that the widespread use of these drugs in the livestock industry is helping breed antibiotic-resistant microbes, complicating the treatment of disease in both animals and people.

Inroads are being made. In 2002, McDonald's announced it would stop buying eggs from suppliers who keep chickens confined in battery cages and that are forced to lay additional eggs through starvation. By 2004, the fast-food chain will require chicken suppliers to stop giving birds antibiotics to promote growth. Wendy's, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken have all hired animal welfare specialists to devise new animal care standards.

The World Bank has also rethought its policy of funding livestock factory farming. In 2001, a World Bank report concluded "there is a significant danger that the poor are being crowded out, the environment eroded, and global food safety and security threatened."

## **Not Much Happier**

The increase in prosperity is not making humans happier or healthier, according to several studies. Findings from a survey of life satisfaction in more than 65 countries indicate that income and happiness tend to track well until about \$13,000 of annual income per person (in 1995 dollars). After that, additional income appears to produce only modest increments in self-reported happiness.

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.

"Excess consumption can be counterproductive," said Gardner. "The irony is that lower levels of consumption can actually cure some of these problems."

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.

There is, of course, no easy solution to the problem. The authors call for green taxes (to reflect the true environmental costs of a product), take-back programs that require manufacturers to recycle packaging or goods, and consumer education and awareness programs.

But first and foremost we need to reorient our way of thinking, says Gardner.

"The goal is to focus not so much on sacrifice, but on how to provide a higher quality of life using the lowest amount of raw materials," he said. "We need to change the way we produce goods and the way we consume them."