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The Environmental Threat We Would Rather Ignore: Overconsumption

by Nate Bellinger

When the population of the world reached seven billion people in October of 2011, many environmentalists used the occasion to renew their claims that overpopulation is the foremost environmental threat we are facing and will lead to ecological destruction and natural resource deficits. Overpopulation is definitely an important issue that we all should take seriously. However, in addition to overpopulation, an equal, if not greater, threat to the environment is overconsumption of finite natural resources. Here, I argue that overconsumption by the world's wealthiest people, and the negative externalities of this overconsumption, is one of the most pressing threats to our environment and something that we should all be paying more attention to and be thinking about ways to address.



Nate Bellinger

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Blaming overpopulation alone for the environmental problems that we are facing is a too simplistic approach; because the point at which the Earth is “overpopulated,” or put differently, has reached its carrying capacity, necessarily depends on how many resources people are consuming. An overly simplistic example may help illustrate this point. Say there are 100 units of fresh water on Earth. If everyone consumed 20 units of freshwater, Earth’s carrying capacity would be five people. If however, everyone consumed one unit of water, Earth’s carrying capacity would be 100 people. Thus, population and consumption are inextricably linked – the more people consume, the fewer people Earth can support. If we did not consume so many resources, population would not necessarily be such a pressing environmental problem.

Overconsumption exists when resources are consumed at an unsustainable level as measured by the ecosystem’s capacity. This is a problem because we live on a planet with finite natural resources. Some of the most critical natural resources that we rely on include freshwater, forests, topsoil, biodiversity, marine fish stocks, and clean air.

Today, we find ourselves facing a situation where overconsumption of natural resources is contributing significantly to deforestation, overdrawn rivers and aquifers, landscape degradation from mining, and other environmental problems. Furthermore, the negative



externalities of this overconsumption are polluting rivers and oceans, contributing to climate change, and making people sick. It is time that we recognize overconsumption as one of the more serious threats facing our environment and begin thinking about ways to address the problem.

Overconsumption in Developed Countries

The world’s wealthiest billion people, primarily living in developed countries like the United States, consume far more resources than is ecologically sustainable on average. Weⁱⁱ buy cell phones (which we upgrade every two years); we have TVs, video game consoles, and cable boxes in multiple rooms in our house; we buy lots of carsⁱⁱⁱ (which are much bigger than they need to be); our houses (which are also unnecessarily large) contain appliances such as air conditioners, dryers, dishwashers, and microwaves; and we are constantly buying new clothes, shoes, toys, and other household items. Consuming these products is not necessarily bad, but increasingly we are consuming these things excessively and are discarding and replacing things that are still perfectly functional. For example, two-thirds of appliances that are disposed of still work.^{iv}

In addition to all the “stuff” we consume, we also consume an inordinate amount of fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas. These fuels power the cars and planes that enable us to travel around the world, heat and cool our homes, and provide us with electricity for our homes and for manufacturing. Again,

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this is not inherently bad, but we use far more fossil fuels than is necessary or sustainable, with perilous consequences for the climate.

We also consume many products that are used just once before ending up in a landfill. Every year, Americans use more than one billion plastic bags and throw away enough paper and plastic cups, spoons, and forks to circle to equator 300 times. In the United States, we consume 1,500 plastic water bottles every second.^v We also consume tons (literally) of paper and cardboard, glass, aluminum, and other materials, which are used just once before being discarded (Recycling helps, but not consuming these products in the first place would be much better.) No matter what indicator is used, the fact is that the world's wealthiest are consuming a staggering amount of resources, far exceeding the sustainable level of consumption.

What is particularly troubling about overconsumption is the inequality in who is over-consuming.

Unsustainable levels of consumption are generally found in affluent societies

such as the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and Australia (countries where population growth is generally not perceived to be a problem). However, many of the externalities of this consumption are born by the poorest people. Carbon emissions, an indicator of fossil fuel consumption, provide a vivid example of this inequality – the world's richest half-billion people, 7% of the global

population, are responsible for 50% of the world's CO2 emissions, while the world's poorest 50% are responsible for just 7% of CO2 emissions.^{vi} American's have a particularly large carbon footprint – our



per capita CO2 emissions are second in the world among all major countries (Australia is number one).^{vii} The

carbon emissions of one American today are equivalent to the emissions of 4 Chinese, 20 Indians, 30 Pakistanis, 40 Nigerians, or 250 Ethiopians.^{viii} These emissions are accelerating climate change, which affects us all but has particularly negative consequences on the world's poorest people.

In short, we are faced with an undeniable situation where a small number of people are consuming far more than their share of the planet's natural resources to the detriment of the planet and to the detriment of the poorest people.

It is worth noting briefly that overconsumption is not inevitable, and, in fact, has been increasing in recent decades. Although there are various factors contributing to this rise in consumption, the advertising industry is a major contributor. The average American is exposed to 3000 advertisements a day – and these ads tell us that we will be happier, sexier, and cooler with a new car, a bigger TV, the latest clothing style, and the newest cell phone or iPod. In 2012, there were 36 companies that spent more than one billion dollars on advertising, primarily



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to convince people to consume more of their products.^{ix} The influence and success of advertising campaigns in encouraging people to consume more goods should not be underestimated.

What Can We Do About Overconsumption?

Admittedly, figuring out how to address the issue of overconsumption is challenging (though no more challenging than figuring out how to deal with the very sensitive and morally-charged issue of overpopulation). Here, I explore some preliminary thoughts on things that we as individuals and as the Sierra Club can do to address the issue of overconsumption; my hope is that this article will encourage others to think of their own ideas and ways to contribute, as well.

One of the most important things we need to do is to decouple the link between consumption and happiness. While advertisers spend billions convincing us that buying stuff will make us happy, there are numerous studies that support the notion that once people's basic necessities are met (mainly food and shelter), consuming additional products will not make you any happier.^x The fact that you can't buy and consume your way to happiness is great news. It means that many people may not need to work so hard to make so much money in order to buy stuff that they don't need and won't make them any happier. Getting this message out is an important step that will hopefully encourage people to think more critically about why we unnecessarily consume so much stuff.



We also need to do more to educate ourselves and others about the true environmental impacts of our consumption. Sometimes this information can be hard to come by; at other times, it is



out there, but we don't want to hear it. Before buying a new cell phone or flying on an airplane, we need to be aware of how that decision will affect the environment and think hard about whether the negative impacts are justified. If people had a better understanding of the true environmental impacts of their decisions, it might encourage them to consume less.

There are a number of lifestyle and cultural changes that we can promote to reduce consumption. One example is promoting a sharing economy, where people share various goods and services. For example, each household probably does not need its own



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lawnmower, vacuum cleaner, tool shed, or car. Instead, these products could be shared among households. This trend is catching on as more neighborhoods and communities are beginning to have tool-lending libraries and car sharing opportunities. Not only does sharing resources help reduce consumption, but it also tends to create a sense of community, which has many additional benefits.

Finally, we should be thinking about ways in which to incorporate the negative externalities of the goods and services we consume into their cost. One way to do this is through a carbon tax.^{xi} Such a tax would incorporate the negative externalities of carbon pollution into the

cost of our decisions that result in fossil fuel consumption. If we were forced to pay for the true costs of all the fossil fuels we burn, we would very likely consume less. Whatever approach or combination of approaches is taken, it is extremely important for the sake of the environment and our overall well being to reduce the current levels of consumption in developed countries.



Conclusion

I believe that we, as Americans, the most profligate consumers of natural resources in the world, have a responsibility and an opportunity to reduce our levels of consumption in order to minimize the negative impact we have upon the environment. Currently, we are consuming far more resources than is sustainable, with perilous consequences for the environment. Addressing the issue of overconsumption will not be easy, but it is critical if we want to leave a habitable planet for future generations.

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ⁱ Nate Bellinger is on the Executive Committee of the Many Rivers Group of the Sierra Club and is a law student at the University of Oregon. Please send correspondences to natebellinger@gmail.com.

ⁱⁱ I use the term “we” loosely because most Americans and readers of this publication will fall into the class of the world’s wealthiest billion people.

ⁱⁱⁱ The United States leads the world (excluding Monaco and San Marino, two small countries with a combined population of less than 70,000) in automobiles per capita.

^{iv} Clean Air Council. (2013). Waste and Recycling Facts. Retrieved from <http://www.cleanair.org/Waste/wasteFacts.html>.

^v Scholtus, P. (2009). The US Consumes 1500 Plastic Water Bottles Every Second. Retrieved from <http://www.treehugger.com/clean-water/the-us-consumes-1500-plastic-water-bottles-every-second-a-fact-by-watershed.html>.

^{vi} The Guardian. (2009). Consumption Dwarfs Population As Main Environmental Threat. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/apr/15/consumption-versus-population-environmental-impact>.

^{vii} Pettinger, T. (2012). List of CO2 Emissions Per Capita. Retrieved from <http://www.economicshelp.org/blog/6131/economics/list-of-co2-emissions-per-capita/>.

^{viii} The Guardian. (2009). Consumption Dwarfs Population As Main Environmental Threat. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/apr/15/consumption-versus-population-environmental-impact>.

^{ix} Austin, C. (2012). The Billionaires’ Club. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-35-companies-that-spent-1-billion-on-ads-in-2011-2012-11?op=1>.

^x For example, see Rosenbloom, S. (2010) But Will It Make You Happy? Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/business/08consume.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; Schwartz, B. (2012). Consumption Can Make Us Sad? Science Says We Can Be Happy With Less. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/01/14/consumption-makes-us-sad-science-says-we-can-be-happy-with-less.html>.

^{xi} For more information about a carbon tax, see Parry, W. (2012). James Hansen, Climate Scientist, Suggests Price on Carbon. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/james-hansen-climate-change-carbon_n_1959268.html; <http://www.carbontax.org/>.