

## Effects of Consumerism

### Author and Page information

- by Anup Shah
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Richard Robbins is worth quoting at length on the impact of consumption on the environment and on people.

William Rees, an urban planner at the University of British Columbia, estimated that it requires four to six hectares of land to maintain the consumption level of the average person from a high-consumption country. The problem is that in 1990, worldwide there were only 1.7 hectares of ecologically productive land for each person. He concluded that the deficit is made up in core countries by drawing down the natural resources of their own countries and expropriating the resources, through trade, of peripheral countries. **In other words, someone has to pay for our consumption levels.** [Emphasis Added]

... Our consumption of goods obviously is a function of our culture. Only by producing and selling things and services does capitalism in its present form work, and the more that is produced and the more that is purchased the more we have progress and prosperity. The single most important measure of economic growth is, after all, the gross national product (GNP), the sum total of goods and services produced by a given society in a given year. It is a measure of the success of a consumer society, obviously, to consume.

However, the production, processing, and consumption, of commodities requires the extraction and use of natural resources (wood, ore, fossil fuels, and water); it requires the creation of factories and factory complexes whose operation creates toxic byproducts, while the use of commodities themselves (e.g. automobiles) creates pollutants and waste. Yet of the three factors environmentalists often point to as responsible for environmental pollution — population, technology, and consumption — consumption seems to get the least attention. One reason, no doubt, is that it may be the most difficult to change; our consumption patterns are so much a part of our lives that to change them would require a massive cultural overhaul, not to mention severe economic dislocation. A drop in demand for products, as economists note, brings on economic recession or even depression, along with massive unemployment.

— *Richard Robbins, Global Problem and the Culture of Capitalism, (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 209-210*

As hinted above, *within* the current economic system of “perpetual growth”, we risk being locked into a mode of development that is:

- destructive, in the long run, to the environment
- a contributing factor to poverty around the world
- a contributing factor to hunger amongst such immense wealth
- and numerous other social and ecological problems

Furthermore, as also hinted above, as consumption increases (in a wasteful way, which we shall see a bit later), the resource base has to expand to meet growth and related demands. If the resource base expands to other people’s lands, then those people don’t necessarily get to use those resources either. This is also quite bluntly captured in this following cartoon image:



© Anne Ward [Tiki Penguin](#)

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### **Misuse of land and resources**

How land is used to produce food etc. can have enormous impacts on the environment and its sustainability. (This can sometimes challenge assumptions on the instinct and common belief that we are overpopulated by sheer numbers and that this is the major cause of environmental degradation. While populations can burden the environment, the most populous regions in the world use far less resources than the wealthiest nations, and so the issue is more about how resources are used and for what purpose.) Take the following as an example:

Junk-food chains, including KFC and Pizza Hut, are under attack from major environmental groups in the United States and other developed countries because of their environmental impact. Intensive breeding of livestock and poultry for such restaurants leads to deforestation, land degradation, and contamination of water sources and other natural resources. For every pound of red meat, poultry, eggs, and milk produced, farm fields lose about five pounds of irreplaceable top soil. The water necessary for meat breeding comes to about 190 gallons per animal per day, or ten times what a normal Indian family is supposed to use in one day, if it gets water at all.

... Overall, animal farms use nearly 40 percent of the world's total grain production. In the United States, nearly 70 percent of grain production is fed to livestock.

— *Vandana Shiva, Stolen Harvest, (South End Press, 2000), pp. 70-71.*

Because industrial agriculture is using more monocultures, rather than a diversity of crops, the loss of biodiversity is leading to more resource usage, as described above. This as well as other political situations such as the motives for dumping surplus food on to developing countries to undersell the local farmers, leads to further hunger around the world. For more information on that aspect, refer to this web site's section on [food dumping](#).

Consumption patterns in wealthier countries increases demand for various foods, flowers, textiles, coffee, etc. Combined with more harmful products such as tobacco and illicit drugs, and with input-intensive agricultural practices (including using herbicides and pesticides) the diversion of and misuse of land and the associated environmental damage in unsustainable methods adds up. For additional examples and information on misuse of land, refer to this web site's look at [causes of hunger](#).

As land ownership has become more concentrated in the hands of fewer owners, larger companies, larger agribusinesses etc, and as things like food dumping, mentioned above, increases hunger and drives rural workers out of jobs, there is an increase in urban

migration as people move to the cities in hope for a better chance. This then places additional stress on the larger cities to provide for more people. It also results in more slum areas, health problems, increasing crime, over-crowding, and so on.

But cities aren't the only places that the landless move to. Some, being pushed off their own lands, will move to less arable land to hope to farm that, which may conflict with wildlife. In other cases, others may move into forested areas, clearing them with a hope to make a living from farming that cleared land. Destruction of old forests in particular can also mean loss of habitat for many wildlife. In yet other cases, many may try to immigrate to other parts of the world if they feel there is no choice left in their own country. In yet other situations, economic growth can also lead to more urban migration. Sometimes this growth of cities can go in hand with decline in the rural areas.

Due to these and a multitude of other complex socioeconomic and political factors, in different parts of the world, there are different proportions of people in urban and rural areas. For example, the World Bank reported in a 1999/2000 report that 74% of poor in Latin America and Caribbean lived in urban areas, while in Europe and Central Asia it was 67%. In the Middle East and North Africa it was 58%. In East Asia and Pacific, 33% while in Sub-Saharan Africa it was 32%. In South Asia it was 27%. (For more details see the World Bank's [World Development Report 1999/2000](#), Table A.2. The World Bank didn't explicitly categorize North and Central America for some reason, which have approximately 76% and 50% urban populations, respectively. Full country breakdowns are available in the report.)

It is not always the case that, as commonly held, the poor are the ones that end up stripping natural resource to survive. Many communities described as poor (materially) have traditions and practices that encourage protection of their environment because they understand their mutual dependency. In addition, land ownership for the poor provides mechanisms to ensure sustainable and efficient use, because of the need to care for it for their survival, as detailed for example, by Vandana Shiva, in her book *Stolen Harvest* (South End Press, 2000). Peter Rosset also shows that [smaller farms are more efficient](#) when it comes to ensuring a productive yet healthy ecosystem.

Economic policies of the wealthier nations and their consumption demands mean that more land is therefore used to grow cash crops (bananas, sugar, coffee, tea etc) for export to wealthier countries (primarily), while other land is diverted for non-productive uses (tobacco, flowers etc). Additional land is also cleared and used to grow things like cattle for beef exports. In the quantities that some of the products of these exports are consumed, it could be argued that a lot of this production is wasteful and unnecessary. The cost to the environment and local populations is borne not by the consumers of the products, but local people instead. [These economic policies that encourage this pattern are often imposed upon the poorer nations, through things like [Structural Adjustment \(SAPs\)](#) etc.]

And because food is a commodity, then it is those who can afford to pay, that will get food. The following is worth quoting at length (bulleting and spacing formatting is mine, text is original):

To understand why people go hungry you must stop thinking about food as something farmers grow for others to eat, and begin thinking about it as something companies produce for other people to buy.

- Food is a commodity. ...
- Much of the best agricultural land in the world is used to grow commodities such as cotton, sisal, tea, tobacco, sugar cane, and cocoa, items which are non-food products or are marginally nutritious, but for which there is a large market.
- Millions of acres of potentially productive farmland is used to pasture cattle, an extremely inefficient use of land, water and energy, but one for which there is a market in wealthy countries.
- More than half the grain grown in the United States (requiring half the water used in the U.S.) is fed to livestock, grain that would feed far more people than would the livestock to which it is fed. ...

The problem, of course, is that people who don't have enough money to buy food (and more than one billion people earn less than \$1.00 a day), simply don't count in the food equation.

- In other words, if you don't have the money to buy food, no one is going to grow it for you.
- Put yet another way, you would not expect The Gap to manufacture clothes, Adidas to manufacture sneakers, or IBM to provide computers for those people earning \$1.00 a day or less; likewise, you would not expect ADM ("Supermarket to the World") to produce food for them.

What this means is that ending hunger requires doing away with poverty, or, at the very least, ensuring that people have enough money or the means to acquire it, to buy, and hence create a market demand for food.

— Richard H. Robbins, [Readings on Poverty, Hunger, and Economic Development](#)

When the best agricultural land is used up to produce these cash crops, more marginal land is used for food and subsistence farming. This can also lead to clearing parts of rainforests, or other forms of encroachment on other ecosystems.

It's not just food crops. Other uses of the world's resources by the wealthier nations include metals and other raw minerals to produce automobiles, planes and so on. As nations such as China begin to rise, their appetite for these resources are quite large. However, while there is some concern raised at the amount of environmental resources such nations will eventually require, little is raised about how for decades richer nations have been consuming in further excess and waste. For more details on this, see Richard H. Robbins, as quoted above.

Many wonder why the poor cannot follow the example of the rich and get out of poverty themselves. Numerous mainstream commentators suggest that the poor should follow the example of the rich and that globalization (in its current form) provides the answer. Some may say this because they or their society has followed this ideology to get out of poverty and it worked for them, so it should work for others. Yet, often missed is where the resource base to support the increase in wealth has typically come from. If it comes from other regions then it can (not always) mean that for one society's gain, others may not. This was apparent in imperial and colonial times where vast amounts of the world's wealth was plundered and accumulated in the imperial centers in Europe. Yet, the consumption inequalities of today and the regions of immense wealth and immense poverty, on a global scale shows a similar pattern to those of previous decades and centuries. The U.N. resource consumption statistic mentioned at the start of this section (of 86 percent of the world's resources being consumed by just the world's top 20 percent) is testimony to this.

Hence, the resource base, from which to get out of economic poverty is lacking and so the same process that may have made today's wealthy richer, is not necessarily the best way for all people.

Furthermore, if today's poor attempted to reclaim those resources for their own use and for sustainable development, it will naturally be seen as a threat to the way of life for those who currently use those resources. As described in the poverty section of this web site, wars throughout history have been because of this control of resources. World War II and the resulting Cold War were also such battles. Yet because in the mainstream this is not acknowledged it is easy to just see this as a threat and act on it, without really understanding why it has become a threat. ([Side Note](#))»

This YouTube video from *Journeyman Pictures* explains some of the imbalances of power that results from resource exploitation:

[Global Resources: Management and Competition](#), July 27, 2006 (see [JourneyMan.tv](#) for higher quality video and transcript)

The wealthier consume precisely because others are poor — the rich consume at the expense of the poor. Such global inequality is very wasteful of resources, as further resources are expended maintaining this unequal balance of power (be it through military, political, social or other means). As Robbins was quoted above, “someone has to pay for our consumption levels”. (The causes of these imbalances are discussed throughout this web site, as well as later on in this section on consumption and consumerism.)

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### **Exporting Pollution and Waste from Rich Countries to Poor Countries**

Pollution is also related to increased consumption. That is, the consumption itself, plus the production and waste of products used in consumption. Automobiles are a clear example. Other examples include industrial waste (especially when just dumped into the rivers and oceans), waste from the tourist industry (including cruise liners, air travel, etc.), waste from industrial agriculture, consumer waste such as household waste, excessive product packaging, our “throw-away” culture, and so on.

While pollution is increasing in poorer countries as well, it is not solely due to rising populations, because, as the U.N. points out, and as mentioned earlier, 86% of the world's resources are consumed by the world's wealthiest 20%. Hence, even if pollution is occurring in poor countries, a large portion of it is to meet this consumer demand. In its September 2008 issue, the journal *Energy Policy* found that around [1/3rd of Chinese carbon dioxide emissions were due to the production of exports](#) and that it is mostly the developed world consuming these.

And long before the fears that the Kyoto Climate Change protocol would encourage western businesses to move dirty industry to poorer countries that were exempt from emissions reduction targets, multinational businesses were already looking for places with lower standards.

In 1991, then Chief Economist for the World Bank Larry Summers, (and US Treasury Secretary, in the Clinton Administration, until George Bush and the Republican party came into power), had been a strong backer of IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Policies, which have proved to be so disastrous to the developing world. He wrote in an internal memo (leaked to the Economist in 1992) that is very revealing:

Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]?... The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that... Under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City... The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under-five mortality is 200 per thousand.


— *Lawrence Summers, Let them eat pollution, The Economist, February 8, 1992. Quoted from Vandana Shiva, Stolen Harvest, (South End Press, 2000) p.65; See also Richard Robbins, Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 233-236 for a detailed look at this.*

Summers was talking about *migrating* industries. That is, moving them elsewhere, but to still serve their original purpose — produce for consumption by wealthier nations and people. So instead of expensive changes to factories to deal with environmental and other issues that the public and society demand, they have had the ability to move elsewhere and continue on without making these costly changes. As a result, we may see a relatively cleaner environment in the industrialized world, but it is not all explainable by using newer technologies, being more efficient, etc (which are no doubt certainly part of the explanations).

This is a partial explanation of why some of the wealthier countries have cleaner air, water and so on, compared to poorer countries that are facing more pollution, even though they consume a fraction of what wealthier nations consume. Consumption in richer countries can come at a high price for those in poorer countries as well then. (See Robbins, cited above, for a more detailed discussion of this “paradox”, who also points out for example, that the “core countries already ship 20 million tons of waste annually to the periphery”, or poor, countries (p.235).)

#### [Side Note](#)»

Another trend is to also export waste to other regions of the world. As one example, hazardous electronic waste, such as old computers, old computer monitors, etc primarily from wealthier nations, are also being exported to places like China, India and Pakistan, where they are processed in operations that are extremely harmful to human health and the environment. However, minimal or non-existent environmental and working standards and regulations, old technologies for recycling and processing, etc. is putting a lot of people and surrounding environment at risk due to the sheer amount of waste to be processed.

*Environmental News Service* quotes Jim Puckett, coordinator of [Basel Action Network](#), and one of the authors of a report titled [Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia](#) :

“They call this recycling, but it’s really dumping by another name,” added Puckett. “Yet to our horror, we further discovered that rather than banning it, the United States government is actually encouraging this ugly trade in order to avoid finding real solutions to the massive tide of obsolete computer waste generated in the U.S. daily.”

Puckett referred to the fact that the United States is the only developed country in the world that has failed to ratify the Basel Convention, a United Nations environmental treaty which has adopted a global ban on the export of hazardous wastes from the world's most developed countries to developing countries. The U.S. has exempted electronic wastes from the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act and the nation's export laws, because the material was claimed to be destined for recycling.

— *Cat Lazaroff, High-Tech U.S. Trash Floods Asia, Environment News Service, 26 February 2002*

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#### **Obesity due to Excessive Consumption**

Please note this [sub-section on obesity has moved to its own new page](#). You can also continue reading on below and see how the issue of obesity is introduced in context to consumption.

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## A cycle of waste, disparities and poverty

Poverty, land control and ownership, pollution and so on, are largely parts of economic and ideological systems too. As exemplified by the Lawrence Summers quote above, a “value” is placed on the environment, on life, on different cultures and so on.

This is so ingrained into the cultures of the wealthy nations, that the thought of massive adjustment of lifestyles and economic systems to a more sustainable consumption seems too much to consider. Instead the system is continued and maintained. Built into the system itself are mechanisms that encourage this, without realizing the costs.

For example, a population where health is generally getting worse may result in more sales of medicines or a growth in private healthcare and other knock-on industries. Instead of these always being seen as a cost, they are seen as providing more jobs and creating wealth, and as a result it counts towards GDP and other indicators of economic health! It then looks like the economy is dealing with this fine, without realizing that even more resources are used to support these jobs and industries that may not be needed in as much intensity.

It is easy to blame consumers from wealthy countries as the sole cause of these problems elsewhere though. However, as mentioned in the initial pages on this section, much of this mass consumerism culture in the “north” has not been based solely on natural demand, but a *created* demand. That is, from large businesses and industry wanting to sell more products and make more profits. Politically this has also been encouraged as it helps create a more conforming populous satisfied by material needs. As an effect of this, as such businesses also strive to eliminate competition by becoming bigger and bigger, this has become more destructive than what we might actually realize, and on a wider scale.

Even as the United States began to feel the onset of a recession (due to crisis of overproduction) coming on in the middle of 2001, the economic and political leaders respond by attempting to encourage people to spend more. The *Economist* is worth quoting to highlight that:

SHOPPING: it’s long been one of America’s favourite pastimes, but more recently it has taken centre stage in the battle to prevent the world’s biggest economy from sliding into recession. As share prices have plunged along with profits, and layoffs have soared, it has sometimes seemed this year as if the American consumer’s addiction to retail therapy was incurable. That’s just as well, because consumer spending has been the main reason the economy has not dipped into recession this year. But now there are signs that even America’s heroic spendthrifts may be losing heart.

— [Spend, spend, spend](#). *The Economist*, August 31st 2001

This over-production and over-capacity (due to over-estimating the *expected* demands) partly due to “under” consumption leads to dominant companies attempting to consolidate losses and maintaining profits via things like mergers and layoffs etc. However, even in wealthier nations, it cannot be a guaranteed success.

Yet poor countries suffer immensely. For example, when the financial crisis hit Asia around 1997, at a time of enormous production, collapse meant that western corporations were able to pick up almost entire industries on the cheap. This helped destroy growing competition, as the situation was getting so competitive and fierce, that the best way (for those who can) to ride through this was to buy out others, merge or consolidate. While capital fled to the West and there was a temporary boom, as exemplified by the hi-tech sector in the U.S., overproduction was likely to catch up, as it seems to have now. Hence the West were consuming on “borrowed” time and resources from the poor. As Robbins said, “someone has to pay.”

Another way then, for industries to continue growth and profitability etc, is to try and create demand. Markets may have to be created where there were none before. But, as a result, the following effects can occur:

- Demands need to be created where there may have been none previously, or may be minimally.
- Luxuries can therefore be encouraged to become necessities.
- The commodification of food, the impact of policies such as structural adjustment policies and conditionalities have led to mass production of the same commodities from many regions, mostly exported to the wealthy nations.
- But the huge “price war” leads to price depressions.
- Mass consumption increases in the wealthy nations that receive these exports at cheap prices and demands are further increased.



- Poor producers are further marginalized as the wealthy export producers use even more resources for the drive for further profits to meet this demand.
- Additional requirements are made on the environment to produce even more.
- Boom and bust cycles lead to various dynamics, such as
  - During booms, there is more consumption in wealthy areas, and from poorer areas there are more people migrating towards rich countries.
  - During busts, further poverty, increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric, and in poor countries especially, pushing the already marginalized onto additional lands because the best lands are already owned and controlled. In worse cases, conflicts can also result.

(Of course, there are many other complex factors, both causes and effects. For more examples, see various sections within the [causes of poverty](#) part of this web site.)

When looking at the destruction of rain forests in Central America, a similar pattern to what is mentioned above was observed by John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto, in their book *Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Truth About Rain Forest Destruction*, (Food First, 1995), and also highlighted by editor Douglas H. Boucher, *The Paradox of Plenty; Hunger in a Bountiful World*, (Food First, 1999), pp. 86—87. Summarizing that here:

The patterns of inter-related issues that would affect forest destruction could be seen in many different areas, such as banana production, citrus and other fruits, rubber tree plantations, and other commodities. Yet, these were “similar politically if quite distinct biologically”, and would typically include the following stages:

1. “Visionary capitalists identify an economic opportunity for the market expansion of an agricultural product”
2. “They purchase (or steal, or bribe into a government concession) some land, including land that may contain rain forest, which is promptly cut down.”
3. “They import workers to produce products”
4. “After a period of boom the product goes bust on the world market” which leads to cut backs, layoffs, etc.
5. Those laid off must seek other means to survive, and in poor countries and rural areas that may mean growing subsistence crops on marginal lands
6. “The only place the now unemployed workers can find land no one will kick them off of is in the forest, which means yet more forest is converted to agriculture.”

They continue to point out the flaws in the accepted Malthusian theories of population growth placing demands on natural resources. An environmental group in India, Centre for Science and Environment, captures this in a simple cartoon graphic:



© Centre for Science and Environment [Campaign on Forests](#)

(See also this web site’s [population](#) section for more on population debates, and this site’s section on [biodiversity](#) for more about deforestation and other issues around biodiversity and its importance.)

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Some examples/case studies

There are many products and industries where one can identify such patterns. We will look at some of these next.

[Tobacco](#) and [obesity](#) are, in a way, simpler examples that many can see being related to the more negative aspects of consumption encouraged by “corporate capitalism.” These two are looked at first.

On the pages after that, we then look at two stark examples that we may not often think about: [sugar](#) and [beef](#) consumption.

- The consumption of these have not historically been as high as they are today.
- Yet, sugar plantations during colonial times, for example, was a major employer of slaves and continues to be a major contributor to environmental degradation, poverty, health costs and all manner of wasted and diverted wealth.
- Cattle raising has often led to clearing of rainforests, such as parts of the Amazon — not to feed local people however, but for fast food restaurants, such as McDonalds. Such demands then serve to meet the “needs” of producers.

The example of [bananas](#) discussed earlier, and how that has affected forests, environmental sustainability, economies of entire regions, etc. is also discussed in more depth after sugar and beef.

There are also numerous examples of how conflict and war can be fueled partly because of demands placed on resources, the want to maintain a certain way of life, even if it is wasteful, etc. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- various conflicts in Africa (such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, etc) for resources to be exported to the west, such as diamonds, wood, coltan (without which computer chips can’t work),
- the historic domination and influence of the Middle East for oil,
- for the support of dictatorships by the west, such as previously in Indonesia to support massacres and invasion of East Timor (also for oil and other resources)
- of oil multinationals being accused for killing local and indigenous people,
- and so on.
- Even the Cold War (which we often just dismiss away as an ideological battle, but behind the ideology was access to resources) was such a battle.
- Many of these are already presented in other contexts throughout this site and links to these are provided at the end of this site’s section on consumption.

These are not complete examples, and of course, over time more will be added here and throughout the site.

Looking at some of these examples next will further highlight how in various ways there is enormous waste structured within our system of the current form of “corporate capitalism.”

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