

Sustainable Consumption

Norman Myers

In order to achieve all-round sustainability of our economies and lifestyles, we need to revise our consumption patterns. Hence the significance of two conferences to be held in Tokyo in late May 2000. The first, entitled "The Transition to Sustainability," will place much emphasis on consumption and is organized by the Inter-Academy Panel, composed of 80 scientific academies around the world and headed by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. The second, "Business and Environment," is primarily a gathering of business leaders and is equally important because the corporate community holds an outsize key to achieving sustainable consumption.

A first step toward sustainable consumption is to recognize that consumption patterns will inevitably change in the future, if only by force of environmental circumstance—notably global warming, among a host of environmental problems. As that future arrives, we must ensure that there is an increase in consumption by the three billion people with incomes of less than \$3 per day. At the same time, the 800 million people in developing and transition countries who earn enough to move into the high-consuming classes should be able to enjoy the fruits of their newfound affluence. How to enable them to do so without undue disruption of environmental systems, especially those of global scope such as the climate?

One answer may lie with the business sector, often fingered as the source of consumption-derived environmental problems. Were human communities to deploy all of the ecotechnologies that are already available from innovative business (such as energy efficiency, pollution controls, waste management, recycling, cradle-to-cradle products, and zero-emissions industry), we could enjoy twice as much material welfare while consuming only half as many natural resources and causing only half as much pollution and waste.* Ecotechnologies are now worth \$600 billion per year, on a par with the global car industry. There are big profits ahead for truly enterprising businesses.

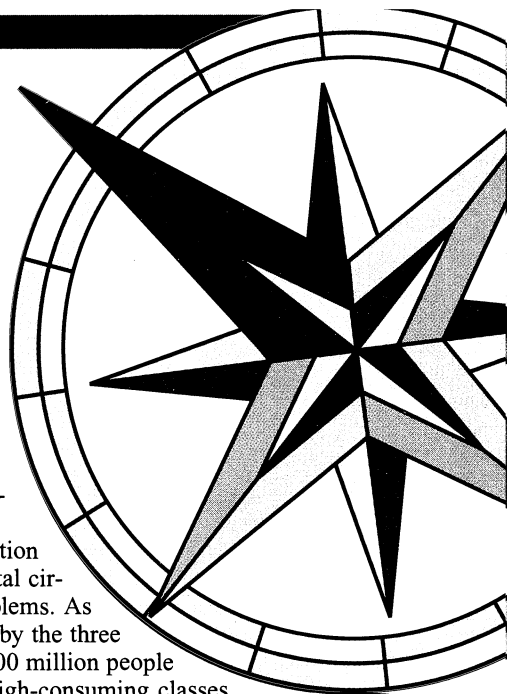
Three policy initiatives could promote the transition to sustainable consumption. We could abandon gross national product (GNP) as an indicator of economic well-being; it suggests to the consumer that our economies need take no account of sustainability. In the United States, per capita GNP rose by 49% during 1976–98, whereas per capita "genuine progress" (the economy's output with environmental and social costs subtracted and added weight given to education, health, etc.) declined by 30%.† Several alternative indicators, such as Net National Product, are being developed by Canada, Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria. Second, we could ensure that prices reflect all environmental and social costs. For example, U.S. society ultimately pays at least \$6 to burn a gallon of gasoline (through pollution, road accidents, traffic congestion, etc.). Pricing gasoline realistically would curtail the excessive car culture and open up huge market demand for improved public transportation. Similar considerations apply to the true price of a hamburger, a shirt, and even a house.

Yet (and herein lies the third initiative) consumers are encouraged to practice environmental ignorance thanks to subsidies that, for example, support fossil fuels 10 to 15 times more than clean and renewable sources of energy such as solar energy and wind power. Were all these subsidies to be phased out and a marketplace with a level playing field established, the energy alternatives would soon become commercially competitive. There are hosts of other subsidies that promote the car culture, over-intensive agriculture, wasteful use of water, overlogging of forests, and overharvesting of marine fisheries. Worldwide they total almost \$1.5 trillion, or twice as much as all military spending. They induce massive distortions in our economies and do massive harm to the environment. Although it will be hard to change consumption patterns, they may be more plastic than currently supposed. (For example, during a recent 20-year period, almost 40 million Americans gave up smoking.) Similarly, it may be possible to change many production patterns—the flip side of the consumption coin.

However hard it will be to live with the drastic changes required, it will not be so hard as to live in a world drastically impoverished by the environmental injuries of current consumption.

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*P. Hawken, A. B. Lovins, L. H. Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution* (Little, Brown; Boston, MA, 1999). †C. Cobb, G. S. Goodman, M. Wackernagel, *Why Bigger Isn't Better: The Genuine Progress Indicator* (Redefining Progress, San Francisco, CA, 1999).



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