

CONSUMING THE INTANGIBLE: AN APPEAL TO SIMPLIFY OUR LIVES

By
Davis Backer
University of Colorado at Boulder

A thesis submitted to the
University of Colorado at Boulder
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements to receive
Honors designation in
Environmental Studies
April 2012

Thesis Advisors:

Dale Miller, Environmental Studies
Dr. Michael Haffey, Sociology
Dr. David Youkey, Philosophy, Committee Chair

© 2012 by Davis Backer
All rights reserved

*To my parents,
this education and project would not
have been possible without your
unconditional love and support, the last 22 years*

Contents

Preface & Acknowledgments.....	i
Abstract	ii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Background	7
Chapter 3 Literature Review.....	11
Chapter 4 Environmental Concerns	20
Chapter 5 False Wants	32
Chapter 6 A Lack of Psychological Wellbeing	39
Chapter 7 Looking Forward	46
Appendix A.....	53
Bibliography.....	54

Preface & Acknowledgments

When the decision was first made to undertake this project, I had very little idea of the direction the paper would take or even the topic being discussed. After taking time to consider the issues germane to my own life, however, it was abundantly clear that consumerism presented itself as a threat to my own health and wellbeing.

In retrospect, I'm very pleased I chose a topic so applicable to my daily experiences. Growing up, I had everything I ever needed and certainly most, if not all, of what I ever wanted. That being said, my parents were careful not to raise my brothers and I as spoiled, entitled individuals. Following the philosophy of Warren Buffet, they gave us just enough to do anything but not enough to do nothing. As I look toward graduation, the idea of graduate school, and ultimately, the next stage of my life, I can't help but be thankful for the plethora of opportunities that were afforded to me. For that, I'm forever grateful to my parents, friends, and community.

As a research paper, this project was refreshingly introspective and it has made me question my own daily decisions in a significant way. It's impossible for me to ignore the fact that I wrote this paper on my MacBook Pro, with my iPhone sitting nearby, going to a four-year, out-of-state institution. I eat meat, I drive cars (though I don't own one), I enjoy nice things, and am far from a minimalist. This project isn't endorsing a massive redistribution of wealth or calling on political agents to radically change their ways. Rather, it's a reflection of worry that the wellbeing of our society is in jeopardy due to our own subconscious priorities. I don't intend to demonize the conveniences associated with wealth but rather to emphasize the importance of wealth merely serving to facilitate our lives – not define them.

In the following pages, I've outlined what I take to be the greatest threats to not only our physical and natural environments, but also our mental ones. Some of you reading will recognize many of my primary, secondary, and tertiary sources while some of it will be brand new material. It is my hope that this synthesis of material is presented in such a way so as to make us critically consider our own habits. It is not meant merely as a theoretical exercise, but as a practical reflection on the way we live our lives.

I'd like to thank my advisors, Dr. David Youkey, Dale Miller, and Dr. Michael Haffey. Their dedicated time, effort, and genuine interest was invaluable in the realization of my project. I hope that the work presented in the following pages is as much a reflection of the passion I have for the material, as it is of the energy they invested as well. I was incredibly fortunate to have such an impressive team with whom to share ideas, commiserate, and to spend nine months working.

Abstract

This project was undertaken to explore three very distinct yet related ideas: (1) How consumerism has contributed to a significant degradation of our natural environment; (2) How our mental health and wellbeing have been corrupted as a result of our culture of affluence; (3) Whether or not consumerism has helped contribute to a salient moral degradation of society. Through a careful process of research and study on material already published on these topics, what follows is a synthesis of expert analysis representing a variety of academic and vocational fields. It's becoming clear that material wealth consistently fails as an adequate barometer for one's chances at happiness in today's society. Yet at an alarming rate, our citizens are turning to the acquisition of material things to satisfy programmed desires that are neither fulfilling nor sustainable. The earth is being tested of its ability to provide for our extractive demands. In the interest of preserving what healthy ecosystems we have left, and in preserving our valuable sense of autonomy, we must redefine what it is that makes us truly happy. The answer lies in placing emphasis on the inherent value of our natural environments and certainly on the closeness of our personal relationships.

1

Introduction

Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.

- Edward Abbey

Plentitude is American culture's perverse burden. Most Americans have everything they could possibly need but they still don't think it's nearly enough. They seem to have hopelessly confused the difference between wants and needs. In the last quarter century the insatiable craving for the consumer culture and a desire of developing nations to emulate the "American way" has only grown stronger. In an attempt to explore this phenomenon, I've studied a variety of work published on relevant topics by a collection of authors. The project largely represents a synthesis of information already published on the topic, concluding with personal recommendations on how to steer ourselves in a promising direction. This paper will seek to answer how a distinct materialistic mindset has degraded the moral fabric of the average North American, its effects on our environment, and why it's imperative that we reverse the trend.

When I look at the wealthiest people around me, those who have seemingly everything they *need* and most, if not everything, they *want* – at least for the moment; it occurs to me that these individuals are often the most dissatisfied with the state of their personal fulfillment as people. This paradox presents itself as a unique problem as the underlying reasons are often poorly understood and misdiagnosed. Ironically, the United States has proudly boasted some of the highest levels of documented GDP for years and yet from a human happiness perspective, it ranks lower than countries like Nigeria, Congo, Iraq, and Cambodia. This data seems to support the idea that North Americans are seeking happiness in all the wrong places. Rather than relying on our families, our close personal relationships, and our environment to provide us with the security we seek, we turn to the

acquisition of material goods to attain this elusive state of satisfaction. Here we encounter highly specialized individuals confronted with an increasingly closed and interconnected world of products over which they have little or no control. Acts of production come to be meaningless exercises in which individuals do not see their roles in the overall process or in the production of the final product. Relationships among people are highly specialized and impersonal. Ultimately, consumption becomes little more than the devouring of one meaningless product after another.

Although the United States has enjoyed overwhelming, global, economic dominance since World War II, this material prosperity has come at high social costs. While the U.S. is home to over 300 million people, many of whom live healthy, prosperous lives, 65 percent of the population is overweight or obese and the country boasts the highest obesity rates among teenagers of any nation in the world. “Diets of highly processed foods and the sedentary lifestyle that goes with a heavy reliance on automobiles have led to a worldwide epidemic of obesity...soaring rates of heart disease and diabetes, surging health care costs, and a lower quality of day-to-day life are the result” (Mayell 2004).

When you consider the rate of increase in resource extraction, waste accumulation, and psychological ailments that are attributed to the typical North American lifestyle, and compare it, in context, to the fact that we live in a finite world, the picture that emerges is one of urgency. People have lost sight of what’s sincerely important in their lives. Hillary Mayell, a journalist for National Geographic, took a close look at a report published by the Worldwatch Institute in 2004. The Worldwatch Institute focuses on the contemporary challenges of climate change, resource degradation, population growth, and poverty in an attempt to develop innovative strategies for achieving a sustainable society. In it, the report acknowledged this startling priority issue, resulting in some disconcerting anomalies. For

instance, the worldwide expenditures for cosmetics is close to 18 billion dollars, while annual expenses to eliminate world hunger and malnutrition are estimated at 19 billion dollars.

Similarly, U.S. and European pet food costs total 17 billion dollars a year, while the estimated cost of immunizing every child, providing clean drinking water for all, and achieving worldwide literacy is 16.3 billion dollars (Mayell 2004).

It has occurred to me that in the search for security and happiness in a world that seems increasingly threatening to a secure future for this and subsequent generations of its populace, that our citizens have turned to the acquisition of new “things” to satisfy what their families and natural environment seemingly cannot. The term designated to describe this degrading acquisitive process is often understood as “affluenza,” a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of over-load, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In fact, affluenza tends to manifest itself in people whose basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health and safety are fully satisfied. Several studies have corroborated this idea, that the high-consumption lifestyle is not necessarily conducive to health and happiness. Findings from a survey of life satisfaction in more than 65 countries indicate that income and happiness tend to correlate well until about 13,000 dollars of annual income per person. After that, additional income appears to confer only modest increments in self-reported happiness (Blatt 2005). Once the United States assumed its role as the economic model that other countries would attempt to emulate, the localized problems we were experiencing suddenly began globalizing. Threats to our wallets, relationships, communities, and environment are being experienced on nearly every continent. Certainly there are areas where the epidemic is less perverse, but like a disease, this “virus” will mutate, adapt, and become more severe if not adequately addressed.

Richard Harwood, a pollster who has worked for the Merck Family Fund, points out that this materialistic mindset isn't unique to any one demographic. Quite the opposite in fact,

It crosses religious lines, age lines, race, income, and education. There is a universal feeling in this country that we've become too materialistic, too greedy, too self-absorbed, too selfish, and that we need to bring back into balance the enduring values that have guided this country over generations: values of faith, family, responsibility, generosity, friendship (*Affluenza*, 2005).

In the interest of providing a future of opportunity and possibility for our children, we must find a way to alter our contemporary understanding of the environment and the subordinate role we've assumed it plays. In addition, a restructuring of the values taught in our homes and schools seems to be in order. As the Native American proverb goes: we do not inherit the earth and her resources from previous generations, rather, we borrow it from future ones. We must change our own model in order to inspire people in developing states to adopt a less wasteful lifestyle.

Considering Kalle Lasn's worry that consumerism is the mother of all environmental problems, it seems incumbent that we address the environmental side of the story. For me, growing up on the rocky Maine coast has provided a unique perspective on the benefit that our natural environment can have on our personal lives. When you're fortunate enough to live in a place of great natural beauty, the daily grind seems that much more manageable. Once we learn to appreciate this benefit in its entirety, we dually come to appreciate the obligation we carry to protect these places. As we'll see in the following pages, part of that responsibility entails curbing our incessant appetite for *more*.

As our country tries to slowly reverse the economic burden placed on us by the global financial meltdown of 2008, the chief concern seems rooted in our obsessive relationship with the quarterly ring of the cash register and the accompanying figure associated with GDP. Our fascination, commitment to, and obsession with this symbol has

resulted in some of the worst environmental atrocities that the world has ever seen. This may be presented as a catch-22 for some people as they agree with my thesis yet insist on the necessity of growth merely to “keep up” with global population growth and productivity gains. I’m hesitant to accept that idea. For decades, most North Americans were of the belief that each generation could (and would, in fact) achieve greater wealth and prosperity than the previous one. The idea that an ever increasing populous could somehow sustainably pursue this self-serving goal is hard to imagine. It was naïve to assume that then and it would be absurd to continue that thought process today; at least by any monetary or materialistic measures.

The example being set for today’s youth—and even future generations—is one that accepts a growing debt crisis. One in which it’s acceptable to “buy now and pay later”. What our shortsighted politicians, corporate CEOs, and even presidential candidates fail to acknowledge, however, is that the debt is already long past due. We can no longer expect future generations to assume the responsibility of shouldering the costs we incur. Resources are being extracted at rates that far exceed our Earth’s capacity to restock, and similarly, waste is being accumulated and disposed of much faster than the planet could begin to absorb. If the American lifestyle were to be adopted by the hundreds of millions of people around the globe who wish to do so, several more planets would be required to fulfill those needs. The earth can, and will, eventually be exhausted of its ability to provide for its inhabitants. When that day comes, the human race better be well on its way to Alpha Centaury, Earth 2.0, or wherever other place in the universe that will have us.

In the past decade, this country has seen more people declare bankruptcy than graduate from college. We have twice as many shopping centers as high schools, and while we constitute less than five percent of the world’s population, we’re woefully responsible for

nearly a quarter of the total production of greenhouse gas emissions. A slow disintegration of the middle class has consolidated wealth to unprecedented levels leaving CEOs with compensation packages nearly 475 times that of their average employee. Almost ninety-five percent of our workforce expresses a desire to spend more time with their families while they find themselves working more hours, annually, than any other industrialized nation in the world. And since 1950, Americans have used up more of the earth's natural resources than *everyone who has lived on the planet before then*. As Harwood recognized, *supra*, this degradation of both our natural and personal/mental environments transcends age, sex, ethnicity, and income levels. While the epidemic has taken hold of the majority of North Americans, other societies around the world have the opportunity to learn a valuable lesson about the importance of preserving more balanced lifestyles. It is my hope that within the following pages, the extent of this issue can be more fully understood, leaving readers with a desire to question their own day-to-day habits.

Realistically, it won't be the contemporary human race, as we understand it, that solves the issues plaguing our planet. It will be an evolutionary lineage very similar to ours but with more of our strengths and fewer of our weaknesses; more confident, farseeing, capable, and prudent. They will have a capacity for empathy, understanding, and foresight that far exceeds our current abilities. They will look back, in retrospect, with a sense of resentment at how we could have possibly steered them into the mess they find themselves. For all of our enormous successes, triumphs, and applications, we continue to prove how young and immature our species really is.

2

Background

In 1943, Abraham Maslow wrote a paper titled *A Theory of Human Motivation* expanded upon within his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*. His most well known work is related to the philosophy he developed on basic human needs. Maslow's "hierarchy of [human] needs" is often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid, with the largest and most fundamental needs at the bottom, and the eventual need for self-actualization at the top. His work on this subject is highly relevant to the thesis of this paper, which is that the dominant life focus today, for a rapidly increasing portion of the world's citizenry, particularly those in developed economies, is on the excessive acquisition and consumption of goods that have nothing to do with fulfilling their basic requirements in life, all to the detriment of their overall sense of wellbeing.

Maslow begins with what he describes as physiological needs. In other words, aspects of one's life that are necessary for survival. In the absence of any one of these, the ability for the body to continue functioning is put at risk. Some of these components include breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, and excretion. Once these physical needs have been secured, Maslow suggests that individual physical safety takes priority in influencing behavior. As Maslow points out, this certainly applies to *physical* safety in the case of war, natural disasters, or abuse where people are highly susceptible to experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Similarly, desires for economic or financial security in the face of economic crisis are dually important factors in personal decisions made across the board. Finding a reliable job, purchasing health insurance, contributing money to a savings account,

and relocating to safer neighborhoods are all examples of actions motivated by the need for security and safety.

The next level up on Maslow's pyramid is dedicated to a social need involving feelings of belonging. Deficiencies in the fulfillment of the sense of belonging can result from any number of experiences, including extended hospitalization, childhood neglect, emotional shunning, and ostracism. During certain periods of development (particularly childhood), the need for a sense of belonging can supersede those for physical safety - as evidenced by children who cling to abusive parents or even adults who remain in abusive marriages or partnership. In the absence of attention to this need, the ability to form and maintain emotionally significant relationships is difficult, if not impossible. Symptoms of loneliness, social anxiety, and depression all threaten the wellbeing of individuals deprived of shared connections or love.

The next level in Maslow's pyramid is that of personal esteem. Humans share an innate need to be respected, feel a sense of personal contribution, and self-worth. To satisfy this need, we seek status recognition, prestige, honor, and attention.

At the top of Maslow's pyramid is the human need for self-actualization. Success, here, manifests itself in living up to the ultimate potential of one's life. Even if this is never fully realized in an individual, the individual will survive but with a life that lacks personal completeness. Maslow's hierarchy is set up such that an individual cannot secure the status of one level without prior mastery of the lower levels of the pyramid. This observation, that wellbeing exists only in a balanced lifestyle and should only be considered from a holistic perspective, is important. As discussed below in this paper, a lifestyle focused on consumerism is incongruent with Maslow's model of a holistic and fulfilling life. In thinking about how the term 'consumerism' will be used within this paper, it must be assumed that

there are connotations of *excess*. The mental health and moral integrity of our society is being threatened by it. Most people tend to associate suffering with scarcity and deprivation.

Unfortunately, the citizens of the wealthiest nations on the planet, however, are suffering in a very different way. Their suffering is caused not by deprivation, but rather, by plentitude.

While it is easy to point to the Industrial Revolution for fostering a propensity for production, utilization, and consumption, history suggests that these patterns have existed for centuries. People were consumers long before they were literate. Evidence supports the theory that prehistoric man traded stone – used for making tools – and other useful minerals. However, it would be naïve to compare the intertribal/village economies of the past with the globalized machine that has resulted today. And, although the tendency to acquire and consume goods beyond those needed to satisfy basic human needs has existed for millennia, the recent mania to consume at a rate that actually degrades our quality of life is a fairly recent phenomenon. Before the Industrial Revolution, the world's consumer economy was modest. Most people (even those who could afford their own land) were farmers, who usually maintained a humble existence from the soil and were afforded little or no disposable income. In the late 18th century, however, this began to change.

As many historians have observed, one of the most significant changes in local economies, consisted of the rapid development of shops and new marketing methods. While more antiquated forums of commerce were still common (such as peddling and fairs), it's clear that the establishment of the shopkeeper was instrumental in the realization of the first consumer societies. Many academics have suggested that success here was largely attributable to the realization by producers that the needs and wants of customers were extremely elastic. That is to say, the needs and wants were not confined to what was required to survive, or even to what was expected of conventional standards. There was a newfound demand for

products and services that didn't necessarily contribute to an individual's existence, but rather were produced for the sole purpose of facilitating of glamorizing day-to-day activities.

For the first time, marketing strategies were put in place to entice new clientele. Storeowners did their best to attract untapped market potential by setting up attractive window displays. Bargain items were quickly established and stores even started selling at losses even if it only meant increased foot traffic. Additionally, consumer credit was first extended around this time - encouraging the public to buy, not only what it didn't need, but more significantly, what it couldn't afford. Popular outlets also promoted gifts to regulars, promoting the importance of status by inspiring others to "have to have" the same thing(s) and instilling a subliminal need for people to constantly try to "keep up with the Joneses" (Stearns 2006).

Peter Stearns, professor of History at George Mason University, notes that among the goods first involved in the "consumer revolution," clothing headed the list. Extravagant hats, wigs, and wide skirts quickly established themselves as luxury, must-have accessories. Regular fashion shows in cities such as London and Paris set the early tone for what would be trendy in the coming months. However, even in its infancy, plenty of people were aware of the dangerous potential consumerism posed for willing participants. "People began referring to an 'epidemical madness' to consume the latest fashions; they talked of 'universal' contagions and 'infections,' referring to the compulsive power of clothing styles" (Stearns 2006). As consumer habits soon began to include household items, these patterns only intensified.

3

Literature Review

Before attempting to address a solution to gluttonous consumption, we must consider the root causes and how it manifested itself in the first place. Kalle Lasn, founder of *The Media Foundation*, *Adbusters Magazine*, *Powershift Advertising Agency*, and the *Culture Jammers Network*, points to the sociological influences that have swept through our society by means of the media.

The first agenda of the commercial media is...to sell fear. What the “news” story of a busload of tourists gunned down in Egypt and the cop show about widespread corruption on the force have in common is that they contribute to the sense that the world is a menacing, inhospitable, untrustworthy place. Fear breeds insecurity—and then consumer culture offers us a variety of ways to buy our way back to security (Lasn 2000).

Lasn’s view implies that overly indulgent consumerism is the result of a type of dependency disorder and that consumers have no true freedom of choice in their actions. The American public has come to *rely* on the process of purchasing and consuming in order to feel positive about the life they lead. Whereas great thinkers such as Edward Abbey and Henry David Thoreau found solace in the pursuit of knowledge and happiness, contemporary society seems to have lost sight of the inherent value in working towards something. It’s no longer about the journey but rather about the materialistic destination. As Lasn suggests, when everything is at hand and easily accessible, nothing is ever earnestly received, and when nothing is hard-won, nothing really satisfies. In the absence of satisfaction, our lives become superficial and insincere (Lasn 2000).

An insight into purchasing motives suggests that expensive goods and services earn the buyer prestige in the eyes of the other people in the buyer’s peer circle. Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability (Stebbins 2009). This reputability,

however, appears to be questionably positive. Typecasts and worries that are connected with the status of affluence seem to be pervasive. These stereotypes may include: 1) the belief that the wealthy are driven solely by self-interest, 2) the belief that the wealthy are acquisitive, ruthless, and dishonest, and/or 3) the expectation that affluent individuals have a sense of entitlement and are overly demanding (Cashman 2009). While it is noble to desire a lifestyle for your own children that is as good if not better than the one you may have enjoyed growing up, there appears to be some merit in avoiding many of the negative connotations associated with highly materialistic lifestyles. Indeed, a humble existence is possible while still providing ample educational opportunities and other such endeavors to your family.

Advocates of consumerism claim that people should be able to spend their time and money the way they want. In general, it's clear that people don't disagree with this—a freedom to decide is important. But because of the overwhelming manner in which advertising has engulfed our lives, consumerism has evolved to become less of a choice and more of a coercion (Masci 1999). As Carl Sandburg so appropriately put it, “[t]ime is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you”. If businesses can't literally make what we need—to feel a part of something larger or to feel included—then they can at least position what they make as what we need, as though it might quench some other, deeper thirst (Walker 2008). The merchant doesn't sell his product to the consumer; he sells the consumer to the product. He does not work tirelessly to improve and simplify his merchandise; he degrades and simplifies the customer (Sandlin, *et al.* 2010).

Critics have argued for years that television advertising aimed at children should be banned, or at the very least, severely limited. Consumer culture is playing an increasing role in the lives of children, shaping many forms of their participation in the life of the

community. There appears to be an interesting dichotomy among the classes, however, in the role of these children (depending on their financial resources). Among the privileged, children are consumers, being educated to spend their family resources to their own individual benefit. Among the poor, however, the most devastating form of economic participation is manipulative labor in all its forms: factory wage labor, sex work, soldiering, domestic labor, and agriculture. These children are themselves consumed, their exploitation widespread (Roche 2009).

The fundamental problem lies in the fact that children are incapable of differentiating between marketing and programming (Masci 1999). The constant barrage of advertising perpetuates a vicious cycle in which children frequently ask for things that their parents either can't afford or don't want them to have. It's difficult for parents to constantly have to say 'no' to their children. The strain that this can have on family dynamics is inevitably great. A common result of this behavior is a propensity for hyper-consuming once these children are no longer limited to their parents for purchasing (Sayer 2002). This way of acting out of defiance or contempt is another example of the negativity that the media has fostered within society. And as many critics point out, it may illustrate a salient "market failure," one where absolute free choice leads to coercion. It may be exactly what stands in the way of establishing a solution to the problem.

Opponents of regulating with regards to televised advertising argue that commercials are not to blame and that they do not send destructive messages to children (or turn them into irresponsible citizens for that matter). After taking care of necessities, most people seem to prioritize the priceless – cohesive family relationships, love, solidarity with others, mutuality, autonomy and so on (Lodziak 2002). Jeff Bobeck, spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters, suggests that most of today's adults grew up on television and

are now productive and law-abiding citizens (Masci 1999). Bobeck seems to draw an unrealistic comparison, though. These proponents of unregulated advertising are failing to acknowledge the consequence of advertisers hiring child psychologists, consultants, and sociologists to determine the most efficient means for conveying their particular product. When millions of dollars are spent each year on such research, children are helpless to defend their mental environment from intrusion. The 24-inch boxes that produced black/white images 30-years-ago pale in comparison to the 60-inch, high-definition, movie-screen sized entertainment centers that most children grow up with today.

Author, Bill McKibben, once did an experiment in which he had people record what their cable provider offered (across all channels) over a 24-hour period. After examining the 2,400 hours of footage he received, the one overriding message he was able to gather was that humans were the most important things on earth. “You, sitting there on the couch, clutching the remote, are the center of creation, the heaviest object in the known universe; all things orbit your desires. This Bud’s for You” (Rosenblatt 1999). The message is overwhelmingly that we are the heart of the universe, that we have needs, and that we won’t be fulfilled until we buy the right product to fill those needs. Again, we return to the idea that consumption has led us to an unfortunate situation where we are increasingly focused on acquisition as the primary goal in life (Cullity 2004). With the average American coming into contact with nearly 3,000 commercial messages a day, it isn’t difficult to understand how this came to be.

While we are warranted in our concerns of how a consumerist mindset has deteriorated the moral fabric of our modern day society, there seems to be an additional consideration that has yet to be acknowledged. Is consumerism killing planet earth? Americans consume three times as much fresh water, ten times as much energy, and

nineteen times as much aluminum as the typical citizen of a developing country (Chapman 2000). It's apparent that many ecological crises are tied to consumption including the depletion of water, increased air pollution, and the depletion of our fisheries (Masci 1999). James Speth, author of *Red Sky at Morning*, outlines several main threats to the planet's environment, all of which can all be connected to consumerism. Land use conversion is the biggest threat of all, according to Speth. As 33 percent of earth's forests have been cleared, 50 percent of wetlands destroyed, 95 percent of original forests within the U.S. lost, and 99 percent of tall-grass prairies eradicated, humans are to blame for all of this. Freshwater shortages, including 20 percent of river flow worldwide being extracted for human use, combined with watercourse modification (60 percent of the world's major river basins have been fragmented) have resulted in serious threats to global biodiversity (Speth 2004). Again, the argument has been made that a continuation of the American lifestyle is sustainable in the long run (note, this assumes stagnant growth elsewhere in the world). When considering the fact that various developing nations are attempting to emulate this lifestyle, however, we are forced to seriously reconsider this prediction.

The environmental harm that is a byproduct of our consumption patterns is explored in further detail in chapter 4, below. For the moment, suffice it to say that it is clear that lifestyles, especially in the west, will have to change if there is to be any chance of averting the long-term consequences of resource depletion, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, the production of waste or the pollution and destruction of valued "natural" environments (Reisch 2004). Technological optimists such as Julian Simon and Jerry Taylor, however, are of the opinion that innovation and progress will serve to circumvent potential future issues. The concept here is that humans have been subject to environmental adversity for thousands of years. What has not only sustained us as a race but has actually enhanced

our living standards is our propensity for learning new ways of life and adapting to our conditions. Any future dearth of resources won't be an issue since we have always adapted ourselves to changing realities. Technological innovation allows one to work around resource limitations (Masci 1999). While this may be true to a large extent, most people believe these claims are overstated and overly optimistic. If the rest of the world arrives at our levels of consumption, we'd be attempting to utilize five to six times the resources we do today on a planet that isn't getting any larger.

In an attempt to find solutions to these seemingly impossible problems, the answer may not be found in a tangible plan of action. Rather than innovating our way out of the situation, it seems more realistic to simply reconsider the path that we're currently on. The solution is not to deny developing nations the opportunity for economic growth. Rather, we must seek to alter the consumption patterns in the United States and other leading countries. It doesn't work to tell people in China and India that they can't have what we have (Masci 1999).

If the United States is going to be considered the system that emerging nations choose to model themselves after, we must begin to represent a sustainable vision. While globalization has afforded many positive benefits in the form of goods and services to developing nations—benefits that were previously out of reach—the insatiable appetite for more has warped the perception of wants versus needs. Items that once constituted daily luxuries such as television, cell phones, computers, and air conditioning are now viewed as expected necessities.

It's become quite clear, however, that the United States is no longer just selling humble goods and services. The idea that America is exporting the consumerist lifestyle (and to bad effect) is overwhelming. The U.S. model—both economically and culturally—has

become the world model. Betsy Taylor points to the fact that in recent years, the desire among peoples to have what we, in the U.S., have has skyrocketed (Masci 1999). This desire is created and celebrated by American films, television, music and advertising. Mark Whiteis-Helm, director of media relations for Friends of the Earth, notes just how illustrious this image is and how prevalent the desire to imitate can be. Americans are idolized for their big houses, big cars, and the multitude of things that they have. The reality of course, is that this is not the way it really is for the average American (Helm 2004). But the rest of the world, learning of life in the United States through the camera lens of Hollywood and the advertising juggernaut of Madison Avenue, doesn't know otherwise.

Even in light of the grossly romanticized version of our lifestyles, the American marketing influence is very intentionally telling people the world over that happiness is tied to acquiring things. "We've glamorized gross consumption, and now people overseas are putting in more hours at work in order to buy more stuff," says Whiteis-Helm.

In the larger context, the habit of preying on the developing world's vulnerabilities to feed our predilection for encouraging consumption is neither defensible nor sustainable. English political economist, David Ricardo, noted that nations thrive in a symbiotic—not parasitic—relationship. International environmental and human rights protections should be enforced and over the long term *must* be enforced (Shell 2009). Undeniably, the process of mustering the public will around the world (not to mention the enormous infusion of capital) to achieve this is unlikely to be available in the short term. Considering these changes at home is a start.

As countries such as China and India begin to grow their economies and demand a higher standard of living, many proponents claim that this will actually improve environmental conditions around the world. When countries attain wealth, they pollute less

and become more efficient. Rich countries have the unique luxury of being able to care about the quality of their air and water. Once basic infrastructure and societal necessities are in place, a window of opportunity presents itself in the form of time allotted to addressing the environment. In contrast, when individuals don't know where their next meal is coming from, they're less inclined to care very much about pollution (Masci 1999).

Whether we drastically change our consumption patterns to cut down on how *much* we take from the earth, or exactly *what* we take from the earth, there is merit to considering both of these options. Success will likely be seen in three areas of social evolution: (i) challenging the mental landscape of consumerism (e.g. Kallé Lasn's culture jamming), (ii) directing consumer behavior towards environmental and social responsibility (as in ethical and political consumption), and (iii) identifying wellbeing as existing through individuals working less, consuming less, and adopting a different sense of temporality (as in downshifting, simplifying and slower living) (Humphery 2010). Much of the difficulty that arises in understanding what promotes "ethical consumerism" is the complexity of understanding what motivates individuals socio-politically (Devinney, *et al.* 2010).

There do appear to be inherent risks in how we go about changing this mindset. If we attempt to simplify our lifestyles without simplifying our hearts, such efforts could reflect more of a fad than a genuine search for balance (Masci 1999). A close look at recent American values suggests that we may be headed in the right direction. Unbridled spending is occasionally replaced by a more cautious, thoughtful and questioning attitude. Those that continue to be frivolous are seen as greedy and immoral. Especially those that drive gas-guzzling cars, indulge in expensive luxury goods, consume in excess and waste in excess. A new social attitude is being created: one with higher morals and values (Arnold 2009). This lifestyle is characterized by five basic tenets: material simplicity, human scale, self-

determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth (Cardigo 2009). Nonetheless, despite the pockets of more enlightened consumer restraint that appear from time to time, the prevailing mood remains one of unbridled consumption, leading to a sense of futility among many consumers who have trouble with the idea that their contributions will only do “so much” (Bedford 2007).

Perhaps what we need more than anything is a renewed appreciation for the non-materialistic world that surrounds us. We will always be consumers to some degree. The key is trying to reevaluate what it is that we consume. Bill McKibben, who lives in the Adirondack Mountains and helps with a campaign to return wolves to the area, insists that it’s the very presence of these animals that he will consume.

I know that what I want is to hear a wolf howling in the woods because it will make this place, and my life here, feel yet more romantic. I will consume that wolf howl, just as my predecessors consumed the quiet of their suddenly wolf-less nights. But once the wolf is there, its howl will also carry certain other, less obvious messages; and there will be the remote chance of an encounter with this other grand representative of creation, an encounter that might go beyond mere consumption. I saw a grizzly bear one recent summer in Alaska, not far away on a muddy bank on a foggy night, and the sheer reality of that encounter shook some small part of me out of the consumer enchantment into which I was born (Rosenblatt 1999).

Just as most of us will never actually witness a polar bear in the wild, there is merit in preserving their territory. It’s a gut feeling that many of us can’t fully articulate. It’s this inherent value that we find in maintaining the wild that pulls at our most primal sense of worth (Carrier 2010). It’s a sign that consumer culture hasn’t completely deteriorated what we consider to be near and dear to us. If we can somehow focus our efforts on renewing this passion, we can provide promising opportunity for future generations (Young, *et al.* 2010). Rather than leaving future generations with a legacy of debt and insurmountable problems, we ought to prioritize them and reconsider our current methods.

4

Environmental Concerns

This market society seems to have obliterated from most people's memory another world that once placed limits on growth, stressed cooperation over competition, and valued the gift as a bond of human solidarity. In that remote world, the market was marginal to a domestic or "natural" society and trading communities existed merely in the "interstices" of the premarket world... It has been dawning on the First World, which is rapidly using up many of its resources, that growth is eating away the biosphere at a pace unprecedented in human history.

- Murry Bookchin, *Death of a Small Planet*, 1989

When we consider the immediate needs and desires that inundate our lives, it can be easy to lose sight of the long-term implications of our daily decisions. Buy-now-pay-later arrangements sound ideal, especially when the government of the world's largest economy is exercising the same judgment. That is, until the bill comes due and, with it, the exorbitant retroactive interest. The opportunity for cheap travel entices all of us, though delays, cancellations, and recycled air cost us plenty – not to mention the toxic fumes that are clogging out our atmosphere. As Ellen Shell, author of *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*, puts it “‘too cheap to fix’ electronics seem less attractive when their life span only briefly exceeds that of their warranty and their broken innards leak heavy metal in our landfills” (Shell 2009). While it would be naïve to ignore our essential and unavoidable role as consumers, it would be equally naïve to dismiss our roles and responsibilities as citizens of a larger community, within which our needs and wants are linked to – and, indeed, dependent on – the needs and wants of others.

We all understand and accept the fact that what we use everyday *came* from somewhere and will eventually *end up* somewhere – namely the earth. Whether it's the smart phone in our pocket, the clothes in our closet, or the car we commute in everyday, it was all the product of our terraqueous planet. However, virtually none of us live with a landfill in our backyards and few of us would even know where to find the landfill closest to where we live. In fact, the closest many of us will ever be to the process of waste accumulation is

watching the local garbage truck come clean out our trashcans. While we may understand that our laptops, refrigerators, and cotton t-shirts weren't simply the product of "immaculate conception," the life cycle of our everyday possessions is still very much out-of-sight and out-of-mind for the vast majority of us.

A discussion surrounding waste accumulation may be getting ahead of ourselves, however. Before we consider the consequences associated with an overflowing accumulation of disposable consumer goods, it's important to understand how the products in our lives came to be in the first place. For most (if not all of these items), the process begins with raw materials. This term refers to the basic material from which a product is manufactured or made e.g. latex, iron ore, logs, crude oil, etc. In theory, these materials are renewable; given enough time and attention, their stockpiles will replenish, allowing for their continued harvest. In light of the current practices exhibited by industry leaders, though, very few of these resources are given the opportunity to replenish themselves at a rate that comes close to the rate that we extract and consume them. Wood, for example, is being harvested at unprecedented rates in an effort to keep up with global demand for the commodity. Environmentalists have been warning for years that the demand for cheap Chinese-made furniture—half of all timber in the world is traded in China—has incited a "cut and consume" cycle that is overwhelming and depleting the world's forests.

IKEA is the third largest consumer of wood in the world behind Home Depot and Lowe's. While the company is lauded for its ability to provide cheap, affordable furniture, its success has certainly come at great environmental costs. Many, indeed *most*, of its products are seen as inexpensive, highly disposable furniture solutions to the low-income individual/family. Included in these IKEA wood products is timber harvested from Eastern Europe and the Russian Far East, where wages are low, large wooded regions remote, and

according to the World Bank, half of all logging is illegal. Large, deciduous forests are on the decline, especially those host to high-demand varieties such as oak, ash, birch, and Korean pine. In an effort to secure these profitable species of wood, illegal loggers sacrifice restricted riverbanks, fish-spawning sites, and other conservation areas, as they bribe officials in exchange for documentation that the timber they poached was acquired legally.

The harvest associated with these practices is manifestly unsustainable. The illegal operations are generally located in remote areas where effective oversight is difficult to enforce, often including wildlife habitats and conservation land. In the long term, deforestation has and will contribute significantly to climate change. According to some estimates, as much as 18 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions are associated with the overzealous practice of timber harvesting—more than the entire global transport system or the whole of the industrial manufacturing sectors.

Even in light of this data, the lack of concern exhibited by factory owners, wholesalers, retailers, and customers of wood products is amazing. As Ellen Shell suggests, “few players on the global scene... are motivated to question seriously the provenance of their wood products. Questions would only raise the price” (Shell 2009). While IKEA boasts its “green initiatives” such as using low-wattage bulbs to light its stores and charging a premium for plastic bags, their customers consume gallons of fuel just to reach the remote stores where they’ll eventually purchase disposable tables and lamps. Wig Zamore, an MIT graduate and urban development expert, said of IKEA’s company practice(s): “IKEA is the least sustainable retailer on the planet” (Shell 2009).

For many companies, IKEA included, the problem may not be a blatant disregard or lack of concern for the environment, but rather a lack of knowledge of the more far reaching consequences of their business practices. Jens Lindell is one of IKEA’s environmental

managers; his history with the company spans over twenty years as an “endgame specialist”. Like many of his co-workers, one of his main priorities in streamlining company efficiency is minimizing costs. In an interview with the manager, Ellen Shell draws attention to this environmental ignorance.

I asked him if he had given any thought to the environmental benefits of longevity, of building a product that lasts for decades or even a lifetime. He told me he hadn’t but added that he’d been environmental manager for just a year and a half. Most of his two decades at IKEA had been spent selling children’s goods. (Shell 2009)

The idea that an “environmental manager” wouldn’t stop to consider the relevant implications of admittedly disposable products seems oxy-moronic to me. When companies assume industry-leading roles, as IKEA has very successfully done, it’s imperative that they set a promising example for the rest of us. Why should we, the consumers, be expected to make more responsible, albeit more expensive, purchasing decisions when a multibillion dollar company chooses to do otherwise? While the paradigm shift must start somewhere, I’m convinced the responsibility is equally shared (if not more so) by those in positions of influence.

Having said this, the purpose of this paper is to appeal to the average North American consumer – not the CEOs or “environmental managers” of Fortune 500 companies. Paul Hawken and Amory and Hunter Lovins published a book at the end of the 20th century called *Natural Capitalism*. In it they explore some of the disturbing realities associated with the needs of the average middle-class family. “Industry moves, mines, extracts, shovels, burns, wastes, pumps, and disposes of *four million pounds* of material in order to provide one family’s needs for a year” (Hawken *et. al* 1999). The gross inefficiencies of our consumption and disposal practices are highlighted by the reality that Americans spend more money on trash bags than citizens of 90 of the world’s 210 countries spend on everything. As comedian Lily Tomlin observes, “we buy a wastebasket and take it home in a

plastic bag. Then we take the wastebasket out of the bag, and put the bag in the wastebasket”.

In the end, we fill these garbage bags with a plethora of clutter only to be replaced by more, just like it, hours or days later. And just as this waste has become “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” for most of us, so too have the products that constitute the input into the creation of the products we consume and discard. The average computer contains 700 or more unique materials that contributed to its manufacture. From chemical factories to mines to oil derricks, these materials converge to produce the sleek, colorful machines we use on a daily basis. With this manufacturing process came 140 pounds of solid and hazardous waste, 7,000 gallons of wastewater, and about a fourth of its lifetime energy consumption. Taking that into consideration, more than twelve million of these computers—amounting to 300,000 tons of electronic junk—end up in the earth every year (De Graaf, *et. al.* 2005). In 2006, the EPA estimated that 163,000 flat-panel and digital TVs and computers fell victim to obsolescence everyday with only a small portion being recycled properly (this figure is likely much higher today). As the authors of *Affluenza* point out, “when we buy a computer, all the rest comes with it, even if it is *out-of-sight, out-of-mind*” (De Graaf, *et. al.* 2005)

Perhaps one of the most cited examples of daily waste that we all experience is that of junk mail. While I no longer live at home and still receive an incessant supply of the stuff, I distinctly remember the piles of coupons, advertisements, and catalogues that were pulled from my family’s mailbox on a daily basis. I also remember my Dad saying how insulting it was that we’re inundated with so much nonsense, if only to be glanced at briefly (if at all) and then immediately discarded. Fortunately, my family and town were conscientious enough to make recycling these items extremely convenient. Unfortunately, however, the producers of junk mail hesitate to change their ways. It takes a reported 150,000 direct-mail

appeals to garner 1,500 memberships for a given organization. Quick math dictates that roughly 148,500 of those solicitations will be thrown out. “Made from trees, printed with inks by fuel-consuming machines, collated, labeled, sorted by other machines, loaded into pollution-spewing trucks, delivered to mailboxes, loaded into other vehicles headed for recycling stations (20 percent) or landfills (80 percent) (De Graaf, *et. al.* 2005).

In 1996, Swiss engineer, Mathis Wackernagel, attempted to estimate the average “ecological footprint” for everyone on the planet. Dividing the earth’s biologically productive land and sea by the total population, Wackernagel and his Canadian colleague, William Rees, came up with a theoretical estimate of 5.5 acres per person. It’s important to note that this estimate assumed *nothing* would be set aside for all other species. In contrast, reported Wackernagel, the average world citizen actually used 7 acres in 1996 – 30 percent more than nature’s ability to regenerate.

Biologist Anthony Ricciardi confirms much of this in his aquatic specific studies. While the polar ice caps and Amazonian rain forests serve as “poster child” examples of uninhibited environmental destruction, his research suggests that similar scenarios are unfolding domestically. Freshwater species from snails to fish to amphibians are dying out five times faster than terrestrial species—as fast as rain forest species, which are generally considered to be the most imperiled on earth. Half of America’s wetlands and 99 percent of its tall-grass prairies are gone. As these systems are being destroyed for development, agriculture, and other uses, 935 species in the United States (356 animals, 579 plants) are fighting to survive (Ricciardi 1999).

While raw materials constitute a fairly salient example of the environmental toll exacted by unbridled consumption, our changing diets - with a growing emphasis on meat - is also a valuable case study. In an attempt to meet rising global demands for such a diet, the

livestock industry has evolved to factory farming. These massive operations are capable of accommodating and processing far more meat than could ever be realized in traditional free range or organic operations. The aim for these producers is to provide their product, whether beef, pork, turkey, chicken, milk, or eggs, at the absolute lowest possible cost while maximizing yield. Food for the livestock is supplied in place, and a wide variety of artificial methods including antimicrobial agents, vitamin supplements, and growth hormones are employed to maintain animal health and improve production. Physical restraints are often used to control movement or actions regarded as undesirable. Additionally, selective genetic breeding programs are often employed to control the consistency of the food product and to produce animals that are better suited to the confined conditions in which the animals spend their lives.

While industry proponents claim that these practices are sustainable, humane, and preferable to alternative options, many studies suggest otherwise – prompting a closer look from environmentalists. The process of raising, slaughtering, and producing these products is extremely inefficient. For instance, 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 powerful greenhouse gas, is produced by belching, flatulent livestock (Mayell 2004). Due to the sheer volume of waste and other residual outputs from these operations it isn't efficient to recycle it into fertilizer. As a result, toxic runoff ends up polluting local streams, ponds, and aquifers, contributing to the degradation of our environment, and the growing threats to global food safety and security.

Appreciating our roles as consumers within a larger, global context will be imperative as we look to the next decade, century, and even millennium (providing we haven't made our environment entirely uninhabitable, leading to our extinction as a species before then. For

the most part, the impressive productive capacities and market forces of the planet have, so far, been dedicated to satisfying human needs and desires with little regard to the short-term or long-term future of life on the planet. It is imperative that we find a way to change this dynamic of meeting human needs and desires in a manner that challenges materialism, and promotes a broad range of goals that are focused on improving the human experience, including ecological responsibility, humanitarianism, consumer ethics, global citizenship, stewardship of our vast ecosystems, a moral and spiritual community, universal values, and the recognition of our global interdependence.

While approximately 80 percent of global consumption is registered with a mere 20 percent of the global population (most of this North America and Western Europe), consumption in developing countries has risen much faster over the last decade than in these industrialized nations. Associated with a high rate of population growth, rapid urban development, and increased motorization/industrialization, the policy decisions that these countries make in the near future will, quite literally, make or break our planet's future. In the interest of preserving this future and leaving a legacy of opportunity rather than debt to our children, the developing countries must adopt an attitude of concern with regard to the sustainability of current levels and patterns of consumption and perhaps more specifically, with regard to the individual, societal, moral, environmental, economic, and political impacts of excessive consumption.

The economic growth in China is a perfect illustration of the consequences of a developing country not sensitizing itself to the risks of following in the footsteps of industrialized countries that have failed to curb their appetites for excessive consumption. Experiencing average GDP growth of over 10 percent during the last decade, China's economy has been on a tear – breakneck development and urbanization on a size and scale

never before seen. While the United States remains the world's single largest economy, the progress seen in China is undoubtedly part of the most ambitious urban experiment ever undertaken. The staggering sums of foreign investment in China's infrastructure and economy is evidence of the fact that most of the world's industrial powerhouses are responsible for fueling this giant.

Because China largely regards economic progress as the solution to most of its misfortunes, it has been committed to economic growth, regardless of cost(s). While this focus has undeniably led to incredible advance, it has also led itself to the papering over of significant inequities and injustices. In an interview with the International Herald Tribune, Hu Jindou, a professor of economics in Beijing put it simply:

In order to achieve modernization, people will go to any ends to earn money, to advance their interests, leaving behind morality, humanity and even a little bit of compassion, let alone the law or regulations, which are poorly implemented. Everything is about the economy now, just like everything was about politics in the Mao era, and forced labor or child labor is far from an isolated phenomenon. It is rooted deeply in today's reality, a combination of capitalism, socialism, feudalism, and slavery (Shell 2009).

Clearly, while China hasn't yet fully embraced the idea of automated assembly lines, or of outsourcing their labor to yet *another* developing country, their ability to promote human prosperity and environmental health is limited.

In light of China's public lack of endorsement for laborsaving technology like automated assembly lines, in favor of exploiting its vast reserve of human labor, it is evident that this isn't the result of a humanitarian concern. The influx of migrant workers from all over China, into the major metropolises of China's industrialized south, are responsible for almost everything that ends up in the hands of U.S. consumers. Essentially America's indentured servants, these migrants are uprooted from their home villages and manage to scrape together the fare to travel by train or bus hundreds or even thousands of miles, only to arrive in China's major cities dazed, broke, and ready to take whatever jobs they can find.

Work contracts are oppressive, employer dictated, sporadic, and often unpredictable. The ability to find decent living arrangements is difficult, if not because of wage/rent relationships, but because of policies put in place under China's restrictive Household Registration Law, making it extremely difficult for migrants to obtain official city residency or the associated privileges and protections.

China's desire to avoid replacing the factory workers with machines is not synonymous with the proliferation of the craftsmen, as we would understand it. While efforts to improve conditions for the Chinese people, particularly Chinese workers, have been slow in coming, America's demand for cheap consumer goods encourages and enables this complacency. While I would argue that the economics demands made in countries like the United States and Western Europe are responsible for bringing about these conditions, there are others who place blame on ineffective governing bodies and an inherent human desire to exploit for the sake of profit.

Richard Locke, professor of Entrepreneurship and Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is an expert on economic development, comparative labor relations, and political economy. According to him, there is only one force on the planet powerful enough to enforce workers' rights and protection – guilt and only one institution capable of arousing that force – the Vatican. While the Vatican has been hesitant to assume the role of global enforcer, Locke insists that there is no other entity that could effectively prevent global industry from exploiting and abusing global labor. The lack of an effective global governing institution means that treaties, or otherwise “agreed upon” contracts, are often ignored when there is neither the will nor the capacity to monitor various company practices.

Having identified the responsibility that needs to be assumed by developing countries – namely one that demands future-oriented planning – it would be naïve to dismiss the significant role played by the world’s wealthiest nations. While we too share a responsibility to think increasingly long-term, we have an equally compelling obligation to reconsider the choices we’ve *already* made. Murray Bookchin, author of the essay “Death of a Small Planet,” outlines an unfortunate reality for most of us:

Soil that was in the making for millennia is being turned into sand; richly forested regions filled with complex life-forms are being reduced to barren moonscapes; rivers, lakes, and even vast oceanic regions are becoming noxious and lethal sewers; radio nuclides, together with an endless and ever-increasing array of toxicants, are invading the air we breath, the water we drink, and almost every food item on the dinner table. Not even sealed, air-conditioned, and sanitized offices are immune to this poisonous deluge. (Bookchin 1989)

While the picture he paints may seem melodramatic, reality suggests otherwise. Ignorance of these facts is understandable, though, considering how truly insulated most of us are from the process by which our consumer goods are produced.

There is no doubt that our quest for inexpensive goods comes at a great cost. Ellen Shell does an exceptional job at illustrating our obsessive fixation on discount culture, on finding the lowest possible price, and the luxury of choice. She draws special attention to the globalized market that has afforded such expansive choices in order to assure these choices exist for the consumers living in developed country markets. Governments have adopted trade laws to facilitate cross border transactions while transnational corporations have set up business offshore so they can minimize the cost of production processes. As evidenced by Nike, IKEA, Microsoft, Apple, and dozens of other innovative companies, the goods that are made available in developed markets are, all too often, provided at the cost of slave or child labor, in sweatshops, or in countries that allow these multinationals to forego adhering to ecological or human rights concerns in their pursuit of profit. While consumers in

developed countries have been socialized to want more and to consume more, we have *not* been socialized to appreciate the impact of our consumption choices on the human rights of other people or the ecological impacts of other nations. We are not being held accountable for our decisions. And insofar as our economic demands have promoted these situations – we should be.

Ultimately, our consumption practices have contributed heavily to a dearth of clean fresh water (especially in developing countries), significant pollution (including ground, air, water, and noise), rapid global resource depletion, and a plethora of scarred landscapes. Mining practices have poisoned water supplies, construction projects have eroded millions of acres of land, contributing to the displacement of thousands of species, and agricultural operations have undermined sustainability efforts at the local level. Our climate is undeniably changing; fresh water reserves, fish stocks, and forests are shrinking; fertile land is being destroyed, and species are becoming extinct. If we are to thrive on this planet, our lifestyles *must* become more sustainable in an effort to protect our natural resource base and the fragile eco-systems that constitute our planet.

5

False Wants

“The key to economic prosperity is the organized creation of dissatisfaction.”

– Charles Kettering, former Head of Research, General Motors

Maslow’s work regarding basic human needs came sometime after Marx’s concern with man’s general sense of alienation. In a sense, these two thinkers were studying two different ends of the same spectrum. On the one hand, we find Maslow writing on the most fundamental human requirements for survival and happiness. On the other, Marx wrote about how people, all too often, suffer from dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and alienation as a result of their pursuit of materialistic goals that cannot provide a fundamental sense of satisfaction. One of the goals in writing this paper was to try and figure out where a happy medium exists between the need to have our basic needs satisfied and the pursuit of acquiring “things” that we don’t need for our survival and why so many consumers “buy” into this culture of false wants.

To understand this inquiry, we need to consider the influence advertising and marketing has had on our lives. Advertisements are intentionally constructed to present idealized images of people who own or use a particular product, in the hope that by pairing these images with the product, viewers will be convinced to purchase the product because they are convinced that owning it will enhance their lives. In 2005, the National Eating Disorders Association reported that the average young adolescent watches three to four hours of television per day. Combined with the fact that four hours of television programming might contain 100 ads, the average American child may view as many as 40,000 commercialized messages every year, from television alone (Media Education Foundation 2005). This figure ignores the influence of newspaper/magazine advertisements,

billboards, signs, and clothing logos. As mentioned in the literature review, there are many researchers and parents who are worried about the effect that this inundation will have on their children's crucial, early development. For all of those that are worried, however, there are also plenty who defend marketing techniques and who still retain faith in the autonomy of the human decision maker.

Many of the proponents of contemporary marketing and consumerism practices are economists who insist that the criticism of consumerism is misdirected. They argue that consumers are not brainwashed slaves to shopping but intelligent people who know what they want and usually purchase things that they genuinely feel will enhance their lives. Martin Regalia, chief economist at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce says that the critics of consumerism "think people are myopic, moronic zombies that are controlled by the media. Consumers actually buy what they like, and they use advertising mostly to take a look at their choices" (Masci 1999). In addition, Regalia and others insist that this is largely a matter of individual choice and that it can be patronizing to tell others what they should or should not be doing with their time and money.

There are few critics who would argue with Regalia when he promotes the importance of consumer autonomy and freedom of choice. Still, it's evident that society would benefit from imposing *some* limits on what we see as rampant and harmful consumerism, especially when it's directed at children. The fundamental problem is that children seem incapable of differentiating commercials from programing, which leaves them vulnerable to advertisers.

James McNeal, a retired professor from Texas A&M University who is considered the "godfather" of kids marketing, speaks to the nag factor of today's youth. In 2000, children aged 2-12 years old had a direct or indirect impact on over \$600 billion of family

spending. While much of that is a direct result from kids pointing and making demands, “the real story of kids’ market power,” suggests McNeal, “is not their spending. It’s their influence on the household” (McDonald 2001). This pattern of wants and demands from children has resulted in a push from European countries to curtail advertising aimed at younger demographics. Since 1991, Sweden has banned all advertising during children’s prime time due to findings that children under ten are incapable of telling the difference between a commercial and a program. Success in Sweden has made the European Union consider whether there should be a European-wide ban or regulation on similar advertising.

Tim Kasser, author of *The High Price of Materialism*, also speaks to the dangers of unbridled marketing efforts and reports that people who watch a lot of television tend to report low satisfaction with their lives and low overall morale.

In the face of messages glorifying the path of consumption and wealth, all of us to some extent take on or internalize materialistic values. That is, we incorporate the messages of consumer society into our own value and belief systems. These values then begin to organize our lives by influencing the goals we pursue, the attitudes we have toward particular people and objects, and the behaviors in which we engage. (Kasser 2002)

Perhaps if these acquisitive tendencies were of some deeper benefit to us, then we wouldn’t have such adverse reactions to the advertising industry and its remarkably successful efforts to shape our buying behavior. The reality, however, is that the pursuit of materialistic values does not yield concomitant increases in well-being, which suggests that people’s needs for self-esteem and competence are not being satisfied. Instead, individuals end up experiencing persistent discrepancies between their actual lives and what they are led to believe, by the advertising industry, their lives should be. Such chronic gaps between actuality and ideals can lead to less positive feelings about oneself and, ultimately, lingering unhappiness.

From childhood we are subjected to an unending message trying to convince us that shopping and buying things will make us happy. This message is problematically misleading

though. Happiness and fulfillment are not the natural byproducts of consumption. As so many researchers have confirmed, the act of therapeutic consumption is a quick fix, at best. While you may feel better for a while, that feeling of fulfillment doesn't last—it's elusive at best—and then you have to start the process over. For example, a housewife who purchases a new washing machine loaded with wash and spin features and a fancy display panel may actually get excitement from the first load of wash she does in the new machine. She'll likely continue to derive satisfaction from each subsequent load of wash she does, although the excitement factor will diminish slightly with each load (law of diminishing marginal utility). Knowing the great excitement and satisfaction she got from using the machine for the first time, she'll try to replicate that feeling with another purchase. The consumption cycle becomes an addiction, seeking to re-live the "high" that comes from an initial purchase. But, the high is elusive and fleeting, leading to a compulsive consumption pattern and undermining our sense of personal choice. While we shouldn't reject the emphasis placed on consumer sovereignty, we should resent the idea that advertising and marketing have become such strong forces in our lives that consumption for most people has become less a question of personal choice and more a compulsion.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan are professors in the department of clinical and social sciences in psychology at the University of Rochester. Their work has focused extensively on what they call "self-determination theory" and the importance of self-directed actions. They define autonomy as acting in accordance with one's self and in feeling free and volitional in one's actions. Autonomous people are fully willing to do what they are engaging in, and they embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment. "Their actions emanate from a true sense of self, so they are being authentic." When controlled, people act *without* a sense of personal endorsement. Their behavior is not an expression of the self, for

the self has been subjugated to the controls. In this condition, people can reasonably be described as alienated (Kasser 2002). This evaluation is very similar to the one we see from Marx in his description of a similar devaluation of the human spirit. His work warns against “estranged labor,” evaluating the dangers associated with the discord of man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside of him, from his spiritual essence, and ultimately, from his human existence (Marx 1844).

Certainly, one of the driving influences behind this trend is commodity fetishism. Marx’s idea that human relations arise out of the growth of market trade, when social relationships between people are expressed as, mediated by and transformed into, objectified relationships between things—namely commodities and money. We end up surrounding our commodities with an aura of awe and desire. They become delinked from the product of human labor, acquiring an exchange value that is separate from us and eventually end up as simply *something* we want. Hence, the commodity becomes the source of the alienation discussed earlier. Even the labor of self-employed commodity producers is alienated because they must produce for the market instead of for their own purpose and need.

While public advertising has proven to be a tremendous success from the perspective of marketing firms, one form of less salient advertising, that seems to be just as effective, comes in the form of the products we bring home everyday. For a myriad of symbolic reasons, status-related identity among them, American consumers continue to participate in a brand-oriented market where they find themselves paying not only a large sum for advertising but also higher prices for products that are only symbolically, but not functionally, different from similar lower-priced products.

One of the earliest sociologists to explore this theme of “conspicuous consumption” was Thorstein Veblen. Veblen drew attention to the stratification of the social classes,

pointing to a socially constructed hierarchy. What's interesting about this hierarchy is the way that it influences consumption decisions as a result of the comparisons we make with those in close social classes. Consistently, the consumer looks to his peers in the class directly above him for consumption cues. Consumption becomes the primary forum for communicating power, wealth, and status. In this way, what was once a relatively private activity of consuming for personal fulfillment or need has evolved into a very public display of intention. Veblen also drew attention to the universality of these patterns—that they don't just exist on specific levels of the social strata or in specific areas of the globe. To the extent that they can, all social classes engage in this conspicuous consumption.

No class of society, not even the abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretense of pecuniary decency is put away.

(Ritzer and Goodman 1996)

This last point is interesting, illustrating the priority that conspicuous consumption can have in some of our lives.

Juliet Schor, author of *The Overspent American*, draws attention to this growing trend of purchasing for the sake of status and identity. “In most of the major expenditure categories—housing, furnishings, automobiles, apparel, cosmetics, footwear, travel, and an increasing large group of food items—some fraction of our consumption is addressed to positional concerns” (Schor 1998). In contrast, we rarely take notice of the kind of furnace in our neighbor's basement, the brand of mattress they're sleeping on, or how much life insurance they've taken out in the interest of loved ones. Visible products have become increasingly important to many of us since their ownership is easily confirmed by our peers.

Increasingly, we see that the brand defines the consumer. We try to issue reflections of ourselves in the purchasing decisions that we make. The popular culture phrases, “we are what we wear, what we eat, what we drive...” are becoming progressively relevant in today’s society. Many of my peers have expressed the sentiment that the collection of brands they choose are among the most direct expressions of their individuality—or more candidly perhaps, a deeper psychological need to identify with others. The former opinion—as an expression of personal individuality—strikes me as ironic, however. Every day I see another girl toting a *Longchamp* handbag. These simplistic carriers come in a variety of colors but every time I see one I mentally clump the owner in with the hundreds of others I’ve seen carrying the same bag. The pursuit of acquiring designer commodities, in the hope that social recognition will earn you respect or envy is misplaced. The premium we pay for this social status could, arguably, be spent in far better ways—improving our public schools, boosting retirement savings, or providing drug treatment for the millions of people the country has locked up in an effort to protect the commodities others have acquired. Finding a way to dissociate what we buy from who we *think* we are—redirecting those dollars—is easier said than done.

6

A Lack of Psychological Wellbeing

To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make money in the shortest time must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.

– Andrew Carnegie

While the environmental side of consumerism is often a salient issue and may be appreciated on a fairly broad social scale, the introspective recognition of an overindulgent lifestyle is harder for people to personally acknowledge. This chapter will focus heavily on the sociological component of consumerism, the alienation associated with highly materialistic lifestyles, and the psychological element of affluence.

Many of us share the misconception that with wealth comes power, convenience, satisfaction, and happiness. While wealth can certainly help make various aspects of our lives, easier and more convenient, it would be naïve to assume that wealth defines our lives. As we'll see, the wealthiest individuals and families—those who have seemingly everything—are all too often overworked, overstressed, and face many pressures unique to their economic standing. Before we consider what these pressures consist of and the effects they can have on us, it's important to understand how and why these feelings manifest themselves in the first place.

To understand that, I turn to Karl Marx and his thoughts on the alienated worker. Marx was convinced that an inherent shortcoming of capitalism was the fact that workers can, all too easily, become disconnected from the activity of their labor, the product of their labor, from themselves, and from other people. One key part of this process is objectification: metaphorically seeing something as an object or taking something with many facets – many values – and reducing it to just one of these facets. When we objectify something, we view it as an *alien* thing. We become artificially disconnected from it. And as

Marx noted, in capitalism, we don't lovingly and creatively engage with our work. We work simply because we need or want money. What was once a source of self-actualization has now become a disjointed chore where we work to live rather than live to work.

Marx describes alienated labor as work that has ceased to be a part of the worker's nature.

Consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless...While man thus becomes alienated from himself, the product of labor becomes an alien object which dominates him. (Fromm 1961)

While Marx goes on to further describe this process, his two main points remain: (1) in the process of most work, and especially of work under the conditions of capitalism, man is estranged from his own creative powers, and (2) the objects of his own work become alien things, and eventually rule over him, becoming powers independent of himself.

Even though Marx did much of his work over 150 years ago, he could never have imagined how relevant his ideas would someday become. While his primary qualm was with capitalism and the nature of the working class within a capitalist society, his aim was not limited to the emancipation of the worker class, but rather to the emancipation of the human being through a rediscovery of free and unalienated activity, and a society in which propagation of the self, and not the production of *things*, is the aim. Today, more than ever, it seems the people are falling victim to this process of automation, mechanization, and commodification.

One of the benefits, passed on to consumers, from the proliferation of the automation and mechanization that has alienated the working class is lower prices. While the bargain hunters among us rejoice at the sound of words like "sale," and "discount," reality suggests that we get what we pay for in a manner that goes beyond the mere monetary price

of the item. Cheap objects aren't necessarily designed to fall apart, nor are they designed *not* to fall apart. In many cases we know this and accept it, and have entered into a sort of contract. Perhaps we don't even want the object to last forever. Such voluntary obsolescence makes craftsmanship beside the point. We have grown to expect and even relish the easy birth and death of our objects. It's noteworthy that this isn't necessarily a *recent* shift in our commodity values. More than a century ago, President William McKinley had this to say: "Cheap merchandise means cheap men. Cheap undermines us, gives us less control over our lives, and weakens our resolve. It cloaks concerns of ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility in a shroud of unaffordability" (Shell 2009). McKinley's bold warning against the pitfalls of "cheap culture" have clearly gone unheeded.

As insidious as the process of alienating a core part of our work force can be, many people will assume that the process is a passive one...one that slowly and unconsciously takes over our wellbeing. To some degree, people who view the process as passive are warranted in that opinion. As Ellen Shell's research suggests, however, the process is far from passive and there are deliberate efforts being made by various companies to achieve this outcome in their labor model. "The de-skilling of labor is as critical to IKEA's business model as it is for every discount business model: Centralized capital, not craftsmanship, is where the power lies" (Shell 2009). This blunt evaluation is exactly what concerned Marx. Rather than treat anyone as an employee and any employee as capable of doing any job, we should reward skill and encourage acquiring the kind of experience that empowers workers.

Matthew B. Crawford, a political philosopher and research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, makes a strong case for the value of dedicated work efforts like those that exist in a skilled mechanic or craftsman. In contrast to those who are able to find meaning and value in their work by engaging in meaningful and fulfilling manual work, he

describes an emerging engineering culture of “hide the works,” which has rendered “the artifacts we use unintelligible to direct inspection”. When we buy a vacuum or remote control car today, we willfully acknowledge that we don’t know or care how the object is made. He describes this as “disburdened of involvement”. If we don’t have mastery over our objects, however, our objects certainly have mastery over us. Crawford acknowledges the fact that this blissful ignorance can be liberating but warns, “such freedom allows our own agency to get displaced. Having mastery over our own stuff is very satisfying, and we’ve traded that for convenience. So in a sense we don’t really own the stuff, we lease it. And I think that haunts us” (Shell 2009). Ultimately, we’ve become a culture that supports judging a book by its cover. As long as the thing works, who cares how it happens.

Craftsmanship cements a relationship of trust between buyer and seller, worker and employer, and expects something of and from both. Craftsmanship is about caring about the work and its application. It is what distinguishes the work of humans from the work of machines, and it is everything that IKEA and other discounters are not. Without craftsmanship and the expectation of craftsmanship, our relationship to the material world breaks down into fits and starts of stopgap measures that are neither satisfying nor sustainable. The idea of quality before quantity should capture peoples’ interest. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. As Marx said, “[t]he worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The *devaluation* of the human world grows in direct proportion to the *increase in value* of [his] world of things” (Marx 1844).

While many of us tend to associate wealthy/lavish lifestyles with convenience and satisfaction, psychologists Orla Cashman and James Twaite point to the downsides of affluence. Research suggests that just as the poor in our society are often viewed as

dishonest, indolent, promiscuous, and apathetic towards education, so the affluent are often viewed as unethical, entitled, arrogant, superficial, and narcissistic (Cashman, Twaite 2009). In addition to the intense pressures to achieve, wealth has very clearly been correlated with negative effects on personal development, integration, and adjustment. All too often, the wealthy are subject to personal experience that place them on the receiving end of negative cultural stereotypes—the experience of being envied, the fear of being approached socially for the wrong reasons, and for the children of affluence, a possible inability to develop an adequate sense of self apart from the family’s economic successes.

Again, while wealth can serve dynamic purposes in facilitating various aspects of our lives, it’s when we chose to define ourselves by material wealth that our lives begin to break down into insignificant bits and pieces. Life doesn’t need to revolve around having more and getting more. Commercial culture is very clearly a dead end—it will never fully resolve the fundamental tensions of modern life, and as noted in Section 5 above, whatever pleasure may be found in consumerism is inevitably fleeting. A movement that was once described as ‘America’s rampant individualism’ carries a degree of irony with it as it so often fails to satisfy the self.

Cashman and Twaite, through the extensive work in their own practice, are confident that they understand where this emptiness originates. They describe the tendency for affluent people to work harder than they should, driven by an intense focus on success. They deny themselves the opportunity to relax, to pursue leisure and recreational activities, and to otherwise enjoy life. As a result, they often spend too much time away from the house, becoming strangers to their spouse and their children, and ultimately deny themselves another important source of life satisfaction. One of the dangerous aspects to such a driven lifestyle is the fact that physical and psychological complaints are often internalized and

pushed aside, either for reasons of personal insecurity or a lack of self-awareness (Cashman, Twaite 2009). Overwhelming, the message is being conveyed that material wealth and its resulting stature in our culture, rather than a focus on contributing to our daily happiness, wellbeing, and mental satisfaction, is the priority.

In the end, however, regardless of the particular ideals people strive for when they want things they do not have, a discrepancy arises, making them feel sad, anxious, guilty, angry, or dissatisfied. Shalom Schwartz, professor of social psychology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, suggests that cross-cultural evidence supports this theory. It's not a pattern specific to one demographic of the globe, it's generally a natural experience shared by humans. "Thousands of individuals sampled in most parts of the globe support that idea that something about materialism conflicts with valuing the characteristics of strong relationships (loyalty, helpfulness, love) and with caring about the broader community (peace, justice, equality)" (Kasser 2002). The aggressive agenda endorsed by the habit of consuming isn't one that lends itself to a promising future for ourselves – let alone for future generations.

One of the consequences of Thorsten Veblen's theory of a salient differentiation of the classes is that owning and accumulating things becomes less easily traceable to subsistence and more so to emulation. In this sense, private property becomes the basis of esteem and everyone else in society seeks to emulate or even outdo, those who have a great deal of it. Ultimately, self-esteem becomes synonymous with material possessions and whether one has as many or more of these as his peers. As Ritzer and Goodman conclude, emulation thus lies at the base of our desire for material goods. As a result, the desire for wealth can never be satisfied as it might be if it were driven by the need to subsist: "since the struggle is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of invidious comparison, no

approach to a definitive attainment is possible” (Ritzer and Goodman 1996). Again, we’re presented with this idea of a fleeting and elusive state of satisfaction when sought after through consumption. Feelings of inspiration, accomplishment, or triumph are still missing from this picture.

Ideally, our values encourage us to pursue experiences that foster feelings of security, competency, and worthiness—experiences that resonate within us as authentic and free. Countless people, in a variety of academic and vocational fields, have promoted the importance of values such as growing as a person, knowing and accepting oneself, caring about family and friends, and helping the community and world be a better place. In an effort to realize this ideal, many people have turned towards a cultural paradigm shift of voluntary simplicity, a growing trend for people to abandon the high-paying, high-stress lifestyle necessary to sustain high levels of consumption, and focus instead on personal growth, nurturing relationships, helping others, and rediscovering their natural environments.

7

Looking Forward

*"Life...is the flash of a firefly in the night.
It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.
It is the little shadow which runs across the
Grass and loses itself in the sunset."
- Crowfoot (1890)*

In the span of nearly twelve months of dedicated work to this project, I've read and studied the works of many of the world's greatest thinkers. As previously mentioned, one of the unique aspects of this project's thesis is the fact that it's so universal. It transcends religion, age, race, income, education, and just about any other imaginable demographic. As a result, I've been able to compile opinions from authors representing a multiplicity of unique fields and professions. It is not my intention, however, to leave the reader with little hope as to how to reverse the unfortunate trend that's been outlined in the preceding pages. While I may not have an all-encompassing solution to the problem, it's clear that there are several paths that offer promising alternatives to the current cultural paradigm.

The solution involves a combination of recommendations made by several of my most prominent sources. Kalle Lasn advocates for increased conscious raising - a proactive task of public education and awareness to illuminate the dangers of advertising and materialistic ideals. Karl Marx would propose a radical restructuring of our economy – one with more emphasis on equality and less risk of widespread exploitation (likely eliminating capitalist modes of production all together). Aldo Leopold would advocate the complete abandonment of materialistic ideals in order to accommodate a more ecologically conscious mindset. Finally, Ellen Shell, while she works hard to remain objective, would be an advocate for voluntary simplicity, which, would involve a cultural paradigm shift that rejects the tenets

of consumerism and embraces a doctrine that emphasizes the importance of our close personal relationships and our ties to the natural environment.

Unlike Marx, I'm not convinced that capitalism is the source of *all* of societies woes. After all, there are any number of countries with economic systems other than capitalism that fail to achieve reasonable levels of wellbeing or happiness. Therefore, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that a radical restructuring of the heart of our economic model is a viable solution to the problem. Additionally, economic models like the former Soviet Union and present day Cuba are hardly models of healthy and happy workers. That being said, Marx's views on alienation, objectification, and mental health are all worthwhile and certainly deserve a place in the overall analysis of a complete solution. In the search for a more tangible resolution, however, Lasn, Leopold, and Shell are closer to being on the right track.

As I previously mentioned, affluenza and the spirit of materialism are often the result of a subconscious disconnect between what we *think* we need and what we genuinely *do* need. In this sense, education is invaluable as a means to explain various desires, provide answers to questions that we have as consumers, and arm us against the unwelcome intrusion of targeted advertising. It would be well worth our time to revisit Adam Smith's concept of enlightened self-interest and the idea that fulfillment of individual wants in the aggregate can serve society's needs. This has been one of the predominant economic theories since its inception and has contributed greatly to the wealth that many developed countries enjoy today. Realistically, however, Smith lived during a time with more sharply defined boundaries. There's little reason to think he could have anticipated the relentless pursuit of low-cost labor around the globe or the reality of such a disposable economy. In the interest of formulating a viable, culturally relevant paradigm shift, it seems incumbent

that we alter these dated ideologies to accommodate the issues germane to today.

Included in any revision will inevitably be the concept of globalization. Being our reality and future, globalism brings with it a sober responsibility. The advantages associated with free markets are important—essential—but they are only free if we make them that way. We are consumers, certainly, but far more importantly we are citizens of the world whose needs and wants are linked to and inextricably dependent on the needs and wants of others around the globe. With this in mind, it becomes clearer that our practice(s) of scouring the world for cheap resources and labor is not sustainable and that “success” is only measureable with sustainable, community wellbeing, and not individualized accomplishments. Knowing that our purchases have consequences, however, we can begin to enact change. Consumers are all too often left to choose between discount retailers whose practices they find questionable, and high-end stores whose prices they cannot afford. As Shell points out, given that these same consumers are laboring in a low-price/low-wage economy, their choice isn’t really a free one. “Voting with your wallet” fails to apply when your values are so completely out of line with your budget.

We can set our own standard for quality and stick to it. We can demand to know the true costs of what we buy, including the costs on human dignity and the environment. We can demand sustainability, minimize disposability, and insist on transparency. We can rekindle our acquaintance with craftsmanship. We can choose to buy or not, choose to bargain or not, and choose to follow our hearts or not, unencumbered by the anxiety that someone somewhere is getting a “better deal”.

While I didn’t mention many of the prominent actors involved in the “deep ecology” movement in this paper, it seems appropriate to address some of their values/concerns as the environment certainly plays a major role in the topic. We are justified in giving credence

to their insistence on recognizing the inherent worth of all living beings, regardless of their utility in satisfying human needs. Low prices and daily convenience are made possible by a variety of unfortunate lifestyles all over the world. Not only for Juarez based cloth cutters, Thai shrimp farmers, and Chinese toy manufacturers, but for all of us. There remains nothing innovative about building business plans on the backs of an insecure, low-wage workforce, about depleting resources and polluting environments to cut costs, or about squeezing producers until they fail or quit or cheat. Prosperity will never be the natural byproduct of a system built on these precepts. And as people like Edward Abbey and Aldo Leopold would support, part of what's required to steer away from this mindset is avoiding merely anthropocentric environmentalism. A mindset that is determined to exploit the environment for human purposes is certain to result in a continuity of current denigration that degrades our own human experience.

As noted in the introduction of the paper, most of us are now fully detached from the natural world, having insulated ourselves with our clothing, cars, household amenities, and industrialized food products. Rediscovering a meaningful relationship with our environment shouldn't be laborious or duty-bound; we should pursue it because it feels right and good. There was a time when many of us ran around in the woods, enjoyed tree house adventures, and otherwise indulged in a time of few responsibilities, unparalleled imagination, and endless opportunities. For most of us though, these memories are the product of only a few childhood years. The mindset of child-like innocence, coupled with an insatiable appetite for the unknown may be just what we need to get back to this curiosity with nature and reintroduction to our surrounding environments. This is not to suggest that we should live in a state of childhood innocence all our lives. Childhood is a magical time precisely because we are shielded from and oblivious to the responsibilities of having to

make our way in the world and provide for our own basic needs and those of our loved ones. Our food, clothing and shelter are all provided for us while we play, and Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy are as real as the aunt or uncle who we only see once a year. But, as we outgrow the fantasies of childhood and maturely adopt the responsibilities of adulthood, it isn't inevitable that we abandon that affinity that we had for the natural world in our youth. Retaining an attachment to our natural environment, whether through a weekend spent hiking and camping in a national park, a Saturday morning bike ride, or a late afternoon walk along the beach or in an inner-city park, has the capacity to keep us connected to our environment and profoundly enrich our lives through the recognition that we are part of something far grander than ourselves.

Ultimately, the crux of the solution will rely upon a conscious decision to abandon our highly acquisitive lifestyles and embrace a simpler existence. For most of us, the significance of the material things that mean the most to us has flowed from us to the object and not the other way around. Ideally, we should look to our material things to enhance the quality of our lives in some articulable way. It's easy to articulate the warmth and comfort we experience from a new pair of winter gloves or boots, or the physical and economic benefits from replacing old leaking windows in our home, or even the sense of beauty we experience from looking at a piece of art work that we buy to hang on the bedroom wall. If we understand this concept—that meaning and value are the things we *give* to symbols, not things we *receive* from them—the dynamic changes—even in the distracting context of consumer culture.

While my proposal places emphasis on the merits of living simply, it isn't meant to advocate for a dramatic redistribution of wealth. Neither is it a call to arms for us to lead lives of asceticism and emulate Buddhist monks. But, a craving to acquire things for the

mere act of acquisition or to improve our status among our peers is an unhealthy way to live. In other words, there's no need to buy a new pair of downhill skis merely because the graphic design has changed from last year's model. As with anything in life, moderation is the "buzz word," which ultimately contributes to a critical balance in the perception people have over their own lives. In the interest of pursuing this balance, there's any number of easy changes that we can adopt. For example, the concept of trading down is no doubt familiar to many of us. Rather than buy new ones, we can hand down T-shirts from one child to the next, we can buy furniture at second-hand shops, hang on to our cars for ten years rather than six, and send handmade cards or crafts instead of buying expensive gifts. For many of us, these changes won't be considered "easy" but can reasonably be implemented without heartbreaking disruption or hardship. A person's decision to live a simpler, less cluttered life shouldn't be viewed by others as an aberrant lifestyle. As more people make the transition to "downsize" their lives, keeping up with the Joneses will be easier and will have positive ripple effects all the way through the global production chain.

As I've mentioned, one of the important aspects to ensuring the success of a potential cultural paradigm shift is going to include the realization that we are all part of a larger *global* community. The effects of our purchasing decisions are hardly restricted to the confines of our neighborhoods, cities, states, or even countries. I see responsible consumption habits as including several key recognitions. In general, it will require the awareness of interrelated global dynamics, the state of the planet, and the vast differences of other cultures. More specifically, it will be important to abandon attitudes of blissful ignorance with respect to the impacts of consumption and production on the environment, accepting the notions of voluntary simplicity and conservation, and understanding the consequences of resource management decisions. Also included would be an awareness of

the impacts of economic development on the integrity of both developed and developing local communities, infrastructures, and natural environments. Lastly, I would emphasize the importance of understanding the impacts on human rights, political stability, societal wellbeing, cultural sustainability, familial wellbeing, quality of life, and standards of living of other nations.

In the end, it would be naïve to adopt the idea that consumers operate in an impersonal market economy where they make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations and consequences—the only requisite for participation being the ability to pay. What I would like the reader to acknowledge is the idea that in an ideal, global community, the consumer sees himself as part of a larger whole that is affected by a collectivity of individual consumption decisions. Ultimately, each person, in their role as a consumer of the world's resources and as an integrated participant in the global economy, will need to question the true global cost of purchasing a product, and this ideal consumer will decide not to purchase at all if the cost(s) are unjustifiable. In addition, if we are to reintroduce ourselves to a life of satisfaction rather than one of elusive happiness, we must reevaluate what is it that makes us happy. Achieving material wealth may *facilitate* this pursuit to a certain extent but ultimately, the richness of life is going to be a product of the relationships we foster and the value placed on our surrounding environments.

Do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am — a reluctant enthusiast... a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it's still here. So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely, mysterious, and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much; I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk-bound men and women with their hearts in a safe deposit box, and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this; you will outlive the bastards.

— Edward Abbey, speech excerpt to Colorado environmentalists, circa 1976

Appendix A

The following mock advertisement was taken from the book *Affluenza* and is a prime example of the “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” costs associated with daily consumption:

“Real Price Tags,” *Affluenza* 2005:

Congratulations! You’ve just purchased a vehicle that will cost \$130,000 by the time it’s paid for! That’s impressive. As an average American, you’ll use your vehicle for 82 percent of your trips, compared with 48 percent for Germans, 47 for the French, and 45 for the British.

The cost of a thirty-mile round-trip commute in this vehicle will be about \$15 a day, assuming gas prices remain stagnant. At that rate, you’ll spend an average of more than \$3,500 annually to get to and from work. When insurance, car payments, maintenance, registration, fuel, and other costs are added together, you’ll spend more than \$8,000 a year to park this vehicle for twenty-two hours a day and drive it for two.

Your vehicle generated 700 pounds of air pollution in its manufacture, and four tons of carbon. It will burn at least 450 gallons of gas every year, requiring more than thirty-five gas station fill-ups. You’ll spend three full days every year vacuuming, polishing, and cleaning the windows of the vehicle and waiting for it at the auto shop. When you divide the miles driven by the time spent to buy and maintain your car, you’ll be going about five miles an hour—even slower than rush hour in L.A.

In addition, your vehicle contributes its fair share to the following national costs:

- 155 billion gallons of gasoline burned annually
- \$60 billion spent annually to ensure Middle Eastern oil supplies
- 40,000 fatal car crashes annually, and 6,000 pedestrian deaths
- 250 million people maimed or injured since the days of Charles Olds (1905), and more killed than all the war’s in America’s history
- 50 million animals killed annually, including at least a quarter million of “extended family”: cats, dogs, and other pets
- Noise and pollution that inhibit sleep and contribute to radical increases in asthma, emphysema, heart disease, and bronchial infections
- One-fourth of U.S. greenhouse gases, which increase drought, hurricanes, and crop failures
- 7 billion pounds of unrecycled scrap and waste annually
- More than \$200 billion annually in taxes for road construction and maintenance, snow plowing, subsidized parking, public health expenditures, and other costs that come directly out of pocket
- A total of more than \$1 trillion a year in social costs

Bibliography

- "Advertising: Exposure and Industry Statistics." *Media Education Foundation* (2005). *Mediaed.org*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/AdvertisingExposure.pdf>>.
- "Affluenza." *DK Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*. 1998. Print.
- Arnold, Chris. *Ethical Marketing and the New Consumer*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley, 2009. Print.
- Bedford, Tracey. *Ethical Consumerism: Everyday Negotiations in the Construction of an Ethical Self. Seminar Resolve*. 15 Feb. 2007. Web. 3 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/>>.
- Blatt, Harvey. *America's Environmental Report Card: Are We Making the Grade?* Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005. Print.
- Bookchin, Murray. "Death of a Small Planet." *The Progressive* 1989: 19-23. *Anarchy Archives*. Web. 23 Feb. 2012. <http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/planet/planet.html>.
- Bryson, Bill. *The Life and times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir*. New York: Broadway, 2006. Print.
- Cardigo, Cristina. *To Reduce or Not to Reduce: Exploring Motivations on the Adoption of Ethical Consumer Practices*. Lisbon University Institute, Summer 2009. Web. 3 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.edamba.eu/userfiles/file/Cardigo%20Cristina.pdf>>.
- Carrier, James G. "Protecting the Environment the Natural Way: Ethical Consumption and Commodity Fetishism." *America: History and Life*. EBSCO, June 2010. Web. 3 Apr. 2011.
- Cashman, Orla, and James A. Twaite. *Toxic Wealth: How the Culture of Affluence Can Harm Us and Our Children*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2009. Print.
- Chapman, Audrey R., Rodney Lawrence. Petersen, and Barbara Smith-Moran. *Consumption, Population, and Sustainability: Perspectives from Science and Religion*. Washington, D.C.: Island, 2000. Print.
- City on Steroids*. *Current*. Vanguard, 07 May 2008. Web. 18 Mar. 2012. <http://current.com/shows/vanguard/88938803_city-on-steroids.htm>.
- Cohen, Sande, and R. L. Rutsky. *Consumption in an Age of Information*. Oxford: Berg, 2005. Print.
- Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*. Oxford [u. A.: Oxford Univ., 2006. Print.
- "Environmental Consumerism." *Welcome to the Global Community*. 2007. Web. 08 Jan. 2012. <<http://globalcommunitywebnet.com/globalcommunity/environmentalconsumerism.htm>>.
- Fromm, Erich. "Marx's Concept of Man." *Erich Fromm Archive*. 1961. Web. 23 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/index.htm>>.
- Graaf, John, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor. *Affluenza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 2005. Print.
- Hawken, Paul, Amory B. Lovins, and Hunter L. Lovins. *Natural Capitalism: Creating the next Industrial Revolution*. Boston: Little, Brown and, 1999. Print.
- Humphery, Kim. *Excess: Anti-consumerism in the West*. Cambridge [u.a.: Polity, 2010. Print.
- Kasser, Tim. *The High Price of Materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002. Print.
- Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge - and Why We Must*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2000. Print.
- Lodziak, Conrad. *The Myth of Consumerism*. London: Pluto, 2002. Print.

- Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labour." *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. 1844. *Chinook E-reserves*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.
- Masci, David. "The Consumer Culture: Are Americans Becoming Too Materialistic?" *CQ Researcher Online*. CQ Press, 19 Nov. 1999. Web. 3 Apr. 2011.
- "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs>.
- Mayell, Hillary. "As Consumerism Spreads, Earth Suffers, Study Says." *Daily Nature and Science News and Headlines | National Geographic News*. National Geographic, 12 Jan. 2004. Web. 03 Jan. 2012. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/01/0111_040112_consumerism.html>.
- McDermott, Matthew. "Cult of Consumerism at Root of Planet's Environmental Degradation & Destruction." *TreeHugger*. 15 Jan. 2010. Web. 08 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.treehugger.com/corporate-responsibility/cult-of-consumerism-at-root-of-planets-environmental-degradation-destruction.html>>.
- McDonald, Marci. "Call It 'kid-influence'" *U.S. News and World Report*. 22 July 2001. Web. 5 Feb. 2012. <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/biztech/articles/010730/archive_038048.htm>.
- Reisch, Lucia A., and Inge Ropke. *The Ecological Economics of Consumption*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2004. Print.
- Ritzer, George, and Douglas Goodman. *Classical Sociological Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. Print.
- Roche, Mary M. Doyle. *Children, Consumerism, and the Common Good*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009. Print.
- Sandlin, Jennifer A., and Peter McLaren. *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption: Living and Learning in the Shadow of the "shopocalypse"*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Sayer, Andrew. "(De)commodification, Consumer Culture, and Moral Economy." *GreenFILE*. EBSCO, 19 Sept. 2002. Web. 5 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.envplan.com/abstract.cgi?id=d353>>.
- Schor, Juliet. *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999. Print.
- Shell, Ellen R. *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.
- Slater, Becky, and Michael Warhurst, eds. "Overconsumption: Our Use of the World's Natural Resources." *Friends of the Earth* (2009): 3. Web. 2012. <http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2009/Overconsumption_Sep09.pdf>.
- Speth, James Gustave. *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print.
- Stearns, Peter N. *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Web. 27 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.olek.waw.pl/inne/1357/Stearns7246.pdf>>.
- Stebbins, Robert A. *Leisure and Consumption: Common Ground/separate Worlds*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Modern Library, 1934. Print.
- Walker, Rob. *Buying In: the Secret Dialogue between What We Buy and Who We Are*. New York: Random House, 2008. Print.
- Youkey, Dr. David. "Karl Marx on Alienation." University of Colorado, Boulder. 17 Feb. 2010. Lecture.
- Young, William, Kumju Hwang, and Caroline Oates. "Sustainable Consumption: Green Consumer Behaviour." *GreenFILE*. EBSCO, Jan. 2010. Web. 3 Apr. 2011.