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The high consumption levels of the global upper-income "consumer class" account for a vastly disproportionate share of worldwide environmental impacts. This paper documents the environmental consequences of consumer class resource use and considers the implications for the future growth of lower and middle-income living standards.

Per capita use of virtually every natural resource varies dramatically with income. Fossil fuel use by the poorest one fifth of the world's population releases a tenth of a ton of carbon dioxide per person per year, compared to half a ton for the middle-income majority and 3.5 tons for the top fifth, or consumer class. Industrial countries, with one fourth of the world's population, consume 40% to 86% of various natural resources. The average resident of an industrial country consumes three times as much fresh water, ten times as much energy, and nineteen times as much aluminum as someone in a developing country. Not surprisingly, industrial countries account for almost all industrial pollution, including emissions of hazardous chemicals and nuclear wastes.

International comparison of consumption patterns shows that as income rises, consumption of ecologically less damaging products such as grains rises slowly, while purchases of energy, metals and other more ecologically damaging products multiply rapidly. The components of a consumer lifestyle, e.g., automobiles, throwaway goods and packaging, high-fat foods, and air conditioning, can only be provided at great environmental cost.

Fortunately, once people join the consumer class, their impact ceases to grow as quickly. Per capita use of chemicals, energy, metals, and paper have been stable in industrial countries since the mid-1970s. This is due in part to higher energy prices, but also reflects a long-run shift toward consumption of technology and services. But the high levels of per capita consumer class resource use is far too high for the entire world to reach without devastating the plant: bringing everyone up to current consumer class standards would triple greenhouse gas emissions, mining, and logging, for example.

Consumer class environmental impacts are felt worldwide as developing nations export resources and resource-intensive products to the industrial world. Japan imports more than 50% of its wood, much of it from the rapidly vanishing rain forests of Borneo. The Netherlands imports an agricultural output equal to three times its own area, much of it from deforested and pesticide-doused tropical regions. In 1989 the European Community, Japan, and North America had combined net imports of primary commodities (crops and natural resources) of $136 billion.

Shifting tastes among the consumer class have, in years past, fueled commodity booms in the tropics, for products such as sugar, tea, coffee, and rubber. Today the illegal trade in exotic and endangered wildlife continues that pattern, as does the production of illegal drugs for American and European consumers. What was once the untouched cloud forest of the Peruvian Amazon is now the herbicide-poisoned heartland of the world's cocaine industry.

Upper-income consumption is too often ignored as a cause of environmental decline. While other factors such as technology and population growth are important, consumption levels play a key role as well. As such, technological change and population stabilization alone cannot save the planet; a complementary reduction of material wants is also required. A study of the international potential for reduction in fossil fuel consumption concluded that the entire world's population could live at the level of West Europeans in the mid-1970s. This includes modest but comfortable homes, refrigeration for food, clothes washers, hot water, and ready access to public transit plus limited auto use.[1] It does not include, nor could the world support, American lifestyles for all, with their larger homes, numerous electrical appliances, and auto-centered transportation. Even the European standard of the 1970s, if projected worldwide, may not achieve the global reduction in carbon emissions that is believed to be necessary to stabilize the world's climate.

"Even assuming rapid progress in stabilizing human numbers and great strides in employing clean and efficient technologies, human wants will overrun the biosphere unless they shift from material to nonmaterial ends. The ability of the earth to support billions of human beings depends on whether we continue to equate consumption with fulfillment." (60-61)

Notes

1. José Goldenberg, et al., Energy for a Sustainable World (Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 1987).