

Over Consumption Linked to most Environmental Issues

Last Christmas I was given one of the best presents I have ever received. Instead of another material gift, a chimpanzee was ‘adopted’ for me from the ‘Adopt-A-Chimp’ program of the Fauna Foundation. This organization’s mission is “to create a loving, safe and healthy environment for retired biomedical research chimpanzees”. These chimps were subjected to dart guns, needles, infectious diseases and invasive surgeries, and can now spend the rest of their lives in peace and comfort. I was elated to know that I was helping to give one of these incredible creatures a better life.

Christmas and other special days throughout the year that have become linked to gift-giving are times when consumption of material goods traditionally peaks. Consumerism is an epidemic that has swept through the western world, which seems to equate personal happiness with consumption and the purchase of material possessions.

"This unprecedented consumer appetite is undermining the natural systems we all depend on, and making it even harder for the world's poor to meet their basic needs," states the Worldwatch Institute. Not only does consumerism extract a devastating toll on the Earth’s water supplies, natural resources, and ecosystems, the “throw away” mentality that has evolved is also creating a huge problem of excessive waste. "Most of the environmental issues we see today can be linked to consumption."

And, as the United Nations puts it, “Inequalities in consumption are stark. Globally, the 20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20%, a minuscule 1.3%”.

Some aspects of our rampant consumerism are well worth thinking about. The National Geographic website reports that worldwide annual expenditures for cosmetics total U.S. \$18 billion; the estimate for annual expenditures required to eliminate hunger and malnutrition is \$19 billion. Expenditures on pet food in the United States and Europe total \$17 billion a year; the estimated cost of immunizing every child, providing clean drinking water for all, and achieving universal literacy is \$16.3 billion.

The funny thing is, according to the results of surveys by America’s National Opinion Research Center, only 33 percent of the population are ‘very happy’ with their lives. That’s a five percent drop from 1974. Declines in the happiness index are similar in other developed countries. Apparently our fetish with the material hasn’t gotten us very far on the satisfaction scale.

For five years, I lived aboard a 40-foot sailboat with my family; quite content with only the possessions we could carry aboard. Confined to a limited space, we never felt in need because we had to make do with less material goods.

We visited many ‘third world’ Latin America countries and experienced the happiness that is so apparent there. Many of the people we met had next to nothing, but still found so much joy in life and were readily generous to others.

The developed world may consider these people to be impoverished, but perhaps it is the other way around. The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes poverty as, “the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions”. But what exactly is the ‘usual’ amount of possessions? Who makes this decision? Many people in underdeveloped countries don’t consider themselves to be poor; it is we who label them as such. Perhaps we are the impoverished ones. Perhaps we revolve too wholly around material things.

Back in 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King stated, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society." Yet we’ve evolved to habitually putting more emphasis on material ends than on the occasion we are celebrating or the wondrous world we live in. Even if we utilize ‘green shopping opportunities’, to lessen the environmental impact

of our purchases, one still can't deny the fact that the most sustainable product is the one never bought in the first place.

So instead of focusing on material presents for birthdays, Christmas, Mother's or Father's Days, or any other time when you feel a gift is absolutely necessary, why don't you try out some different ideas:

Donate, sponsor, or join a group as a gift for someone. On the Jane Goodall Institute's website you can help provide African families with clean water, help make a forest free from snares, send seeds or fuel-efficient cook stoves to Tanzania, or support an environmental education program in the Congo. On Conservation International's website, you can protect an acre of rainforest, or help save pandas and tigers.

You can 'adopt' a variety of endangered animals from the World Wildlife Federation, or foster an orphaned elephant from the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya. You can also join, in the recipient's name, a plethora of environmental organizations, which are helping to better our world.

Check it out, and don't be afraid to think outside of the box!

As Bill McKibben says in his *The Problem with Christmas* article, "Start sharing in the deep human secret that consumer society is set up to obscure: the things that please us most are almost always counterintuitive. We need to be out in the cold air, we need to think about others, we need to serve."