

Sustainable Consumption

Before you Begin

World consumption has expanded at an unprecedented pace in the twentieth century. Some benefits of this consumption have ensured people are better fed, housed and have a longer life span. However, increasing consumption that too at fast pace is undermining the environmental resource base. The report of the Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI), “Over Consumption? - Our use of the World's Natural resources” mentions that natural resources including materials, water, energy and fertile land are the basis for all life on land. However, humanity's rapidly growing consumption of these resources is causing severe damage. Our climate is changing, our fresh water reserves, fish stocks and forests are shrinking; fertile land is being destroyed and species are becoming extinct. In order to continue to thrive on this planet, our lifestyle will need to become more sustainable, so that we are able to protect our natural resource base and the fragile ecosystem on our planet.

The case examples highlight how consumerism is changing the way people look at resource consumption. It is important that individuals take responsibility for consuming goods and services in a sustainable manner.

In the age of convenience consumerism, we may waste as much as we consume. We may pay more for the packaging than for the product. There needs to be a shift in what and how much we consume; is it really a need or a want? What are the better alternatives to the packaging? If we do not address today's problem of overconsumption, the status of the natural resource base will only worsen and impact quality of life.

Case Example 1

A sustainable past

In the good old days, there was the cloth shopping bag. We took it to the shops hundreds of times till it was torn. We did not have the plastic bags to use once and throw away. We drank tea in china cups or steel tumblers; no paper cups to litter a place. We did not have soft drink fountains with their disposable cups, we used bottles instead. An empty milk powder tin remained on the kitchen shelf for years as a store for sugar or gram. Milk was bought in clean glass bottles which were returned the next day; no plastic pouch or cartons to be thrown into the bin the next day. We had handkerchiefs washed and rewashed till they were torn; no paper napkins to throw away. Babies wore clean cloth diapers (usually made from grandmother's old soft cotton sarees), washed and rewashed; no throwaway diapers. Those days we did not waste.

Case Example 2

New Plastic Economy

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation report “The New Plastics Economy” details the scale of the packaging waste problem. In 2013, industry produced 78 million metric tons of plastic packaging worldwide. Of that, 40 percent was landfilled and another 32 percent was “leaked” to the environment, polluting land and sea. Only 28 percent of the plastic, the report says, was collected for further use. Half of that was incinerated for energy. The other half was recycled.

Source:

<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/programmes/systemic-initiatives/new-plastics-economy>

