

## Ecological Living: Sustainable Consumption

We are all participants in a moral community, as well as members of a society. As individuals, we act as citizens and consumers. We may fulfill our duty as citizens by being informed, voting, and joining with others in groups that support environmental cleanups, or ecosystem restoration projects, or effective legislation and government regulation. Chapter 10 considers how citizens may help shape environmental policy through their involvement in nongovernmental organizations, governments, and businesses.

This chapter addresses our individual ethical decisions as consumers, as well as the responsibility of businesses and governments to support consumption that is environmentally sustainable. What does this mean for those of us who are affluent, or at least enjoy many of the benefits of living in an affluent society? For an answer, we use the worksheet after chapter 8 to construct and test ethical presumptions concerning sustainable consumption.

First, we consider arguments that we have a duty to reduce our consumption. Economists claim that increasing consumption is necessary for a healthy economy, but chapter 3 argues that our growth economy is environmentally unsustainable.<sup>1</sup> If we take both of these concerns into account, what might our ethical presumption be?

Second, we look at a concern for character by comparing the ecological virtues suggested in chapter 5 (gratitude, integrity, and frugality) with what it means today to be a consumer. Are we wasteful? Is our society placing too high a value on consumption?<sup>2</sup> Think about persons you admire for the way they live. What choices, as consumers, do they make?

Third, we evaluate our relationships in our consumer society by recalling the concerns of chapter 6. As consumers, how might we contribute to maintaining and restoring healthy ecosystems, for the good of our society and own health, but also for the good of the animals and plants that also depend on these ecosystems?<sup>3</sup> Should our tax laws give businesses economic incentives to promote increasing consumption through advertising?

Fourth, we look at rights. International human rights law affirms that we all have a right to a healthy environment. Yet this right seems to clash with our right to enjoy the economic and social benefits of sustainable development. This conflict may be resolved by accepting that the exercise of our rights as consumers should be constrained by the health of the natural environment.<sup>4</sup> Yet this is easier said than done.

After constructing presumptions concerning our consumption of goods and services, we then test them by considering the likely consequences of acting on them.

### Duty: To Reduce Our Consumption

Chapter 4 offers three ethical arguments for the presumption that we should not litter. If we restate these as ethical presumptions about consumption, our actions as consumers should (1) respect the *intrinsic worth* of nature, (2) reflect moral consideration for the well-being of *future generations*, and (3) protect the *rights of the poor* to an equitable share of the earth's resources. If our present level of consumption as a society is environmentally unsustainable, and if one or more of these presumptions is reasonable, then it is also reasonable to conclude that we have a duty to reduce our consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Text from Chapter 9 of *Doing Environmental Ethics* by Robert Traer (Westview Press, 2013).

Chapters 2 and 4 present arguments for respecting the intrinsic worth of organisms, species, and ecosystems. If these arguments are convincing, we have a duty to reduce, reuse, and recycle. The moral issue is not merely what changes will protect the environment, but how to allocate fairly the costs of these changes. In this chapter we renew the argument that it is fair to expect industrial countries to assume a greater share of responsibility for funding environmental initiatives.

Chapter 4 also asserts that we have a duty to future generations to care for the environment. In the same way that we should leave a public space free of litter so others using it after us may enjoy it as we have, we should reduce our consumption so future generations will be born into an environment as healthy as the environment we now enjoy. This means reducing our consumption of renewable resources to less than the optimal scale and investing in finding replacements for the nonrenewable resources we are using. Because this assertion concerns our relationship with future generations, we address it in that part of this chapter.

The third argument in chapter 4 involves our right to consume the earth's resources. Corporations, individuals, or governments own or have rights to use most of these natural resources. If we accept Locke's argument—that those owning properties and governments holding land in trust for its people have a duty to ensure conservation among present users *and also* preservation of natural resources for future generations—then, for the sake of the common good, we have a duty to constrain our use of both private and public land.

### **Equity**

The Brundtland Report by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development asserts the right to sustainable development for every society. The issue of equity concerns how to apportion responsibility for achieving economic development and consumption that is environmentally sustainable. For the past twenty years there has been a contentious debate between those who argue that the developed countries should bear a greater burden of the costs for achieving these goals and those who assert that all countries have the same duty to seek environmental sustainability.

This dispute is best understood in the context of recent history. In 1750 the living standards of most people in the world were roughly the same. By the 1980s, however, the average person living in a highly industrialized society was “eight times richer” than a comparable person living in a less-industrialized society. Today the consumption of resources like oil and metals and the wastes produced by this consumption are more than thirty times higher in North America, Western Europe, Japan, and Australia than in the developing world.<sup>5</sup>

If everyone in the world consumed at the same rate as those living in the United States, it would take six Earths to support the world's present population. Consuming at the rate of the British and French would only require three Earths. If everyone lived like the Chinese, even given China's recent spurt in industrial development and consumption, we could all live on the planet we have.<sup>6</sup>

Are these simply facts identifying differences in wealth? Or is the current disparity in living standards between developed and developing societies evidence of injustice? Put more

starkly, is this simply a capitalist version of the imperialist exploitation of the weak by the strong?<sup>7</sup>

If the history of Western conquest, colonialism, and imperialism seems to account for much of the present inequity in the world, then the ethical conclusions asserted by Henry Shue and Peter Singer in chapter 4 would apply. We could reasonably infer that developed societies not only have a duty to provide funds for sustainable development in poorer countries, but also have a duty to reduce consumption if it is necessary to realize environmental sustainability.

### Agenda 21

Agenda 21, which was approved at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, affirms such a duty.<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 4.3 acknowledges that poor people damage the environment, but argues that *unsustainable consumption in developed societies* poses the main threat: “Poverty and environmental degradation are closely interrelated. While poverty results in certain kinds of environmental stress, the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances.”<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 33 of Agenda 21 states that industrialized countries have a duty to fund sustainable development in developing countries: “Developed countries [should] reaffirm their commitments to reach the accepted United Nations target of 0.7 per cent of GNP” and “to the extent that they have not yet achieved that target, agree to augment their aid programs in order to reach that target as soon as possible and to ensure prompt and effective implementation of Agenda 21.”<sup>10</sup>

The United States has rejected this moral claim, arguing that using a percentage of GNP to calculate its duty to developing countries would be unfair because the US economy is much larger than that of other countries.<sup>11</sup> Other industrial societies, however, have accepted this ethical presumption. In an effort to be more responsible, by 1996 Japan, Germany, and France were each giving more than the United States for direct assistance to developing countries.<sup>12</sup>

At a 1996 meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which oversees the implementation of Agenda 21, the representative of the US government urged developing countries to look to the private sector for investment capital, rather than to loans from developed countries. This would also mean relying on loans administered by the World Bank, which requires borrowing countries to accept structural adjustment programs (SAPs) to force these nations to “implement monetary policy, reduce inefficient subsidies, decrease safety net benefits, divest government holdings, liberalize trade, and implement other export-oriented growth strategies.”<sup>13</sup>

Supporters of SAPs claim that imposing these conditions on countries generates “lower inflation rates, increased savings, lower budget deficits, improved trade balances, higher economic growth rates, employment creation, and poverty reduction.”<sup>14</sup> Critics argue that SAPs not only increase disparity in wealth, but make it harder for poor countries to protect the environment.<sup>15</sup> Once subject to SAPs, governments of developing countries seeking to attract foreign investment will usually refrain from passing effective environmental

protection laws, because these increase costs for businesses. Also, governments that must reduce expenditures to meet SAP requirements will generally spend less to protect the environment.<sup>16</sup>

Agenda 21 asserts that: “Special attention should be paid to the demand for natural resources generated by unsustainable consumption and to the efficient use of those resources consistent with the goal of minimizing depletion and reducing pollution. Although consumption patterns are very high in certain parts of the world, the basic consumer needs of a large section of humanity are not being met. This results in excessive demands and unsustainable lifestyles among the richer segments, which place immense stress on the environment. The poorer segments, meanwhile, are unable to meet food, health care, shelter, and educational needs.”<sup>17</sup>

Agenda 21 affirms that nations have not only a duty to protect the individual right to a healthy environment, but also a *duty to create an equitable international order*.<sup>18</sup> Although the US government rejects these moral presumptions affirmed by Agenda 21, the European Union has accepted the goal of contributing 0.7 percent of the gross national product (GNP) of its member states to direct assistance for developing countries.

Is it reasonable for industrialized countries to accept this duty as an ethical presumption? If so, then the government of the United States bears the burden of showing that the consequences of implementing Agenda 21 are unfair or onerous.

### **Character: Consumer Choices**

As consumers, we have a significant choice to make. We can allow ourselves to be persuaded by advertising that consuming more is the way to be happy, and that our increased consumption will support a better world by stimulating economic growth. Or we can consume less and live more frugally, in a way that is more environmentally sustainable.

Jared Diamond writes: “We Americans may think of China’s growing consumption as a problem. But the Chinese are only reaching for the consumption rate we already have. To tell them not to try would be futile. The only approach that China and other developing countries will accept is to aim to make consumption rates and living standards more equal around the world.” Whether or not we agree with this argument, he continues, “we shall soon have lower consumption rates, because our present rates are unsustainable. Real sacrifice wouldn’t be required, however, because living standards are not tightly coupled to consumption rates. Much American consumption is wasteful and contributes little or nothing to quality of life.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to recognizing that we should reduce our waste, rising prices are prompting many of us to reduce our consumption. But what else might motivate us to consume less?<sup>20</sup> Religious teachings offer an answer that has long been compelling, and some people so love nature that they freely choose to take more responsibility for protecting animal life. Also, many of us are beginning to eat “lower on the food chain” by consuming less meat, especially beef, as a way of reducing animal suffering and conserving natural resources.

### **Religious Life**

The scriptures of Jews and Muslims teach that serving God leads to the joy of salvation, and Christian scripture adds the Great Commandment that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. In each of these traditions being faithful is now understood to involve caring for the earth. The focus of Buddhist teaching is overcoming desire through mindfulness, because the desire to possess the world through mindless consumption is illusory.

It is no accident, therefore, that the *virtue of frugality* is a goal of religious orders, whether these are Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist. Such orders emphasize living simple lives in natural settings, but promise that such a way of life will awaken a deep sense of gratitude and compassion for all life. Jews reject the ideal of monastic life, but the kibbutz movement in Israel has promoted a vision of frugal, communal living.

Saint Francis is an exemplar in the Christian tradition,<sup>21</sup> the Buddha is the teacher for Buddhists, and Sufis represent this way of life in Islam. The Buddha rejected the ascetic life, but counseled restraint in eating and other pleasures. Simple clothing, modest meals and often fasting, physical work, and contemplation are the distinctive practices of a “religious” life.<sup>22</sup> Today we may hope that millions of people feel called to join such religious disciplines, as these communities care for the land and are low consumers of nature’s resources.

Of course a religious person doesn’t have to join a celibate community to live with gratitude, integrity, and frugality. Also, persons not active in religious communities may refrain from excessive consumption to protect the beauty and wildlife of nature.

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, had a mystical love for the wild and affirmed in his private writings his faith in the God of creation. “The Song of God, sounding on forever. So pure and sure and universal is the harmony, it matters not where we are” for “as soon as we are absorbed in the harmony,” then “plain, mountain, calm, storm, lilies and sequoias, forests and meadows are only different strands of many-colored Light—are one in the sunbeam!”<sup>23</sup>

### **Love of Animals**

Jane Goodall’s research with chimpanzees offers another edifying example of someone with great love for nature. As a child, she was inspired by stories of Dr. Dolittle, and in 1960 began living in Tanzania with chimpanzees and doing research at Gombe Stream National Park. Where many researchers saw “primitive” apes living a simple existence, Goodall discovered highly intelligent, emotional creatures living in complex social groups.<sup>24</sup> To continue her research and conservation work, she founded the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI). Members of the JGI are striving to create healthy ecosystems, promote sustainable livelihoods, and inspire actions by people all over the world.<sup>25</sup>

One JGI initiative gives consumers the ethical choice of purchasing coffee grown in the Gombe ecosystem, which is marketed by Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. People who purchase this high-quality coffee support cultivation of a sustainable, chimpanzee-friendly crop grown by farmers in the impoverished Kigoma region of western Tanzania. The coffee is shade-grown (trees aren’t cut down). Also, because chimpanzees don’t like coffee beans, they don’t raid the fields, thus avoiding human-wildlife conflict, which is an increasing, life-threatening problem where humans and wildlife live near each other.<sup>26</sup> Fair

Trade Certified coffee also supports environmentally friendly, shade-grown coffee in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>27</sup>

Goodall acknowledges that the threat to wildlife posed by economic development has led many who care about wild animals to despair, but she believes we can trust in the human brain, the determination of young people, the “indomitable human spirit,” and the resiliency of nature. “So let us move into the next millennium with hope,” she writes. “[L]et us have faith in ourselves, in our intellect, in our staunch spirit. Let us develop respect for all living things. Let us try to replace impatience and intolerance with understanding and compassion. And love.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Eating**

Whether we have faith in a creator, or in *karma*, or are moved simply by the wonder of life and the power of love, we may choose to eat in a more environmentally sustainable way by reducing our consumption of meat.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that about half of the grains harvested today are fed to livestock. “Feedlot cattle consume 7 kilograms of grain to produce 1 kilogram of live weight. Pork takes nearly 4 kilograms of grain per kilogram of live weight. Poultry and fish are more efficient converters, needing about 2 kilograms of grain for each kilogram of live weight produced. Cheese and egg production are in between, consuming 3 and 2.6 kilograms of grain per kilogram of product respectively.”<sup>29</sup>

The consequential argument is clear. If more people eat less meat, the grain harvested in the world can feed more people. Chapter 12 considers the agricultural implications of this issue.

Today most of the world’s vegetarians are Hindus, because not eating meat is practiced in the Hindu tradition as a way of improving a person’s *karma*. “The Vedic and Puranic scriptures of Hinduism assert that animals have souls and the act of killing animals without due course has considerable karmic repercussions (i.e., the killer will suffer the pain of the animal he has killed in this life or the next). The principle of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) compels one to refrain from injuring any living creature, physically, mentally or emotionally without good reason.”<sup>30</sup> The moral presumption of the Hindu tradition is a vegetarian diet.

We may choose to eat lower on the food chain without becoming strict vegetarians. Some Jews promote “eco-kosher” cooking.<sup>31</sup> Supporters of “cruelty free diets”<sup>32</sup> assert the right of animals not to be killed by humans or oppose the suffering inflicted on animals by the industrial food production system. Whatever the motivation, eating lower on the food chain reduces our per capita consumption of grain, and this means there is more grain for others to eat.

### **Consumer Power**

Consumers may influence markets in other ways. Fair Trade Certified foods are a small market niche, but demand for organic food has had a major impact on retailers.<sup>33</sup>

Consumers can now also purchase more energy-efficient lightbulbs, appliances, and automobiles, and some cities allow a switch to green sources of electricity. In response to consumer demand, Home Depot sells lumber that is certified to have been cut in sustainably managed forests.<sup>34</sup>

In 2002 Dell made a commitment to recycle and reuse 98 percent of the original materials in its computers, and since then it has arranged with Goodwill to accept every brand of computer equipment for this recycling program.<sup>35</sup> Consumers can also purchase products and services that are more environmentally friendly.<sup>36</sup> The European Parliament has laws that require manufacturers to bear the costs of recycling electrical appliances. With consumer support, this could also be the ethical presumption for manufactured goods sold in the United States.

### **Relationships: Our Natural Community**

What would it mean to “think like a field” of grain? It would mean being aware of planting, growing, harvesting, soil erosion, and fertility loss. It would also mean having a sense of life over generations. Those who cultivate and eat the grain harvested from such a field help to sustain its ecosystem and also belong to this natural community.

We should respect hydrological cycles, protect the plants and other species that help the natural community build and retain its valuable soil, and preserve the wildlife that helps the natural community resist stress and maintain its ability to re-create.<sup>37</sup>

In short, our consumption should be limited to the yield from land that protects its integrity. Thinking this way may help us challenge the marketing ideology of our consumer society. By giving priority to living within the ecological community of our habitat, we can resist the appeal of advertising to consume more and more.

How might we make this change? Information by itself is not enough. People change their behavior together, as families and friends, in social networks, and in movements. Conversations with others—particularly with those we trust—have an inordinate influence. Those who install programmable thermostats so they can heat their homes only when they are there are likely to influence friends and family to make the same change. Research verifies that people who installed solar panels generally have friends who have already made that change.<sup>38</sup>

Good intentions also are not sufficient to achieve a more sustainable lifestyle. Visual or auditory prompts are needed to remind us to do what we intend to do. In one study, more conveniently located recycling containers and the use of prompts increased the amount of newspaper recycled in three apartment complexes from 50 to 100 percent. Signs by themselves have not been shown to be effective in encouraging pet owners to pick up after their dogs. However, when signs were combined with modeling the desired behavior, 80 percent of dog owners picked up after their pets. We should not be surprised that living more ecologically is the best way to encourage others to live more ecologically.<sup>39</sup>

### **Local: Control and Consumption**

Arguments supporting local control over how land is used clash with current regulations of the World Trade Organization, which prohibit domestic restrictions on “free trade.” There are, however, ethical as well as practical reasons for urging greater local control.

First, outsiders are more likely to sacrifice the environment for short-term economic gain. “The outside producer could simply have an economic advantage, and by producing a good more cheaply render the local producer unable to compete, thereby forcing the local producer either to leave the business or, worse, to lower production costs by disrupting the local land’s health—by becoming, that is, an irresponsible community member.”<sup>40</sup> Or, “the

outside producer would gain an advantage over the local producer by misusing distant land in some way, thereby again encouraging the local producer to do the same locally to stay competitive, thus disrupting the local autonomy on which land health depends.”<sup>41</sup>

Second, local control encourages local consumption, and when local products are consumed locally, people are likely to have a greater attachment to the land and greater knowledge of how their lives affect the land and how far they can push it without diminishing its yields.<sup>42</sup> Current government policies, however, undermine local decision-making by favoring corporate food producers and absentee control.

Third, “all sustainability is local.”<sup>43</sup> We cannot simply apply abstract economic or ecological principles to a landscape, but need to assess the nature of a particular place. Local people know their environment, and scientific assessments should not ignore their experience.

A recent report by the Rainforest Alliance states that in the Maya Reserve in Guatemala, local communities and companies have created fire control and prevention plans, improved workers’ living and working conditions, increased the use of safety equipment, and experienced less social conflict through better land-use mapping.<sup>44</sup> The study concludes that forests are more likely to be well protected and carefully managed when local communities have a role in decision-making as well as alternatives to clearing land for cattle grazing, farming, and other less sustainable activities. Before intervening in a local environment, therefore, we should consider “what is happening upstream and downstream, how we can create meaningful occupations, enhance the region’s economic and physical health, and accrue biological and technical wealth for the future.”<sup>45</sup>

Fourth, we need to remind ourselves and others that participation in decision-making is a human right. Local people have a civil right, under the moral presumptions of international law and the domestic laws in most nations, to be involved in decisions that affect their environment and access to life-sustaining natural resources. This is why Friends of the Earth International argues for the right to know: “People have the right to play an active role in protecting their environments, and access to information is key to securing this right.” The right to know is necessary, yet not sufficient. “Even when sufficient information is provided about a particular project or plan, people, and particularly marginalized groups like indigenous people, people of color and women, are not always allowed access to decision-making channels.”<sup>46</sup>

The necessary social conditions for human dignity, which are protected by civil and political rights for individuals, also require protection for the relationships of peoples and communities. Therefore, FOEI asserts: “The right to decide is crucial to people’s self-determination, a fundamental principle in human rights law that holds that people can ‘freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’ (UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).”<sup>47</sup>

### **Advertising: End the Tax Write-Off**

Contemporary advertising promotes greater consumption and instant’ gratification.<sup>48</sup> This is thinking “like a mall.” Promoting increased consumption as the path to a fulfilling life assaults the traditional beliefs of every religious tradition, but few religious leaders in the West have criticized our lifestyle of overconsumption. An exception is Pope Benedict XVI,



who has condemned both Marxism and capitalism for being concerned only with material issues.<sup>49</sup>

Advertising persuades us that it is good to use natural resources for our pleasure. It rationalizes destroying a public good for a private gain. If advertising persuades people to consume more market goods, this may mean that fewer resources will be available for nonmarket goods. (When a forest is logged to produce paper products, it is no longer available for wildlife and human recreation.) Public policies that subsidize advertising by treating it as a tax exempt business expense should be unmasked as rationalizations for private gain.

Economists Daly and Farley argue that it would be more appropriate to tax advertising as a “public bad.” At least we should not allow advertising to be written off as a production cost.<sup>50</sup> Advertising is not a cost of producing goods, but an expense incurred in stimulating demand. In the last quarter century spending on advertising has been growing three times faster than the population of the world.<sup>51</sup> This trend may be beneficial for the bottom line of advertisers, producers, and television networks, but it undermines our sustainable use of natural resources.

Critics of marketing consumer products in less developed countries also argue that the practices of advertising are destroying traditional values. For example, Western marketers have tried to change the frugality of Indian customers by encouraging them to throw away used products.<sup>52</sup> Given the scarce resources of most Indians, if Western marketing is successful in transforming Indian culture so that people are less frugal, the consequences will be adverse for many individuals and the society.

Western marketing practices also undermine traditional systems of economic exchange, by characterizing these “as impediments [to] the development of market exchange systems, [and] as primitive practices to be broken, rather than as alternative need satisfaction systems.”<sup>53</sup> One ethical critic of Western marketing suggests that when it clashes with the basic values of another culture, companies engaged in such marketing should either stop doing business there or make changes in their products and services to respect the values of that culture.<sup>54</sup>

### **Rights: To a Healthy Environment**

To enjoy a right to a healthy environment, we must empower the government to ensure that our food supply is safe, adequate, and affordable, because there is no “invisible hand” behind free markets to provide this protection. Therefore, it is reasonable to support laws that regulate agriculture, the raising of livestock, food processing, and global trade that brings food into the country, and also to support taxes that enable governments to provide these essential services.

Similarly, our right to enjoy the fruits of economic development, by purchasing the food that we like, does not include a right to avoid the costs, as a society, of ensuring that economic development is environmentally sustainable. We cannot expect to have a healthy life as a people without exercising our rights in a manner that maintains a healthy natural environment.

To put this issue starkly, we should not think of buying a hamburger as simply our “right” if we have the money to pay the market price, when our present system of raising cattle for

beef is both devastating the natural environment and heavily subsidized by tax breaks. Our consumer rights are constrained by the limits imposed on our globalized society by the impact of our consumer lifestyle on the earth's biosphere.

### **Environmental Impact of Cattle**

“Cattle have arguably caused or are related to the most environmental damage to the globe of any nonhuman species through overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification, and tropical deforestation for ranches.”<sup>55</sup> What is the evidence for this assertion?

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 30 percent of the earth's ice-free land is directly or indirectly involved in livestock production, which causes about 20 percent of the world's greenhouse gases.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, cattle eat about half the world's grain, and producing a pound of beef takes about seven pounds of grain and 2,700 gallons of water.

In contrast, an acre of grains, using much less water and producing no methane, may yield ten times more protein than an acre used to produce beef. An acre of legumes may yield twenty times more protein than an acre used for grazing cattle. If for no other reason than economic efficiency, we should reduce our consumption of beef and eat more grains and legumes.

Those who argue that eating fewer hamburgers would be bad for the economy fail to take into account the externalities of producing beef.<sup>57</sup> The following social and environmental costs of raising cattle in the way that we do now are *not* included in the price we pay for a hamburger:

- Erosion and loss of topsoil, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity.
- The subsidized use of surface water and water from aquifers.
- Subsidies paid to agribusiness for growing corn (which is fed to cattle).
- Sewage disposal from cattle feedlots into the surrounding environment.
- Medical costs related to feeding animals in feedlots and eating animal products.
- Antibiotic-resistant infections caused by regularly feeding cattle antibiotics.
- Transport costs including the carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere.
- Emissions released in producing fertilizers for growing cattle feed.<sup>58</sup>

Removing only the subsidies in the United States for the use of water to produce beef would raise the cost of hamburger to more than \$35 per pound.<sup>59</sup>

### **Real Cost of Beef**

Do we have a right to buy a hamburger at a price that does not cover the social and environmental costs of producing it? Not a moral right, as this leaves these costs to others—to those living near land degraded by cattle ranching and to future generations that will inhabit a less fertile environment.

Locke argued that the right to private property should not deny good land for the use of others. Today rainforests are being leveled to raise cattle for beef, and aquifers are being drained to grow corn to feed cattle. Jefferson believed in the right of landowners to improve their land, but argued against inheritance rights on the ground that these rights undermine democracy. Today four meatpacking companies in the United States control over 80 percent of the market,<sup>60</sup> and there is no limit on the “right” of these transnational

corporations to lobby Congress for government subsidies on growing corn and raising beef that degrade the environment but provide consumers with a “cheap” burger.

Moreover, eating beef directly affects human welfare. Midgley writes: “It is enormously extravagant to use grains, beans, pulses and so forth for animal food, and then eat the animals, rather than letting human beings eat the grains, etc. right away. In the present food shortage, and still more in the sharper ones which threaten us, human interests demand most strongly that this kind of waste should be stopped.”<sup>61</sup>

What should we do? We should reduce our consumption of beef.<sup>62</sup> If a sufficient number of consumers were to stop buying beef, demand would decline, and over time the market and food suppliers would reduce the supply of beef and increase the supply of other commodities in response to increased demand for these foods.

Eating less beef would also increase the supply of grain available for human consumption. Given the global shortage of grain and rising prices making grain too costly for poor people to purchase, we should take this ethical action immediately.<sup>63</sup>

We should also support legislation that over several years will require producers (of food and other goods as well) to internalize the social and environmental costs of their products. This would not only increase the market price of commodities that are now heavily subsidized, but would also shift consumer demand to environmentally sustainable foods.

### **Consequences: Sustainable Consumption**

Following the worksheet at the end of chapter 8, we now test the ethical presumptions that we have constructed about our consumption by considering the likely consequences of acting on them. We distinguish probable from possible consequences and note when long-term consequences are uncertain. We identify the likely pros and cons of acting on an ethical presumption and then compare these predictions.

We weigh the value of ecosystem integrity and human rights without using cost-benefit analysis, but rely on this analysis for goods that are adequately priced by markets. We attempt to internalize the costs of economic *externalities*—cleaning up and restoring environmental damage, creating substitutes for depleted resources, and treating waste that exceeds the absorption capacity of a habitat. Moreover, we refrain from economic discounting that passes on the costs we are incurring to future generations.

Throughout this assessment we place the burden of proof on those who claim that the likely consequences of acting on ethical presumptions promoting environmental sustainability are sufficiently adverse that we should set them aside. In our discussion, if the integrity of an ecosystem, or a human right, is at risk, then the evidence to set aside a presumption should be compelling. Otherwise, the evidence only has to be convincing.

### **Presumptions: Duty**

As individuals and as members of developed societies, we have a duty to:

1. Affirm and maintain the intrinsic worth of a healthy environment.
2. Care for future generations by consuming no more than is fair for our generation.
3. Respect the rights of others to use the natural resources we are also consuming.
4. Abide by Agenda 21 by giving 0.7 percent of GNP to less developed countries.

*Pros and Cons.* The first three presumptions would likely help to conserve natural resources, although the long-term consequences are uncertain. Acting on the fourth presumption would possibly stimulate economic development in less developed countries, but under the current system of globalization might add to environmental degradation rather than reduce it.

There are economic costs in acting on these presumptions, but the long-term costs and benefits are uncertain. Some of the economic costs can be set by the market and weighed by cost-benefit analysis, but the first three presumptions largely involve nonmarket values.

The strongest argument against acting on these ethical presumptions is the prediction of adverse economic consequences. Acting on the first three presumptions would mean reducing our use of natural resources, which would raise the costs of production as well as the prices for some commodities. The fourth ethical presumption might stimulate economic development, but the international aid could be squandered or stolen.

*Compelling or Convincing Evidence?* Acting on the first and third presumptions involves, respectively, the integrity of an ecosystem and a human right, so compelling evidence is required to set aside these presumptions. The second and fourth presumptions do not directly involve environmental integrity or a human right, so only convincing evidence is needed to justify setting aside these presumptions.

Long-term estimates of all these possible costs are uncertain. If we agree that the consequential argument bears the burden of proof, then we may conclude it is reasonable to act on the ethical presumptions that express our sense of what is intrinsically right.

### ***Presumptions: Character and Relationships***

To live with greater character and virtue, as members of a moral community that extends consideration to other organisms, species, and ecosystems, we should:

1. Live with greater frugality for the sake of present and future generations.
2. Eat lower on the food chain to attain a more sustainable way of living.
3. End the tax deduction for advertising because it subsidizes greater consumption.
4. Support shade-grown coffee and other ecological agricultural practices.

*Pros and Cons.* The first two of these presumptions cannot be assessed by cost-benefit analysis, because each involves nonmarket values. Those who live inspiring lives, like John Muir and Jane Goodall, help keep our hopes alive, but this is a nonmarket good that cannot be measured by an economic calculation. Eating lower on the food chain would have economic impacts, but it would also improve our health (which is more than an economic benefit) and might help others see that they belong to an ecological community (with values that are not merely utilitarian).

Also, the long-term consequences of acting on the first two presumptions are uncertain. Those criticizing these choices argue either that each will be of little consequence (merely a lifestyle choice), or if widely adopted would extend our economic recession.<sup>64</sup> The breadth of these predictions reflects our inability to foresee the future.

The consequences of acting on the third presumption can likely be assessed by cost-benefit analysis. The fourth presumption may be seen, in terms of consequences, as a lifestyle issue (and so of little consequence), or as a way of challenging industrial

agriculture (which might have major consequences). Chapter 12 considers what this would mean for farming.

*Compelling or Convincing Evidence?* The fourth presumption concerns maintaining ecosystem integrity, therefore compelling consequential arguments are needed to set it aside. Convincing arguments would suffice to overturn the first three presumptions.

The uncertainty of predicting the likely outcomes of acting on presumptions 1, 2, and 4 weighs in favor of acting on them, because of their intrinsic worth. This is especially true for presumption 4, which involves ecosystem integrity. The moral argument for fairness in support of ending the tax subsidy for advertising should prevail, unless the consequences of doing this are clearly more adverse than beneficial.

### **Presumptions: Rights**

To protect the human right of everyone to a healthy environment, we should:

1. Support taxes and laws to ensure safe, adequate, and affordable food.
2. Eat less beef to protect the environment and increase the supply of grain for food.
3. Support greater control by local people over the use of local land.
4. Internalize (in the market price) the externalities of food production.

*Pros and Cons.* The rights to a healthy environment and to sustainable development depend on laws that protect both nature and the production of food using natural resources. Moreover, we cannot expect to exercise our rights without paying the costs of governmental regulation to ensure the protection of those rights.

Those who argue against local control, based on a prediction of likely consequences, claim that only a market evaluation will ensure the best use of natural resources. Certainly local people may waste their local resources or may resist a reasonable use of these resources for the sake of others. Yet local participation in land use decisions is crucial for human dignity, and therefore this nonmarket value should be protected.

Chapter 3 argues for internalizing externalities in all areas of production and assessing these costs to producers or, if this is not feasible, to the countries where production takes place. These costs should be included in the market price for goods. Those opposing this presumption on consequential grounds argue that it will raise the price of food and other commodities. Those defending the presumption note that industrial agriculture is heavily subsidized, and that these subsidies conceal the real costs of our agricultural system, which are presently being paid in taxes (that are unfairly distributed as government subsidies) or passed on to future generations.

*Compelling or Convincing Evidence?* The first three of these presumptions directly assert human rights, so compelling evidence that the consequences will be more adverse than beneficial should be required to set these presumptions aside. The fourth presumption asserts that cost-benefit analysis should include all the real costs, which seems self-evident. As the last presumption does not assert ecosystem integrity or a human right, only convincing evidence is needed to overcome it.

### **Predicting Consequences**

All these consequential evaluations require a detailed analysis, but these brief comments illustrate the reasoning involved in doing environmental ethics. Subsequent chapters give

greater consideration to some of these issues. We should now realize, however, that it will never be easy to know which consequences are probable, rather than merely possible, and that long-term consequences are usually uncertain. This insight should give us pause, whenever someone claims that predicting consequences is clearly the best way to decide what action is right.

In the following chapters we again construct ethical presumptions based on our duty, character, relationships, and human rights. These chapters, however, do not repeat the explicit worksheet found at the end of chapter 8 to consider deontological, teleological, and consequential arguments. Instead, throughout each chapter we “test” presumptions by predicting likely consequences as we consider arguments for what these presumptions should be.

## NOTES

1. “Earth has lost its ability to regenerate—unless global consumption is reduced, or global production is increased, or both.” Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 27.
2. “We cannot survive as a species if greed is privileged and protected and the economics of the greedy set the rules for how we live and die.” Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars*, xv.
3. Consider fish. Ed Stoddard, “Eating Fish: Good for Health, Bad for Environment?” *Reuters*, August 10, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/08/12/us-fish-omega-idUSN0926310820070812>; “Until All the Fish Are Gone,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/21/opinion/21mon1.html>; and Jane Kay, “Salmon Arriving in Record Low Numbers,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 30, 2008, A-1, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/30/MNRIUOE8C.DTL>.
4. Rights are constrained by reality. “If soil erosion and withdrawal of groundwater continue at their present rates until the world population reaches (and hopefully peaks) at 9 to 10 billion, shortages of food seem inevitable. There are two ways to stop short of the wall. Either the industrialized populations move down the food chain to a more vegetarian diet, or the agricultural yield of productive land worldwide is increased by more than 50 percent.” Such an increase is unlikely, because the constraints of the biosphere are fixed. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 33.
5. Jared Diamond, “What’s Your Consumption Factor?” *New York Times*, January 2, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/02/opinion/02diamond.html>.
6. Jeremy Lovell, “World Moves into Ecological Red,” *Reuters*, October 5, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL04722887>.
7. Tom Athanasiou, *Divided Planet: The Ecology of Rich and Poor*, 53–54, citing Paul Bairoch in Robert Heilbroner, *Twenty-First Century Capitalism*, 55–56, in Don Mayer, “Institutionalize Overconsumption,” in Laura Westra and Patricia H. Werhane, eds., *The Business of Consumption: Environmental Ethics and the Global Economy*, 69.
8. The duty of developed nations to provide financial support for environmental actions in developing nations is explicitly part of the financial agreement in the Convention on Biological Diversity, which was approved in Rio in 1992. See Convention on Biological Diversity, Article 20, <http://www.cbd.int/convention/articles.shtml?a=cbd-20>.
9. United Nations, Agenda 21 (Rio de Janeiro: Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992), <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf151/aconf15126-1annex1.htm>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Despite its enormous wealth and growth in technology, the United States is far behind other industrialized countries in trying to help poor nations on the path of development, according to a new study by an independent think tank. Haider Rizvi, “Anti-Poverty Index Scores U.S. Last on Environment Policies,”

*Green Gauge*, October 11, 2007, [http://editthis.info/lauraibm/Anti-Poverty\\_Index\\_Scores\\_U.S\\_Last\\_on\\_Environment\\_Policies\\_%2812-Oct-07%29](http://editthis.info/lauraibm/Anti-Poverty_Index_Scores_U.S_Last_on_Environment_Policies_%2812-Oct-07%29).

12. Donald A. Brown, "The Need to Face Conflicts between Rich and Poor Nations," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 35.

13. *Ibid.*, 37.

14. D. Reed, "Introduction" in D. Reed, ed., *Structural Adjustment, the Environment, and Sustainable Development*, ix–xxv, in Donald A. Brown, "The Need to Face Conflicts between Rich and Poor Nations," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 37.

15. D. Reed, "Global Economic Policy" and "Conclusions: Short-Term Environmental Impacts of Structural Adjustment Programs," in Reed, *Structural Adjustment, the Environment, and Sustainable Development*, 299–333, in Brown, "The Need to Face Conflicts between Rich and Poor Nations," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 38.

16. Brown, "The Need to Face Conflicts between Rich and Poor Nations," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 39–40.

17. Agenda 21, Chapter 4, Section 4.5, <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=52&ArticleID=52&1=en>.

18. Holmes Rolston III, "Environmental Protection and the International World Order: Ethics after the Earth Summit," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 5 (1995): 735–752.

19. Jared Diamond, "What's Your Consumption Factor?" *New York Times*, January 2, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/02/opinion/02diamond.html>.

20. Adam Werbach, former head of the Sierra Club, promoted the PSP (personal sustainability promise) among Walmart employees, with permission from the management to extend the program to all its stores, encouraging each person "to commit to a behavioral change that would benefit the earth. It could be the decision to carpool, to plant trees, to eat organic food, to recycle—anything that might reduce pollution and waste and raise environmental awareness." Burr Snider, "Werbach at WalMart," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 6, 2008, P-14, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/06/CM9TTS800.DTL>.

21. Despite his love for animals, Saint Francis was not a vegetarian. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 216.

22. An old meaning of the word *religious* refers to persons who take vows to live a life apart from the world.

23. John Muir, "Mountain Thoughts," Sierra Club, [http://www.yosemite.ca.us/john\\_muir\\_writings/mountain\\_thoughts.html](http://www.yosemite.ca.us/john_muir_writings/mountain_thoughts.html). He saw no reason to believe that human beings are more important to God's purpose than other creatures. "Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos?" John Muir, "Man's Place in the Universe," Sierra Club, [http://www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/muir\\_biography.html](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.html).

24. "Jane Goodall's Wild Chimpanzees," *Nature* (March 1996), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/goodall/story.html>.

25. "Animals," The Jane Goodall Institute, <http://www.janegoodall.org>.

26. "Africa Programs," The Jane Goodall Institute, [http://www.janegoodall.org/news/article-detail.asp?Entry\\_ID=446&Category\\_ID=5](http://www.janegoodall.org/news/article-detail.asp?Entry_ID=446&Category_ID=5).

27. See chapter 14 in Robert Traer and Harlan Stelmach, *Doing Ethics in a Diverse Society*.

28. "Jane Goodall—My Four Reasons for Hope," The Jane Goodall Institute, <http://www.janegoodall.org/jane/essay.asp>.

29. Lester R. Brown, *Full House: Reassessing the Earth's Population Carrying Capacity*, 163.

30. "Vegetarianism," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarian>.

31. Some Jews are combining “traditional Jewish dietary laws with new concerns about industrial agriculture, global warming and fair treatment of workers.” Alan Cooperman, “Eco-Kosher Movement Aims to Heed Conscience,” *Washington Post*, July 7, 2007, A01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/06/AR2007070602092.html>.
32. “Animal Rights Concerns,” <http://www.animalsuffering.com/index.php>. See Kim Severson, “Suddenly the Hunt Is on for Cage-Free Eggs,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/us/12eggs.html>.
33. Tony Cenicola, “Five Easy Ways to Go Organic,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2007, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/five-easy-ways-to-go-organic>.
34. Michael Barbaro, “Home Depot to Display an Environmental Label,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/17/business/17depot.html>.
35. “Recycling,” Dell, <http://content.dell.com/us/en/corp/dell-environment-recycling.aspx>.
36. See, for example, “Responsible Shopper,” Co-op America, <http://www.coopamerica.org/programs/responsibleshopper>.
37. Eric T. Freyfogle, “Consumption and the Practice of Land Health,” in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 194.
38. “Fostering Sustainable Behavior,” <http://www.cbsm.com/pages/guide/social-diffusion:-speeding-adoption/>.
39. “Fostering Sustainable Behavior,” <http://www.cbsm.com/pages/guide/prompts:-remembering-to-act/>.
40. *Ibid.*, 195.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, 123.
44. Haider Rizvi, “Local Control Saves Forests—Report,” *Common Dreams*, March 28, 2008, <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/03/28/7941>.
45. *Ibid.*
46. “The Right to Know,” Friends of the Earth International, <http://www.foei.org/en/get-involved/take-action/solidarity-work/the-right-to-know>.
47. “The Right to Decide,” Friends of the Earth International, <http://www.foei.org/en/get-involved/take-action/solidarity-work/the-right-to-decide>.
48. George C. Brenkert, “Marketing, the Ethics of Consumption, and Less-Developed Countries,” in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 92.
49. Ian Fisher and Larry Rohter, “The Pope Denounces Capitalism and Marxism,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/14/world/americas/14pope.html>. The pope also argues that capitalism has failed to overcome the “distance between rich and poor” and is causing “a worrying degradation of personal dignity through drugs, alcohol and deceptive illusions of happiness.”
50. Herman E. Daly and Joshua Farley, *Ecological Economics*, 413.
51. James Gustave Speth, *Red Sky at Morning*, 127.
52. Brenkert, “Marketing, the Ethics of Consumption, and Less-Developed Countries,” 100. We may be encouraged to learn that: “They have met resistance in this.”
53. A. Fuat Firat, Erodogan Kumcu, and Mehmet Karafakiolglu, “The Interface between Marketing and Development: Problems and Prospects,” in Erodogan Kumcu and A. Fuat Firat, eds., *Marketing and Development*, in Westra and Werhane, eds., *The Business of Consumption*, 105.
54. Brenkert, “Marketing, the Ethics of Consumption, and Less-Developed Countries,” 107.



55. Robert Goodland, "Environmental Sustainability," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 204.
56. Mark Bittman, "Rethinking the Meat-Guzzler," *New York Times*, January 27, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/weekinreview/27bittman.html>. The cattle population is about 1.3 billion. Anup Shah, "Beef," *Global Issues* (last updated August 22, 2010), <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption/Beef.asp>.
57. "Like oil, meat is subsidized by the federal government. Like oil, meat is subject to accelerating demand as nations become wealthier, and this, in turn, sends prices higher. Finally—like oil—meat is something people are encouraged to consume less of, as the toll exacted by industrial production increases, and becomes increasingly visible." Bittman, "Rethinking the Meat-Guzzler."
58. Goodland, "Environmental Sustainability," 213. For a personal reaction to raising cattle according to an industrial model, see Howard F. Lyman with Glen Marzer, *Mad Cowboy: The Cattle Rancher Who Won't Eat Meat*.
59. Simone Spearman, "Eating More Veggies Can Help Save Energy," *Common Dreams*, June 29, 2001, <http://www.commondreams.org/views01/0629-06.htm>.
60. Robert Goodland, Catherine Watson, and George Ledec, *Environmental Management in Tropical Agriculture*, 237, in Goodland, "Environmental Sustainability," in Westra and Werhane, *The Business of Consumption*, 214.
61. Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 27. To cut waste we not only need to change our eating habits, but also our industrial food system. "Inefficient harvesting, transportation, storage, and packaging ruin 50 percent of the food" that is produced. Ben Block, "Conserve Water Through Food Efficiency, Report Says," Worldwatch Institute (May 23, 2008), <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5751>.
62. Beef consumption is declining, probably because of rising unemployment in the United States. Meredith Davis, "Where's the Beef? U.S. Beef Consumption in Decline," *Reuters*, December 22, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/22/us-usa-beef-consumption-idUSTRE7BL1MI20111222>.
63. "The current food crisis causing hunger and starvation for millions of people across the world is not going to end as long as those who dominate the international grain markets remain unwilling to change their behavior, according to experts specializing in international trade and environmental economics." On the demand side, "the trends include the addition of 70 million people every year, while some 4 billion people are already struggling to move up the food chain and consume more grain-intensive livestock products. At the same time, the amount of grain used for car fuels is also rising immensely." See Haider Rizvi, "Food Crisis Set to Get Worse," Organic Consumers Association (April 21, 2008), [http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article\\_11683.cfm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_11683.cfm).
64. As we consider economic problems, we should remember that there is no "invisible hand" to ensure that markets promote the common good. Only democratic decision-making and laws that check the power of economic interests will make justice and equity possible.