

AMERICANS EXERT A DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON THE PLANET.
CAN CONSERVATIVE CONSUMPTION HELP US HELP THE EARTH?

CONSUMING *vocation*

BY JIM FARRELL

WE AMERICANS ARE REALLY GOOD AT LEAVING OUR giant footprints all over the planet. It's an essential part of the American way of life.

In the 1992 book *We're Number One*, Andrew Shapiro noted the accomplishments of American culture — some wonderful, others problematic. Of the 19 major industrial nations, for example, Americans were first in greenhouse gas emissions, contributions to acid rain, air pollutants per capita, forest depletion, paper consumption, garbage and hazardous waste per capita, gasoline consumption and oil imports. We use more credit cards and own more cars and TVs than our global neighbors. We're first in time devoted to watching television and last in books published per capita.

Both individually and collectively, Americans exert a disproportionate impact on our blue-green planet, says a 2004 Worldwatch Institute report.

In a wonderful book called *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, John Ryan and Alan Durning explore the environmental impacts of the things that most of us use or consume every day — coffee, newspapers, athletic shoes, computers, cars and fast food. They note that each of us is responsible for producing about four pounds of garbage a day. That seems a lot until you consider that the average American uses more than 100 pounds of materials daily, including 20 pounds of coal.

We consume coal not just through the electricity we pay for, but through the spaces we occupy — offices, schools, supermarkets and shopping malls — and through the energy embodied in the products we buy. A quarter-pounder is more than a meat patty on a toasted bun. When we eat that hamburger, we're also responsible for a pound or two of corn and 600 gallons of water, in addition to the oil needed to power the food chain from farm field to feedlot to slaughterhouse to supermarket or drive-up window.

Americans engage nature mainly by “remote control,” which not only is an accessory of television but a guiding principle of American civilization. With our gadgets and machines, we remotely control the extractions and extinctions of the natural world. Within an economy of money and a culture of convenience, this remote control makes perfect sense. But within the economies of energy and nature, it has become an uncontrolled catastrophe. And within the moral ecology of everyday life, it's a disaster, because we don't respond to what we don't see. Author and sociologist Philip

Slater calls it “the toilet principle of American life” — if I can't see the damage I'm doing, I'm not responsible for it.

We need to gain control of our lives and our consumption. The 20th century was the age of the ecological exception, an era when human beings acted as if they didn't depend on a planet with a fragile biosphere. But now our abundant life seems to be threatening nature's abundance of life. So the 21st century is the age of the ecological transition, when we learn again how to nest human civilizations harmoniously within the cycles of nature.

It might help to think about consumption as vocation. Usually when people write about vocation, they think more about production than consumption, more about work than leisure, more about seriousness than fun. But we could think about these oppositions ecologically, as part of larger systems of life and meaning. Instead of thinking about work *and* consumption, we might think about the *work* of consumption and our calling to consume carefully — to consume as a practice of care for our communities, both human and natural. We might think about leisure not just as rest *from* vocation but as the rest *of* vocation.

Most Americans have more impact on the world through their consumption and leisure and fun than through their work. So it makes sense to consider how we're called to consume conservatively as part of our dominion of God's evolving creation. It might be promising to consider how — both individually and institutionally — we can make changes that make a difference. In *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices*, for example, Michael Brower and Warren Leon suggest three priorities for American consumption: driving fewer miles, eating lower on the food chain (including less meat) and reducing household energy use (sometimes by buying less house).

As St. Olaf's Lilly Scholar for this year, I'll be pondering these perspectives, and I can use all the help I can get. Let me know what you think about the possibilities for an abundant life of *positive* environmental impacts. 🍷

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