

Consumerism and Overconsumption



Indigenous Wisdom

"Certain things catch your eye but be careful! Pursue only those that capture your heart"
-Lakota saying



Background

Consumerism is the cultural value summarized by "more is better." It places value on purchasing goods as the centre of our economy and our identity as individuals. Our overconsumption is destroying the environment, hurting workers, and making us less happy.



- The average American household owns an astounding 300,000 items – and Canadian households are similar.
- Our consumption and disposal of goods is accelerating. In 2017, consumers purchased on average 60% more clothes per year, and kept them for half as long as consumers did in 2000.
- The distribution of resource consumption is unequal across the world. Consumption of natural resources, mainly in the form of goods and products, is concentrated in developed countries. Conversely, despite being abundant in natural resources, developing countries consume a fraction of these resources.

Some Impacts of Overconsumption

- The **embodied emissions** of the products we consume, including food, are responsible for up to 80% of our individual ecological footprint in North America.
- **Fast fashion** contributes more to climate change than the air travel industry. It is the source of about 10% of global carbon emissions.
- Manufacturing products creates significant amounts of waste that hurts both ecosystems and human health. The amount of hazardous waste generated by American manufacturing increased from 4.5 million tons a year during World War II to 265 million tons a year in 1990.
- Workers are mistreated throughout the production process of many items that society consumes. For example, many smartphones contain minerals, such as cobalt, that are mined by child laborers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who are forced to work without any protective equipment.



Alternatives to Consumerism

Solving overconsumption means that we need to transform the values that underpin our society. We must also reconsider our current economic system, capitalism, which is built around the principle of constant growth, production and consumption.

- Economist, Kate Raworth has proposed the Donut Economics model, which prioritizes meeting the basic needs of all people while living within natural boundaries.
- Many Indigenous economic systems are based on principles that oppose our current paradigm of overconsumption. Some examples of these principles are:
 - Humans are part of an interconnected natural world. Balance with nature is prioritized and a central part of any system or decision.
 - Wellbeing is prioritized over wealth. Resources are shared and people are valued for their generosity instead of for their opulence.



- Building community breaks through the worldview of **individualism** that capitalism upholds. It allows us to meet our needs and be happy through helping each other instead of through buying things.

Glossary

Embodied emissions. The emissions that resulted from the production of product. For example, the embodied emissions of a car represent the emissions produced through mining its metal and assembling it at a factory, while its operational emissions represents the emissions produced from burning gas to drive the car.

Fast fashion. Cheap, poorly constructed, mass-produced clothing designed based on current trends.

Individualism. A worldview seeing each person as a detached unit responsible only and entirely for themselves, instead of part of a connected web of interdependent relationships.

Learn More and Take Action

Learn more about overconsumption through an excellent collection of short movies, and find ways to take action:

- **Story of Stuff Project** (www.storyofstuff.org/)

Raise your voice and connect with others in the youth climate justice movement, working to end our current paradigm of a consumerist society:

- **Sustainabiliteens** (www.instagram.com/sustainabiliteens)

Learn more, take action, and donate to global organizations working for fairer working conditions in sweatshops:

- **Clean Clothes Campaign** (<https://cleanclothes.org/>)

Support and learn more about the movement for a just, sustainable, and democratic economy:

- **New Economy Coalition** (neweconomy.net/)
- **Degrowth Movement** (www.degrowth.info/en/)

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