

CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL CHOICES

To some degree we're all consumers. If you care about what that means to the environment, this book is for you.

In "The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists" (1999), Michael Brower and Warren Leon list the leading consumption-related environmental problems, suggest what consumers can do to help solve them, give a brief history of consumption in the U.S., and end with a careful overview of their methods.

They characterize the book as a counterbalance to corporate advertising's message of Buy! Buy! Buy!

So at the outset, they make clear that what most needs to change are consumers' choices, which unfortunately are often in the hands of institutions, corporations and the government, not individuals. For example, there are 200,000 industrial waste dumps in the U.S., which dwarf landfills as threats to health and the environment.

That said, they focus mostly on helping individuals make healthier, more environmentally friendly choices – itself a most valuable endeavor.

The leading consumption-related problems are air and water pollution, global warming and habitat alteration. The consumer

choices which contribute most to these problems are - in diminishing order - driving cars and light trucks, eating too much meat and poultry, the growing of fruits, vegetables and grains, home heating, hot water and air-conditioning, household appliances and lighting, home construction and household water and sewage.

Transportation, food and household operations account for as much as 80 percent of our impact; the other 20 percent are housing, personal items and services, medical care, yard maintenance, private education, financial and legal services.

Transportation and household operation cause 30 times as much air pollution as yard activities. Food purchases, surprisingly, cause 5 times as much water pollution as transportation does. Growing food, especially meat and poultry, is second only to transportation in overall environmental damage.

Since driving cars and light trucks constitutes the single most damaging consumer behavior, the authors suggest several mitigating actions. If you move, try to locate where driving can be minimal. Don't buy a new car, whose manufacture creates 3 times its weight in carbon and almost 700 pounds of ordinary pollutants. If you must buy a car, choose the greenest and the simplest. Rent a truck or a 4 wheel drive if you need these only occasionally.

Eat less meat, and buy organic when you can. Don't buy a house bigger than you need, and support cluster housing and open space. Urban sprawl threatens 35 percent of wildlife.

Replace old furnaces and install natural gas or electric heat pumps. Buy into green energy sources if you can. Use compact fluorescent bulbs instead of incandescent, and reduce use of wood burning fireplaces. Try to limit use of off road vehicles, pleasure boats, yard machines and dry cleaning – all seriously polluting.

They list 7 rules for responsible consumption, among them giving special attention to major purchases – an efficient refrigerator or car, for instance. Also, scrutinize heavy purchases carefully – plastic bags are no big deal; yachts are.

Analyze your consumption quantitatively – lawn-watering vs. tooth-brushing. Don't agonize over minor decisions – paper or plastic, cloth or disposable diapers. Buy thoughtfully – a computer to keep you working at home.

Ask governments to reduce oil, water and grazing subsidies, to shift taxes from incomes to pollution, to create refundable deposits for batteries, beverages, even cars. Governments can make choices possible, even if they can't dictate policies.

The history of consumption in the U.S. shows we've always been conflicted; but we also waste and consume twice as much per person as the British or Japanese.

The authors admit they're sometimes subjective - even their extensive information is incomplete - but argue that a flawed analysis is better than none.

My library is small, these days, but this book earns a place in it, as a guide to all future purchases and returns.