GUEST ESSAY

New Consumers: The Influence of Affluence on the Environment

Norman Myers

Norman Myers is a tropical ecologist and international consultant in environment and development. He is based at Green College, University of Oxford, U.K. and also serves as a visiting professor at Duke University in the United States. As one of the world’s leading environmental experts, he has served as an adviser to many governments and international agencies. He has been the first scientist to identify and help find solutions for 15 important environmental research issues, including tropical deforestation, rate of species extinction, protecting biodiversity hotspots, over-consumption, unsustainable agriculture, environmental security, harmful environmental subsidies, and environmental refugees. He has published 17 books, 250 scholarly papers, and more than 300 popular articles.

There is a remarkable phenomenon emergent in the world. It is the new consumers: people with household incomes of at least $10,000 per year. Already they total 915 million in 17 developing countries and 115 million in three middle-income countries. Assuming no financial meltdowns, the number of these new consumers is expected to grow rapidly and cause the biggest consumption boom in history.

Just two of these countries are "consumption powerhouses." They are China with 300 million and India with 130 million new consumers today—a combined consumer class larger than that in all of Western Europe. And the members of China’s consumer class will soon surpass that in the United States. By 2010 there could well be 500–600 million new consumers in China and at least 200 million in India. They have enough money to buy household appliances of many sorts, notably television sets and videos, fridges and freezers, washing machines. They are also shifting to a diet strongly based on meat. Most importantly, they are buying cars in large numbers.

Take a closer look at this last item. China now has more than 7 million cars compared to 51 million in Japan. But China plans to catch up as fast as it can and by
2010 could have 30–50 million cars. India, with around 7 million cars today, could have more than 20 million cars by 2010.

The most damaging pollutant from cars in the long run is carbon dioxide, a gas estimated to be responsible for about half of global warming projected to take place during this century. Worldwide, most human inputs of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere come from coal-burning power plants. But at least one-fifth comes from motor vehicles.

To this extent, the entire world community has an interest in the prospect of all those new cars in China and India—just as China and India have an interest in the far larger numbers of cars in the so-called developed countries. All 20 new consumer countries already possess more than 117 million cars, projected to rise to 300 million by 2010.

Fortunately the new consumers can, if they feel inclined, buy types of cars that are more fuel efficient and sparing in their CO₂ emissions, notably hybrid-electric cars such as Toyota's Prius and Honda's Insight. Moreover there should soon be cars that are even more environmentally friendly. The Hypercar, pioneered by the American energy expert Amory Lovins, will weigh only half as much as today's car, will be aerodynamically designed, and will also have many other innovations that will enable it to get at least 200 kilometers (124 miles) per gallon of gasoline travel—or, better still, run on a hybrid mixture of gasoline and electricity or a fuel cell powered by hydrogen gas.

**Bottom line:** can we persuade the new consumers to enjoy their high-flying lifestyle in sustainable fashion? **Answer:** only when the long-established consumers of the rich world start to modify and restrain their own runaway and wasteful consumption and help speed up the transfer of more environmentally benign technologies to the world’s developing countries.

After all, the best things in life are not things. The global challenge of existing affluent consumers and the rapidly increasing new consumers is to figure out how to encourage and reward a shift from "more is better" to "enough is best."