

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee Creation Stewardship Notes # 5 – November 2003

If everyone in the world today consumed resources like the average U. S. citizen does, at least four planet Earths would be required. This is due both to the amount of consumption and the type of things we buy. When shopping, we usually base our purchasing decisions on two factors - the price and the quality of the product or service. We are often oblivious to the social and environmental costs associated with the life cycle of the product – its production, use and disposal. In fact this information is usually not readily available.

The monetary price may only partially reflect the cost of a product. To produce a ton of office paper from virgin pulp requires 6.5 tons of wood and produces 2.8 tons of greenhouse gases. Paper with recycled content reduces these costs as well as the landfill cost of waste paper disposal and yet buyers of paper with recycled content in the U. S. generally pay a premium of 4 to 8% in price. Only 5% of all printing and writing grade paper in this country has significant postconsumer recycled content. On the other hand, in many European countries where the infrastructure for recycling is better developed and where the scale of production and use of recycled paper is greater, it costs the same or less than that made from virgin wood pulp.

“Green purchasing” - shifting spending from environmentally and/or socially harmful goods and services to more friendly alternatives - is one step in reducing the impact of overconsumption and pollution. It also sends a message to producers about the types of products and production methods that are wanted. It may seem to us that the few individual purchases we make have little significance. However, it is the sum total of purchasing decisions by many individuals that is responsible for the problems associated with overconsumption and pollution. Our individual decisions can be part of the solution, particularly if we can organize and provide the information individuals need in order to consider environmental and social costs when making purchasing decisions. According to a survey by LOHAS Consumer Research, 63 million U. S. adults or approximately 30 percent of households engage in some form of environmentally or socially conscious buying.

But it is not only individual purchases but also purchases by institutions, government and private, that have great power in shaping the market. The 3,700 colleges and universities in the U. S. bought some \$250 billion in goods and services in 1999 – equivalent to nearly 3% of U. S. gross domestic product. Religious institutions have a similar clout in the market both in their purchases and also in affecting the behavior of adherents. Churches are becoming more concerned with environmentally and socially responsible purchasing. This may involve many types of decisions, from use of paper to janitor supplies, from management of landscape to use of energy. In 2002, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles installed solar panels on the roof of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels that generated enough energy to power the building and more than 60 additional residences.

Coalitions of institutions or companies can be even more effective. The Recycled Paper Coalition was founded by a number of businesses in 1992 to use corporate purchasing power to increase the supply and quality of recycled paper products. The 270 member companies bought 160,000 tons of recycled paper in 2001 with an average postconsumer recycled content of 29%.

However, in order to be responsible “green” consumers, we need more information available to the public about the way in which products are produced and the environmental and social costs associated with these products. We will try to supply some of this information in some of these Creation Stewardship Notes. A recent study published in the journal *Nature* showed that 90% of the population of each of the world’s largest predatory fish species are gone, largely as a result of overfishing. Many of the world’s important ocean fisheries are in decline. Some

harvesting or farming methods for seafood are very destructive of habitats or result in the catch and destruction of large numbers of other sea organisms (known as bycatch). Also some seafood contains pollutants, particularly mercury. Should we take these facts into consideration when purchasing seafood? How can we apply them to particular products? *The Green Guide* has recently (July/August 2003 issue) published a “Best fish list for your health and the sea’s.” Information from this article is listed below (note that in many cases the source of the seafood is important):

Yes fish (Low mercury, not overfished or farmed destructively; good for purchase)

Abalone (farmed), anchovies, catfish (U.S. farmed), caviar (U.S. or French farmed), clams (farmed), crawfish, herring, hoki, rainbow trout (farmed), salmon (wild Alaskan), sardines, squid (Pacific), striped bass (farmed), sturgeon (farmed).

Sometimes fish (Recovering populations and/or moderate mercury; limited purchase)

Arctic char (low mercury in sea-run char), blue crab (Gulf Coast, moderate mercury), blue mussel (moderate mercury), dungeness crab (moderate mercury), king crab (Alaskan), snow crab, cod (Pacific, moderate mercury), flounder (Pacific), halibut (Alaskan, moderate mercury), mahimahi (moderate mercury), Eastern oyster (moderate mercury), pollack (moderate mercury), sablefish/black cod (moderate mercury, much bycatch), salmon (wild Pacific), scallops (harvesting causes habitat damage), sole (Pacific), tilapia (farmed), tuna (“dolphin safe” harvest, canned, moderate mercury).

No fish (Overfished, farmed destructively, high bycatch and/or moderate to high mercury)

Bluefin tuna (97% gone), caviar (Russian or Iranian from Caspian Sea), Chilean seabass, cod (Atlantic), king crab (imported), flounder (Atlantic), Great Lakes salmon, groupers, haddock, halibut (Atlantic), king mackerel, marlin, monkfish, orange roughy, oysters (Gulf Coast), pike, salmon (farmed or “Atlantic”), sharks, shrimp (every pound harvested means 3 to 15 pounds of bycatch destroyed), skate, snappers, soles (Atlantic), swordfish, tilefish (a.k.a. golden bass, golden snapper).

You can download a wallet card with these lists at: thegreenguide.com. For more information on pollutants see: ewg.org/issues/mercury.

Even with this information, there may still be a problem in obtaining information about the source of much of the seafood in the market. We need to be persistent in asking for more information about products in the market so that we can consider environmental and social costs as well as the monetary price.

The information in this note is from:

1. Lisa Mastny. 2003. Purchasing Power. Worldwatch Paper 166.
2. Conservation Frontlines, Summer 2003
3. The Green Guide, July/August 2003.