

The consumption paradox

## Is guilt good for the Earth?

**Jon Entine** says we have to accept consumerism is here to stay, but we can do it better

Stop buying stuff you capitalist Spig! We're raping the planet through over-consumption, and it's not even making us happy.

No, you socialist Malthusian! Prosperity is based on growth and consumption. Otherwise society will fall into the slough of despondency that characterised the Soviet bloc.

It sounds like a schoolyard brawl – Earth First v Fox News. But in a more nuanced form it's a serious and raging debate in a world where the confusion between "what we want" and "what we need" has never been more profound. Let's call it the Consumption Paradox.

Annie Leonard, auteur of the Internet phenomenon *The Story of Stuff*, which inspired her best-selling book of the same title, has become the hip proselytiser of the modern back-to-basics movement. With cartoon wit, she argues that the world is a finite resource that we are chipping away at with catastrophically escalating fervour. Capitalism may bring sporadic bursts of consumption delirium, but it doesn't breed sustainable security or contentment.

The angst of the affluent is becoming almost tangible. A new ad campaign by investment management company US Trust – *What is Worth?* – is filled with pictures of happy families running through autumnal forests, gathering at the beach for sunsets and embracing at a wedding. Net worth, says the firm that oversees \$80bn in other people's money, isn't just about money. It's about values and beaches and forests. Oh, and don't forget to send us your millions to manage.

No wonder Leonard's radical sustainability argument has such an alluring subversive charm. Corporations, for example, are portrayed as a bloated man sporting a top hat

with a dollar sign etched on its front, like a character from *Monopoly*, which was created during our last great financial meltdown.

"We'll start with extraction, which is a fancy word for natural resource exploitation, which is a fancy word for trashing the planet," she says at one point. "What this looks like is we chop down the trees, we blow up mountains to get the metals inside, we use up all the water and we wipe out the animals." It's cute, funny and devastatingly effective in getting its message across – and for anyone with a bit of sense, hopelessly misleading and simplistic.

Leonard is clearly onto something, though. "We're now extraordinarily rich by almost any standard of human history," says Andrew Oswald, a professor of behavioural science at Warwick business school. "But because we are creatures of comparison, it's harder to get happier and happier."

We've lived beyond our financial means and have been exploiting the earth for years like it's a no-interest credit card, but now the bills are coming due.

### Profound questions

Saleem Ali, environmental studies professor at the University of Vermont, poses the dilemma cogently in his thought-provoking book *Treasures of the Earth: Need, Greed and a Sustainable World*. Ali argues: "Would the world be a better place if human societies were somehow able to curb their desires for material goods?" It may be the most profound question of our times, as we struggle with the fact that our recent prosperity was in part an illusion.

Ali posits a controversial notion that humans have an instinctive "treasure impulse" to mine the earth



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We can't just keep on pulling stuff out

*We've lived beyond our financial means and have been exploiting the earth for years*

for salt, gemstones, carbon resources or whatever to make life easier. Only later do we recognise the damage we've caused. Now we're in a unique time when we can both look back and project forward to understand the consequences of exploitation, and address ways to both moderate it and distribute the bounty more equitably.

Ali incorporates the perspective of his ethnic homeland of Pakistan, where natural resource extraction has dramatically raised living standards but with considerable consequences. There is "no plausible turning back from the lifestyles of comfort and convenience we had come to accept", he concludes.

Call him an optimist, but in an elegant narrative rich with history and anthropology he explains how major changes can be made in the way we mine earth's treasures. Much of his focus is on how to reuse resources that we've already exploited.

I believe he's mostly right. In the real world, sustainability is kind of boring. If we're going to make progress we've got to both suck it up and lobby hard for those slow-yielding investments in our earth's future. What's saddest about our current situation is the precariousness of the lives of so many people, even in the more prosperous industrialised world. That's not going to improve much if we embrace Annie Leonard's call for extreme austerity. ■



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