

# TO **BUY** OR NOT TO BUY

WITH THE SILLY SEASON JUST AROUND THE CORNER, WE PUT THE QUESTION TO EVERY ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS SHOPPER: CAN BUYING GREEN SAVE THE PLANET?

WORDS BY **GREG FOYSTER**

**Y**OU'RE STANDING IN A STORE facing a shelf of sustainable products. Their earthy green packaging beckons. For many an ethical consumer, a heated inner dialogue ensues. If you vote with your dollar, you'll be supporting sustainable industries, runs one argument. But what happened to the message of reduce, recycle, reuse? Do you really need the item or is it just a waste of resources cleverly marketed to make you feel like you're doing your bit for the planet?

Touring a supermarket and eco-store with advocates from both camps, G opens the debate and welcomes your opinion on when to fill your trolley with green goodies and when to walk away. >>



“THE CONSUMER DRIVES THE CHANGE,” says Stephen Reardon, research manager with ECO-Buy, a not-for-profit organisation promoting green purchasing. We’re in The Greenstore, a sustainability shop in Fitzroy, Melbourne, browsing shelves stocked with scented vegetable soaps, eco-cleaning cloths and refillable bottles. In a capitalist system, notes Reardon, governments are reluctant to regulate consumer behaviour and choices, so the biggest influence you can have on the market is what you buy. “You can do a lot by guiding your spend towards things that are better for the environment.”

The Greenstore has been selling eco-homewares since 1995, but the idea of shopping for salvation is older still. After the alternative lifestyle approach of the 70s failed to convert the mainstream, environmentalists in the late 80s chose a more pragmatic path. The strategy shifted from abolishing capitalism to reforming the system through considered purchasing. The original *Green Consumer Guide*, published in 1988, summed up the sentiment: “Your vote at the cash register has more impact than ever before. Use it!”

That perky phrase has spawned a worldwide industry worth \$500 billion – and growing. The Australian market for ‘Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability’ products expanded from \$12 billion in 2007 to \$19 billion in 2009, says Nicholas Bez, research director at Mobium Group. This category includes organic food and natural therapies as well as green products such as solar

panels, recycled paper and hybrid cars. “The growth is driven by more availability in more mainstream channels,” says Bez.

Although the market has become larger and more sophisticated, the central premise remains the same. The consumer still wields incredible power, according to Christopher Zinn, spokesperson for consumer advocacy group Choice. “What you choose to buy or not buy sends a very strong message straight to the top.”

Choosing the greener alternative as a consumer gives manufacturers a direct incentive to create environment-friendly products. Energy Star ratings are a good example, says Zinn. “People who make fridges know that the more efficient they are, the more stars they have and the more they’ll sell.”

Not to mention that a seemingly trivial purchase could build exposure for a serious issue. “About 10 years ago Safe was one of the only brands of recycled toilet paper in the mainstream,” says Nick Ray, project co-ordinator of the Ethical Consumer Group, which publishes an annual guide to supermarket shopping. “Now there are a whole lot more. And thanks to that, there’s really been a growing awareness of the issue of logging and the importance of using recycled content.”

But how does it work? How can a humble roll of recycled toilet paper save an entire forest? Well, there’s the initial reduction in logging demand, for starters. But there’s also a broader social effect. “Part of the transformation is about small communities of people buying differently and then that growing into a critical mass,” explains Ray. In this way, buying recycled toilet paper could be connected with the movement to preserve old-growth forests. It could even be associated with a recent

Supreme Court decision to uphold a ban on logging in East Gippsland.

Back in The Greenstore, Reardon mentions that politics often follows public attitudes and therefore consumer choices. If more Australians bought GreenPower, governments might be more inclined to invest in renewable energy. “Politicians don’t act on things unless there is a strong signal,” he says.

And if politicians refuse to act, then perhaps business will step up to the challenge. In the US, retail giant Walmart has started compiling a ‘sustainability index’ of the ecological impacts of the products it sells. “Because Walmart is the world’s largest retailer, the sustainability index could have quantum impacts on the supply chain,” says Bez from Mobium Group. “Already Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Safeway in the US are looking at the scheme.”

Another advocate of corporate sustainability is author and psychologist Daniel Goleman. In his book *Ecological Intelligence* he describes a commercial utopia where people have complete information about every product’s lifecycle and environmental impact. This “radical transparency” means consumers can shop in a truly sustainable way. When helping the planet is tied to profits, “we incentivise business to make positive changes by voting with our dollars”.

Here’s how far those dollars could go: “Shoppers in Berlin or Brooklyn or Beijing could make informed choices that would speed the conversion of China’s power grid from coal-belching plants to alternative sources, reduce the clouds of toxins that a Mexican farmer inhales, upgrade working conditions in sweatshops in Vietnam, or enhance the health of miners in Africa.”

Buy the right products, and you could be buying a better future.



“IN OUR SOCIETY, CONSUMING LESS IS A FAR MORE IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO GET OUT TO MANY PEOPLE THAN CONSUMING GREEN,” says Kim Humphery, associate professor at the School of Social Science and Planning at RMIT, Melbourne, and author of *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West*. We’re standing in the supermarket, talking over the drone of an industrial freezer. “It’s overconsumption that’s the problem.”

As we walk past row upon row of brightly packaged goods, the scale of that problem becomes clear. To create the comforts and conveniences of modern life, humans have cultivated one quarter of the Earth’s land, fully exploited or overexploited 80 per cent of world marine fish stocks, increased the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by over 30 per cent and multiplied the species extinction rate by as much as 1,000 times. That’s a massive impact.

For a big-picture view, consider humanity’s ‘ecological footprint’ – the area of productive land or sea needed to sustain a given population over time. At the moment, we’re in ‘overshoot’ mode, meaning we’re using resources more quickly than the planet can replace them. According to the Global Footprint Network, “It now takes the Earth one year and five months to regenerate what we use in a year”.

Yet resource consumption is grossly unequal around the globe. An Australian has an ecological footprint 2.8 times the world average and more than nine times that of an Indian. If everyone on the

planet wanted to live the Aussie lifestyle, we would need 3.7 Earths to supply resources. And this is exactly the point – billions of people in developing countries do want a Western lifestyle. Unfortunately, our consumption habits are unsustainable on a global level.

When it comes to climate change, there’s an even stronger link between affluence and environmental impact. Stephen Pacala, director of the Princeton Environmental Institute, calculates that the world’s richest seven per cent of people are responsible for 50 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions.

Shocking statistics like these have convinced key environmentalists that Westerners need to curb their consumption of all products – including ‘green’ ones. UK climate change activist George Monbiot labels environmental products “eco-junk” and writes: “Giving things up is an essential component of going green.” David Suzuki’s *Green Guide* includes a chapter titled “Less Stuff: The Zero Waste Challenge”. Even Stephen Reardon from ECO-Buy admits: “You’re not going to save the environment by buying a product – even if it’s a green product – when you didn’t really need it in the first place.”

The overall message is that we need to pare back purchases to the bare necessities. But how to define ‘necessities’? As the economy has expanded, more items have come to be seen as essential. Humphery gives the example of common white goods, such as washing machines and dryers. “It’s now convention that those are what you have in a household. They’ve become part of our standard of living”

There’s another problem with packaging environmentalism as a commodity. “The economic system we live in is very good at grabbing hold of

messages that are radical or rebellious and using them as a way of selling more stuff,” says Humphery. While he talks, Bob Dylan’s “Mr Tambourine Man”, a song associated with the 60s counter-cultural movement, is piped through the supermarket loudspeakers to shoppers.

And herein lies the danger: the rather stark message to buy less becoming swamped by the far more palatable marketing to buy green. It’s easy to imagine well-meaning shoppers consuming an unsustainable amount of sustainable products, and ecosystems collapsing under the weight of all those good intentions.

A final criticism is that the focus on individual lifestyle change detracts attention from the need for collective action. Humphery has great respect for the ethical shopping movement, but believes change needs to come from a deeper level. “It’s actually the economy that’s got to change,” says Humphery. “The market philosophies underlying our lives – all those things have to change, not just what’s on our shelves.”

He’s not the only one challenging the wisdom of an ever-expanding economy. The first international conference for ‘de-growth’ was held in Paris in 2008, and several new books have proposed alternative economic models. Tim Jackson, economics commissioner on the UK Sustainable Development Commission and author of *Prosperity Without Growth*, observes: “Consuming less may be the single biggest thing you can do to save carbon emissions, and yet no one dares to mention it. Because if we did, it would threaten economic growth, the very thing that is causing the problem in the first place.”

Perhaps the best thing you can buy for the planet is nothing at all.

“Choosing the greener alternative gives manufacturers a direct incentive to create environment-friendly products.”

The Ethical Consumer Group has a handy guide for organising a shopping tour of your own. Visit [www.ethical.org.au/swac](http://www.ethical.org.au/swac) for more information. Head to G’s Facebook page to join in the discussion on whether it’s best to buy or not.