



Module 7: My Personal Commitment to Sustainable Consumption

Introduction

Did you know that the concept of sustainable consumption is derived from the concept of sustainable development? In this module, you will learn about the importance of sustainable consumption and your personal relationship with environmental and human health through aspects such as quality of life, housing, food, and health; furthermore, you will learn how to measure sustainable consumption and what regulations to abide by.

Analyzing consumption and identifying alternatives for sustainable consumption will be accomplished by drafting proposals for reducing consumption of natural resources in the school as well as in the home, and by evaluating how other schools and families have done it throughout the world.

Objectives

By the end of this module, the teacher will be able to:

- a) Identify the concepts of sustainable consumption and their impact on one's health.
- b) Know the sustainable development perspectives when making purchasing decisions.

- c) Identify sustainable consumption initiatives in the United States.

Themes

1. *Sustainable development and sustainable consumption*
2. *Re-conceptualization of wealth and prosperity*
3. *Environmental quality*
4. *Standards and methods of consumption*
5. *Fair and sustainable trade*
6. *School, family, and social management*
7. *Better practices*

1. Sustainable development and implications

We all consume natural resources, as all of the raw materials that satisfy our human needs come from the planet's resources. As human beings we have specialized abilities for using resources according to our primordial needs for food, dress, transportation, shelter, and entertainment. However, the way in which we've satisfied our needs has impacted the delicate balance of the natural cycles.

Nevertheless, to satisfy them over the long-term requires us to incorporate new ways of transformation, use, and disposal of wastes in a way that guarantees we safeguard the needs of future generations.



To find these new ways of relating to nature, it's necessary to first remember that we are part of a consumer society. In regards to consumerism, Bauman (2007) tells us that consumption is a kind of social agreement that results in the reconstruction of desires, goals, or human longings, a force that coordinates systematic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of individuals. Also, he says that consumerism plays a predominant role in the process of individualization and self-identification in group settings.

The environmental challenges that today's generation faces are more important than those we faced just 20 years ago; curbing the effects of environmental degradation seems like a difficult goal to achieve, but the efforts of each parent, teacher, employee, and child can make a difference.

2. Sustainable consumption

What is consumption? In general terms, it represents the total amount of resources extracted from the environment, which are utilized in large part for economic purposes, but a significant portion of which are thrown away as waste.

To go into more depth, it is necessary to distinguish between *consumption of goods and services* and the necessity of *consumption of resources*. The second term refers to the amount of materials

and energy used to create a product or service that satisfies human necessities. It is important to make this distinction because by addressing *consumption of goods and services* you are not necessarily reducing the amount of natural resources that are demanded, this is only true if in the reduction of consumption you choose products and services whose production is more environmentally-friendly.

The most critical aspect of sustainable consumption implies making decisions not only concerning how much you consume but also analyzing the processes of each product or service that your demand requires.

Sustainable consumption is defined as *"the use of goods and services that responds to basic human necessities but that minimizes the use of natural resources, toxic materials, and the reduction of contaminating emissions in such a way that the needs of future generations aren't put at risk."*

2.1. Reconceptualization of wealth and prosperity

The term *sustainable consumption* is emphasized at the beginning of Principle 8 in the Report from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, a result of the Land and River Summit of (1992): *"To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of*



production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.”

The Recommendations of the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection were extended, in 1999, to include a chapter specifically referring to sustainable consumption, and in clause 43 it established the following: *“Sustainable consumption includes fulfilling the needs of the present and future generations for goods and services in any form that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.”*

In conclusion, to promote sustainable consumption with students, think about:

- a) Changing the patterns of actual consumption (production, distribution, consumption)
- b) Considering the needs of the present and future generations.
- c) Promoting goods and services that provide a better quality of life, which minimize the use of natural resources, toxic materials, emissions of waste and contaminants.

2.2. Patterns and methods of consumption

Being a sustainable consumer doesn't mean foregoing your well-being, quality of life, or social or economic development, but rather promising to transform your patterns and methods of consumption to protect the environment while at the same time satisfying your needs. The World Health Organization says that “the perception that an individual has a place of existence, in the content of the culture and the system of values in which they live and in relation to their expectations, their norms, their concerns” (1994).

The term “quality of life” is universally applicable but at the same time is very relative to a historical, cultural, and socio-economic context for each person. It is satisfied by physical, psychological, health, social, and economic elements, and the belief system - making it still more complex and variable in meaning. However, you can decide what kind of quality of life you desire, for our future generations, for the world in which we live, and above all, you can begin transforming yourself into a sustainable consumer.

But how can you do it? Here you have a list of practical ways to do it systematically, and day by day. Perhaps you are already familiar with some of these suggestions by means of communication through school, your job, or with your friends, but word of mouth is not enough.

It is necessary to understand and practice them with discipline, just as it is important to involve others so that they can be adopted into a lifestyle.

We suggest the following actions for selecting, buying, and using products in your home, school, and at your job. Along with feeling healthier, eating better, and saving money, you will also be contributing to the preservation of our environment:

- Read the label before buying or using a product, and be informed about where it is produced: is it local? What materials does it contain? Is it toxic? How is it made? What waste is generated in the process? Question before consuming.
- Buy products packaged in glass rather than plastic.
- Use baskets, canvas bags, or tough plastic bags when you go shopping to eliminate the consumption of plastic bags.
- Stop purchasing disposable kitchen products (cups, plates, silverware).
- Reduce the use of aluminum and products made with it like tetra-brik, aerosols, and aluminum cans.
- Reduce the consumption of batteries.
- Use recycled paper.
- Buy ecological products for cleaning your home, or better

yet, make your own at-home products by mixing $\frac{3}{4}$ water with $\frac{1}{4}$ vinegar for a cleaning solution; using sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) as a substitute for bleach; and by mixing 5 drops of lemon, orange, or mint essential oil in two liters of water instead of using toxic cleaning products for washing windows and floors.

- Eat fresh and natural foods from local vendors that require little packaging.
- Reduce your consumption of water.
- Recycle and separate waste products.

One way to evaluate the transformation of lifestyles in favor of the environment is to measure the presence of toxic substances in your home. Look through your cabinets, acknowledge your habits of consumption and observe the progress you have made by way of acting in a sustainable manner. Then, devise a long-term vision of our impacts. Furthermore, it is important to know your ecological footprint, which records the consumption and production of wastes expressed in the biologically productive area and the marine space necessary for maintaining the population; basically, it measures the “consumption of nature” in accordance with our lifestyle.



Knowing your ecological footprint serves as a reference for reducing your levels of consumption- but how can you measure it?

The Earth Day Network created the website [<http://ecofoot.org>] in which after answering 15 simple questions about your food consumption habits, mobility and use of energy - it calculates how much land you are using to satisfy your consumption.

While there is not one solution for returning balance to nature, each individual action can make a difference. Next, we will present some of the most recent sustainable consumption suggestions: (source: Story of Stuff: Another Way. Annie Leonard).

1. Devise ways to use fewer resources: Every day you can put actions in place to reduce the use of natural resources, which will, in turn, reduce their impact on the environment, especially by reducing the consumption of electricity in your home and at work. For example, disconnect appliances that aren't being used, turn them off sooner, sleep in lightweight clothing in place of cooling your home with an air conditioner, etc...

2. Reduce: The first principle of the 3R's and the most IMPORTANT: Before consuming, ask yourself if you really need it, and if you really do, choose products that are made in your city/state. Remember that local products are more sustainable because they require fewer resources

to bring them to your table. Reduce distances that you travel every day, this also counts!

3. Spread the word: Getting the word out is the first step towards making changes. Share this information with your children, friends, colleagues, and everyone else you know (or don't know!). Talking about the environment gives it importance, generates consciousness, and spreads the word to others.

3. Legislation for sustainable consumption

In Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 (guidebook on topics of sustainable development published by the United Nations) references two programs related to sustainable consumption: "It's a matter of the non-sustainable modes of production and consumption," and "The elaboration of politics and national strategies for promoting the transformation of non-sustainable modes of consumption."

Some of the activities that are highlighted in the documents are the following:

- The promotion of the research and development of ecological technologies.
- Encouraging ecologically rational use of new and renewable energy sources.
- Encouraging ecologically rational and sustainable use of renewable natural resources.
- Reducing the generation of waste.



- Encouraging recycling to the level of industrial processing and of the consumer.
- Reduction of unnecessary bottling and packaging material.

Additionally, fair trade, a market-based approach to empowering developing country producers and promoting sustainability, is directly related to sustainable consumption under the premise that it is oriented to benefit small producers or propel their own economic, social, cultural, and ecologically sustainable developments.

Fair trade seeks to reduce the number of intermediaries between producers and consumers; to pay a determined price for products with the objective of generating greater incomes, as well as developing socially responsible practices in the commercial sector. In turn, the producer respects the environment and appropriate labor regulations while offering quality products.

More information about fair trade in the United States can be found by visiting the following internet links:
<http://www.transfairusa.org/>
<http://www.fairtradefederation.org/>

More information about fair trade world-wide can be found by visiting the following internet links:
www.globalexchange.org
www.globalcrafts.org

More information about sustainable consumption in North America can be found by visiting the following web page:
<http://nasca.icspac.net/>

4. School, family, and social management

As sustainable consumers it is our responsibility to know and join the management efforts developed by these organizations. Here are some examples of contributions made by others which might give you ideas towards strengthening your contribution as a sustainable consumer in the personal, family, school, and social environment. Through practices directed at changing your patterns of purchasing, consumption, management, and selecting the right goods and services, sustainability is just a step away:

Educational Guides: EPA for Students and Educators

Developed as a free online resource from the EPA, <http://www.epa.gov/epahome/students.htm>, this page includes hands-on activities, classroom resources, and opportunities for students in the K-12 classroom and beyond. Teachers can access lesson plans to use with their students and students can learn how to keep their school environment safe with toolkits and assessment tools such as the EPA's Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools Kit, SunWise Program, among others.



The Daily Green

This is a valuable website

[http://www.thedailygreen.com/going-](http://www.thedailygreen.com/going-green/)

[-green/](http://www.thedailygreen.com/going-green/) that tackles the relationship between maintaining your daily lifestyle while incorporating good consumer practices—an important aspect to consider as you work towards sustainability. On this webpage, you will find research, guides, and simple yet detailed advice for recommendations that you can put into practice in your home. For example: you can find pages dedicated to managing food and waste in the home, how to recognize an ecological product and how to make the best selections when purchasing products, and how to contribute towards your local economy. You can sign up for their free newsletter on the website as well.

It is important to recognize that as a consumer you have the power to decide which products to buy and which not to buy, a decision based on the recognition of businesses that care for the environment and that assure ecologically sound processes and products. In the United States, legislation has worked to promote corporate social responsibility and more and more businesses are adopting this commitment.

As you can see, converting yourself into a responsible consumer is a formative process, with respect to UNESCO stressing the role of education in molding attitudes, values, and behavior, while at the

same time developing capacities, abilities, and the promise to build a sustainable future.

5. Innovation of the formative processes

In 2005, The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was developed as a commitment from Mexico to UNESCO during the Johannesburg summit.

No Child Left Inside Act

For more than three decades, environmental education has been a growing part of effective instruction in America's schools. Responding to the need to improve student achievement and prepare students for the 21st century economy, schools throughout the nation now offer some form of environmental education. Thirty million students and 1.2 million teachers annually are involved in programs ranging from environmental science courses to an interdisciplinary approach that uses the environment as an integrating theme throughout the entire curriculum.

Environmental education should enhance the coordination and interdisciplinary treatment of the content and process of teaching-learning with the natural and social sciences. It should also make sure that the students:

1. Understand the joint evolution and the interaction between human beings and nature,



- from a vision that permits them to adopt it as their own and, in the social environment, to understand the consequences of their actions at the local, regional, national, and global levels.
2. Value the richness of our natural wealth and recognize themselves as inhabitants of an extremely diverse country, making a commitment to the care, conservation, and sustainable use of the earth.
 3. Understand and appreciate that their respectful behavior towards nature and responsible use of natural and energy resources contribute to promoting, maintaining, and reestablishing the sustainability of the environment and supporting their quality of life now and for future generations.
 4. Understand the diverse factors that are involved in the environmental problem: economics, politics, cultures, history, society, nature, among others, and that the solution requires multiple responses with an integral focus that takes into account different understandings, criteria, and interests.
 5. Are capable of adopting a participatory commitment in making informed decisions that contribute to the prevention, moderation, and

solution of environmental problems.

6. Develop values like democracy, tolerance, respect, solidarity, collaboration, and responsible participation to promote the establishment of harmonious relationships with their immediate social and natural environments.

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