The Environmental, Societal, and Economic Effects of Capitalism and Globalization

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A Global Ecological Crisis

“I think the environment should be put in the category of our national security. Defense of our resources is just as important as defense abroad. Otherwise what is there to defend?”

-Robert Redford

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_environmental.html?i=7pGLgS5d8iGhpoMSU_99
We are in the midst of an ecological crisis

Humans have been thoughtlessly plundering the environment and the situation has become dire

The “elites” in society are largely to blame for this due to their high level of conspicuous consumption

- The elites have the most to gain from taking what they can from the Earth
- They don’t pay the price because of externalities - instead others suffer because of the poor choices that the elites make
- They are protected from the damaging effects due to their separation from the rest of society, particularly from those living in poverty
- Most people try to emulate those who are a class above them, which perpetuates the problem
- They need to set a better “example” for the rest to follow

(Kempf, 2008)
Effects On Our Environment and Health

- Climate change and global warming
- Melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels
- Floods, droughts, and severe heat waves
- Toxic chemicals and emissions that pollute land, water, and air
- Acid rain
- Overflowing landfills
- Depletion of wetlands, forests, and other natural resources
- Extinction of wildlife
- Increases in illnesses such as allergies, asthma, and cancer

(EPA.gov, 2013)
A Global Social Crisis

“An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.”
-Plutarch c. 46 A.D.-127 A.D.; source unknown
We are also in the midst of a social crisis
Democracy is eroding
Freedoms are slowly being taken away from us
Inequality is growing as the gap between the rich and the poor widens and the middle class becomes non-existent
Greater inequality leads to less sense of community
“Socially excessive inequality” leads to poorer health and lower quality of life
Unemployment has reached record numbers
The media and politicians simply parrot the elites
Neither of the major political parties is handling the situation well
(Kempf, 2008; Wisman, 2011)

“We won't have a society if we destroy the environment.”
-Margaret Mead
http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_environmental.html#pGLg5SsBxGhpoMSU.99
Evolutionary Roots and Historical Causes

- The current environmental crisis did not arise exclusively from damage imposed by “Western” culture
- Throughout history humans have been the cause of ecological problems
- Centuries of overpopulation, overconsumption, exhaustion of resources, and lack of foresight have taken their toll
- Fortunately, in the past and now, there have been people who have valued and cared for plants and animals and supported environmental conservation
- Incentives and societal pressure dominate peoples decisions and behavior
  (Penn, 2003)
Conspicuous Consumption

“He is richest who is content with the least, for content is the wealth of nature.”
-Socrates

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_nature.html?qmEem8F1WEETtK5Kr.99
“Conspicuous consumption”, coined in 1899 by sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, is largely to blame for the current environmental dilemma. Purchasing and using goods and services in an attempt to display status, power, and wealth; particularly high degree in U.S.

In the past this was done by possessing kingdoms, armies, or slaves.

Today, in societies where social mobility is possible, it is done by everyone (rich or poor) as people attempt to emulate those who are a class above.

For those who have the means, it consists of continually buying and showing off the latest expensive or techy “gadgets”, taking extravagant vacations, and throwing lavish parties (Carolan, 2005; Kempf, 2008; Wisman, 2011).

Has led to the “embodiment of conspicuous consumption” - bodily control through fad diets and pills, exercise and equipment, and plastic surgery, making us the actual conspicuous possession to be showed off wherever we go (Carolan, 2005).

Similarly, humans attempt to control and purify the environment as well via manicured lawns, national parks, and river dams, however nature cannot be entirely tamed (Carolan, 2005).
“How might we explain to our grandchildren why we pursued further embellishments of our outdoor cooking appliances at the expense of safer highways and clean air? Or why we found continued escalation in the amounts spent on Patek Philippe wristwatches and Hermes handbags more important than cleaner drinking water and safer food?” -R. H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess*, 2000
Planned Obsolescence

- A major contributing factor to environmental degradation is Planned Obsolescence.
- Developed in the 1930’s to help stimulate the economy.
- A questionable marketing ploy.
- Shorter life-spans of products, frequent design changes, and alleged improvements and upgrades make people feel that they need to ditch their existing, functioning item and buy a new one in order to keep current and/or fashionable.
- Places a burden on consumers and the environment.

(Gułtinań, 2009)
Four Key Issues With Regard to Globalization of the Economy

1. Unprecedented levels of wealth
2. Unparalleled poverty rates
3. Extraordinary ecological challenges
4. Political and economic instability
   (Guptara, 2010)
Seven Essential Steps to Creating the Right Kind of Globalization

1. Realistic optimism
2. Education that nurtures citizenship and personal fulfillment, not just job training
3. Restore media to truth-telling instead of sensationalism and entertainment
4. Install direct democracy and abolish political parties and representative democracy
5. Liberate research from the constraints of private ownership
6. Introduce a global minimum wage and guarantee of food, clothes, and shelter
7. Implement reforms to ensure that the global economy does not cause enslavement
   (Guptara, 2010)
“After all, sustainability means running the global environment - Earth Inc. - like a corporation: with depreciation, amortization and maintenance accounts. In other words, keeping the asset whole, rather than undermining your natural capital.”

-Maurice Strong

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_environmental.html#pGLgSSsBsGhpoMSU.99
A balance between the three “pillars” of which we need to be stewards
- Environment
- Society
- Economy

The U.S is a key player and leader in working with other nations to protect the global environment
(EPA.gov, 2013)

“All is connected... no one thing can change by itself.”
-Paul Hawken
What Can We Do?
A Lot!

Although the task seems monumental, all is not lost.

“The mountains are calling and I must go.”
- John Muir

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_nature.html#qSmEem8F1MEE1tbKr.99
Remain optimistic - there are plenty of people who care and are working on solutions (Kempf, 2008)

Inform ourselves and become more aware of environmental issues and the economy

Engage in self-reflection and critical thinking (Carolan, 2005)

Educate others and spread awareness whenever the opportunity arises

Practice population control by limiting the number of children being born, adopting or fostering instead (Penn, 2003)

“There are always flowers for those who want to see them.”
-Henri Matisse

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_nature.html?m=EmBF1
- Clean up our act and set a good example
- Reduce, reuse, and recycle
- Practice social, environmental, and economic stewardship
- Compost yard and food waste instead of throwing them away
- Do not litter
- Walk or ride a bike instead of driving whenever possible
- Turn off unnecessary lights
- Do not waste or pollute water
- Use only the amount of products that is needed to get the job done
  (EPA.gov, 2013)

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”
-Mahatma Gandhi
Do not emulate the wealthy or try to keep up with the “Joneses”; we have nothing to prove and will actually lead happier and less stressful lives if we ‘keep it simple’ (Carolan, 2005; Kempf, 2008; Wisman, 2011)

Hold off on new purchases until truly needed, replacing only those items that are broken or outdated to the point that they are no longer useful or efficient

Make greener purchases - buy organic and local whenever possible, look for energy efficient appliances and other products, buy sustainable, recycled, or refurbished items, avoid hazardous chemicals and buy ecologically friendly products instead (EPA.gov, 2013)

Rethink the things that are truly important and make us happy (Wisman, 2011) - family, friends, pets, fresh air, good food, music, the beauty in a sunset, a field of flowers, or a baby’s smile
Vote for visionary leaders who will serve the public instead of catering to the corporate elites (Kaivo-oja, 2002)

Petition lawmakers and public officials for greener energy, automobiles, and other “alternative” strategies, organic farming practices, higher taxation for the wealthy and corporations, and continued, new, and/or improved social services and protections for vulnerable populations (Pilotti & Rinaldin, 2002)

Government can provide both consumer and corporate incentives for those who need the extra nudge, as well as policies that support sustainability (Guiltinan, 2009; Penn, 2003)

There is no one-size-fits-all; acknowledge that there may be a better way, stop doing what is not working, and look to other societies to see what is working for them (Kaivo-Oja, 2002; Pilotti & Rinaldin, 2002)

Create global law that is transparent, effective, and just (Guptara, 2010)

Collective action and activism (Penn, 2003; Pilotti & Rinaldin, 2002)

“It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment.”
-Ansel Adams

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_environmental.html?i=afGLgSs6Ghp0MSU.99
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_environmental.html#pGLg5SsGhpoM5U.99
Thank You for Watching!
References


Scheffer, K. A. (2013). All original photographs contained herein were taken by the author; all other images from ClipArt.
