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# The Consumption of our Discontent

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'sustainable consumption' is gaining interest as a key factor of sustainable development. This evokes issues of vested interests in continued economic growth versus change in lifestyle towards a less consumptive balance of work and leisure. It is shown that such a development is attractive to many people. It may still be stalled by various interest groups who actually thrive on an 'organized dissatisfaction'. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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## Introduction

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**S**USTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IS A TERM IN VOGUE BUT THOSE WHO TAKE 'SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION' seriously, sometimes – and with reason – feel like members of a special sect with common prophets and language. It is imperative to find a way to join a broader discourse and this paper is a rather frank attempt to discuss ways forward to this.

Taking the terms seriously requires factor reductions – down four-, five- or tenfold – in resource use (Daly, 1991; Meadows *et al.*, 1992; Lovins *et al.*, 1995) This is indeed drastic in relation to e.g. the single digit percentage reductions of the Kyoto protocol (and it is well known that even this cautious step is rejected in some quarters today). Thus factor decreases have a somewhat quixotic<sup>1</sup> character and such demands are ignored by most people. Even those who accept the scientific conclusions try to accommodate their feelings either by referring to a soothing time frame that tends to accompany the demand – 50 years or so – and to future achievements of technical development. The latter, however, apart from being unrealistic in many instances, begs the question about the rebound effect.

This paper will discuss where to locate the issue and look for possible solutions. To this end, it will swing between individualistic perspectives and the way our political and social institutions work. It will question the common scarcity view of our present world and present a typology of 'over-consumption' and a model of society to illustrate the conflicting interests, but it will also present some evidence – with data of a kind that is often overlooked or even intentionally disregarded – that people's attitudes to consumption and related issues of work and time open a real opportunity for change. This leads to the conclusion that to move forward it is necessary to discuss downshifting at work and other key factors in our

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<sup>1</sup>To readers who, like me, are puzzled by the term: 'having ideas that are not practical and plans based on unreasonable hopes of improving the world' or 'impractically idealistic' (Collins). Think of Don Quixote!

lifestyles. Another conclusion is that this will require actions in the political field and the paper suggests that many interest organizations play a problematic role because they may misconstrue people's basic opinions.

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## We are Keynes' Grandchildren!

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A point of departure is that we in Western countries live in a surplus economy. On the whole we are beyond scarcity. Not beyond desire but beyond satisfying reasonable needs. We are in fact the 'grandchildren' of whom Keynes wrote in 1930 that they will have solved the 'production problem' and no longer have to be greedy and concerned about making their living; the productive capacity would be sufficient for all to enjoy life in a leisurely manner (Keynes, 1983).

Such a statement of course sounds politically incorrect because uneven distribution still leaves some people poor, at least relative to the norm, but this skewed distribution is a political problem, not one of lacking resources. It is no excuse to postpone an adaptation to more sustainable ways of life today when we are aware of the ecological limits. Failing to do so, one must admit the relevance of the critique by Horkheimer and Adorno describing ours as 'a society which skilfully manages to keep a threatening surplus at a distance' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. 290).

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## A Typology of Over-Consumption

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If 'over-consumption' is the problem, three terms – partly overlapping and non-excluding but still clearly distinguishable – can highlight different aspects of the issue: *waste*, *sumptuousness* and *affluence*.

*Waste*<sup>2</sup> implies that consumption takes a larger toll of resources or pollution than required. It is simply inefficient in relation to the satisfaction derived – as with an old car using too much petrol for the transport service rendered. In an ecological perspective, such waste lacks positive meaning and normal technological rationality would be to try to reduce it with new and more efficient technologies.

*Sumptuousness*<sup>3</sup> stands (here) for conspicuous consumption/activities – meant to serve as a social marker – which are only available to a limited group *and* are characterized by a high specific resource/pollution density. In line with the example above e.g. the most 'thirsty' snob cars (like SUVs).

*Affluence*<sup>4</sup> refers to an oversized flow of consumption in relation to a specific reference or societal norm. If the reference is the supply of fossil fuel or the air quality, affluence is too many people driving their cars too far. The term gained its present negative connotations in the critique of mass consumption.

*Waste* may appear as uncontroversial, at least from a consumer perspective, but even if short-lived products do squander resources a producer may rather think it a waste to make durable, simple and cheap products if this will shrink the market and jeopardize further expansion. Combating *waste* is still superficially innocuous in the sense that it seeks to make the best of a given situation. This refers to allocative efficiency, which is the basic economic drive (assuming that economy deals with scarce resources). At stake is not what to do but only how. Reducing *sumptuousness* is already more contested since it may inflict upon the relation between social groups and the issue of distribution. Reducing *afflu-*

<sup>2</sup> 'To spend or use carelessly . . . to allow to be used inefficiently' (Webster, 1991, p. 1331).

<sup>3</sup> 'Expensive or extravagant'. Confer sumptuary [laws/taxes] 'designed to regulate personal expenditure/habits on moral or religious grounds . . . prevent extravagance and luxury' (Webster, 1991, p. 1182).

<sup>4</sup> . . . Having a generally sufficient and typically increasing supply of material possessions (Webster p. 62).

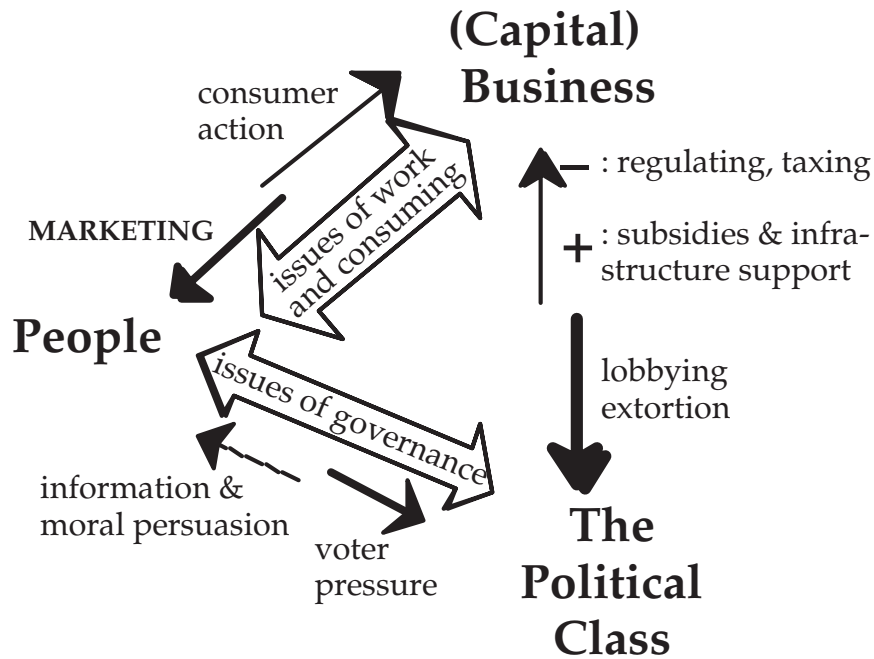


Figure 1. A three-actor model with relations relevant for sustainable consumption

ence is definitely a delicate political undertaking since it challenges the habits of the whole population and cultural norms about the value of economic growth and consumption’s utility value. While allocation and distribution are well known dimensions of economics, affluence refers to a third and novel one, the *scale* of the economy (Daly and Townsend, 1993).

The three aspects also have distinct relations to the concept *need*, a term used rather recklessly (and often persuasively) in everyday language while actually carrying a lot of political weight. *Waste* obviously does not encroach on need satisfaction but merely concerns the way it is handled, but *sumptuousness* and *affluence* do presuppose an opinion on what is deemed a human need. This is in the end a social, political decision. ‘False needs’ are those purportedly not genuine to human nature but conjured up – and catered for – by an expanding, profit-seeking production while real needs are those that a good society should provide all its members (Heller, 1974).

### Three Principal Actors

My tool of analysis is a crude model of society with three types of interacting actors: *business* (capital), *people* and *the political class*, each with its interests and mindsets (See Figure 1). To characterize them briefly, *business* is the main organiser of production. It is profit oriented but basically indifferent to what is being produced (although it may be sensitive to what the consumers think of its action). *The political class* is composed of politicians and but also of administrators and ‘bureaucrats’ as well as experts who work in conjunction with the government; it is basically concerned with legitimization and safe-guarding its position in power. It follows that we should not expect change to follow when and because a universal ‘we’ (all actors) get informed and begin to act rationally and morally ‘rightly’. Neither should researchers take for granted that their mission simply is to help governments striving for sustainability.

The picture also indicates that the relations involving *people* are well mapped ideologically: people act as employees or consumer versus *business* and as citizens versus *the political class*. The third relation remains more undefined and contested: according to what general theory can we describe what goes on between business and the political class?

Two comments about other possible actors are warranted here. The media – sometimes called ‘the fourth estate’ – is not viewed as a type of actor in its own right. It is a part of, and dependent on business (as advertisers), in spite of its self-image of scrutinizing business and politics in the public interest. Another possible category of actors is organizations – trade union and a multitude of other interest groups – supposedly representing particular interests for people on the political arena. I will return to both of these later.

The simplistic assumption about ‘people’ as one of the actors is not to deny that human beings constitute all the actors. Acting in prescribed roles but also alternating between positions, individuals create bonds that make society coherent. *Business* and, possibly to a lesser degree, *the political class*, are likely to follow an instrumental rationality while *people* may be more apt to follow a communicative rationality with a broader set of deliberations.

Assuming that governments intend to promote a more sustainable consumption, there is a lot they can do. The State of the World report 2004, which is focused on the consumer society, suggests measures like phasing out subsidies, transfer to ecotaxes and regulating product standards and labelling (World Watch Institute, 2004). This is important and goes some way. But it is far from done to the full possible extent and business offsets these efforts by marketing (versus consumers) and by putting pressure on the politicians. This explains governments’ reluctance. In fact politicians often show a Janus face: trying to please environmentally concerned citizens by urging the public to behave environmentally correctly while at the same time satisfying business by promoting increased consumption. In the latter, many politicians probably also adhere to genuine beliefs, shared with business, about the necessity and the benefits of an expanding economy: ‘endless economic growth . . . has been elevated to the status of a modern religion’ (World Watch Institute, 2004, p. 96).

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### What Do People Want of Consumption – and Work?

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Making the individual as consumer the central figure in the quest for sustainable consumption may appear natural but involves some problems. In the first place, it may obscure how producers construct the field of consumption to satisfy their interests. It also neglects that the range of possible choices may not be so large as generally assumed due to lock-in effects and structural factors. Finally there is a certain reluctance to trust the judgment of consumers when it runs counter to certain ingrained ideas.

In the first place, it is important to acknowledge that consumption is much more than shopping. Shove stresses the importance of the normal, unquestioned daily practice and the ecological relevance of what she calls ‘inconspicuous consumption’. This is an important remark. An iceberg could be a metaphor where the reflected consumption forms the visible part. However, one may also view consumption as a ‘situated practice’ as described by Giddens: a routine act whose intentionality can be recalled if need be. This means that consumers are knowledgeable all the way and their actions can be brought up to conscious reflection. In terms of the iceberg, even the submerged part can be a subject of reflection, in particular when it is linked to the visible part (such as petrol and cars!) (Giddens, 1979; Shove and Warde, 1998).

The asymmetrical ‘ratchet effect’ in household behaviour expresses a related situation: marketing forces, genuine pleasure and social pressure pull to inflate consumption while habits, commitments and investments stand in the way of reducing it in order to live lightly, at least at short notice.

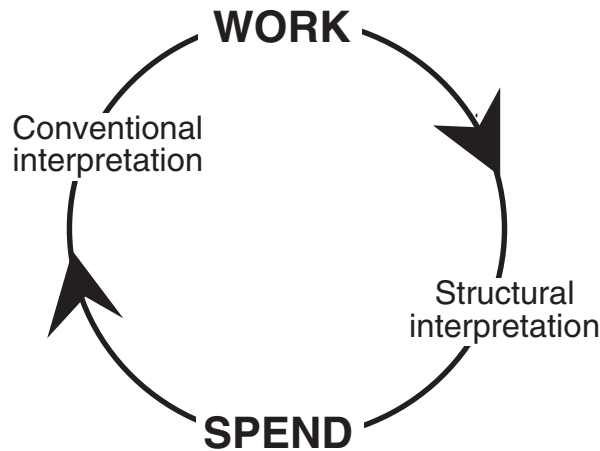


Figure 2. Twin relations of work and spend

This leads up to the general concern of many researchers that attitudes do not bring behaviour change. Minna Antio summarizes ‘young people master the course of green consumerism . . . but they do not necessarily act accordingly’.<sup>5</sup> One obvious reason – which often seems to be bracketed in these analyses – is that consumers meet thousands of commercial and cultural summonses to consume every day. The British National Consumer Council also comments soberingly that people do indeed have a positive but also ‘passive view of sustainable behaviour’ and, importantly, ‘everyone has more immediate and pressing concerns . . .’. Another interesting comment is that people seem to expect that others, in particular the authorities, should set the conditions right rather than leaving it to each person to act responsibly (National Consumer Council, 2003, p. 5).

It is worth stressing that changes in consumer behaviour may have several roots. One important driver is the self-interest in safer, cleaner or healthier products such as food; another is awareness of the negative effect on the environment.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes they go hand in hand. People in the NCC study tend to identify sustainable consumption with ‘eco-products’ and are concerned about the extra costs they carry. But this is rather a narrow view; it can, to the contrary, be shown that to follow the advice on ‘green’ food, ‘green’ travel or ‘green’ living (as advocated by many authorities and other advisers) is in fact money-saving (Alfredsson, 2002). Unfortunately for the environment, spending the saved money may result in take-back effects that nullify the first order effects.

This leads to the issue of lock-in to a way of life, quite evident in the case of employment. We can describe the connection between work and consumption with a ‘work-and-spend’ circle (Figure 2, developed after Schor (1991)). Evidently, most people cannot spend without prior work and earnings (upward arrow). This also tallies with the economic understanding that one’s supply of work is a response to one’s wish to consume. But most jobs are offered in a standard package: full-day, every day and life-long work. This institutional norm for the duration of work also determines the income. Thus the ‘work contract’ for a majority may in effect become an incitement to consume (downward arrow) one’s surplus – or ‘discretionary’ – income. Most people’s experience is of course that this is quickly appropriated by commercial forces.

This may be regarded as a case of the ‘rebound effect’. Normally this is tied to gains in technological efficiency, which, contrary to naive expectations, by way of lower costs may lead to increasing volumes,

<sup>5</sup> Presentation at National Consumer Research Centre, Helsinki, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> A third reason is of course concern about global injustice.

which offset the initial gain. Such take-back effects are extremely important because they undermine the logic of environmental improvements by technical efficiency. Work also regularly becomes more productive (efficient); this is in effect the dominant cause of economic progress. But historically, only a minimal fraction of this productivity increase has been used to reduce working hours – almost all of it has been turned into higher incomes (or profits).

Objections to this argument usually refer to the idea of consumer preference, consumer sovereignty etc (neglecting the well known critique that one cannot express a preference in the market for things such as fresh air, safe school-ways and many other urgent issues). Such notions have a strong hold in the discourse – even to point of depressing scientific and folk doubts about the merits of a continued growth in consumption. A recent trend is, however, to question the satisfaction derived from consumption. The classic question ‘Does money buy happiness?’ (Easterlin, 1973) has become topical of late, in the academic field as well as in politics. This is demonstrated e.g. by the British government report about the state of knowledge of life satisfaction and whether this is an appropriate area for political intervention. A main point is that higher consumption fails to improve happiness ratings for a group above a certain income (which for countries is as low as the 1950s level in Britain). More relevant happiness factors are social relations, a good job etc. This leads the report to propose *inter alia* that one should rather strive for a better balance between work and leisure, in other words shorter working hours (Donovan and Halpern, 2002).

This tallies well with a multitude of information about people’s views on life, which seems to be disregarded, possibly because it does not comply with the ruling paradigm of progress. Three issues merit special attention.

1. *The preferred working hours.* This is the object of a great number of surveys and experience shows that the wording of the question is crucial. Only a minority – 15–20% – is prepared to *forego income* for shorter hours in an individual decision. But a majority of 50–60% favour shorter hours *instead of a higher income* (and only a small minority prefer ‘increased private consumption’). This confirms that working hours is a social issue, which requires a collective choice for the future (Sanne, 1995).
2. *The pace of life.* Time stress has become topical, in popular discourse as well as in academia, with worries about its effects on people’s daily life, health and social relations. Evidently, most people would prefer a less rushed tempo (AllensbacherInstitut, 1999). It has been shown that people blame the work/consumption nexus for the time shortage. All the same most people focus on other means to handle the dilemma, e.g. how to organise and gain control over one’s time (Southerton, 2003).
3. *The needs and wants.* The notion of the sovereign consumer, acting according to his/her preferences, rules standard discourse, effectively excluding the concept of ‘need’. All the same there exists a popular distinction of needs versus wants (as well as one of necessities versus luxury) (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992). In spite of frequent objections, it is also possible to study people’s conception of ‘needs’ empirically. This has yielded some interesting results, where respondents distinguish between what they have and what they consider needed, either for themselves or generally, in today’s society. A Swedish survey mapped the occurrence of certain belongings and habits of consumption together with people’s perceived need for them.<sup>7</sup> (See Figure 3) It shows that almost all households have and need a number of basic welfare means such as health care and proper housing. Some household appliances are also very common and considered essential. But as one moves down the list, there are many VCRs, microwave ovens and other gear in the homes which are not deemed ‘needed’. The

<sup>7</sup>The survey was initially conducted in order to map ‘consensual poverty’ in terms of necessities for a normal life (based on a similar British study, *Poor Britain* (Mack and Lansley, 1985)). By having people answer to what they deem ‘needed’, one avoids the problems of defining and delimiting the elusive concept of *need*.

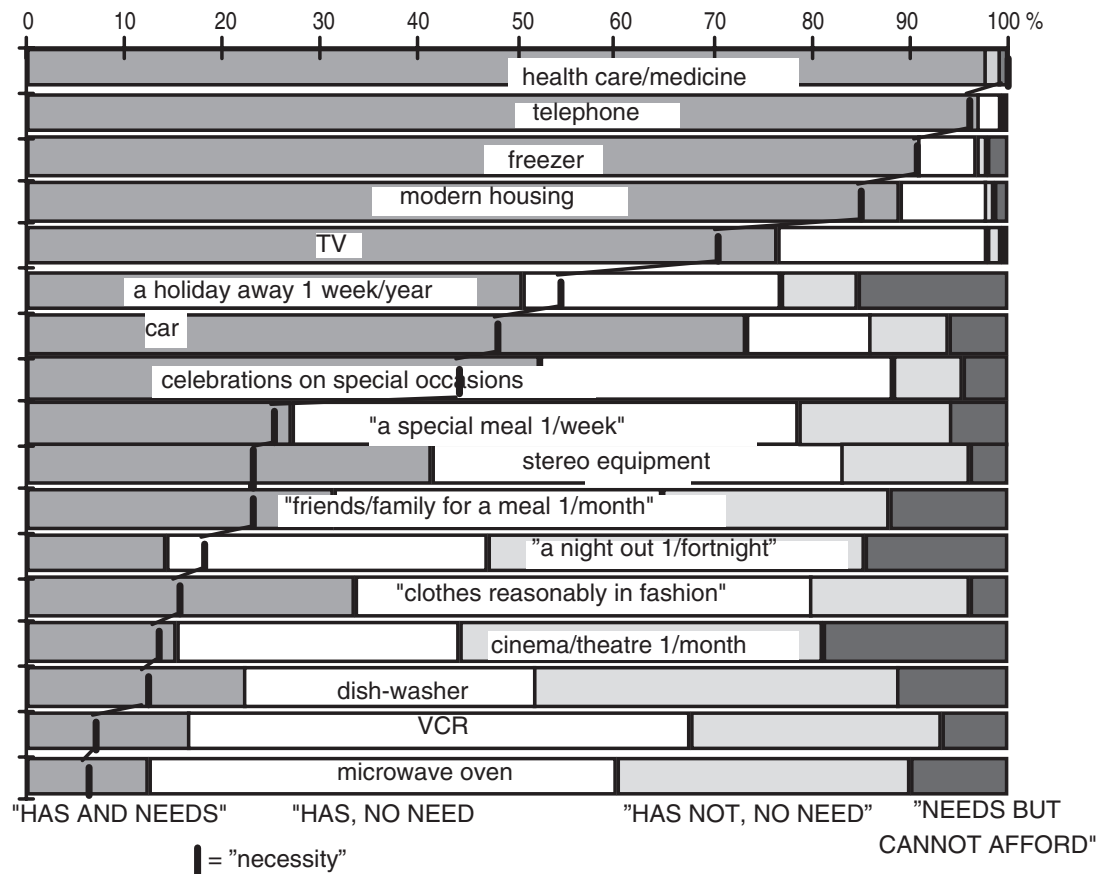


Figure 3. What do you have and what do you need? Examples from a 1992 survey (see Sanne, 1995). Bold vertical lines indicate to what degree items are also considered 'necessities'

reasons for acquiring them may have been curiosity, status, comfort or wish for distinction. The category of indifference ('has not, no need') is also big (Sanne, 1995, 1998).

This indicates a 'rational' approach to consumption. Respondents were able (and willing) to distinguish between essential and non-essential consumption and to identify 'heterodox', contested consumption, which is not hidden in the inaccessible parts of the iceberg of normality and unquestioned norms and habits. This also infers that it is feasible to argue about changing or refraining from such consumption (Bourdieu, 1977; Wilk, 2002).

### Organized Dissatisfaction – and Beyond

The emerging picture above about people is not the conventional one of the unsatisfiable consumer. It is more in line with the claim of André Gorz (in several texts) that the typical attitude is that 'we have enough' or 'we can make do' (Gorz, 1989). More consumption does not bring added satisfaction; there is a discontent with its unfulfilled promises, with the inability to choose something else than what the market offers and with the constant lack of time in daily life.

However, this picture fails to catch on in mainstream public and political debate. It has been suggested that this is due to the lack of an established (political) vocabulary about contentment, but it is also unwanted knowledge (*cognitio non grata*). Material contentment runs counter to strong interests. The discourse is dominated by growth-oriented actors – business and the political class. Economic growth thrives on dissatisfaction. This is why descriptions like the ones above are sometimes ‘explained away’ as a ‘sour grapes reaction’ of downwards adapted preferences or ‘instilled needlessness’. Actual behaviour – long working hours, consumption habits – supposedly disproves stated preferences.

Here we might return to the triangle of actors. As reflecting citizens, people have an influence on politicians, but this is often mediated by organizations – political parties, trade unions and business organizations and other interest groups. An obvious dilemma is that their *raison d'être* is to give voice to what can be found of popular dissatisfaction. No organization will thrive on the message that its members are satisfied with their conditions. This distorts the political decision process, which is already characterized by lobbying and deliberately created and implanted perspectives. Agnes Heller calls ours a ‘dissatisfied society’ and this is an *organized dissatisfaction* (Heller, 1993).

The dissatisfaction is further amplified by the media, not just because of its ties to and joint interests with business (and increasingly with the political class). It is also in the nature of media to focus on problems rather than progress and to pay attention to losers and individuals rather than to winners and groups. So they abound with examples which underline discontentment. In this way, media and self-interested civil society organizations form a symbiotic relation, which perpetuates and normalizes a world view of dissatisfaction with the present conditions, material as well as in other respects. Sometimes organization leadership even seems to adopt the perspectives of the other leading actors in society.

It is delicate to claim to know what the ‘grassroots’ really think and want, but there is good evidence that ‘living lightly’ would gain wide acceptance under the right conditions. To do so, it is probably crucial to be able to point to tangible benefits, and that the necessary changes affect all people in order to be accepted as fair. To achieve this also requires enlightened citizens and a dedicated political leadership.

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