Overconsumption: the major environmental concern of today

Sociology, Population

Overconsumption: The Major Environmental Concern of Today By Ashley Miller Overconsumption: The Major Environmental Concern of Today Our planet and life as we know it is in grave danger! Did you know that, in 2007, humans need for natural resources had surpassed the amount of resources the earth had to offer by fifty percent? What this means is that it would take one and a half planets to fill the overwhelming need for natural resources in order to serve mankind. By 2030, people will require such a great amount of resources to sustain the current level of consumption that our earth will eventually fail to provide this need (WWF 9). Natural resources that humans are consuming at a significant rate include materials, water, energy, and fertile land. These resources support all living life on earth, and due to humans increasing need for natural resources we are causing severe damage to our planet. Some of the effects that we are seeing due to the overconsumption of these resources include reductions in many things such as clean water supply, fish numbers, and woodlands. We are seeing many more species coming closer and closer to being placed on the endangered species list and our rich fertile soil is diminishing quickly (Giljum et al. 3). We are also seeing a significant change in our climate due to rising levels of greenhouse gases. Many people believe that overconsumption is a result of overpopulation which makes overpopulation out to be the larger issue, but it isn’t. Overconsumption of natural resources should be a separate, distinct issue and should be addressed as the major environmental concern of today, not overpopulation. There are many reasons why overconsumption should be the main environmental concern of today. First of all, humans need natural resources and ecosystems in order to survive on this planet. According to

Ehrlich and Goulder, some natural resources are essential to well-being and some are even critical to life itself. Being able to sustain these natural resources and ecosystems is essential to human life (1146). When humans consume resources at a rate in which they cannot be replenished this creates a major problem for all life and the ecosystems in which all life depends. Services that the ecosystems provide include water filtration, crop pollination, climate regulation, nutrient cycling, photosynthesis, and soil formation. It also includes goods that are taken directly from the ecosystems like food, medicine, wood, and biofuel (WWF 10). Many of the services that ecosystems provide cannot be replaced. When these services are threatened by human activities it causes the ecosystems to become strained eventually leading to ecosystem failure. “ The dependency of human society on ecosystem services makes the loss of these services a serious threat to the future well-being and development of all people around the world" (WWF 12). All of the effects of overconsumption put direct pressure on the “ biodiversity" that supports ecosystem services (WWF). Many of the effects from overconsumption stem from human demands. These demands are for food, water, energy and materials. Also, there is a substantial need for space for towns, cities, and infrastructure (WWF 12). Food production, housing, mobility and manufactured products contribute greatly to the environmental pressures. These pressures include climate change, land, water and energy use, habitat loss and pollution. Building homes contributes to significant amounts of direct and indirect emissions of greenhouse gases and particulate matter. Transportation leads to habitat loss, greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution. “ Private vehicles are by far the largest

contributor to impacts from mobility. Manufactured products are either the second or third most important contributor to the carbon footprint of rich countries" (Huijbregts 79). Fossil fuel extraction and the production processes involving fossil fuel combustion are major contributors of pollution and greenhouse gases. The extraction and refining of materials that are used for their structural or material properties lead to the depletion of non-renewable resources (Huijbregts 78). The effects of overconsumption not only cause severe damage to our planet, but they are also the sources of direct and indirect impacts on human health. Climate change, ozone depletion, forest clearing, and land alteration all have direct health impacts. Some of the major impacts include shortages of water supplies, flooding, land erosion, increased risk of sun damage, and exposure to greenhouse gasses. Some of the major health concerns directly linked to land degradation and desertification include high risks for the spread of contagious diseases, low food supply, and the reduction of natural remedies. They are also effects of wetland loss and damage, the loss of biodiversity, water shortages and contamination, and damage to Coastal Reefs and their ecosystems. All of these environmental changes also have indirect health impacts such as a variety of health issues due to the loss of decent living conditions, the forced migration of large populations due to natural resource loss or contamination, conflict, and “ inappropriate adaptation and mitigation" (Huijbregts 27). Now that I have discussed the effects of overconsumption on our planet I will talk about the reasons why overconsumption should be a separate issue than overpopulation. The main reason is that developed countries such as the United States consume the

greatest amount of natural resources yet they only account for a small portion of the population. “ People in rich countries consume up to 10 times more natural resources than those in the poorest counties. On average, an inhabitant of North America consumes around 90 kilograms (kg) of resources each day. In Europe, consumption is around 45 kg per day, while in Africa people consume only around 10 kg per day" (Giljum et al. 3). These wealthy developed countries consume the greatest amounts of resources yet their share of global population is relatively small. In 2010, North America only accounted for five percent of the global population. Oceania, which consumes about 100 kg of resources each day, only accounts for one percent of the global population (Engelman 4). Africa and Asia, which account for seventy five percent of the global population, only consume around 24 kg of resources each day combined (Engelman 4; Giljum et al. 20). Income plays a major role in the amount of resources that are consumed. According to the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF), “ the amount of resources used by low-income countries decreased between 1970 and 2007, while middle-income countries’ resource use has increased slightly and the resource use of high-income countries has not only significantly increased, but it dwarfs that of the other two income groups" (77). This shows that the more money people possess, the more likely they are to consume a greater amount of resources due to extra disposable income. This is unfortunate, but unfortunately this is human nature. Another issue due to overspending and overconsuming of these wealthy industrialized countries is the amount of pollution that these countries emit into the atmosphere. “ The world’s richest half billion people — that’s about

seven percent of the global population — are responsible for half the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. While the poorest fifty percent of the population are responsible for just seven percent of emissions" (Pearce). The greater the income of the country the greater the environmental pressure from consumption. In Huijbregts report on the environmental impacts of consumption and production it explains that “ as total food consumption and the share of animal calories increase with wealth, nutrition for rich countries tends to cause higher environmental impacts than for poor countries. " This is true because as people’s incomes increase they will consume more meat and fish, along with many other processed foods which require materials such as cardboard, plastics, and paper to make their distribution possible. Construction in wealthy countries also has a significant impact on the environment and ecosystems. Waste from demolition and excess waste from building homes and infrastructure account for fifteen to thirty percent of all waste accumulated in landfills (Environmental Impacts of Construction). In addition, wealthy countries produce the largest amount of particulate matter (pollution) from construction and the production of construction material for housing (Huijbregts 78). The clearing of land for construction has a significant impact on ecosystems and wildlife habitats in the developed countries as the economy continues to grow (Environmental Impacts of Construction). Another reason why overconsumption should be separated from overpopulation is that the global economy is growing faster than population. It is estimated that the world’s economy will grow by four hundred percent by 2050 (Pearce). As less developed nations seek to better their economic status they will, in turn, consume more. “ It remains a global

truth that economic betterment is a common human pursuit" (Valentine 121). The effect that this will have on the planet is great. As the global economy grows, more and more products will be produced to reach more consumers, therefore, creating greater consumption. A significant statistic that demonstrates how much the world economy is growing is the amount of world merchandise exports. This number is now greater than $16 trillion which is more than double what it was in 2000 and over 150 times greater than it was in 1948 (Dauvergne 5). The final reason why overconsumption should be a greater concern than overpopulation is that if we don't significantly reduce our consumption of natural resources the biosphere will react so severely that our ability to continue is compromised. When that happens, humans will either adapt or perish. If we don't significantly change how and what we are consuming then humans will not be able to sustain themselves and a significant decline in population will result, possibly even extinction (Myers). According to Valentine, this is similar to what happened on Easter Island and to the Norse and Mayan civilizations. As these people consumed all of their resources and collapsed the ecosystems around them they no longer could sustain themselves and their civilization fell. One could venture to say that a solid counter argument to the idea that overconsumption is the major environmental concern the planet faces today is that the population is increasing rapidly and that overconsumption is relative to overpopulation (Myers). When people say that overconsumption is relative they are implying that overconsumption is an effect of overpopulation. They will argue that as soon as there is a reduction in population there will be an automatic decrease in the damage that humans

are causing to the planet which will result in the earth regenerating itself. This isn’t quite true, however. Yes there may be a small reduction in damage to our planet, but it does not solve the problem of overconsumption. As I have already discussed, the effects from overconsumption are great and they affect our planet immensely and most of the consumption comes from only a small portion of the global population. In fact, Pearce explains that: Rising consumption today far outstrips the rising headcount as a threat to the planet. Most of the extra consumption has been in rich countries that have long since given up adding substantial numbers to their population, while most of the remaining population growth is in countries with a very small impact on the planet. All of the extra two billion or so people expected on this planet in the coming thirty or forty years will be in this poor half of the world. Stopping that, even if it were possible, would have only a minimal effect on global threats. Just because we reduce the population does not mean these high consuming countries will reduce their consumption. Actually, they may even start consuming more. As for the increasing population, according to Pearce and others, population growth is slowing. Engelman of the Worldwatch Institutes states that “ from mid-2009 to mid-2010, the population grew 1. 16 percent, compared with 1. 32 percent annually a decade earlier and with slightly more than 2 percent four decades ago. " One reason for this slowing of population growth is that the population is aging. “ In 1970, the world’s median age — the precise age at which half of all people are younger and half are older was 22. 1 years. In 2010, it was 29. 1 years" (Engelman 2). On average, this “ median" age has been increasing by a couple of months every year and it doesn’t seem to be

slowing down. Another reason for the decline in population growth is that women are having fewer babies than ever before. “ Forty years ago, the average women had between five and six children. Now she has 2. 6" (Pearce). This is true throughout the world. Almost every country has seen a decline in fertility. “ Many industrial countries are now experiencing either relatively slow population growth or — in Japan, Germany, and 14 East European countries — absolute decline" (Engelman 2). This decline is due to the aging population and low fertility rates. Even though the population growth has greatly slowed down, population is still rising by 70 million people a year. Pearce has pointed out, though, that this is because there is a time lag. During the baby boom era large numbers of young women may have only given birth to two children each, but this is still a great number of babies. He says that “ within a generation, the world’s population will almost certainly be stable, and is very likely to be falling by mid-century. " So, all in all, what is the major concern of our planet today? According to the information I have stated within this paper, the countries with the greatest consumption should be more concerned with overconsumption rather than overpopulation of the poor countries. Overconsumption should be a separate, distinct issue and should be addressed as the major environmental concern of today, not overpopulation. This is such an important issue because human’s survival depends on it. Overconsumption of our natural resources affects every person on this planet. The effects of overconsumption are already clear and things are not going to get any better. Things are getting worse and they will not get better if humans don’t change soon. In another ten years humans might be dying off and in another

hundred years humans may even be extinct if something is not done soon! No one wants to repeat the catastrophe that led to the fall of major civilizations like the Norse and Mayan people. The main thing that has to be done in order to help sustain our planet and the natural resources that we need to survive is to significantly reduce the consumption of the countries with the highest levels of resource use. This includes sharp reductions in consumption for both the United States and for Europe. This would mean major changes to current lifestyles. It would mean that people in these countries need to go back to a simpler life that’s about establishing good relationships with family and friends, more leisure time, and finding a higher self-fulfillment. In rich countries like the United States people think having more possessions will make them happier. “ However, research examining happiness and wellbeing has established that above a certain threshold an increase in material wealth does not improve life satisfaction any further" (Giljum et al. 31). It would also mean that people would have to start recycling as much as possible. In order to do this the governments would have to implement policies that include things like promoting composting in homes, high charges for waste disposal with the highest charge for residual waste, collecting a large assortment of recyclables separately, increase the amount of recycle bins or containers where people can bring a wide range of recyclables, open up centers where people can “ collect, refurbish and sell a wide range of items, including furniture and electrical goods, " and set up limitations and high taxes on landfills and incinerating plants (Giljum et al. 32). “ Implementing policy measures that reward resource-efficient behavior and informing consumers about their options to reduce natural resource use"

would also be very helpful in reducing the amount of consumption in these countries (Giljum et al. 29). These are all short-term measures that can be taken to help reduce consumption and use resources more efficiently. However, in the medium to long—term we need to also address questions like “ how can new models of development be created in the industrialized countries that focus on well-being instead of increased production and consumption and how can developing countries increase their inhabitants quality of life without overusing the resource capacities of our planet" (Giljum et al. 30)? It’s going to be very difficult to sustain life on this planet with how things are currently going, but I believe that humans want to survive and they will do whatever is necessary to continue to live on this planet. I have faith in the human race and I know that when it comes down to it we will do whatever it takes to put this planet back together and create a more sustainable way of living for all people on earth. Works Cited

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