

Consuming our own Future: Unpacking the Truth of our Society

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Abstract

The world today has become “a throwaway society”, where people replace their goods with newer ones. People have enough money to purchase goods in plenty. This isn’t good. We’re already seeing very real and devastating examples of the environmental impact of our throw-away society. Whether its food, housing, energy or consumer products, we are taking more from the planet than we ever have before, and there are more of us doing it. Most of us eat more, use more, buy more and have more than we need. And we throw more of it in the garbage. But why? The reason is the term, “consumerism”. The economy, today, is judged by the production and selling of goods. The more goods produced and consumed by society the higher the growth rate of the economy. The economy is considered to be “doing well” if the purchasing power of the people is high. Consumerism is the equation of personal happiness with consumption and the purchase of material possessions. This leads many scientists to question whether the Earth can sustain the ever-growing human population. We are at present in a situation where the planet’s ecology is not coping with all the pollution because of a huge, continuously increasing, consumer demand. This excessive demand for consumer goods has created most of the current ecological imbalances.

Introduction

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

~ Aldo Leopold

We’re a gloomy lot, with many of us insisting that there’s nothing we can do personally about global warming, or that the human race is over-running the planet like a plague. But according to leading ecologists speaking this week in Albuquerque at the annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America, few of us realise that the main cause of the current environmental crisis is human nature.

More specifically, all we're doing is what all other creatures have ever done to survive, expanding into whatever territory is available and using up whatever resources are available. What happens then, of course, is that the humans will then die in a sea of their own waste. Epidemiologist Warren Hern of the University of Colorado at Boulder, points out that the human population has quadrupled in the past 100 years, and at this rate will reach a size in 2025 that leads to global collapse and devastation. But there's worse. Not only are we simply doing what all creatures do: we're doing it better. In recent times we're doing it even faster because of changes in society that encourage and celebrate conspicuous and excessive consumption.

As a society we are embedded in a regime of consumption. Consumerism brings out a thirst in people to have things, be it objects or services that will make them feel better. People want stuffs for themselves before anyone else. All countries need consumerism to survive, because we need food, shelter, and clothing. In the beginning of 2010, the most frequent reason given for attending college had changed to making a lot of money, as a replacement for of reasons such as becoming an officer or an executive in a field or helping others in difficulty. This statement directly correlates with the rise of materialism, particularly the technological aspect. At this time compact disc players, digital media, personal computers, and cellular telephones, mobiles all began to assimilate with the affluent class' everyday lifestyle. This clearly indicates-"a shift away from values of community, spirituality, and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection." **Dr. Martin Luther King, April, 1967** rightly opined,

"We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, militarism and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered. A nation can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy."

As Dr. King keenly observed more than 52 years ago, society should encourage its members to look to their relationships with others for fulfilment, but instead, it promises that if we buy the latest gazzets or the grandiose new fashion, then we will be happy and popular. Of course, that is a lie, and the prized possession is soon forgotten, replaced by something better, faster, cooler, newer, which is soon forgotten itself. The cycle never ends. Today, consumer is called the king of the market. It is constant attempt of producers that the production of product must conform to the needs of consumer. In addition to the satisfaction of consumer, it is also the endeavour of producer that their sale should be maximum. They, therefore try to increase their sales by all possible means.

The world today has become "**a throwaway society**", where people replace their goods with newer ones. They purchase goods, use them and throw them away. New goods, when they become old are replaced by newer ones. The question of repair does not arise. People have enough money to purchase goods in plenty. On the right side of the pendulum, consumerism

has reached an all-time high, with products reaching their planned obsolescence within absurdly short time spans and new products being rolled out (and bought) by the millions every day. And, since every action has an equal and opposite reaction, we have to expect consequences viz. **‘mass extinction due to mass consumerism.’**

Some could argue that extinction is a natural phenomenon and that is right, in isolated situations. But considering the scale of this potential mass extinction, we’re talking the possible loss of three fourths of earth’s current species, it’s hard to view it as anything other than grossly un natural. Rather than the large-scale natural disasters like meteors or successive volcanic eruptions believed to have caused past mass extinctions, scientists say this one’s different. Human activities including deforestation, over-fishing, poaching and global warming could be to blame for a sixth mass extinction:

This isn’t good. We’re already seeing very real and devastating examples of the environmental impact of our throw-away society. Whether its food, housing, energy or consumer products, we are taking more from the planet than we ever have before, and there are more of us doing it. Most of us eat more, use more, buy more and have more than we need. And we throw more of it in the garbage. But why? The reason is the term, **“consumerism”**. The term 'consumerism' refers to chronic procuring of new goods and services without paying much interest to its requirement, resilience, product source or the actual effect the product is having on the environment in terms of manufacturing or disposal. It is used to describe the tendency of people to identify strongly with products or services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names and perceived status-symbolism appeal, e.g. a luxury automobile, designer clothing, or expensive jewellery.

The economy, today, is judged by the production and selling of goods. The more goods produced and consumed by society the higher the growth rate of the economy. The prosperity of a nation is judged by the per capita income of individuals residing in it. The economy is considered to be “doing well” if the purchasing power of the people is high. **Consumerism** is the equation of personal happiness with consumption and the purchase of material possessions. An intended consequence of this, promoted by those who profit from consumerism, is to accelerate the discarding of the old, either because of lack of durability or until you then move to step two, **“I want it...etc.** “This is one of the things that allows people to surrender to consumerism. Our society has transformed into a community of consumers rather than citizens and consumerism can in fact be one of the most appropriate words to describe the globe. We spend more than what we need, we spend to make ourselves feel better and the worst part is we spend to prove that we are actually living and a part of the group.

Consumerism is not very viable for the entire society as it is because of consumerism that an individual is actually not able to think rationally when it comes to buying a product. It is valued on the terms of the amount of money spent on goods and services. Even associations

like friendship and family are used to work on the brains of the customer to promote giving gifts and so on. All this makes it impossible to live in a healthy balance environment. A lot of people don't even have enough of space in their homes or offices to store the products that they would have purchased eventually leading to **Overconsumption**.

Overconsumption is a situation where resource use has outpaced the sustainable capacity of the ecosystem. A prolonged pattern of overconsumption leads to environmental degradation and the eventual loss of resource bases. Generally, the discussion of overconsumption parallels that of human overpopulation that is the more people, the more consumption of raw materials takes place to sustain their lives. However, humanity's overall impact on the planet is affected by many factors besides the raw number of people. Their lifestyle (including overall affluence and resource utilization) and the pollution they generate (including carbon footprint) are equally important. Currently, the inhabitants of the developed nations of the world consume resources at a rate almost 32 times greater than those of the developing world, which make up the majority of the human population (7.4 billion people). However, the developing world is a growing market for consumption. These nations are quickly gaining more purchasing power and it is expected that the Global South, which includes cities in Asia, America and Africa, will account for **56% of consumption growth by 2030**. This means that consumption rates will plateau for the developed nations and shift more into these developing countries. The theory of overpopulation reflects issues of carrying capacity without taking into account per capita consumption, by which developing nations are evaluated to consume more than their land can support. The United Nations estimate that world population will reach 9.8 billion in the year 2050 and 11.2 in 2100. This growth will be highly concentrated in the developing nations which also pose issues with inequality of consumption.

There is a spectrum of goods and services that the world population constantly consume. These range from food and beverage, clothing and footwear, housing, energy, technology, transportation, education, health and personal care, financial services and other utilities. Each of these requires a different resource and once that resource is exploited to a certain point that qualifies as overconsumption. Two main factors of why people buy so much and so often are due to planned and perceived obsolescence. This factor of production was introduced first in the United States and it revolves around the design of products. With these methods, the products are intentionally designed to be discarded after a short amount of time. As of 2012, only 1% of goods purchased were still in use after 6 months. When it is planned, designers create products that will not be able to work after a certain amount of time but they work for enough time to ensure the customers will come back to buy again. And the result is, **Waste generation**, measured in kilograms per person per day and **a reduction in the planet's carrying capacity** and subsequently **resource depletion, environmental degradation and reduced ecosystem health**.

Looking at the two largest sectors of over consumption, the fashion and food industries, we can see most of the harmful effects on the Earth starting here. The fashion industry has created a new venue, fast fashion, which in 2013 produced 15.1 million tons of textile waste and of that, 12.8 million tons were thrown out. The food industry is the other largest sector of consumption and studies show that people waste a fifth of food products just through disposal or overconsumption. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization collected data and found that by the time food reaches the consumer, 9% (160 million tons) goes uneaten and 10% is lost to overconsumption-meaning consumers ate more than the calorie intake requirement. Other aspects of losses surrounding dry matter came at each stage in the food system, the highest amount being from livestock production at 43.9%, transportation accounted for 18% and consumer waste accounting for 12.2% loss.

As of 2012, the **United States** alone was using **30% of the world's resources** and if everyone were to consume at that rate, we would need 3-5 planets to sustain this type of living. Resources are quickly becoming depleted, with about $\frac{1}{3}$ already gone. With new consumer markets rising in the developing countries which account for a much higher percentage of the world's population, this number can only rise. The World Watch Institute said China and India, with their booming economies, along with the United States, are the three planetary forces that are shaping the global biosphere. The State of the World 2005 report said the two countries' high economic growth exposed the reality of severe pollution. The report states that the world's ecological capacity is simply insufficient to satisfy the ambitions of China, India, Japan, Europe and the United States as well as the aspirations of the rest of the world in a sustainable way.

Consumerism destroying the Environment and Future Generations

“If everyone consumed resources at the US level, you will need another four or five Earths.”

Paul R. Ehrlich, biologist

Consumerism has always been a part of civilization in human societies but has never been under such scrutiny or been recognized as much as it has in the past few generations. The public light has been intensified immensely in the past few decades on this delicate subject that is deeply rooted in our economies, governments and especially our lifestyles. Environmental awareness has also been tied to the consumerism debate with an emphasis on sustainability and longevity. These issues will have a profound effect on the world that we set up for future generations and the survival of our ecosystem. The most noticeable effects of mass consumerism are its harmful effects on the environment.

This leads many scientists to question whether the Earth can sustain the ever-growing human population. As the population grows exponentially, our need for resources grows with it. Many of the resources we are currently utilizing for energy, food and clothing are non renewable and damage large portions of land in the production and distribution of them.

These environmental effects have multiple sources that are very historical and deeply written into tradition. Capitalist countries are mainly responsible for spreading mass consumerism and almost always use substantially more resources than other less developed countries. People are raised to be consumers and are heavily influenced by their surroundings. It also explains how parents feel the need to consume certain products for their children as a reflection of themselves when they state, “The things we buy our kids are, in many ways, an expression of our hopes and fears for them. We buy them clothes that fit them and help them fit in...Often; we make substantial sacrifices to make these purchases. **Today, we love our children by shopping for them.**”(Farrell 76). This type of criticism is very valuable in the fight for awareness of consumerism and personal accountability for the effects of it.

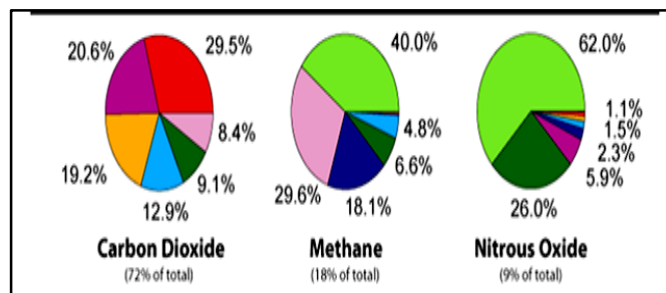
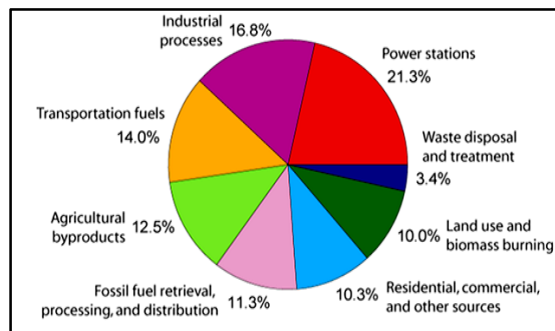
We are at present in a situation where the planet’s ecology is not coping with all the pollution because of a huge, continuously increasing, consumer demand. This excessive demand for consumer goods has created most of the current ecological imbalances. This rate of consumption is increasing at an alarming rate. Moreover, the production, processing, and consumption, of commodities requires the extraction and use of natural resources (wood, ore, fossil fuels, and water); it requires the creation of factories and factory complexes whose operation creates toxic by-products, while the use of commodities themselves (e.g. automobiles) creates pollutants and waste. This will cause enormous ecological devastation in the future, to the extent that around 2025, people will need to complete major changes in their lifestyles to avoid the worst possible scenario. Top negative consumerism effects are:

- Craving for goods is high. The wants and desires of the people increase. The better their income, the better their purchasing power. But in case, they are not able to do so, then they feel dissatisfied.
- One is in a rat race to earn more & is forced to cope up with stress and other work related tensions.
- Material wealth is the deciding factor about whether a society is highly developed or not. Spiritual values are underplayed. Over-dependence on labour saving devices.
- A car for each individual would mean gradual erosion of public transport.
- Crime rate also increases as wants to possess expensive gadgets increase. Thefts become common and daylight robberies take place.
- Personal relationships also get affected as people are busy trying to earn more to maintain their standard of living.
- Cheaper goods are imported from other goods affecting the growth of locally based manufacturing industries.
- The natural habitat is being destroyed to create more goods and build more buildings affecting the weather. Global warming will eventually result in health problems. Industrial pollution is affecting people in many ways.
- People lifestyles have also changed in the sense they are more lavish, full of material comforts rather than focusing on simplicity.
- Consumerism is also depleting the natural resources of the respective country.

- Psychological health also can get affected if one’s desires are not meant such as depression. Jealousy and envy can lead to crime.

It is of benefit for people to look at how they live their life and what they can do to change their lifestyle, so that an excessive need for goods and products will not become a major drive in one’s life. This may be difficult to do while the overall consensus is to buy more products. However, this is not reducing consumerism. At times, products may be needed to improve a lifestyle; however, people often wish to increase their buying and spending power and buy more products so they can feel better or can keep up with others. Thus, this need for an increase in products in the household creates an increase in the number of products manufactured, which in turn often results in an increase in environmental damage.

Environmental Degradation Facts



Annual Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sectors

- Every year, we extract an estimated 55 billion tons of fossil energy, minerals, metals and bio mass from the Earth.
- The world has already lost 80% of its forests and we’re continually losing them at a rate of 375 km² per day. , 5-10% of tropical forest species will become extinct every decade.
- Every hour, 1,692 acres of productive dry land become desert.
- 27% of our coral reefs have been destroyed and remaining 60% will be gone in 30 years.
- We have a garbage island floating in our ocean, mostly comprised of plastics-
- We are using up 50% more natural resources than the Earth can provide. At our current population, we need 1.5 Earths, which we do not have.

Some Noticeable Facts

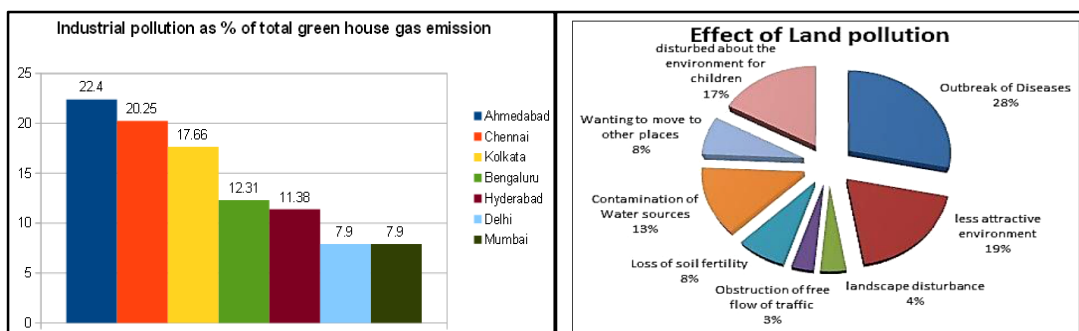
Public health emergency declared in Delhi due to air pollution

A public health emergency was declared in Delhi on the afternoon of November 1, 2019, after air quality plunged to 'severe plus' levels since the night of October 31. On Friday, at around 11 am, the overall air quality index (AQI) was around 530. An AQI between 0-50 is considered 'good', 51-100 'satisfactory', 101-200 'moderate', 201-300 'poor', 301-400 'very poor', and 401-500 'severe'. Above 500 is 'severe-plus' or 'emergency' category. The levels of particulate matter (PM) 10 and 2.5 were above 500 and 300 micrograms per cubic metre (ug/m³) respectively, five times more than their prescribed standard. Delhi has been shrouded in a thick blanket of haze since November 1 morning. Current air quality is a combination of the accumulated toxins because of local pollution, which was further spiked because of cracker burning on Diwali night, combined with stubble burning and extremely adverse weather. Such levels of PM10 can cause severe lung and heart ailments, especially in children and the elderly. Over one lakh children died as a result of air pollution in 2016, according to the World Health Organization's latest report.

Coal, oil main sources of emission

Power generation from coal and oil has been found to be the main source of emissions at 19 out of the 50 largest number of hotspots, followed by manufacturing industries, most notably steel plants in China and transportation.

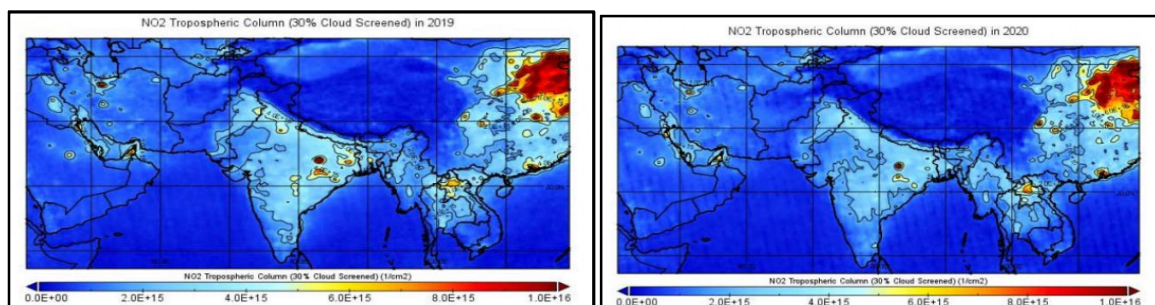
Type of Industry	Total Units	Wastewater Generation (MLD)
Chemical	27	97.8
Distillery	35	37.0
Food, Dairy & Beverage	22	6.5
Pulp & Paper	67	201.4
Sugar	67	96.0
Textile, Bleaching & Dyeing	63	11.4
Tannery	442	22.1
Others	41	28.6
Total	764	501



A recently report by the Centre for Ecological Sciences of the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, has found that industrial pollution remains the main cause of worry for Ahmedabad. The study has said that out of 9,124.45 Gg CO₂ emitted in Ahmedabad, Industry alone accounts for 22.41%, which is highest of the six other comparable cities-Delhi, Greater Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru & Hyderabad as against Ahmedabad's 22.4% of pollution caused by Industry, 7.9% of pollution is caused by industry in Delhi & Mumbai, followed by Hyderabad's 11.38%, Greater Bengaluru's 12.31%, Kolkata's 17.66 % and Chennai's 20.25 % As against industrial pollution, the report says that Ahmedabad ranks fifth in causing domestic pollution with 27.9% of total CO₂ emitted-compared to Hyderabad's 17.05%, Bengaluru's 21.6 %, Delhi's 30.26%, Mumbai's 37.2%, Chennai's 39 % & Kolkata's 42.78%..

As for the third most important pollutant, transport, Ahmedabad's transportation accounts for 25% of all pollution, ranking it fourth. The comparable figures for other cities are--13.3% for Kolkata, 19.5% for Chennai, 17.4% for Mumbai, 32% for Delhi, 43.5% for Bengaluru, and 56.5% for Hyderabad. The study estimates greenhouse gases (GHG), footprint of GHG emissions (in terms of CO₂ equivalent) and explores the linkages with the population and GDP. GHG footprint (aggregation of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions of GHG) of Delhi was found to be 38,633.2 Gg, Greater Mumbai 22,783.08 Gg, Kolkata 14,812.10 Gg, Chennai 22,090.55 Gg, Greater Bengaluru 19,796.5 Gg, Hyderabad 13,734.59 Gg, and Ahmedabad 9,124.45 Gg CO₂.

In India power plants were supposed to comply with emission standards, but the Ministry of Environment and Power took no action against polluting coal power plants. On the contrary, it had extended the deadline for implementation of emissions standards for thermal power plants, alleges Greenpeace. In fact, the 2015 emission standards could have resulted in a 48 per cent decrease in **NO₂**.



NO₂ emissions cost health

NO₂ is a dangerous pollutant that contributes to the formation of PM_{2.5} and ozone, two of the most dangerous forms of air pollution. So, breathing air with a high concentration of NO₂ can irritate airways in the human respiratory system. Such exposures over short periods can aggravate respiratory diseases, particularly asthma, leading to respiratory symptoms (such as

coughing, wheezing or difficulty breathing. The **IIT Kanpur Comprehensive Study on Air Pollution and Green House Gases in Delhi** (2016) states that vehicles contribute 20 per cent to the PM_{2.5} emission load in the city. The recent Safar study found that emissions from the transport sector increased by 40 per cent in 2018 as compared to 2010. PM 2.5 are fine particles that can enter the bloodstream affecting heart and brain function. Further PM 2.5 in the air can enter the placenta, threatening both mother and baby.

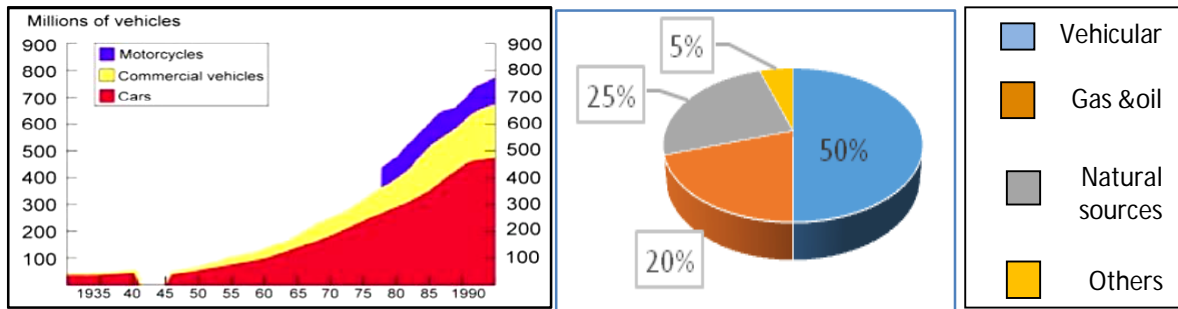
93% children below 15 exposed to toxic air: report

Children are extremely vulnerable to air pollution, says a report released during the first global conference on air pollution and health in Geneva. As many as 93 per cent children below the age of 15 years breathe polluted air. The risk is higher in low- and middle-income countries where 98 per cent of children under 5 are exposed to PM 2.5 levels above guidelines by the World Health Organization on air quality.

Air pollution has now emerged as one of the leading threats to child health, accounting for almost 1 in 10 deaths in children below five. The report, **Air pollution and child health: prescribing clean air**, examines the heavy toll of both ambient and household air pollution on the health of children. It says that pregnant women exposed to polluted air are more likely to give birth prematurely. Air pollution also impacts neurodevelopment and cognitive ability and can trigger asthma, and childhood cancer along with chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life.

Air pollution in India is a serious health issue. Of the 30 most polluted cities in the world, 21 were in India in 2019. As per a study based on 2016 data, at least 140 million people in India breathe air that is 10 times or more over the WHO safe limit and 13 of the world's 20 cities with the highest annual levels of air pollution are in India. 51% of the pollution is caused by industrial pollution, 27 % by vehicles, 17% by crop burning and 5% by other sources. Air pollution contributes to the premature deaths of 2 million Indians every year. Emissions come from vehicles and industry, whereas in rural areas, much of the pollution stems from biomass burning for cooking and keeping warm. In autumn and spring months, large scale crop residue burning in agriculture fields-a cheaper alternative to mechanical tilling-is a major source of smoke, smog and particulate pollution. India has a low per capita emissions of greenhouse gases but the country as a whole is the third largest greenhouse gas producer after China and the United States. A 2013 study on non-smokers has found that Indians have 30% weaker lung function than Europeans

“Air pollution is stunting our children’s brains, affecting their health in more ways than we suspected. But there are many straight-forward ways to reduce emissions of dangerous pollutants,” says **Maria Neira, Director**, Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health at WHO.

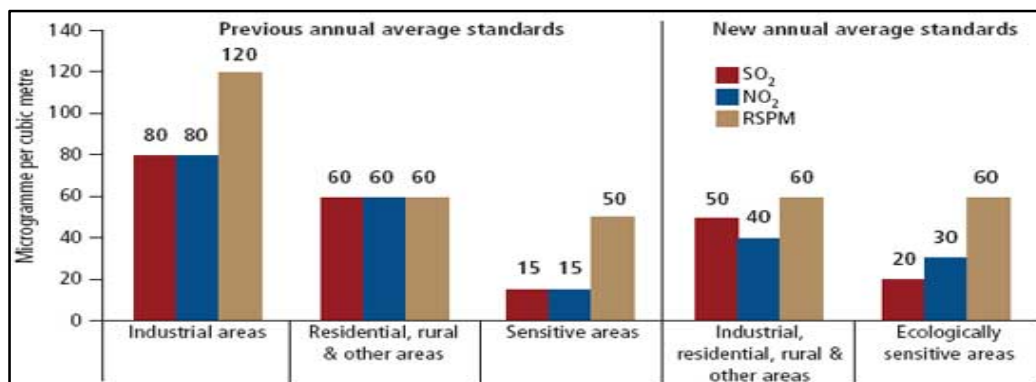


Global increase in trend of motor vehicles

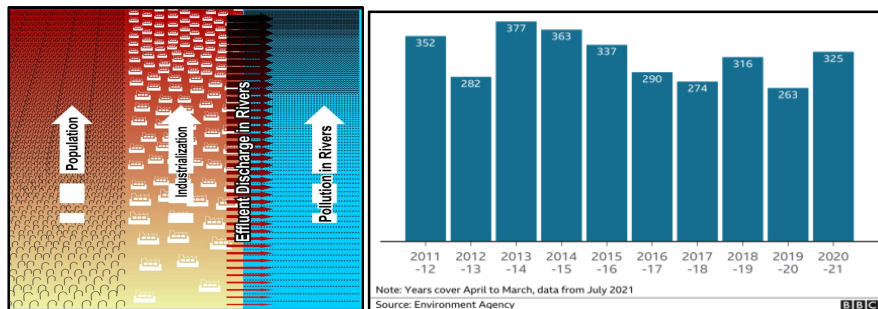
Are we destroying our environment?

We may not be doing it on purpose, but our presence is having a negative effect on our environment. The size of the human population has grown exponentially since we discovered a way to cure some of the most common diseases. With our population boom, we required more land, more water, more of everything.

- Forests have almost disappeared because we needed to clear them to plant more crops, to give animals a place to graze and to supply us with wood and other raw materials.
- Technology and Industry can be blamed too. Vehicle emissions, toxic waste, carbon emissions-all emit toxins into our atmosphere, causing air pollution. These are all by-products of our inventions and ingenuity. This is what's causing Global Warming.
- We didn't realize that the Earth's supply was not infinite. It can be depleted, and that's the state that it's in right now. We are using our natural resources faster than our planet can replenish them. Soon, we will have a shortage when the supply runs out.



A number of industrial locations across India critically polluted. These include industrial areas in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and other major cities; the cpcb monitors air quality of 341 locations in 128 cities. Many of these areas were considered only moderately or highly polluted under the previous standards. This may curb expansion of industries in critically polluted areas



If we have the power to cause all these degradation to our environment, we also have the power to correct it. Though it's a huge undertaking, we mustn't lose hope and just keep doing what we can. Governments, organizations and environmental groups are joining together to correct the mistakes that we have committed in the past. From your end, you can make a contribution too.

- Go Green. Buy products that are environment friendly.
- Don't forget to Reduce, Re-use and Recycle. We must stop our habit of wastage.
- Let people know. Share your views on the degradation that's happening and raise awareness. Every person you enlighten, counts.
- Report any kind of activity that degrades our environment such as dumping waste in water bodies, burning of plastic, improper disposal of garbage and the like.
- Plant trees wherever you can. More plants will mean more allies to absorb and deter the greenhouse effect.
- Do not buy products that are manufactured in ways that pollute and degrade the environment.

The effect of consumerism on our environment is a very serious problem that a few environmentalists have tried to fix. Of the three factors, often pointed by them, to be responsible for environmental pollution-population, technology, and consumption-consumption seems to get the least attention. One reason, no doubt, is that it may be the most difficult to change; our consumption patterns are so much a part of our lives that to change them would require a massive cultural overhaul. The real responsibility is up to us and if we do not take action quickly the future generations will get the punishment for our mistakes. We must keep in our mind that Happiness can't be purchased in the marketplace, no matter how much advertising tries to convince you of it. Market driven forces have usurped the role once assumed by family, home, common-sense and community. We have been programmed to believe that we should pursue more money to spend on more things offered in the marketplace, to be living mannequins for the material adornments of the hour, our worth determined by what we have or don't have, rather than what we **are**, what we **do** or what we know. We should always remember that **it is impossible to win a war against yourself or your uncontrolled desires.**

There are so many little things that we can do to save our planet, our environment, ourselves. We must understand and let other people understand that the survival of our future generation depends on what we do now. Do your share. No effort is ever too small. It is important that the planet's worsening environmental crisis is taken seriously and action is taken to make adequate change to prevent a looming ecological crisis within the next twenty years. A simpler, less polluting lifestyle will result in a more manageable, sustainable environment, which as a result can function better as a support structure for the planet's overall functioning

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