

# FUNCTIONALISM VERSUS CONSUMERISM DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE

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## Summary

There are hopeful signs that consumers are beginning to change their attitudes, so as to demand a quality of life less dependent on a lot of consumer products that are profligate with natural resources. They are beginning to demand more information so as to be able to function in ways that foster the planet's life support systems. This consumer interest is described, and the activities of consumer organizations to ameliorate resource depletion are mentioned. Lifestyles more in tune with the environment will be needed to adapt to change, and to use resources sparingly. Only appropriate innovation can meet this challenge, so factors that foster or inhibit innovation are examined. Resources that are common to all pose the most acute problems of depletion, so the better management of sea fisheries in the interest of consumers is considered in some detail. This is an

example both of what is desirable, and of what inhibits progress. The use of eco-taxes for influencing consumer behavior in the use of carbon fuels for energy is discussed. Poor nutrition and hunger are widespread, and certain to become more severe. The possible advantages and disadvantages of the new GM technologies are explored, as they may reduce hunger if safe for, and acceptable to, consumers. It is pointed out how the market mechanism, so efficient at providing for some needs of consumers, does not provide others so well. The increase in the total number of consumers, and a suggestion of how improvements in public health could be the only non-coercive way to alleviate the problem conclude the article.

## **1. Introduction**

Consumers interact with the life support systems on which they depend in complex ways, and have done so since humans evolved from their predecessors. For instance, the fauna of huge marsupials that lived in Australia died out when, and probably because, the earliest humans arrived and consumed them in a nonsustainable way. What is different in modern times is that the extinction of species is far more rapid, and that the loss of diversity is accelerating. The available knowledge of species interaction in human ecology cannot predict what ecological problems will follow for future consumers. It is less difficult, although far from easy, to estimate the effects of depleting finite resources. The principle of precaution, to err on the safe side, demands urgent actions by consumers to stabilize resource use, availability and regeneration. Only thus will consumers function effectively in the face of environmental change.

First, a few remarks about the terms used in this article. “Consumer” is not limited to people in their capacity as buyers of goods or services. It is taken to include people in their attempts to obtain their chosen quality of life. Everyone needs clean air, water and food and many want to enjoy an unpolluted countryside and the cultural heritage of their own and earlier generations. “Sustainable development” is a term mainly used by those concerned with the deterioration of the world’s environment that is caused by industry, and by the amount of farming needed by a growing population and the actions of consumers. The world’s finite natural resources are being depleted at an accelerating rate. Renewable resources are being used faster than can be replenished by nature. Pollution is damaging forests, lakes and the seas, and may be changing the atmosphere so that skin cancer will increase, and the climate change. Thus, the current pattern of economic development cannot be indefinitely sustained. The economy must in future pollute far less than it now does, and use resources far more sparingly. The question that must be faced is whether prudence and ingenuity are sufficient to achieve sustainable development; or whether people in richer countries, such as those of the US and the European Union (EU), must consume less than they now do. It is argued that consumers of the wealthy nations will have to accept a lower standard of living than they now enjoy. In democratic societies this will be difficult to achieve. It is certain, however, that what counts as a high standard of living will have to be measured less by the quantity of material goods. In the future a higher value will need to be placed on the arts, culture more generally, and sport. These can give consumer satisfaction without intensive use of resources. Knowledge-based industries are already growing at a revolutionary pace, and can be the basis for an alternative economy that should be beneficent to the environment at the start of the twenty-first century.

## 2. The Interaction between Consumers and their Life Support Systems

In so far as policies are able to encourage economic activity that is sustainable in the long term, this will be good for consumers. Environmentally aware consumers are increasingly concerned with the standard of living of their children, and their children's children, as well as of themselves. Given the complexity of the problem, there can be no simple solution. Any component of a solution demands serious consideration. For this reason a few examples will be examined to illustrate the range of action that will be needed. In each, time is of the essence. The saying "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The next best time is now" should be an inspiration.

The economic stability that depends on sustainable development is not a marketable commodity. If it were, people would pay a lot for it, as many do, for instance, for house insurance. There are many problems that stand in the way of achieving stability, some highly political, and difficult to resolve. It seems best if the UN, and national, regional and local governments take a broad view of problems that may hinder sustainable development. They can then concentrate their main efforts on those that are most important to consumers, and those that have better prospects for effective action by the global community than by the governments of member states acting individually. The solution to some problems may demand collaboration between economic associations of states, such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) or the EU, within the World Trade Organization (WTO), some in the OECD; and above all in the UN.

World food availability, particularly to poor consumers, is grossly inequitable. Malnutrition or even starvation is widespread, yet in North America and in Europe there is chronic overproduction. The European Common Agricultural Policy has been making inadequate attempts at cutting overproduction by setting aside land not needed for food as wasteland. This land should be used for other production that is needed in the region. For instance, the demand for hardwood has grown and will continue to grow. Its price has been lower than it would have been with sustainable production because supply has met demand by felling the standing crop of forests. Logging the tropical rainforests is squandering the future for present greed. As the resource is used up, there will be a worldwide shortage of hardwood and its price will rise sharply for consumers. Much temperate land not now needed for food should be planted as broadleaved forest, bringing back the oak, beech and maple that are the natural climax vegetation of in much of cultivated Europe and North America.

Fish stocks are overexploited because the size of the fleet worldwide is far too large for the stocks of fish available. This problem will be examined in some depth later. With good management more fish could be caught at a lower price to the consumer.

The customary taxes on labor tax something both abundant and renewable. Taxes on finite resources, on the other hand, would contribute to a sustainable future. A tax on carbon could be beneficial to the environment, and thus to consumers. It would improve the efficiency with which energy is used, and help to cut the production of greenhouse gases. This topic will also be examined later.

Consumers' organizations are attempting to inform and educate consumers about how to operate in a more sustainable way. People need reliable and independent information published, and summarized on an eco-label, about products they might buy. There is rather inconsistent pressure for more recycling and less packaging. Some packaging is needed, but much of it is a branch of the advertising industry that consumers could do without. More fundamentally, goods and services of all kinds could be designed from scratch with the impact on life support systems in mind.

For consumers to achieve a better balance between the exploitation of resources and the conservation of the systems that their lives need for support, among the first actions that should be taken by authorities at every level and by non-governmental voluntary associations are the following:

- to identify policy areas where the welfare of consumers depends on development being capable of being sustained in the long term;
- to organize collaborative working groups of experts in each area, leading to recommendations for cost-effective action by each authority; and
- to suggest priorities, encourage democratic pressure for them, and then act on them vigorously.

An example of a policy area that will be increasingly important in trying to achieve a sustainable system is the initiation of innovation. This has to be the basis for consumption that can be sustained into the future, and for substitution where resources become depleted.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**John Godfrey**, a member of the Consumer Committee of the UK's Food Standards Agency is Vice-Chairman of the Consumers in Europe Group and a Director of European Research into Consumer Affairs (ERICA). His main research has been on the ethology, genetics and evolution of populations of the rodent *Clethrionomys* in the universities of Oxford (where he was Royal Society's Stothert Research Fellow and lecturer at Brasenose College), and Edinburgh (where he was Lecturer in Zoology and then University Fellow). He worked on the genetic effects of ionizing radiation on populations of mice for the Medical Research Council. He is a Member of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, of the Consumer Panel of the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, of the Ionizing Radiations Advisory Committee of the Health and Safety Commission, of the Food Standards Agency's Stakeholder Group in its Review of BSE Controls, and of the European Commission's Advisory Committees on Fisheries and Aquaculture, and on Agricultural Product Health and Safety. He is Spokesman for Action Programme for the Citizens of Europe, founding member of the Permanent Forum for Civil Society, and on the committee of the Standing Conference on Food and Low Income. He jointly organized an EC-US conference on Biotechnology and the Food Supply for DG XII. He was a participant in the UK Foreign Office conferences: Sustainable Oceans in the Twenty First Century; Revision of the Common Agricultural Policy; Next Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations; Europe After 2000; Governance of the Oceans; Preparing for Earth Summit III; and Enlarging the European Union: How well are we preparing for a new Europe?, at the College of Europe, Warsaw. He lectured on GM foods and the consumer at Al-Balqua' University, Jordan, gave evidence to the House of Lords on the European Food Authority. His recent publications include contributions to the National Consumer Council's *Agricultural Policy, Production Systems and the Consumer Interest*, "BSE—where are we now?" in *Consumer Policy Review*, and *Europe for Everyone: the social dimension of the EU and the present Inter-Governmental Conference*, published by the Federal Trust, and short contributions in *Nature*, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Lancet*.