



World citizens?

HAVE YOU been feeling guilty about the rate at which you (or we) have been using up the limited resources of an all-too-finite planet? Perhaps the only good news is that it may be up to someone other than you and me to really pile on the damage over the next few years or decades.

That's not to say that we're about to go on an energy diet, you and I, or suddenly and completely reform our lavish lifestyle and wasteful ways. Rather, some of those who have envied the Western way of life for so long may finally get their own taste of the good life and their own shot at "conspicuous consumption."

"Business as usual" won't work for too much longer.

For most of the 20th century, the US used 30% of the world's resources with only 5% of its population. China has now caught up with us in total consumption and is

using twice as much steel and meat as we do, although the lifestyle of the vast majority of its citizens lags far behind ours. If their economy continues to expand at its present rate, in 25 years their projected population of almost 1.5 billion people would consume much more than we've ever come close to. Their paper consumption alone would almost double the world's current production. Better plant some more trees!

If the Chinese had three cars for every four people as we do, their 1.1 billion cars would be far more than the 800 million in the world today. Parking lots and roads for all those cars would cover more area than China now has planted in rice. The total world production of oil today would have to increase 20–25% just to supply China, although in reality it is unlikely to ever increase. But this is only part of the story.

In the same 25 years, India's population is expected to exceed even China's. And there will be even more people, maybe 3 billion more, in other developing countries with

the same aspirations of a better life, if not for themselves, then at least for their children.

So it's pretty obvious that "business as usual" won't work for too much longer. I think it's also obvious that we're unlikely to voluntarily go back to a pre-industrial lifestyle or give up much of what we feel we've "earned." But as more and more people compete in a world economy for resources that are stretched beyond their limits, conflicts are sure to intensify. If we allow scarcity-driven conflict to force change, the economic disruption will be enormous. In a world unable to supply the needs of its people, it's terribly counterproductive to waste resources on war and destroy assets that should be used to sustain all those in need. We must begin immediately to usher in changes in policy and lifestyle to reduce the severity of conflicts on the horizon.

A new economic model is clearly needed. The old model based on fossil fuels and disposability was okay for immediate gratification, but it will surely cause us to be cursed by future generations around the world. The new model must be based not only on a renewed commitment to conservation, but also on renewable energy sources, re-use, and recycling to a much greater degree. We need to rethink our transportation systems, as well. Parts of this model are in place, with Europe's wind farms supplying 40 million people. By 2020, it's expected that wind power will provide half of the residen-

tial electricity for 195 million Europeans. Experimental wave- and tide-driven power generation, Japan's solar-power boom, our hybrid car fleet, South Korea's re-forestation efforts, and the numerous cities developing bicycle-friendly infrastructure are all steps in the right direction. Admittedly, it'll take much more than these baby steps to get from where we are to where we've developed a way of living on this earth that's truly sustainable. But we don't need to know every step if we can see the direction in which we must head. What's important is that we take a step at a time, because inactivity is an untenable choice.

—Leon Buckwalter

Data source: Lester R. Brown, Scripps Howard News Service