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**Level:** Grades 8-12

**Length:** 2 Class Periods

**About the Author**

Adapted, with permission, from *Living in a Material World: Lessons on Commercialism, Consumption, and Environment*, © the Center for the Study of Commercialism, Washington, D.C.

**Lesson Plan**

**The Resource Racket: A Global Perspective on Resources and Consumption**

**Overview**

Students examine the material lives of families around the world, study inequities in the use of natural resources, and consider the environmental impacts of different consumption patterns.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students will recognize global inequities in consumption of the Earth's natural resources and understand how this affects our environment as well as the lives of people around the world.

**Preparation and Materials**

- Overheads *What Causes our Environmental Problems?* , and *Global Income Distribution*

Photocopies of:

- *Wasting Away: Natural Resources and the Environment*, 1 per student
- *Group Discussion Questions*, 1 per group
- *Family Profiles*, 1 set only, cut into sections
- *The Culture of Commercialism: A Critique*, 1 per student

**Procedure**

If possible, obtain a copy of the book *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* by Peter Menzel and keep it in the classroom, allowing students to browse through the book for a week or more before conducting this activity. The photographs in the book will enhance students' understanding of the activity. However, if the book is not available, the activity can be implemented effectively without it.

Explain that the class will be studying the lives of typical families in countries around the world. Be sure students understand that the families they will be studying are real families. Based on statistical data from the United Nations and other sources, each of these families represents an average family in their country, based on where the family lives (urban, rural, suburban, small town, village); the type of dwelling they live in; family size; annual income; occupation; and religion.

Divide the class into groups of three students.

- To each group, distribute a copy of the *Group Discussion Questions* and a *Family Profiles* selected from those provided. Permit time for students to discuss the questions and prepare their answers to share with the class as a whole. (Note: Cards are provided for 11 families/countries, so that the activity can be conducted in a large class with small groups each studying a different country. However, many other approaches could be utilized, including larger student groups or multiple cards per group. It is not necessary that all cards be used. Canadian educators might want to see if they can find Canadian statistics to create a Canadian Family profile.)
- Allow each group to make a brief presentation to the class, as described on the Group Discussions Questions handout.

Distribute the background reading *Wasting Away: Natural Resources and the Environment* and ask students to read it.

### **Guided Discussion**

Ask students to consider the following questions. (You might wish to conduct a discussion with the class as a whole; or ask students to write their responses as a homework assignment; or assign small groups specific questions to discuss and present to the class.)

- What are the essential needs of families everywhere? (Examples include clean water, adequate food, a home, warm clothes, access to medical care.)
- Of the families we studied, which spend their time and income primarily on essential needs? Which have more time and income to spend on other, nonessential items or activities?
- Once their basic needs are met, are most families satisfied with what they have, or do they usually want more?
- Does commercialism affect our desire for material goods? (Yes, commercialism stimulates artificial wants.)
- Do you think that American families are exposed to more or less commercialism than families in most other countries?
- How could commercialism affect the environment? (By stimulating increased consumption of material goods and thus increased consumption of natural resources and increased environmental impacts.)
- How might a high level of commercialism affect a country and its culture? (For answers to this question, read *The Culture of Commercialism: A Critique*.)

Present the overhead *What Causes our Environmental Problems?*

*Since mid-century, world population has doubled. Global economic output, which can be considered a measure of the amount of natural resources harvested and consumed, has increased fivefold. However, this increase in total consumption on a global level has not been linked with improved living conditions for most of the world's population. Statistics indicate that the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer.*

*These three factors - increased population, increased consumption, and greater disparity in distribution of income - are not independent but interrelated. (For example, population growth is greatest where poverty is greatest. In country after country, birth rates have decreased when health care, education, economic opportunity, and economic security were improved.)*

Present the overhead *Global Income Distribution*

*This table shows the distribution of global income, comparing the proportion of income received by the world's wealthiest and poorest people. In 1960, the richest 20% or one-fifth of the world's people received 70% of global income. In 1989, almost thirty years later, the richest fifth were receiving even more, almost 83% of global income. During the same time frame, the poorest fifth of the world's people experienced a decrease in the share of global income that they received, dropping from 2.3% to 1.4%. In 1960, the ratio of the amount of income received (and thus resources used) by the richest fifth compared to the poorest fifth was 30 to 1. By 1989 that disparity expanded to a ratio of almost 60 to 1.*

*Some experts consider this inequity to be at the root of many of our environmental problems. It leads to very high levels of consumption by those with the most of income and persistent poverty among those with the least income. Those who live at the ends of the income spectrum, rather than those in the middle of the spectrum, contribute the most to the world's environmental problems.*

*The world's wealthy impact the environment through consuming large amounts of natural resources (as energy, raw materials, and manufactured goods). The world's poor impact the environment through their daily struggle to survive. As they can give little attention to anything other than trying to meet their basic needs day by day, they are forced to cut their forests for firewood, grow crops on steep slopes, and graze cattle on already impoverished land.*

## **Conclusion**

Although the students clearly did not cause these problems, if they wish they can incorporate these concerns into their lives both now and as adults. Discuss:

- What advantages might there be to reducing the income disparity between the world's richest and poorest? *(Reduced human suffering; reduced environmental impacts of over consumption; reduced environmental impacts of the poor struggling to survive; world population growth slowed; also, as many wars are fought over land and natural resources, less war.)*
- How do these social inequities and environmental concerns relate to our own lives? *(On a personal level, through choices related to consumption and charitable giving.)*
- How do they relate to our society as a whole? *(To political and economic policies in many areas.)*
- Which of the world's citizens are best able to contribute to balancing the income inequity? *(The richest 20%, which includes almost all Americans and Canadians.)*

- For most North American families, would consuming less mean living in poverty? (*No. It would mean giving up luxuries that many families in other countries never dream of.*)
- Do you think that most Americans could still be happy if they consumed less? (*Yes. The per capita income of Americans more than doubled from the 1950s to 1990s. Throughout these decades, surveys showed that the percentage of Americans who considered themselves happy did not increase but remained essentially the same.*)

## **Variations / Extensions**

### **Activity One**

Assign an estimated numeric value to represent the impact that a person in each country has on the environment. (Ehrlich and Ehrlich have estimated that the per capita environmental impact of the U.S. population is one and one-half times that of Russia; twice that of Britain, Sweden, France, or Australia; 14 times that of China; 40 times that of India; and almost 300 times that of Laos or Uganda.) Then multiply the impact per person values by the population of each country to project the total estimated environmental impact of all the people of that country. Discuss the concept that both impact per person and number of people determine total environmental impact. Or study the work of Rees and Wackernagel, who have calculated per capita impact in terms of an "ecological footprint," defined as the amount of land necessary to support a person at a given level or in a given country.

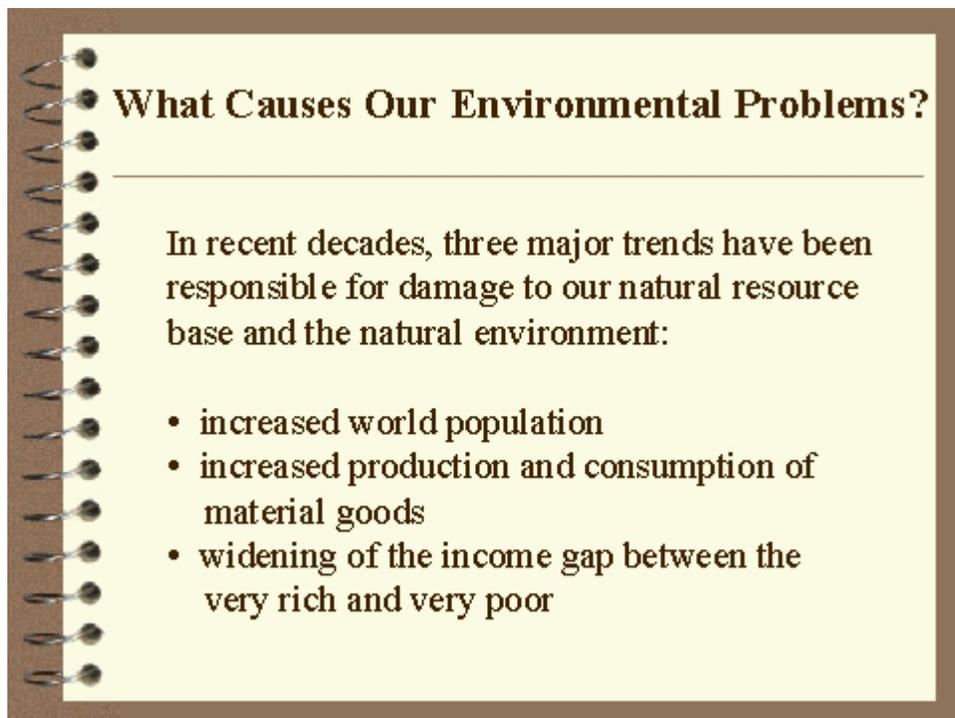
Expand the discussion to include one or more of these points: Natural resources form the basis for every economy. Long-term economic prosperity depends on the availability and responsible use of resources. The availability of natural resources influences the political strength and international influence of nations. The history and even the demise of many civilizations has been determined by the use or misuse of environment and resources.

### **Activity Two**

Have students read and respond to Michael F. Jacobson's essay *The Culture of Commercialism: A Critique*.

**Sources: Brown et. al.; Durning, A.; Ehrlich & Ehrlich; Menzel, P.; Rees & Wackernagel; World Population; and World Resources.**

## **What Causes Our Environmental Problems?**



**What Causes Our Environmental Problems?**

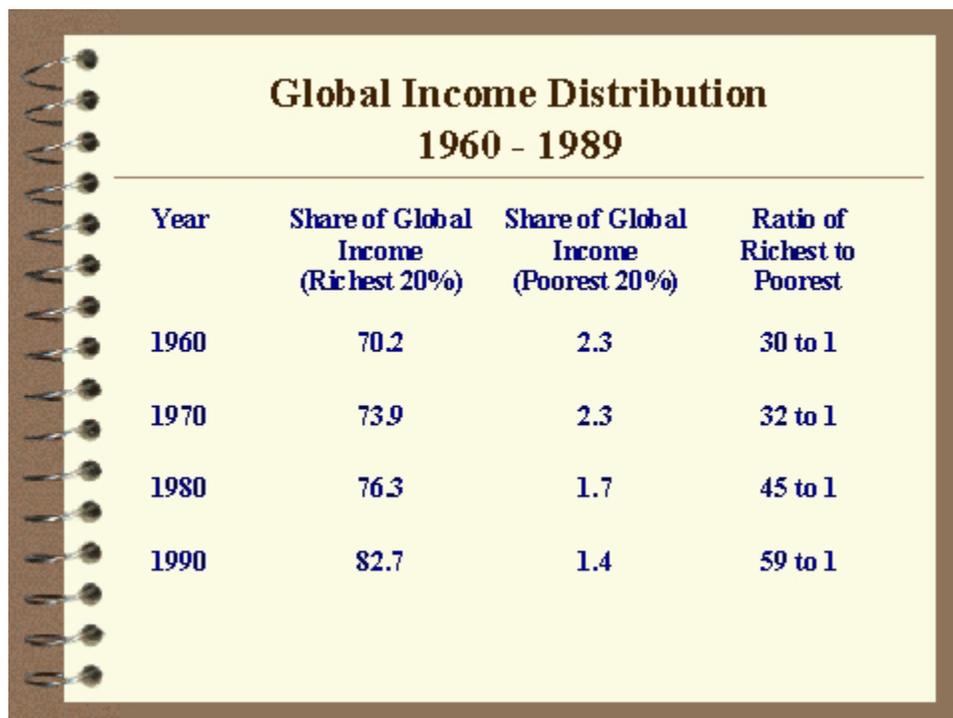
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In recent decades, three major trends have been responsible for damage to our natural resource base and the natural environment:

- increased world population
- increased production and consumption of material goods
- widening of the income gap between the very rich and very poor

Overhead # 2

## Global Income Distribution 1960 - 1989



The image shows a spiral-bound notebook with a yellow page. The page is titled "Global Income Distribution 1960 - 1989" and contains a table with four columns: Year, Share of Global Income (Richest 20%), Share of Global Income (Poorest 20%), and Ratio of Richest to Poorest. The data shows a clear trend of increasing income inequality over the period.

Year	Share of Global Income (Richest 20%)	Share of Global Income (Poorest 20%)	Ratio of Richest to Poorest
1960	70.2	2.3	30 to 1
1970	73.9	2.3	32 to 1
1980	76.3	1.7	45 to 1
1990	82.7	1.4	59 to 1

## **Wasting Away: Natural Resources and the Environment**

We are totally dependent on natural resources. Everything we have or use is made of natural resources, or raw materials and energy obtained from the environment. The clothes you're wearing, the chair you're sitting on, your house and TV and school and books, the school bus, city streets, whatever you ate for breakfast, and the package your breakfast came in are made of natural resources. Natural resources sustain human life.

Non-renewable resources include oil and gas, soil and water, and minerals like iron and aluminium. They are found in strictly limited quantities on our planet and are not replenished by natural processes (except in geological time frames of millions of years). Renewable natural resources include things like trees which can be replenished or will grow again. However, even these are available in finite quantities. Trees, for example, can only grow so fast. Sunlight and wind are the only natural resources available in essentially limitless amounts. And, although it's not the kind of "event" that makes front-page news, many scientists think that depletion of natural resources is one of the biggest problems our society will face in the twenty-first century.

Our use of natural resources affects the environment in many ways. Our use of natural resources has impacts that go far beyond simply using materials that are in limited supply. The environment is affected at every stage of the chain of extraction-processing-manufacturing-marketing-consumption-disposal.

The harvesting of raw natural resources directly impacts the environment through mining, timber cutting, construction of dams, and the like. Then the raw materials must be made into a usable form, such as metallic ores into more pure metals. This is an energy-intensive process that typically results in air and water pollution as well as unwanted or even toxic by-products. Next, to produce specific consumer products like clothes, camcorders, or skateboards, further manufacturing processes are needed. These manufacturing processes also use energy and often generate pollution. Then the final consumer products need to be transported and stored, which again involves additional inputs of energy and materials and has further environmental impacts.

Finally, the products must be packaged and marketed to us, the public. This involves still more natural resource use and more environmental impacts related to packaging materials, billboards, print ads, and so on. Packaging and advertising contribute significantly to the cost of a product and to its overall environmental impact as well. In the United States, discarded packaging materials alone account for about 35% of household trash. Print advertising in catalogues, fliers, magazines, and newspapers also contributes significantly to household trash.

When we actually purchase an end product, is the chain of impact finally complete? Not yet! If using the product we have bought requires gasoline, batteries, or electricity, the production and use of these generates more pollution.

At some point, whatever the item - be it a few ounces of packaging that holds a fast-food meal for two minutes, or a two-ton automobile that lasts for years - we throw it away. But really, there is no "away." Something must be done with the stuff we no

longer want. That can cause problems. A lot of our trash is just plain dangerous. Even common household products like paint, batteries, and cleaning supplies are often toxic. Also, the sheer volume of trash we produce is a problem in itself.

In some parts of the U.S., trash is incinerated or burned. Incineration produces air pollution, and the ash left behind is toxic. In other areas, trash is buried in landfills. That has problems, too. Landfills require huge tracts of land. Pollution problems often develop around older landfills. Newer landfills are built to stricter health and environmental standards. However, both landfills and incinerator ash must be carefully monitored for hundreds of years into the future.

How much is enough? Of course, some products we buy are necessary to our health and well-being, or improve the quality of our lives. We need clothes and stoves and so on. And who would want to give up books and music and other things that enrich our lives? The question of concern is, at what level of consumption are we using up our natural resources and our environment for things that we don't need and that don't really enhance our lives?

The developed countries of the world hold 25% of the world's population, but consume 75% of all energy, 85% of all wood products, and 72% of all steel produced.

Americans consume the most of all, even more than people in other developed countries. For example, we consume about twice as much energy per person as the British, French, Swedes, Norwegians, or Japanese. Our consumption of other resources is also high. In fact, from 1940 to 1976, Americans consumed more minerals than did all of humanity up to then. And our consumption rate for most resources is still rising.

Commercialism impacts the environment. Our consumption rate reflects the level of commercialism in our culture. Over the last few decades, advertising has gradually helped convince us to make changes in our lives. Ads surround us. They encourage us to want more and buy more, often regardless of our true needs. Commercialism stimulates artificial wants, and satisfying these wants means consuming more material goods and thus increases resource consumption and environmental impacts.

Ads suggest that we should want things that are newer, faster, fancier, more fashionable, a different colour, larger or smaller, just like what everyone else has or different from what everyone else has. This *perceived obsolescence* is used to stimulate us to buy more. The classic example of perceived obsolescence is fashions in clothing. The same approach is used when makers of computers, stereos, cars, and other products tempt us with new products even though the older versions serve our needs well. A related approach, *planned obsolescence* is used by makers of other products. For example, some toys, equipment, calculators, small appliances, and other items are built to last only a short while. When broken, these items are not able to be repaired but must be replaced. Finally, purveyors of fast food and prepared foods tell us that life will be easier and more fun if we eat their highly processed and packaged foods.

A healthy environment and a supply of natural resources are basic to our well-being. The basic premise of almost all ads is that we will be happier if we have *this*, too. Companies with products for sale would like us to believe that, since their profits increase when we buy their products. Yet our well being and happiness are not necessarily dependent on having more and more and more material goods. Our long-

term health, happiness, and well-being *are* dependent on a healthy environment, as well as on our relationships with family and friends.

Does commercialism foster a culture of waste - a culture in which we are encouraged to make choices that are fundamentally at odds with our need to conserve natural resources and care for the environment? It seems that the typical American lifestyle involves always wanting more. When we live in highly consumptive lifestyle, we use more resources and create more pollution. Many environmental problems are tied to our rate of consumption of material goods and thus of natural resources. The most basic method of caring for our environment is to conserve natural resources and use them wisely.

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## Resource Racket: Group Discussion Questions

**A.** Review the information on the family assigned to your group, including their lives in general as well as their annual per capita income and the percentage of their income used to purchase food. Then discuss these questions in relation to each item on the *Potential Purchases* list:

- Do you think that having this item would be very meaningful or important to the family? Why or why not?
- Do you think that advertising and commercialism are likely to be significant influences on the family's desire for this item? Why or why not?
- Is it very likely that the family would purchase this item? Why or why not?

### Potential Purchases:

- TV video game(Does the family have electricity? A television? Do you think they've ever seen a good video game before?)
- rice and beans(In most cultures, grains and legumes are the foundation of the traditional diet. They're cheap, tasty and healthy.)
- car or truck(Personal vehicles are expensive to own and operate. For the average American family, transportation is the second largest expense, after housing.)
- new cook pot or other kitchen item(Does the family cook on a wood fire or in a microwave? What new kitchen item do you think they would need or want?)
- shoes(What type of shoes and what features, such as durability or brand name, might be important to members of this family?)
- canned soft drinks(Canned sodas have no nutritional value and a large portion of their cost is packaging.)

**B.** Plan a brief presentation for the class. Include an overview of the family you studied. Select three or four items from the *Potential Purchases* list to focus your presentation on, choosing times that will give other students insight into the family's circumstances.

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## **The Resource Racket: *Family Profiles***

### **UNITED STATES**

Population: 263.1 million  
Population per physician: 630  
Literacy rate: female - 95%; male - 96%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 9

### **The Skeen Family**

Size of family: 4  
Size of home: 1600 sq. ft.

Workweek:  
father - 40 hours  
mother - 20 hours, plus housework  
Per person income: \$22, 356  
Percentage of income spent on food: 9%

Although the Skeen family has never been robbed, their precautions against crime include locked doors, a home alarm system, carrying Mace, and using a lock bar for their car steering wheel.

#### **Number of:**

radios - 3  
stereos - 3  
telephones - 5  
televisions - 2  
VCRs - 1  
computers - 1  
bicycles - 4  
automobiles - 3

#### **Most valued possession:**

Bible (father and mother)

**Wishes for the future:** tools, new carpet, camping trailer

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### **MEXICO**

Population: 93.7 million  
Population per physician: 1,001  
Literacy rate: female - 85%; male 90%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 51

## **The Castillo Balderas Family**

Size of family: 6

Size of home: 700 sq. ft.

Workweek:

father - 36 hours salaried, plus freelance welding

mother - 60 hours, in home

Per person income: \$2,971

Percentage of income spent on food: 57%

Percentage of income spent on clothing : 28 %

Their neighbourhood was once a squatter's camp, in which permanent homes were gradually built by residents who acquired established jobs. Because of this, the Castillo Balderas family water supply is a garden hose that brings water several hundred yard from a water main to the courtyard of their home.

### **Number of:**

stereos - 2

telephones - 0

televisions - 1

VCRs - 1

bicycles - 3

automobiles - 0

### **Most valued possessions:**

television (family as a whole)

stereo (father)

Bible (mother)

bicycle (first son)

### **Wishes for the future:**

truck

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## **MALI**

Population: 10.8 million

Population per physician: 19, 450

Literacy rate: female - 24% male - 41%

Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 162

## **The Natomo Family**

Size of family: 11

Size of home: 990 sq. ft. (two units)

Workweek:

father - 112 hours

mother -112 hours (all in the home)  
Per person income: \$251  
Percentage of income spent on food: 57%

The Natomo family's daily life includes carrying water from a communal well, bathing from a bucket, pounding grain to make flour, and cooking over an open fire. Mr. Natomo enjoys listening to soccer games on the family radio.

**Number of:**

radios - 1  
telephones - 0  
televisions - 0  
VCRs - 0  
bicycles - 1  
automobiles - 0

**Most valued possession:**

bicycle (father)

**Wishes for the future:**

irrigation system, motorcycle,  
a wall to enclose their garden

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## **VIETNAM**

Population: 73.8 million  
Population per physician: 2857  
Literacy rate: female - 84%; male 92%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 165

### **The Nguyen Family**

Size of family: 5  
Size of home: 860 sq. ft.

**Workweek:**

father & mother -119 hours  
(17 hours per day, no  
holidays)  
Per person income: \$215  
Percentage of income spent on food: 55%

The Nguyen family lives on a communal farm that grows, harvests, and polishes rice. Their television is shared with about 15 relatives. They have no means of waste disposal, as the family throws nothing away.

**Number of:**

radios - 0  
telephones - 0

televisions - 1 ( shared)  
VCRs - 0  
bicycles - 2  
automobiles - 0

**Most valued possession:**

house (father)  
Children's health (mother)

**Wishes for the future:**

their own TV, radio, new  
beds, a motorcycle

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## **GERMANY**

Population: 81.3 million  
Population per physician: 370  
Literacy rate: not available  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 14

### **The Pfitzner Family**

Size of family: 4  
Size of home: 925 sq. ft.

**Workweek:**

father - 40 hours  
mother - 50 hours, all at home  
Per person income: \$19204  
Percentage of income spent on food: 40%

The lives of the Pfitzner family are in many ways much like those of an average family in the U.S., and they family's home, appliances, and toys are much like ours.

**Number of:**

radios - 3  
tape recorders - 1  
televisions - 1  
VCRs - 1  
video cameras -1  
motorcycles - 1  
automobiles - 1

**Most valued possessions:**

family memorabilia (parents)

**Wishes for the future:**

new refrigerator, house in the  
country, cleaner environment

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## **GUATEMALA**

Population: 10.6 million  
Population per physician: 2,256  
Literacy rate: female - 66%; male - 61%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 114

### **The Calabay Sicay Family**

Size of family: 5  
Size of home: 316 sq. ft.

Workweek:  
father - 60 hours  
mother - "constantly"  
Per person income: \$944  
Percentage of income spent on food: 66%

The Calabay Sicays are a Mayan family who have never been more than 30 miles from their home. They garden, catch fish in the nearby lake, and weave cloth from which they make most of their won clothes, blankets, and carrying bags.

#### **Number of:**

radios - 1  
telephones - 0  
televisions - 0  
automobiles - 0

#### **Most valued possessions:**

portable cassette player (father)  
religious painting, Bible (mother)  
dolls (daughters)  
soccer ball (son)

#### **Wishes for the future:**

"to stay alive" also television,  
pots and pan, kitchen table

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## **ALBANIA**

Population: 3.4 million  
Population per physician: 719  
Literacy rate: 99%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 103

## **The Cakoni Family**

Size of family: 6  
Size of home: 432 sq. ft.

Workweek:  
father - 84 hours  
mother - 21- 28 hours per week  
Per person income: \$1,200  
Percentage of income spent on food: 100%

The Cakoni family cooks in pots made from large tin cans, with wire handles. Their water supply is a daily 40 minute donkey ride. The children walk three hours round trip to school each day. On television, they watch programs from neighbouring Italy, a much more affluent nation.

### **Number of:**

radios - 1  
telephones - 0  
televisions - 1  
VCRs - 0  
bicycles - 0  
automobiles - 0

### **Most valued possessions:**

TV (for all)

### **Wishes for the future:**

(not stated)

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## **SOUTH AFRICA**

Population: 42.7 million  
Population per physician: 1640  
Literacy rate: not available  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 58

## **The Qampie Family**

Size of family: 7  
Size of home: 400 sq. ft.

Workweek:  
father - 40 hours  
mother - 10 hours plus housework  
Per person income: \$2,543  
Percentage of income spent on food: 34%

The township in which the Qampie family lives is permeated by violence. By 8:00 p.m., the family stops venturing outside, even to their backyard outhouse. They close up the house and lock it up tight, although this makes it sweltering hot inside.

**Number of:**

radios - 1  
telephones - 1 (broken)  
televisions - 1  
VCRs - 0  
automobiles - 0

**Most valued possessions:**

(not stated)

**Wishes for the future:**

typewriter, computer  
(children)  
house, car (parents)

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## **CHINA**

Population: 1,238.3 million  
Population per physician: 730  
Literacy rate: female - 62%; male - 84%  
Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 149

### **The Wu Family**

Size of family: 9  
Size of home: 600 sq. ft.

Workweek:  
all adults - 60 hours  
Per person income: \$364  
Percentage of income spent on food: 60%

The Wu family includes the grandparents, their two sons ages 25 and 30, and the sons' wives and children. In a pond beside the house, the family raises fish to eat and sell. Clothes are washed in a nearby stream. Each night, the family watches two to four hours of television together.

**Number of:**

radios - 2  
portable cassette players - 2  
telephones - 0  
televisions - 1  
automobiles - 0

**Most valued possessions:**

TV (parents, first son)  
bicycle (second son)

**Wishes for the future:**

TV with 30" screen, VCR,  
refrigerator, more tools

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**RUSSIA**

Population: 149.7 million

Population per physician: 210

Literacy rate: 99%

Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 48

**The Kapralov Family**

Size of family: 3

Size of home: 1500 sq. ft.

Workweek:

father - (deceased)

mother - 42 hours plus

housework

Per person income: \$3,469

Percentage of income spent on food: 60%

Although Mr. Kapralov was recently killed by thieves, the rest of the family must continue their lives. The children play in the snow, take music lessons, and play chess and other games.

**Number of:**

radios - 2

stereos - 1

telephones - 2

televisions - 2

VCRs - 0

automobiles - 1 (broken)

**Most valued possessions:**

domra - a musical  
instrument (mother)

Video games, books, stuffed  
animal, Barbie doll (daughters)

**Wishes for the future:**

to repair the family car so that  
it can be used

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**KUWAIT**

Population: 1.2 million

Population per physician: 238

Literacy rate: female - 67%; male 77%

Rank of affluence among United Nations members: 21

**The Abdulla Family**

Size of family: 7

Size of home: 4850 sq. ft.

Workweek:

father - 50 hours

first daughter - 60 hours

second daughter - 45 hours

Per person income: \$16,380\*

Percentage of income spent on food: 29%

Its petroleum reserves have made Kuwait one of the richest nations on Earth. As his children in their teens and 20's watch MTV on the satellite dish, shop at the mall, and cruise the freeways talking on their cellular phones, Mr. Abdulla worries that Kuwait has become such a consumption-oriented society.

**Number of:**

radios - 4

telephones - 5

televisions - 2

VCRs - 2

computers - 1

automobiles - 4

**Most valued possessions:**

(not stated)

**Wishes for the future:**

fishing boat,

more income,

more vacation

time

*\* Income figure includes "guest-workers" of other nationalities, many of whom are servants for Kuwaitis, such as the two live-in servants who work for the Abdullas.*

## **The Culture of Commercialism: A Critique**

### **Are we immune to commercialism?**

Each of us would like to believe that we're immune to the effects of advertising and commercialism. Maybe other people are affected by ads, but we ourselves are too smart, too savvy.

Yet are we really immune? A lot of evidence suggests that we are influenced. Think about the nationally-advertised products we buy, the style of our clothes, the kinds of food we eat, the attention we give to our appearance, and our encyclopedic knowledge of brand names. In these ways and others, our lives reflect the ads around us.

Over the years, the sophistication of marketing has increased a great deal. The messages that encourage us to buy are designed by creative, talented people. Modern scientific knowledge of human psychology and of how the brain processes visual information is used in developing ads. An array of technical equipment and resources is also used. Ads talk to our conscious, rational mind and to our subconscious fears and desires.

Of course, no one would advocate a ban on marketing. Ads provide information that can be helpful to us as consumers. Ads increase our understanding of the product choices available to us. And in an economy based on free enterprise, ads play a vital role for the business community. Ads are a valid part of modern life.

Some people are concerned about all the advertising we're exposed to. They feel that the constant message to buy influences us in ways that are not to our benefit. One concern is that the message to buy overshadows other messages about helping each other, caring for our environment, and contributing to community.

What follows is a summary of concerns about the influence of commercialism in our lives. The information is not presented as an objective argument on the pros and cons of commercialism. In fact, this list and essay were put together by an organization that works to fight commercialism. Do you think these concerns are valid? Why or why not?

### **What are the effects of advertising and commercialism?**

1. Commercialism distorts our culture by turning every event into a reason to consume. Anthropologists say that holidays reflect a culture's values. In America, every holiday is a sales event.
2. Advertising projects false images. For example, some ads imply that you're not cool unless you drive an expensive car, that smoking means you're an independent spirit, or that to be mature means drinking alcohol.

3. Commercialism contributes to environmental problems by encouraging wasteful use of natural resources. Over-packaging, disposable goods, and buying things we don't really need all contribute to unnecessary use of limited resources. The manufacture and disposal of the things we buy cause other environmental problems, including habitat loss and increased air and water pollution. Billboards cause visual pollution.
4. Advertising perpetuates stereotypes. Examples include stereotypes related to race (African-Americans as musicians and athletes), gender (women as sex objects, men as business people), and class (middle-class whites as the social norm).
5. Advertisers influence the content of publications and broadcasts. Government censorship of the media is illegal. Yet it is well documented that newspapers and other media are censored by advertisers. For example, a beer producer may pressure a magazine in which it buys ad space not to print articles on the dangers of drinking.
6. Corporate sponsorship of civic, environmental, or other non-profit groups may influence those groups. For example, tobacco industry contributions may discourage an organization from joining anti-smoking campaigns.
7. Commercialism has influenced our political process. Many politicians try to attract votes with an image created by advertising and media coverage. In the past, candidates tried to attract votes by their stand on the issues.
8. The public's perception of a company's activities and priorities can be distorted by image advertising. For example, ads can portray major polluters as environmentally conscious companies that give to worthy causes.
9. Advertising costs us money. Businesses pass many of their advertising costs on to us. Also, the price of a product increases when ads successfully cultivate the idea that a certain product can give us status or a cool image.
10. Ads cost us more in taxes, too. Advertising is a fully tax-deductible business expense. Because of this, state and federal treasuries receive billions of dollars less in business taxes each year. Tax rates for citizens must make up for this, so individual taxpayers indirectly subsidize advertising.
11. Ads can be misleading. They emphasize the benefits of products and services and ignore the drawbacks.
12. Ads encourage a brand-name mentality, or buying on the basis of the maker rather than quality or price.
13. Advertising fosters dissatisfaction, envy, and insecurity. It can make us feel unattractive, uncool, and unhappy with what we do or don't have.

14. Our commercialized society places a strong emphasis on appearance, encouraging us to care about our own and others' appearances rather than about characters, talents, and personalities.
15. Constant exposure to ads may encourage materialism and selfishness. This may make people less inclined to help others. Statistics show that giving to charitable causes has decreased in recent years. Similarly, there has been a decline in public support for government programs to aid the least fortunate members of our society.
16. Corporate sponsorship may influence content and undermine the objectivity of exhibits at science and art museums. For example, is an exhibit sponsored by a company that makes insecticides likely to examine human/insect relationships in a fair and balanced way?
17. Ads take a lot of our time. The average person spends almost an hour a day reading, watching, or listening to ads through TV, radio, theaters, videotapes, newspapers, magazines, mail, or telephone. By the time the average American is seventy-five years old, advertising will have taken four years of his or her life.
18. Paid product placements influence the content of movies, TV shows, books, and board games. This compromises artistic integrity.
19. Advertising promotes alcohol and tobacco use, which kill half a million Americans annually. Problems related to alcohol hurt more people's lives and cost society more money than all illegal drugs combined.
20. Marketers compile detailed electronic portraits of shoppers. Companies sell mailing lists for everything from foreign car ownership to sexual preference. These computer databases present a staggering potential for abuse.
21. Commercialism has spread into almost every aspect of life. Being unable to escape it is annoying to many.
22. Advertising aimed at young children intrudes on the parent-child relationship, can undermine parental authority, and can create friction in the home.
23. Commercialism may erode values - such as sharing, co-operation, and frugality - fostered by families, religious institutions, and schools.
24. Commercial foods and the ads for them tend to encourage unhealthy eating habits.
25. Commercialization of school materials and equipment may undermine objective, unbiased education.

26. Heavy promotion of shopping and buying distracts us from other activities such as reading, thinking, and playing. All the ads we're exposed to make it easy to forget how many different kinds of activities we enjoy.
27. Our commercialized culture encourages people to spend money that they don't really have. The number of Americans with financial problems has increased steadily in recent years.
28. Advertising implies that there's an easy solution to everything, from being healthy to having friends.
29. Many ads imply, even if they don't say outright, that happiness is something we can buy. When we act as though this is true, our personal horizons and ability to find fulfillment in life are limited.
30. Commercialism does not just promote specific products. It promotes consumption as a way of life.

**What is the cumulative effect of all this commercialism?**

Commercialism has clear parallels with industrial pollution. Just as modest amounts of waste can be absorbed by the natural environment, so modest amounts of commercialism can be assimilated by our cultural environment. Large amounts, however, can totally overwhelm either environment, and such is the case today.

For decades we failed to recognize, let alone control, the harm caused by industrial practices. In some cases, such as air pollution from coal-burning furnaces, the problems were obvious but were either ignored or justified on the basis of short-term economic gain. In other cases, such as toxic chemicals that pollute the air and water, the dangers were not even recognized. So it is with commercialism: We excuse its obvious defects in the name of economic progress; we don't even try to identify more subtle effects.

Again as with pollution several decades ago, the consequences of excessive commercialism remain unexamined and unproven. Our understanding rests on a handful of often preliminary or inconclusive academic studies. The fact is that, despite the dominance of commercialism in our culture, social scientists have barely begun to explore its nature and its consequences. Moreover, government regulatory programs are inadequate to contain commercialism. Agencies that focus on deceptive advertising have such small budgets - totalling only about one thousandth as much as what is spent on advertising - that only the most blatantly dishonest advertising can be stopped. Other forms of commercialism go completely unexamined.

What, then, is the impact on our society, when, as *Advertising Age* [a technical journal for people who work in the advertising industry] wrote, "mass-media advertising explodes out of a shotgun and sprays everyone in its path, kids included"? Andy beyond advertising, what are the effects of living in a culture where even schools, museums, sports and non-commercial broadcasters have been commercialized? Does commercialism turn engaged citizens into mere consumers?

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