

Some convenient truths

Scaling back our energy-hungry lifestyles means more of what matters, not less

This is a guest essay by Robert Costanza, Susan Joy Hassol, Tim Kasser, and James Gustave Speth. Author affiliations at end of piece.

The work of recent Nobel Peace Prize winners Al Gore and the IPCC, along with a veritable mountain of other evidence, clearly lays out the reality and potential costs of human-induced climate change. Most analyses have concluded that we can and must keep our economies growing while addressing the climate challenge; we need only reduce the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases we produce. We can do this, they say, by using more efficient light bulbs, driving more fuel-efficient cars, better insulating our homes, buying windmills and solar panels, etc. While we agree that these things need to happen (and the sooner the better), it is clear that they will not be enough to solve the big problems the world faces.

The inconvenient truth is that to ensure quality of life for future generations, the world's wealthiest societies cannot continue our current lifestyles and patterns of economic growth. Further, the large proportion of humanity living in poverty must be able to satisfy basic human needs without aspiring to an overly materialistic lifestyle.

Does this inconvenient truth mean doom and despair? Absolutely not. Indeed, we think this seemingly inconvenient truth is actually a blessing in disguise, for our high-consuming lifestyles and western patterns of economic growth are not actually improving our well-being: they are not only unsustainable, they are undesirable.

Scientists are discovering a *convenient* truth: **our happiness does not depend on the consumption of conventional economic goods and services, but instead is enhanced when we have more time and space for socializing, for nature, for learning, and for really *living* instead of just consuming.**

For example, University of Southern California economist Richard Easterlin has demonstrated that well-being tends to correlate well with health, level

of education, and marital status, but with income only to a fairly low threshold. He concludes that "a reallocation of time in favor of family life and health would, on average, increase individual happiness."

Cornell economist Robert Frank, in his 2000 book Luxury Fever, similarly concludes that overall national well-being would be higher if we consumed less and spent more time with family and friends, working for our communities, maintaining our physical and mental health, and enjoying the benefits of nature.

And British economist Richard Layard's 2005 book Happiness: lessons from a new science echoes many of these ideas and concludes that current economic policies are not improving happiness and that **"happiness should become the goal of policy, and the progress of national happiness should be measured and analyzed as closely as the growth of GNP."** The country of Bhutan now uses "Gross National Happiness" as its explicit policy goal.

Other research demonstrates that when people "buy into" the materialistic messages of consumer society, they report lower levels of life satisfaction, more depression and anxiety, and more physical health problems. What's more, one study in the UK suggests that people with lifestyles that require high ecological inputs are no happier than those with more sustainable lifestyles, and another in the U.S. suggests that happy people live in more ecologically responsible ways.

Although consuming the Earth's resources doesn't seem to make us happy, there is substantial and growing evidence that **intact nature contributes heavily to human well-being**. The annual, non-market value of the services that natural ecosystems provide to humanity (like purifying air and water) has been estimated to be substantially larger than global GDP.

These convenient truths mean that we can solve the problems of climate change and create a sustainable and more desirable future. But to do so we must give up the false connection between material consumption and well-being. **We must refocus our policy goals on quality of life (all life) rather than quantity of consumption.** This is not a sacrifice. On the contrary, failure to do so is the real sacrifice, not only of our own happiness, but that of our progeny.

These convenient truths are thus prescriptions not for *less*, but for ways we can have *more* of the things that really matter.

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*Posted online at Gristmill – A blogful of leafy green commentary. Grist – Environmental News & Commentary. Located at the following URL:
<http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2007/12/7/171425/969>*