

Environmental Watch

Examining Environmental Claims and Their Costs • May-June 2009

King County “EcoConsumer” Advice: Bad for Consumers and the Environment

by Todd Myers

Claim

“Transportation of food requires copious amounts of fossil fuels and other resources that contribute to global warming and pollution, so the lower the food mileage we rack up, the better.”

King County EcoConsumer column, Seattle Times, April 19, 2009

“Reducing the consumption of wasteful and unneeded products would likely result in job losses in certain sectors here and around the world. The hope is that those workers could shift to equal or better green jobs, and that new employment opportunities would arise locally. From recycling processing plants to university science labs, jobs should grow organically out of the new green economy.”

King County EcoConsumer column, Seattle Times, April 25, 2009

“Free trade usually means reducing trade restrictions among nations. This can result in companies continually moving production to countries with cheap labor and lax environmental regulations. It may also hurt workers in developing nations when products from other countries flood the marketplace. Fair trade, on the other hand, seeks to pay workers reasonable wages while also setting standards for worker safety and environmental protection.”

King County EcoConsumer column, Seattle Times, May 9, 2009

“Many trees used for tissue products do grow on tree farms, and lumber by-products such as wood chips may be reclaimed for tissue. But some trees from old-growth forests still end up in a product we use for five seconds and then flush down the toilet.”

King County EcoConsumer column, Seattle Times, June 6, 2009

Facts

Every other week, King County Recycling and Environmental Services publishes a column in the *Seattle Times*, which provides advice to “ecoconsumers,” helping them make more environmentally friendly buying decisions. The columns, written by taxpayer-funded, county employees, are filled with scientific and economic inaccuracies, as well as simple factual errors.

Instead of providing useful information, the columns too often rely on eco-fads and encourage consumers to take steps that are either ineffective or, in fact, counterproductive. There are a number of options available for those who want to spend a little more to reduce environmental impact. The wealth of disposable income that we enjoy can be used to buy products that reduce environmental impact. But consumers should be given good information to ensure that they are making purchases that have a truly beneficial impact instead of sounding good but providing little environmental benefit.

The False Calculus of Food Miles

With a growing concern about CO₂ emissions, especially from the transportation sector, environmental activists have begun to focus on “food miles,” the miles food travels to reach the consumer, as a surrogate for carbon emissions. The fundamental problem with this analysis is that it



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ignores the environmental impact of all of the other inputs into food production and focuses only on the final shipping distance.

We've addressed these fallacies before (*Environmental Watch*, October 2007). Rich Pirog, a researcher in sustainable agriculture at the University of Iowa, notes that food miles are "not a reliable indicator of environmental impact. What one would want to do is look at your carbon footprint across a whole food supply chain." Pirog compared the energy use of Idaho and Maine potatoes.

Take the case of the well-traveled Idaho potato and its closer-to-home cousin from Maine. For a consumer on the US East Coast, the Maine potato seems the winner in the local food derby. But Maine potatoes get to market by long-haul truck while Idaho's go by train, a more energy-efficient mode of transportation, so they have a smaller carbon footprint even with a larger number of food-miles.¹

Another study found that New Zealand sheep had a smaller carbon footprint, even when shipped to Great Britain, than sheep raised in the UK. The study found "that lamb raised on New Zealand's clover-choked pastures and shipped 11,000 miles by boat to Britain produced 1,520 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions per ton while British lamb produced 6,280 pounds of carbon dioxide per ton, in part because poorer British pastures force farmers to use feed."²

A better approach is to appropriately price energy and water to account for environmental impact. Producers, looking to reduce costs, will limit use of scarce resources. Price is the best way to aggregate the various resource inputs and encourage producers to use less and pass the savings on to consumers. False statistics, like "food miles," are likely to encourage consumers to buy costly goods that actually have a greater environmental impact. By endorsing such simplistic and misleading metrics, the EcoConsumer sends consumers in the wrong direction.

Killing "Unneeded" Jobs

An underlying theme of many of the EcoConsumer columns is that we buy too many "unneeded" goods. It is unclear what constitutes "unneeded," however. Thirty years ago a cell phone would hardly be considered a "need," but I'm guessing that nobody in the King County Recycling and Environmental Services office goes without.

The EcoConsumer admits that eliminating these goods would "likely result in job losses." They "hope" that these jobs would be replaced by "better" green jobs. This, however, shows a fundamental misunderstanding of economics and the efficiencies of resource use.

First, the notion that government can effectively pick and choose environmentally friendly products has been shown to be false. Biofuels are a recent example. There is broad consensus that the current generation of biofuels have a greater-than-projected environmental impact, with a growing number of studies indicating that biofuels may actually have a negative environmental impact. Washington state agencies have failed to meet self-imposed targets for biofuel purchase due to the high prices.

Second, hoping that inefficient "green" jobs will replace traditional jobs has proven to be a wild goose chase. Environmental groups like Sightline have admitted that communities that relied on traditional jobs, like Aberdeen, Washington, lost jobs and never recovered. A recent study of "green" jobs in

¹ Deborah Zabarenko, "Do Food Miles Make a Difference to Global Warming?," Planet Ark, <http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=44883> (Accessed 10/31/07)

² "Greener by Miles," *UK Telegraph*, June 3, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1553456/Greener-by-miles.html>

Spain found that promoting the green sector killed more than two jobs for every one it created.³ It should not be a surprise that limiting opportunities for economic growth also limits job creation. Activists themselves admit that “green” jobs are worse than the jobs they replace, noting that they require more labor input to produce the same output, leading to lower wages for those jobs.⁴

Finally, a competitive and creative economy makes great strides every day toward the efficient use of resources. Energy use per unit of output has declined by about one-third in the last 25 years. Aluminum cans are lighter today than three decades ago because producers found ways to use less. Government likes to emphasize the latest eco-fad. But as they pick incorrectly, entrepreneurs march on day by day making the real improvements in resource use.

Putting faith in government to accurately pick and choose needed and “unnecessary” products would be the triumph of hope over experience.

Trade Policies that Aren't Fair to People or the Environment

The best example putting ideology ahead of fact is the EcoConsumer's advocacy of “fair” trade. Such policies are opposed by virtually every trade expert, including Nobel Prize winners, from the liberal economist and columnist Paul Krugman to free-market economist Milton Friedman.

The EcoConsumer justifies “fair” trade on two fronts, claiming it is better for workers and the environment. Both are demonstrably false.

First, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, who has done more than almost anyone to address the suffering of the poor worldwide, especially in his native Bangladesh, notes that free trade is best for developing countries. In his excellent book Banker to the Poor, he notes:

I would like to see all barriers and protections around the world markets disappear. Protectionism is built up in each nation in the name of the poor, but its real beneficiaries are the rich and clever people who know how to manipulate the system. By contrast the poor have a better chance in a bigger open market than in a smaller protected market. Everyone would benefit from the free flow of commodities, finances and people.

Protectionism, in the name of fairness, limits opportunity for the very poor who need them.

Second, as noted above, growing food or producing products where it is most efficient, even if that is in other countries, is best for the environment. New Zealand's climate is suited to raising sheep and it is better to raise them there than to put stress environmental resources in the UK.

Finally, prosperity is good for the environment. It is no coincidence that the wealthiest countries also have the cleanest air and water. Poor countries are losing forests. The United States is seeing an increase in forest acreage.

There can be individual products that have a beneficial, short-term environmental impact. Following “fair trade” policies, however, would be bad for the environment and the poor.

Throwing Away Old Growth

Finally, the EcoConsumer passes along a claim that is fundamentally incorrect. The authors claim old growth forests are harvested to make toilet paper. This is simply incorrect.

³ http://www.economist.com/businessfinance/displayStory.cfm?story_id=13404568

⁴ John Talton, “Calculating the Benefits of a Green Recovery,” *Seattle Times*, May 22, 2009, http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/soundeconomywithjontalton/2009251471_calculating_the_benefits_of_a.html

The irony about old growth is that environmental activists simultaneously claim that:

- Old growth forests are rare and dwindling
- Old growth is used for everything from building construction to toilet paper

Both of these things cannot be true. Old growth cannot be scarce, driving the cost of that type of fiber up, and be used for a wide range of products, including low-value products like toilet paper. The truth is that old growth is scarce and used only for very expensive products.

The claim that old growth is used in toilet paper relies on semantic games. One article says that some pulp for toilet paper comes from “old, second-growth forests.”⁵ Second-growth is not old growth, and the insertion of the word “old” is intended to confuse readers not familiar with forest science. The definition of old growth can be complex, but in this context it means forests which have never been harvested. Second-growth is, by definition, not old growth.

Another claim is that paper producers receive “as much as 22 percent of its pulp from producers who cut trees in Canadian boreal forests where some trees are 200 years old.”⁶ This sentence could not be more caveated:

- Saying “as much as” indicates that the actual number is unknown, which the environmental groups who make this claim admit.
- The pulp isn’t from old growth forests, but from producers who *may* cut trees there.
- The age of “some” individual trees is not indicative of the quality of habitat, which is the critical issue for ecosystems. There are forests with old trees that are quite poor in their ability to support the creatures that need old growth forest.
- Trees in boreal forests are not harvested for pulp, which is a very low value product. Pulp is a by-product of the higher-value products like timber and the scraps from those uses would go to waste if not used for pulp, chips or the like.

In the way some praise Native Americans for using every part of an animal, competition has pushed sawmills to use every part of the tree. Some pulp comes from these scraps. If those scraps are from old growth timber, it is an alternative to throwing the scraps away, but not a primary source.

Finally, while some claim that not using toilet paper would protect trees, this is incorrect for much of the pulp supply. Hardwood tree farms exist due to the demand for pulp. If the demand went away, landowners would find other uses for their land, converting forestland to other uses. Decreasing demand doesn’t always mean the forests will remain.

While at the Department of Natural Resources I helped develop the policy to protect old growth forests on state land. We need to increase the amount of old growth for animals who rely on that specific type of habitat. But the canard of old growth is used to justify a range of unscientific policies that are costly and counterproductive. Purchasing recycled toilet paper is very unlikely to save a single old tree.

Costs

Fortunately, few people follow the guidelines offered in the EcoConsumer column. Following the advice on trade, “food miles,” toilet paper and a “green” economy, would, at best, be costly and of limited effect. If the suggestions being offered were followed more widely, or adopted as policy, they would have some very counterproductive impacts for consumers, workers and the environment.

⁵ Leslie Kaufman, “Mr. Whipple Left It Out,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/science/earth/26charmin.html>

⁶ Ibid.

Consumers who want to spend a little more to reduce their impact on the environment can find products that reduce use of some resources. But there are some guidelines to keep in mind:

- Pay attention to price. Low prices often reflect lower energy and resource costs for all elements of a product. Paying more isn't always better.
- Remember that the economy is dynamic and that there will be reactions to all buying decisions. Buying more recycled paper may mean that forests grown to produce pulp might be used for some other purpose, like development.
- Avoid simplistic rules such as "food miles." These rules are often misleading and lead to unintended consequences.
- Don't confuse goals. Buying local might help your neighbor but might not help the environment and certainly won't help developing countries.
- The best thing we can do to help the people in developing countries and their environment is to encourage economic development and trade. One good resource is kiva.org, which provides microloans to entrepreneurs in developing countries.

Prosperity allows people to spend discretionary income on products that may not make economic sense but provide other values. Such expenditures are similar to charitable contributions. Like any charity, however, consumers need to be sure they are getting what they pay for and that they are receiving good advice. The EcoConsumer column too often provides advice that is incorrect, misleading or ineffective.