

Guide Questions

1. Identify & explain all social, economic and environmental principles
2. Analyze the article in the context of “systems thinking”
3. Draw a diagram showing the connection between various parts of the system

How much is enough?'

from the Center for a New American Dream

Can Americans enjoy a high-quality life while consuming less? Can we embrace a new "American Dream" of a thriftier, more conserving lifestyle, with more time for friends, family, hobbies and community life?

The Center for a New American Dream opened its national office this year to help Americans start a new conversation about the social and environmental effects of our materialistic lifestyle and the question of "how much is enough?" Ellen Furnari, executive director of the Center, noted that the United Nations 1992 Earth Summit challenged developed nations, declaring that "the major cause of the continued degradation of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries." Unfortunately, says Furnari, the United States and most other industrialized nations have not lived up to the promises they made at the 1992 Earth Summit. "We all need to address more seriously the issue of consumption," she notes.

Consuming 300 shopping bags of resources each week

A report released this past April by the World Resources Institute of Washington, D.C., and three international research groups, said a survey of consumption patterns in four developed countries found that: The average American every week uses the equivalent of 300 shopping bags filled with natural resources for food, shelter, energy and transportation. Americans end up paying about \$200 billion a year on cleanup of resource extraction, pollution and wastes.

Furnari says, "Our research discovered that a majority of people agreed with the statement, 'I believe my own buying habits have a negative effect on the environment.' We learned that people will consider changes in their consumption habits when they see clear links between our materialistic way of life and environmental degradation. "This center has been founded to inspire a new dialogue about consumption's daily impact on the environment and our own lives and to provide tools for people to change and shape a new American Dream," says Furnari.

Many are disappointed with work-and-shop treadmill

Betsy Taylor, of Takoma Park, Md., executive director of the Merck Family Fund and one of the Center's founders, says, "The American dream of having more and more is killing us and our environment. People are hungry to talk about their disappointment with the work-and-shop consumer treadmill, and how to find a better balance in their lives." The Center's birth stems from a major conference in 1995 on materialism and the environment. "Our research showed that many Americans believe we are on the wrong track, focusing too much on acquiring things while our families and our environment suffer," Taylor says.

Survey: materialism, greed dominate American life

One of the key findings of the research, conducted in 1995 by the Harwood Group for the Merck Family Fund, stated: Americans believe our priorities are out of whack. People of all

backgrounds share certain fundamental concerns about the values they see driving our society. They believe materialism, greed, and selfishness increasingly dominate American life, crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community. People express a strong desire for a greater sense of balance in their lives-not to repudiate material gain, but to bring it more into proportion with the non-material rewards of life.

Based on focus groups and a national public opinion survey, the research also revealed that people feel the material side of the American Dream is spinning out of control, that the effort to keep up with higher-spending neighbors is increasingly unhealthy and destructive.

Some other key findings of note:

- Huge majorities of Americans cite responsibility, family life, and friendship as key guiding principles for themselves.
- Most people have not thought deeply about the ecological implications of their own lifestyles; yet there is an intuitive sense that our propensity for "more, more, more," is unsustainable.
- Over 90% of people agreed that an underlying cause of environmental problems is that "we focus too much on getting what we want now and not enough on future generations."
- Over 85% agreed that "today's youth are too focused on buying and consuming things."
- Almost two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement: "I would like to have more balance in my life."

We're working longer hours

One of the new organization's board members is economist Juliet Schor, who wrote *The Overworked American* (1992). "Millions of Americans are exhausting themselves trying to reach an increasingly unattainable American Dream," she says. Her research, for example, showed that between 1969 and 1987 the average employed person put in an extra 163 hours a year on the job. "As more and more income is required to achieve a middle class standard of living, many Americans find themselves working longer hours, and going into debt, to reach those standards. At the same time, that standard of living turns out to be extremely destructive of the environment, both because of what and how much we consume," Schor says. "Downshifting, living more simply, and being more in tune with the environment and inner goals have become extremely significant trends in contemporary America," she notes. "Millions of Americans are reducing the stress of their work lives and are achieving more balance in their lives. Millions more want to, but haven't yet seen their way there," Schor says.

More stuff just isn't doing it

Board member Alan Durning of Seattle, Wash., writes, "More stuff just isn't doing it for many people. While many families are stuck in poverty, others are finding that the race to have it all leaves them feeling empty." Durning says, "The time we spend driving, shopping, working, and watching TV has increased in recent years, while the time spent in conversation, at family meals, and in informal visits with neighbors has decreased."

The Center intends to help people examine the impact of our high-consumption lifestyles on the environment. "We Americans now consume our body weight in raw materials each day," Durning says, "materials extracted from farms, forests, grasslands and mines. Most of us must consume less if the environment is to have a chance."