

*State of the World 2010* press talk: **[title slide]**

Chris's introduction.

[Thank Chris, authors, participants]

I want to start with a bit of a deconstruction of this year's report—or more specifically the cover of this year's report. Some of you might have recognized the image, which comes from the 1830 woodblock print “The Great Wave Off Kanagawa” by Katsushika Hokusai. What's different with this version, which was created by artist Chris Jordan, is that this 8 foot by 11 foot image is made up of 2.4 million pieces of plastic—the number in pounds that enters the world's oceans every hour. This image recruits a global icon to draw attention both to the extreme dangers of consumerism and the great wave of change that will be needed to create a sustainable society. **[zoom in slides]**

This message is at the heart of the *State of the World 2010*. More and more evidence makes it clear that for humanity to thrive long into the future, technology upgrades and policy changes alone aren't going to be enough to save the day. Instead, we'll need to do something much bolder, and much more sweeping. We'll need to transform our cultures, intentionally and proactively shifting them away from consumerism and toward sustainability. **[thesis slide]**

The good news is that this shift is not only possible, it is already starting to happen. Around the world individuals and organizations alike are using societal institutions to reject consumerism and develop sustainable cultures. From incorporating Earth rights into the constitution of Ecuador to schools integrating ecological awareness into curricula, the lunchroom, the playground and even the walk to school, there are countless efforts underway to make the natural, default setting of society: sustainability.

Granted, we're at the very beginning of this cultural transformation, and we've got a long way to go. But keep in mind that consumerism had its beginnings just two centuries ago. And in that relatively short time it has become natural for many of the world's people. But, with deliberate effort, we can replace consumerism with sustainability just as quickly as we replaced home cooked meals with McDonalds happy meals and community parks with shopping malls.

And let's be clear, consumerism—that is the cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning, contentment, status, and acceptance through what they consume [**slide: definition of consumerism**]—was NOT simply a side-effect of growing wealth, but was systematically implemented by individuals intentionally re-engineering our culture—even if they weren't conscious of their actions in these terms. The good news is that we can use the same strategies that were used on Madison Avenue to make sustainability second nature and high consumption lifestyles a taboo.

But before going into the how of this cultural transformation, let me quickly define culture.

Culture, to be clear, isn't simply values, the arts, human institutions, or the stuff we create—it's all of these and more. As anthropologists Robert Welsch and Luis Vivanco define it, culture is the sum of all social processes that make the artificial—or human constructed—seem natural. [**slide: definition of culture**]

Hence norms, symbols, practices, behaviors which in reality are arbitrary, come to be seen as perfectly natural. For example it feels natural for me to sit here, in a heated office—wearing clothes I should add—talking to you all through a little black box sharing this message—not as a myth or story but as a report summary. Of

course it's only growing up in this cultural system that makes this experience feel natural.

Even basic biological acts like *eating* are heavily influenced by culture. What food I eat, when, even how (with a fork or spoon instead of chop sticks or my hands) is all set by the cultures we're part of. This is the reason why few of us on this call have eaten insects but eating the meat of cows, pigs, and chickens, seems natural to us.

The bad news is that two centuries of intentional cultivation of consumerism has led to us seeing it as perfectly natural to define ourselves primarily by what and how much we consume. Not surprisingly, this has led to consumption levels that our finite planet cannot sustain.

I don't think I need to go into the unsustainability of our consumption patterns more than briefly but the human ecological footprint found that we used the resources of 1.3 planets in 2005—the same year that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment found that over 60% of our ecosystem services were being degraded or used unsustainably—a reality so disturbing that it led the Assessment board to warn that “human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.” **[slide]**.

Of course, we don't have 1.3 planets to use so more accurately stated, at current consumption levels Earth can only sustain 5 billion people—almost 2 billion fewer individuals than our current population. And if everyone were to consume at American standards, this number drops dramatically to just 1.4 billion people. **[slide]** Americans now consume 88 kilograms of resources each and every day--more than most Americans weigh.

In total, 112 empire state buildings worth of resources are being extracted daily from the earth, and \$30.5 trillion is being spent on household consumption each year. These numbers will prevent creation of a sustainable society—even with a rapid transition to renewable energy and policy changes that better internalize ecological costs.

Until we recognize that our ecological problems—from climate change and local pollution to deforestation and species loss—are driven primarily by unsustainable consumption patterns, which they themselves are an effect of cultures that exaggerate the desire to consume, we will not be able to solve the ecological crisis that threatens to wash over human civilization.

Yet consumerism is deeply embedded in our cultures today—in large part driven by business and marketing, but also reinforced by government policy, the media, even educational systems, as we discuss in the report.

The fact that we see it as normal to be able to identify hundreds of brand logos and jingles, while few of us can identify more than a few species of wild plants and animals—that's culture. [slide]

The fact that we feed our children diets high in sugars, fats, and processed ingredients, even when we know this is making them fat and sick—That's culture.

The fact that when loved ones die a ritual intended to lay them to rest requires injecting them with toxic chemicals and sealing their bodies up in expensive and ecologically costly caskets—that's culture.

And the fact that we spend thousands of dollars each year on pets that we now see as part of the family, buying them food, toys, even

health care that's better than many people in the world can afford—that's culture.

Today, industries, supported by billions of dollars of advertising, use a variety of means to make it feel “natural” to use their goods—even when those goods are harmful to people or the planet.

Look at fast-food as an example. In the early 1900s, the hamburger was scorned as a cheap and unsafe ‘food for the poor’. But by the 1960s, through the work of innovative entrepreneurs, the hamburger had become a beloved meal, and today, in the US, fast food is a \$120 billion industry—with half of those chains being burger joints. McDonald's alone spends \$1.2 billion in advertising each year, and with the help of Ronald McDonald, serves 58 million adults and children each day in its 32,000 stores spread across 118 countries. **[slide: McDonalds map.]**

This industry has played a major role in transforming the human diet, making it natural, from childhood on, to eat sweet, fatty, high-on-the-food-chain meals, which not only has significant ecological impacts, but plays a role in the obesity epidemic and subsequent ill health of the population of 1.6 billion overweight and obese people worldwide.

A similar story can be told regarding bottled water, soda, disposable diapers, cars, and many other products, where industries worked to transform cultural norms to sell their wares.

With consumerism now so deeply embedded into our cultures, it is going to take a concerted, intentional, and proactive effort to extract it.

But the good news is that using key societal institutions we can replace our consumer culture with cultures of sustainability. Those institutions, specifically, are education, government, the media, business, traditions, and social movements—some of the very same institutions that centered cultures on consumerism in the first place. **[slide of six institutions]** What’s exciting is that there are already many efforts within each of these spheres already happening.

Education is starting to play a role in teaching new sustainability values and a deeper ecological consciousness. Perhaps most exciting—as Kevin Morgan and Roberta Sonnino discuss—is the effort to transform school lunches so that healthy, sustainable, locally produced food is replacing the fatty, sugary, processed stuff found most often in cafeterias. **[slide]** The city of Rome has been one leader in this process—with 2/3rds of the food now served in schools being certified organic, a quarter local, and 14 percent being Fair Trade. In the process, as the food is less processed, it is healthier and helps children establish healthy eating practices from a young age.

Governments are also playing a significant role in editing citizen’s choices so that it is easy for them to be sustainable. As Mike Maniates discusses, governments have always played an important role “choice editing”—through the creation of laws, taxes, and subsidies—but increasingly governments are starting to use this tactic to reinforce *sustainable* behaviors—from the 5 cent bag tax that was just passed January 1<sup>st</sup> in Washington, DC to the incandescent light bulb bans being phased-in in countries around the world.

In the realm of the economy, the very role of business is starting to shift: moving from simply maximizing profit to maximizing social good. Social enterprises are cropping up all over the world—specifically created to improve society—and do so profitably.

**[slide]** For example, Cabbages and Condoms, a restaurant chain in Thailand not only uses a clever brand to sell food and the idea of safe sex, but uses the profit of the chain to fund community development, health, and family planning programs.

In the media, more news stories, works of art, even blockbuster movies like Avatar and Wall-E are drawing attention to sustainability issues. Marketers too are starting to use their trade to reinforce sustainable living. **[slide]** As Jonah Sachs and Susan Finkelpearl discuss, social marketing is quickly becoming a powerful tool. One example is the popular spoof animation “The Meatrix,”—which critiqued factory farming and mobilized viewers to fight it. This short flash movie reached 20 million viewers at just a fraction of the cost of a traditional ad campaign.

In the realm of traditions, religions, the role of elders, even rituals are being harnessed to cultivate values and understandings of sustainability. Take the rite of passage all of us will eventually go through: death.

Groups like the Green Burial Council are working with religious groups, industry, and conservation groups to reset norms around this somber rite, making it natural to bury your loved ones without first toxifying their bodies with chemicals, encasing them in expensive coffins, and relegating them to cemeteries that rely on toxic pesticides to maintain an artificial green space. Instead, the Green Burial Council works with families who want to help heal the Earth, burying deceased loved ones sustainably in green cemeteries that over time will become natural preserves.

As these examples show, there are many efforts all around the world in which people are working actively to grow sustainable cultures.

Consumerism took root through the slow, steady accumulation of more and more small acts that tipped cultural systems to a new pattern. This process will now have to be repeated—mobilizing millions of individuals to move beyond changing personal habits to taking an active role in transforming cultures. It's not enough to simply change our light bulbs, we must change our very cultures.

In all the roles we play—from parent and teacher, to worker, business owners, citizen, activist, artist and community member—we'll need to work intentionally to help cultivate a culture of sustainability. Taken separately, these individual efforts will seem small—like drops of rain in the ocean—but together they could form a great wave of change.

We'll now be happy to take any questions about the report you may have. **[slide]**

### Joining by phone for Q&A:

**Gary Gardner** is a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute who focuses on sustainable economies.

**Roberta Sonnino** is a lecturer in environmental policy and planning in the School of City and Regional Planning at Cardiff University.

**Michael Maniates** is Professor of Political Science and Environmental Science at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania.

**Jonah Sachs** is co-founder and creative director of Free Range Studios, a design and communications firm.

**Susan Finkelpearl** is online strategy director at Free Range Studios.