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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

**THE
WORLDWATCH
INSTITUTE**

2010

STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

Advance Praise for *State of the World 2010*:

“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”

—**Bill McKibben, author of *Deep Economy and The End of Nature***

“Worldwatch has taken on an ambitious agenda in this volume. No generation in history has achieved a cultural transformation as sweeping as the one called for here...it is hard not to be impressed with the book’s boldness.”

—**Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank**

“This year’s *State of the World* report is a cultural mindbomb exploding with devastating force. I hope it wakes a few people up.”

—**Kalle Lasn, Editor of *Adbusters* magazine**

Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

In this year’s *State of the World* report, 50+ renowned researchers and practitioners describe how we can harness the world’s leading institutions—education, the media, business, governments, traditions, and social movements—to reorient cultures toward sustainability.



full image



extreme close-up

Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

For discussion questions, additional essays, video presentations, and event calendar, visit blogs.worldwatch.org/transformingcultures.

Cover image: *Gyre* by Chris Jordan
Cover design: Lyle Rosbotham



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Preface

Christopher Flavin
President, Worldwatch Institute

The past five years have witnessed an unprecedented mobilization of efforts to combat the world's accelerating ecological crisis. Since 2005, thousands of new government policies have been enacted, hundreds of billions of dollars have been invested in green businesses and infrastructure, scientists and engineers have greatly accelerated development of a new generation of “green” technologies, and the mass media have turned environmental problems into a mainstream concern.

Amid this flurry of activity, one dimension of our environmental dilemma remains largely neglected: its cultural roots. As consumerism has taken root in culture upon culture over the past half-century, it has become a powerful driver of the inexorable increase in demand for resources and production of waste that marks our age. Of course, environmental impacts on this scale would not be possible without an unprecedented population explosion, rising affluence, and breakthroughs in science and technology. But consumer cultures support—and exaggerate—the other forces that have allowed human societies to outgrow their environmental support systems.

Human cultures are numerous and diverse—and in many cases have deep and ancient roots. They allow people to make sense of their lives and to manage their relationships with other people and the natural world.

Strikingly, anthropologists report that many traditional cultures have at their core respect for and protection of the natural systems that support human societies. Unfortunately, many of these cultures have already been lost, along with the languages and skills they nurtured, pushed aside by a global consumer culture that first took hold in Europe and North America and is now pressing to the far corners of the world. This new cultural orientation is not only seductive but powerful. Economists believe that it has played a big role in spurring economic growth and reducing poverty in recent decades.

Even if these arguments are accepted, there can be no doubt that consumer cultures are behind what Gus Speth has called the “Great Collision” between a finite planet and the seemingly infinite demands of human society. More than 6.8 billion human beings are now demanding ever greater quantities of material resources, decimating the world's richest ecosystems, and dumping billions of tons of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere each year. Despite a 30-percent increase in resource efficiency, global resource use has expanded 50 percent over the past three decades. And those numbers could continue to soar for decades to come as more than 5 billion people who currently consume one tenth as many resources per person as the average Euro-

pean try to follow the trail blazed by the world's affluent.

State of the World has touched on the cultural dimensions of sustainability in the past—particularly in *State of the World 2004*, which focused on consumption. But these discussions have been brief and superficial. Early last year, my colleague Erik Assadourian convinced me that the elephant in the room could no longer be ignored. At Worldwatch, no good idea goes unpunished, and Erik became the Project Director for this year's book.

While shifting a culture—particularly one that is global in scope—sounds daunting if not impossible, the chapters that follow will convince you otherwise. They contain scores of examples of cultural pioneers—from business leaders and government officials to elementary school teachers and Buddhist monks. These pioneers are convincing their customers, constituents, and peers of the advantages of cultures based on nurturing the natural world and ensuring that future generations live as well or better than the current one.

Religious values can be revitalized, business models can be transformed, and educational paradigms can be elevated. Even advertisers, lawyers, and musicians can make cultural shifts that allow them to contribute to sustainability rather than undermine it.

While the destructive power of modern cultures is a reality that many government and business decisionmakers continue to willfully ignore, it is keenly felt by a new generation of environmentalists who are growing up in an era of global limits. Young people are always a potent cultural force—and often a leading indicator of where the culture is headed. From modern Chinese who draw on the ancient philosophy of Taoism to Indians who cite the work of Mahatma Gandhi, from Americans who follow the teachings of the new *Green Bible* to Europeans who draw on the scientific principles of ecology, *State of the World 2010* documents that the renais-

sance of cultures of sustainability is already well under way.

To ensure that this renaissance succeeds, we will need to make living sustainably as natural tomorrow as consumerism is today. This volume shows that this is beginning to happen. In Italy, school menus are being reformulated, using healthy, local, and environmentally sound foods, transforming children's dietary norms in the process. In suburbs like Vauban, Germany, bike paths, wind turbines, and farmers' markets are not only making it easy to live sustainably, they are making it hard not to. At the Interface Corporation in the United States, CEO Ray Anderson radicalized a business culture by setting the goal of taking nothing from Earth that cannot be replaced by Earth. And in Ecuador, rights for the planet have even entered into the Constitution—providing a strong impetus to safeguard the country's ecological systems and ensure the long-term flourishing of its people.

While sustainability pioneers are still few in number, their voices are growing louder, and at a moment of profound economic and ecological crisis, they are being heard. As the world struggles to recover from the most serious global economic crisis since the Great Depression, we have an unprecedented opportunity to turn away from consumerism.

Forced deprivation is causing many to rethink the benefits of ever-greater levels of consumption—and its accompanying debt, stress, and chronic health problems. In early 2009, *Time Magazine* proclaimed the “end of excess” and called for Americans to push the “reset” button on their cultural values. In fact, many people are already questioning the cowboy culture, buying smaller cars, moving into less grandiose homes, and questioning the suburban sprawl that has characterized the postwar era. And in poor countries around the globe, the disadvantages of the “American model” are being discussed openly. In *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken has documented the

recent rise of a plethora of diverse non-governmental movements that are working to redefine human beings' relationships to the planet and each other.

While consumerism remains powerful and entrenched, it cannot possibly prove as durable

as most people assume. Our cultures are in fact already sowing the seeds of their own destruction. In the end, the human instinct for survival must triumph over the urge to consume at any cost.

Christopher Flain