

# Consumption, Environmental Sustainability and Human Geography in Australia: a Missing Research Agenda?

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## Abstract

'Consumption' is a central concept in the global environmental sustainability agenda. However, one important argument from *Agenda 21* — that all social actors must now practise 'sustainable consumption' — has been publicly and politically marginalised in high-income countries such as Australia. Geographers potentially have a role in bringing consumption back onto the agenda by constructing a critical geography of consumption. Such research can help understand how the contextual use of natural resources is perceived and practised, and how consumption helps to shape contemporary social relations. This body of knowledge is vital for building sustainable development into everyday lives. Yet a focus on urban consumption perceptions and practices appears somewhat lacking in Australian geography. Ways forward can be drawn from international geography, such as in the United Kingdom where a substantial body of work has drawn a complex picture of contemporary consumption and environmental understanding. It has also challenged prevailing 'ecological modernisation' policy approaches, which ignore consumption's cultural facets. In sum, considering consumption in Australia can offer insights into cultural practices expressed through consumption; can challenge and add to European geographical literatures, and can also contribute to sustainability debates by offering alternatives to currently ineffective policy discourses.

KEY WORDS *sustainable consumption; lifestyles; human geography; urban*

## Introduction: why consumption matters

'Consumption' has in the past decade become a pivotal concept in debates about global environmental sustainability. *Agenda 21*, the 'blueprint' for sustainable development, argues that reducing the impacts of all social actors' consumption practices is vital in making sustainable development a realistic goal (UNCED, 1992). Chapter 4 of *Agenda 21* outlines how this may

be taken forward, through the promotion of patterns of 'sustainable consumption'. This has been defined as:

The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, whilst minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as

not to jeopardise the needs of future generations (IISD/United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999, 1).

Within this framing, individual and collective consumption becomes the site of increased efficiency in production and use, as a means to secure current and future generations' living standards. The geographical foci of sustainable consumption are so-called 'northern' countries with high incomes, high resource consumption and high waste patterns. Although located in the southern hemisphere where supposedly the path to sustainability is through the creation of 'sustainable livelihoods', Australia fits comfortably into this 'northern' pattern.

Yet, sustainable consumption has failed to become a political or public issue in Australia. The reasons for this can be seen in the numerous barriers to change evident throughout society. First, there are political and systemic barriers. The structuring of economic systems makes consumption and economic growth 'probably the single most important objective of modern politics, more or less unquestioned right across the political spectrum' (Jacobs, 1997, 47: see also Trainer, 1998 for an Australian perspective). In such systems the idea of reducing consumption, and trying to regulate citizens' and businesses' resource use practices, is both politically untenable and economically undesirable. There are also cultural challenges. For one, 'consumption is deeply rooted in values and lifestyles of industrial countries' (UNCED, 1992, 69). Through its historical centrality from the industrial revolution onwards, it has come to shape social and personal relationships, as well as wants, needs, aspirations and limitations. It arguably frames citizens' relations and rights with the state, especially in the current neo-liberal climates of the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), and Australia where citizens' rights have been partly translated into consumer rights (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992). Finally, consumption is a central part of individuals' everyday practices and often 'unseen' habits. This is not just overt consumption,

such as shopping and transport use. Forms of resource consumption are also implicit in pervasive technical infrastructures and systems. For example, consumption occurs through the provision of utilities to households, which are often experienced as an 'invisible' part of everyday lives (Hobson, 2003). In short, consumption is everywhere, implicated in all levels of social relationships that span the international relations of trade to individuals' everyday habits of water and electricity use.

Yet, the need to reduce and alter the consumption patterns of all social actors is unquestionably vital to environmental sustainability. A conservative scenario suggests that high-income countries must reduce levels of consumption by 50% in the near future. Others put this estimate nearer 90%. In the current political and cultural climates, how will this come about? This paper does not aim to discuss the various policy mechanisms put forward as solutions. Rather, it considers one role that geographers may play in this debate, with special reference to the Australian context.

#### *Constructing a critical geography of consumption*

Elaine Hartwick (2000) has outlined how geography can help uncover consumption's often-unquestioned political, environmental and relational centrality to modern societies. This may be done by mapping a supply and consumption chain, thereby uncovering the environmental and social costs of bringing a product from its natural origins into our shops and homes. One well-known example is David Harvey's practice of encouraging students to think about how the breakfast they ate that morning had made it to their tables. There is another role that geography can play. As well as considering consumption as a practice that partly determines national and international political and economic relations, geography can also examine what consumption and the environment means to individuals, both as a cultural norm and as an everyday practice that helps to shape individual and collective actions and attitudes. This is important, as it is

these perceptions that will shape reactions to a sustainable consumption agenda. That is, only when we know why and how individuals consume and how they link their consumption to the environment, can we realistically set about changing consumption practices.

This paper argues that such a body of knowledge is important but currently lacking in an Australian context. Although the environment and consumption have long been subjects of study in Australian geography, this proposed research agenda focuses on individual practices and meanings of consumption in *urban* environments. The focus on urban contexts is pivotal: first, because 85% of Australians live in urban settings; and second, because these areas are intensive sites of consumption, both through infrastructures and individual behaviours. Thus, urban Australia is where sustainable consumption has to be most effective. Understanding more about how and why consumption happens in Australia also enables geographers to construct well-informed critiques of prevailing political discourses about consumption issues. Current policy discourses, it is argued here, essentially reinforce political framings of citizens as malleable and economically rational consumers, leaving little space for alternative debates about how sustainable consumption might be brought from policy rhetoric into reality.

### **The trends and politics of consumption in Australia**

There are clear reasons why consumption should be considered a pressing environmental concern in Australia. At a broad level, a 'limits to growth' scenario has become an important part of resource management and sustainability debates. This is a country that arguably has ecosystem limitations in terms of agricultural productivity and water availability, yet is experiencing rapid social change, expansion and population growth. In short, consumption is on the rise.

On average, Australians have become steadily richer over the last few decades. As monetary wealth has increased, so has consumption: as

a nation we now own more goods, use more energy, eat more processed food and have larger houses than ever before (Australian Academy of Science, 2001, 2).

This can be seen in Australians' 'ecological footprints'. An ecological footprint is the area of biologically productive space that is now in constant production to support the average individual of a country. According to Wackernagel *et al.* (1998), the global average per citizen is 1.7 hectares. The average for each Australian is 9 hectares, second only in magnitude to citizens of the USA at over 10 hectares per person. Although 9 hectares does not exceed the total available capacity in Australia (estimated at 14 hectares per person), the continuing upward trend of consumption may soon reach this limit. This upward trend is exemplified by the 84% increase of natural resource use between 1973–74 and 1997–98, 94% of which came from fossil fuel (Jessup and Mercer, 2001). This increase is predicted to continue (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000), especially in Australia's ever-growing urban areas whose population is responsible for one-fifth of the country's greenhouse emissions (Australian Greenhouse Office, 2001a). Such predictions are pertinent in the light of 2002 figures which show that Australia's greenhouse emissions are continuing to increase (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002), overshooting the 108% of 1990 emissions target for the period 2008–2012, as agreed at the 1997 Kyoto Protocol meetings (although this is a politically contested figure: see Australian Greenhouse Office, 2002).

Despite this, the Australian government is offering little time or commitment to tackling this upward trend, siding with the USA in marginalising the Kyoto Protocol from national policy. The spate of corporate collapses in Australia during 2002 (HIH, Ansett, One-Tel), plus the international security climate post-September 11th 2001, has seen Australian policy focus on growth and national security. Sustainability has continued its downward slide off the public agenda, with research showing politicians,

voters and the media no longer believing it is a 'big-ticket' issue (for example, McManus, 2000).

What, then, can be done about addressing Australians' consumption in this climate and in relation to environmental concerns? A common recourse has been to look to environmental groups or deep ecology protagonists to campaign for and point out the environmental imperatives. Yet, it is argued here, geographers have the capacity to enter this debate from a different perspective. That is, by understanding more about how and why Australians consume, and the meanings they attach to consumption and the environment, geographers have the chance to scrutinise and critique the accepted social practices of consumption in Australia. Rather than having the environment marginalised as a social concern, the aim is to link consumption practices and the environment to on-going political concerns through bringing the environment from 'out there' into everyday contexts.

### **Consumption, environment and human geography in Australia: what do we know and what is missing?**

Consumption and environmental meanings have long been a subject of study in Australian human geography. This research has taken a number of perspectives. For one, Wait (1997; 1996) has researched the selling, marketing and consumption of 'Australia' as a cultural experience. There is also Anderson's work on zoos as 'constructed' nature (Anderson, 1995). A rich stream of work also exists on social constructions of nature, wilderness and the environment from Anglo, Aboriginal and historical perspectives (for example, Mackey *et al.*, 1998). The implications of this array of perceptions for the management of environmental goods and problems have also been considered (Baker *et al.*, 2001; Head, 2000a; 2000b; Stratford *et al.*, 2000), along with the possibilities of consuming nature sustainably through eco-tourism. This emphasis on links between Australian landscape, cultural heritage and sustainable management is essential given the physical and historical environment of the nation. However, the links between

sustainability, environmental perceptions and consumption in urban contexts have not been so strong. Cultural geography in urban Australia has successfully focussed on, for example, how living in cities is experienced from gendered and multi-cultural perspectives (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998). Yet little emphasis has been given to understanding how living in high-consumption urban contexts might inform individuals' environmental perceptions, which is an important body of knowledge for tackling issues of sustainability.

#### *Why urban contexts matter*

The importance of urban perspectives for a critical geography of sustainable consumption should not be under-estimated. Urban living creates epistemological and physical divides between the built and the natural environment, the land and the concrete, the artificial and 'real' (Descola and Palsson, 1996). Knowing about rural perceptions of land, resources and environmental management may not automatically serve as a template to understand urban-dwellers' perceptions. Neither does it say anything of how urban living facilitates or blocks individuals from making connections between their everyday practices and the current issues of the 'environment'. This city/nature division has come into even sharper focus over the past few decades as climate change issues have brought the 'global' and 'local' into stark contrast. Can and do Australians see how their everyday resource consumption is an environmental issue? This is an essential point for sustainable consumption, as making these connections between self and the environment are vital if, as individuals and as researchers, we are to make a contribution to halting environmental degradation.

In the face of this dilemma, critical social theorists have been arguing for a transcendence of the divide between the artificial and the real — the city and the bush — in both research and policy. This stretches understandings of the 'environment' by considering it as the 'total environment' of everyday practices. As Castree and Braun (1998, 34) urge, 'we need to get out

of the habit of excluding urban historical geographies from our environmental histories'. As such, human environments today are not just about nature and the natural (however these concepts are constructed) but are rather a hybrid of the built and the modified within which natural resources and spaces are transformed and used, and culture is enacted. Consumption, as a form of social, political and economic practice, is implicit in these hybridised environments.

### **Learning from elsewhere: findings from British social sciences in the 1990s**

The importance of this work has been evident in UK-focussed research. With the advent of environmental consumption as a political and research topic during the 1990s, social scientists began to question the normative assumptions made about how and why individuals consume. They set out to understand what concepts such as 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable consumption' might mean to members of the public, on the assumption that the concepts had to be meaningful to individuals before they would prompt positive action. In the process, the social scientists discovered substantial discordance between policy framings of the environment and the public's environmental concerns. This was partly due to urban contexts redefining the nature of 'environmental' problems for individuals. Global warming and ozone depletion were meaningless in the face of social concerns about crime and loss of community, degradation of lived space, pollution and quality of life, to name but a few. Indeed, the environment here was a vehicle used to express social, often physically immediate, concerns. Concerns about nature and the global environment were evidently lacking.

Consumption in this context became both a cause and solution of environmental problems. Individuals made links between their own practices and environmental degradation whilst arguing for the need to maintain their quality of life through consumption. Indeed, the notion that consumption could ever become sustainable was questionable due to its pervasiveness, and its multiple forms driven by contextual factors.

For example, consumption can be about identity, habits, duty, or feelings of social exclusion (Williams *et al.*, 2001).

In sum, this work has substantially broadened researchers' understandings of how consumption practices are a central part of the UK's social and technical contexts, and how they are created and enacted through cultural and personal norms and discourses. How would this work translate into an Australian context? There is no doubt that Australian experience and perceptions of environmental and cultural heritage would offer a challenge to this work through the substantial geographical, historical and cultural differences between the two countries. Indeed, the changing nature of what it means to be 'Australian' in a multi-cultural society provides a fascinating context for debating the different perceptions of environment and consumption. In this sense, consumption becomes a way of finding out about culture and change, and a way of linking social practices and perceptions to broader social, political and technical problems in the light of the environmental sustainability agenda.

### **Implications for policy analysis and governance**

A further interesting insight that critical geographies of consumption can offer is to consider the relationship between public perceptions and policy discourses. For example, how have policy framings of consumption, the consumer and the environment been constructed in Australian public life, and how do these contrast/clash/accord with individuals' perceptions? For one, it can be argued that current policies have discursively attempted to side-step any critiques of consumption *per se*, making use instead of a suite of approaches that belong to the 'ecological modernisation' perspective. This perspective focuses on optimising efficiency within production and consumption practices. It assumes that existing institutions and structures can internalise environmental problems through efficiency, restructuring and creativity (Gouldson and Murphy, 1997) and that environmental 'limits' will alter as new technology comes to our aid.

This approach to sustainable development as a 'win-win' situation for the economy and environment has prevailed in Australian approaches to sustainability (called 'no regrets'; Bulkeley, 2001). Since Australia's 1992 *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* (NSED) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992), there have been numerous initiatives to promote more ecologically-efficient technologies. For example, there are green building initiatives, such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation's (CSIRO) 'Reshaping cities for a more sustainable future' program. Environment Australia has established an Eco-efficiency Unit that aims to promote 'strategies that businesses can use to improve their bottom line and their environmental performance at the same time' (Environment Australia, 2002, 1).

In terms of the individual, there is no sustainable consumption policy at a national level. However, there have been various programs aimed at influencing the attitudes and consumption practices of Australian households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Most of these initiatives have been information-led, low-key and focussed on single issues. For example, the Australian Greenhouse Office's 'Global Warming-Cool it!' initiative features a two page, 10 bullet-point and celebrity-endorsed advertisement, which suggests simple actions such as putting lids on pots when cooking, cutting down on waste and servicing your car regularly (Australian Greenhouse Office, 2001b).

However, campaigns such as these have been shown to have very limited success in altering consumption patterns (Owens, 2000). Policy analysts argue such failure is due to public misunderstandings of science. Geographers have countered this by arguing that environmental information is not 'misunderstood' but rather contested, mobilised, debated and often rejected by individuals (Harrison *et al.*, 1996; Burgess *et al.*, 1998). This is because the ecological modernisation and eco-efficiency policy approaches referred to above ignore the collective and shared meanings of consumption, relying instead on neo-classical economic models of consumption

as an individual, rational and utility-maximising act. As a result, prevailing policy approaches are often rejected by many individuals as meaningless and unrealistic ideals which ignore the realities of everyday consumption (Hobson, 2001; 2002). And over-all, this body of work has questioned the assumptions within prevailing policy approaches about how individuals understand and relate to environmental issues.

### **Concluding Remarks: what sorts of questions need to be asked?**

The point this paper has aimed to make is that Australia would serve as a fascinating and timely site for investigating the relationships between consumption, urban contexts and environmental perceptions. The intellectual groundwork has been set by the existing literature on consumption and the environment. However, future research would benefit from a shift in focus, to consider the importance of urban contexts for the future of environmental sustainability. The implications of this work are threefold. First, such research would provide an interesting challenge to other, mostly European, geographers' work on consumption, which often pays little attention to the Asia-Pacific region (except in anthropological writings). Second, such work would engage with concepts — such as consumption — that are useful in assessing cultural practices and perceptions in Australia today. Whereas work often focuses on identity alone, consumption offers another way to discuss and understand practices and processes in everyday urban life. Finally, new research can also offer an informed alternative to the prevailing policy voices of environmental governance in Australia. Current voices suggest that eco-efficiency, product labelling and some environmental information are all that is required to persuade individuals to change their consumption practices. By considering how environmental concerns are felt and framed in everyday life, alternative policy framings can be forwarded.

What questions need to be asked? Some starting points might be to consider the place that consumption as a practice has in Australian

everyday lives and identities. What do individuals think of concepts such as sustainable consumption, and how do they think such practices might come about? How do these perceptions fit into broader debates about the structural barriers and determinants of consumption practices in capitalist economies like Australia? How, if any, are connections made between the environment 'out there' and everyday practices in homes, jobs and leisure? How best would sustainable consumption be framed in an Australian context? What impact does multi-culturalism have on the current sustainable consumption agenda, which takes a 'one size fits all' approach? Although not comprehensive, these are just a few suggestions that, it has been argued here, might help to prise open the potentially insightful relationships that exist between consumption and environmental perceptions in Australia today. Not only is this work intellectually challenging but it also offers a chance for geographers to add another voice to debates about consumption and the future of sustainability, in Australia and beyond.

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