

*As Dovetail wraps-up the [Consuming Responsibly](#) series, a time of reflection is encouraged to examine our role in purchasing and land use decisions that have the potential to adversely impact our environment. Nearly 20 years ago, many of these same concepts were addressed in the [Report of the Intelligent Consumption Project \(ICP\)](#) that outlined a framework to encourage and provide necessary information and incentives to make informed consumer choices. The effort was led by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters and the USDA Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory. Dr. **Jim Bowyer**, Dovetail Associate and Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota Department of Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering; and **Douglas MacCleery**, retired Assistant Director of Forest Management for the U.S. Forest Service in Washington, D.C. The following commentary is their reflection on the continued relevance of that work.*

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## Intelligent Consumption: the key to a sustainable future for the Earth

By Dr. Jim Bowyer and Douglas MacCleery

### Overview

Traditionally, resource conservation efforts have focused primarily on the land and on resource use, and extraction activities and their damaging impacts on important ecosystem values (biodiversity, water, forests, soils, etc.). Often ignored or given short shrift are the human consumptive behaviors and choices that are driving resource use and extraction.

Over the last several decades, the writings of Aldo Leopold and other conservationists have resulted in a strong societal acceptance of the idea that individuals have an ethical obligation to manage land in a way that reduces adverse ecological impacts and is sustainable over the long term. But there remains a lack of broad acceptance by society that consumers have a personal ethical obligation to make informed consumption choices that reduce their environmental footprints. Indeed, living in large homes and driving fuel guzzling vehicles often elevates social standing within a community – a situation that may be beginning to change with concerns over global climate change.

The Intelligent Consumption Project (ICP), which issued a [report](#) in May 2001, offers a useful and detailed framework for encouraging and providing the information and incentives for making informed consumer choices. This framework includes a focus on the following elements:

- 1) Ethics and moral authority
- 2) Technical and scientific information – including establishing a National Materials Commission
- 3) Research and development
- 4) Public education
- 5) Institutional incentives and barriers

Together the recommended actions in the ICP, were they to be effectively put in place, could help make responsible or intelligent consumption a core component of conservation and climate action in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Background on the Intelligent Consumption Project

The ICP grew out of an October 1999 conference “Building on Leopold’s Legacy: Conservation for the New Century,” hosted by the Wisconsin Society of Sciences, Arts and Letters. The conference was held in Madison, Wisconsin, on the fiftieth anniversary of the publishing of Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*. At the conference, Doug MacCleery delivered an address titled, *Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic: is it only half a loaf unless a consumption ethic accompanies it?* That address provided the conceptual basis for the ICP.

The ICP drew together a variety of conservation leaders, as well as those from industry, journalism, consumer advocacy and ethics. One of the report's organizers and editors was Curt Meine, the premier Leopold biographer.

The ICP sought to explore the role that informed consumer choices can play in shaping conservation policy and practice, and ultimately in shaping our landscape. Intelligent consumption can be viewed as a critical part of society's continuing effort to develop a holistic and viable conservation ethic.

Although the rate of population growth is slowing, the expected increase in the world's population within this century, as well as rising per capita incomes, will present society with challenges unprecedented in our history as a species. Not the least of these will be the challenge of providing food, energy, shelter, clothing, and other goods for an expanding population that is increasingly affluent and able to consume.

The ICP examines how responsible consumer choices, guided by a consumption ethic, can and should contribute to conservation efforts domestically and globally.

### Developments since the ICP Report was issued

Since the ICP Report was issued in 2001, there have been several developments aimed at raising consumer awareness of the environmental effects of their consumption choices and expanding availability of information helpful to making informed choices. Examples include:

- Growth and development of product certification systems, and increasing sophistication of such systems
- Use of life cycle assessment in guiding product design and manufacture, and strategic thinking vis-à-vis environmental problem solving

A variety of forms of media have also been developed over the past several decades which focus on environmental impacts of personal consumption. Among them are:

- A 2004 Oregon State University Extension bulletin authored by Viviane Simon-Brown highlighting the ICP and its lessons and implications. (<https://joe.org/joe/2004october/al.php>).
- Oregon State University Extension Service developed what they dubbed The Unshopping Card. It was a wallet-sized card that began with the question "Do I really need this?" the most important question in addressing responsible consumption. Then, assuming that the answer to the first question was "Yes" the would-be consumer was led through a series of additional questions:
  - Do I Really Need This? - Could I borrow, rent, or buy it used? - Is there a smaller model that might work just as well? - Is it made of renewable or recycled materials? -Is it recyclable or biodegradable? - Is it energy efficient? - Is it water efficient? -Is it worth the time I worked to pay for it? - Is it over-packaged? - How long will it last? -If it breaks, can it be fixed? - How will I dispose of it? - What is its environmental and social cost?
- Several documentaries highlighting the adverse impacts of consumption have been produced and received high viewership.
- The following books have also highlighted various challenges with personal consumption:
  - *Confronting Consumption* (2003) - <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/confronting-consumption>
  - *Prosperity without Growth* (2009) - <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/prosperity-without-growth-economics-finite-planet>

- *The End of the Long Summer* (2009) - <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/43531/the-end-of-the-long-summer-by-dianne-dumanoski/>
- *Living in Denial* (2011) - <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/living-denial>
- *Consumption and Its Consequences* (2012) - <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Consumption+and+Its+Consequences-p-9780745661070>
- *The Irresponsible Pursuit of Paradise, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (2017) - <https://itascabooks.com/the-irresponsible-pursuit-of-paradise/>
- *Consumption and the Consumer Society* (2019) - [http://www.bu.edu/eci/files/2019/10/Consumption\\_and\\_Consumer\\_Society.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/eci/files/2019/10/Consumption_and_Consumer_Society.pdf)

## Conclusion

In the last decade, widespread concern over the effects of global climate change and its existential threat to ecosystems and humans has brought renewed attention to reducing both individuals' and society's ecological footprint.

Despite the time that has passed since it was issued, the ICP Report and its detailed recommendations remain highly relevant today. It, along with other sources of information, provides a blueprint for reshaping our future.

The original and complete ICP Report is available at the Dovetail Partners website:  
<https://dovetailinc.org/portfoliodetail.php?id=678ab77a88dfc>