

**INFORMATION** **C O N S U M E R S**

A NEW SCIENCE : LEARNING TO CONSUME

47/73

The following text is taken from the Belgian consumers' magazine "TEST ACHATS" No. 133, dated March 1973. The magazine is published in Brussels (rue Royale 27) in French, with an edition in Dutch called "TEST AANKOOP". It seemed to us that this article would be of interest to our readers as evidence of a consciousness of practical problems in consumption and the environment, to the solution of which every European citizen can contribute by his own personal action. Without this participation, indeed, the big political decisions on the national level may well remain a dead letter.

"There is too much talk about pollution, and too little is done about it. Many indeed are the laments which end with the magic phrase "only in ...." followed by the mention of some obvious solution, and expressions of irritation that "they" do not adopt and implement it. Little by little the idea of inevitability is gaining ground. "Pollution cannot be got rid of, because it is the price of growth; and growth cannot be brought to a halt ....." "

We hear too much of "they should" and "all they have to do is.....". Why not begin with ourselves? We believe that everybody is capable of protecting the environment and that the only way of creating an adequate movement is by the addition of everybody's goodwill. It is useless for the State to lay down a mass of regulations if they do not enjoy the consent and support of consumers. There is no point in putting a gendarme at the elbow of every citizen. The Highway Code should, theoretically, shield us from the hecatomb, pollution by exhaust gases and the din; but the fact that drivers in general

X/192/73

are bad citizens makes the code a deadletter.

I have the right to park on the sidewalk, and I use it; but a day may come when I can no longer go down the street on foot, and loudly will I inveigh against the negligence of local authorities.

We shall not get out of this through laws, fines, lawsuits and de-pollution credits. We shall only get out of it by every consumer taking it into his own conscience, by the thorough conversion of everybody to the objectives of a balanced society. There is nothing abstract about this; it is not a moral reflection or spiritual illumination. Quite simply, it is a question of choosing, day after day and purchase after purchase, whichever product or whichever service does not pollute, does not kill, does not waste, does not impoverish the poorer members of our community.

#### Consuming better

We propose below a few definite gestures which will enable you both to economise and to reduce pollution. Each by itself may seem insignificant or paltry. There is in our society an insidious ideology which decries economy and treats it as a form of avarice.

"Be prodigal", say the prophets of this school, "and you will be happy". We would rather say: "Let us consume too much, and we shall live the less". Even if we have money and to spare, it is an act of folly to waste it in buying a heap of useless objects, all of them wrapped in masses of paper, cardboard and plastic. We are buying the wind, and we are hungry for our pains. There is joy, alike, in giving and in receiving; but there is no more than peevish disappointment in not counting the cost.

Advertising has conditioned us to buying more and more goods and doing so faster and faster; and thus we have acquired habits of consumption which are reflected in pollution in many forms, and in a quickening rate of waste. We must break away from these habits which are turning against us all. The advice which follows is with this in view.

It would be absurd to say "let us stop consuming". What we say is: "Let us consume better, more intelligently, more economically, with more

respect for others and for the framework of the life we live".

Serious estimates have been made by which we are told that at the rate we are going, there is only 20 year's supply of oil still left to us, only 15 year's supply of copper, 18 year's of zinc, 21 year's of lead. Admittedly these figures are open to dispute; but there can be no denying that the problem is serious; and it has already been reflected by comparative shortages. In 1972, the price of lead climbed by 43 % and those of zinc and tin rose by 12 %.

#### Save water

- Repair taps and pipes wherever there are leaks. Though the flow be tiny, it is continuous and adds up to a big waste. Often, all that is needed is to replace a washer.
- Do not allow a tap to flow more than it need -- for example, when you brush your teeth or wash your hands under the tap.
- If you are replacing your bath by a shower, remember that this uses 5 times as much water.
- See that washing machines and dish-washers are used only at full capacity. Wait till there is enough soiled linen or dirty crocks to give the machines a full load. You will be saving not only water, but also electricity.
- Do not use coloured toilet paper. The paper decomposes, but the dye pollutes the used water.
- Use only the strict minimum of detergent. Avoid detergents containing phosphate or enzymes. Do what you can to replace detergents by soap flakes. In the used water the soap dissolves of its own accord.
- Do not wash your car too often. The washing does not improve the state of the paintwork. Use bucket and sponge rather than a hose. After all, why do you wash your car at all? Isn't it just to impress the Jones's?

#### Save energy

- Reserves of energy are nearing exhaustion. Production of energy pollutes both water and atmosphere. Any waste of energy is an indirect act of pollution.

- Turn out the lights which are not necessary for what you are doing. Avoid extravagant lighting in the garden, the porch or the hall.
- Keep your lamps clean, so as not to have to use unduly powerful bulbs and lose part of the light they give.
- The colour of ceilings and walls has its influence on the light reflected from them.
- Block the drafts in your house to diminish fuel consumption.
- It's best to use your car as little as possible. The lower its power rating the better. In either case you will be committing less pollution.

#### Save packaging

- Paper comes from timber. The trees make the oxygen from which we live, protect us from erosion and preserve our natural resources.
- Do not use napkins, table cloths, drinking vessels or plates made of paper or board. Paper tissue used for cleaning can be replaced by a sponge.
- Do not wear paper clothing. The cost in use is disproportionate.
- Between two evils choose the lesser. Paper is preferable to plastic, which does not disintegrate and thus becomes everlasting refuse.
- Drink out of a glass, and do not use a straw, especially a plastic straw.
- Do not buy ironmongery (screws, nails or tools) sold on thick sheets of board and covered with a plastic capsule. This packaging often costs more than the product itself.
- Turn your back on over-packaged goods, such as slices of cheese individually wrapped in plastic, or big cardboard boxes much more voluminous than the product they contain. This cardboard debauchery is not given you for free -- its aim is to make you buy.
- Buy things for choice in bulk, using receptacles you will keep for the purpose, such as baskets, bags, jars, bottles or cardboard boxes.
- Do not buy magazines or newspapers which nobody in your family really needs.
- Do not use aluminium foil. Do not buy dishes sold in throw-away aluminium containers. Aluminium does not disintegrate. It is expensive, is a waste

of energy and will ultimately become scarce. You should realise that the metallurgy of the aluminium costs 20 kwh per kilogram. It should be kept for durables.

- If possible, do not buy products in aerosols. This type of packaging often costs more than the product; and even when it is empty there is the risk of explosion.
- Buy milk, water, wine and other liquids in returnable bottles. If this is not possible, choose glass rather than cardboard and cardboard rather than plastic.
- Refuse the bags (especially plastic bags) which some shops give you as a "present" for wrapping the smallest purchase. In any case you will be paying for them. A good strong hand-bag or string shopping bag are just as useful.
- A sheet of paper is a precious article. It represents a chunk carved out of the forest. Be sure you write on both sides.
- Do your best to promote the re-utilisation of materials by handing over your old newspapers, rags and papers to philanthropic societies, or firms which collect them.

#### Save transport

- Save transport : whenever possible let there be several people in the car. Take a look at a queue of cars -- in most of them the driver sits alone, whereas he could transport 4 people or more at the same cost. Think of this in arranging journeys to the office, to school or for a shopping bee.
- For long trips take the train rather than the car. The train is far less guilty of pollution and carries many more passengers than the car per unit of space or energy.
- For shorter trips, choose walking or cycling. It is healthier, often quicker and always causes less pollution".

No comment is needed. All that is left to us is to express a single wish -- that what you have just read shall one day become an integral part of european law until it becomes an integral part of the european conscience.