

### **The unsustainable season of “stuff”**

For every bag of garbage we throw away, we have created 70 garbage bags of waste upstream along the supply chain, according to American academic Annie Leonard, who has spent most of the last decade running around the world studying garbage.

That was food for thought indeed as I trudged last weekend along a mountain trail in Clearwater Bay, under High Junk Peak, looking down over the scores of ant-sized garbage trucks scurrying across Hong Kong's largest landfill. In this season of compulsive overconsumption, chilled by the palpable depression following the Copenhagen Climate Summit, it was sobering to be reminded that our global crisis is about more than CO<sub>2</sub> – it is about unsustainable depletion of all of our natural resources.

Did you know that 50% of all of the presents gifted at Christmas are discarded or passed on? Did you know that the food discarded by US and British households could meet the nutritional needs of 1.5bn people? Did you know that 99% of the “stuff” that we consume is trashed within six months? We are not just a world of compulsive consumers – we are a world of compulsive wasters – and it is costing our planet dear. One third of the world's total natural resource base – from wood, to metal ores, to oil and gas, to guano – has been used up in the past three decades. Instead of spending all of our mental energy on clever, complicated and politically impossible initiatives like global carbon trading schemes to solve our climate crisis, shouldn't we instead simply be focusing on our addictions to hyperconsumption, and our chronic wastefulness – except of course that there are uncountable millions of jobs around the world that depend on these two forces.

Annie Leonard's "*Story of Stuff*" will without question cause a stir when it is published in two months time. It is an epic description of the unsustainability of our present lifestyles – at least those of the world's rich nations. At the heart of this, inevitably, sits the US, with 5% of the world's population, but accounting for 30% of the world's resource use, and 30% of the world's waste. If the entire world were to consume at this level, we would need the resources embedded in three to five earth-sized planets. Of course, the fact that we only have access to one planet proves slightly problematic.

The poignant part of Annie Leonard's story is that the explosion of consumption that has occurred since 1950 coincides almost exactly with a persistent erosion of human happiness, according to US surveys spanning the past six decades. US national happiness apparently peaked sometime in the 1950s and America's lucky population has become steadily more miserable ever since. Ms Leonard puts this collapse down to the corrosive impact of advertising, which we are more harassed by today than at any past time. Bombarded by around 3,000 adverts a day, our contentment is under steady assault: "3,000 times a day, we're told that our hair is wrong, our clothes are wrong, our furniture is wrong, our cars are wrong – but that it can all be made right if we just go out shopping," she argues. As an obsessive avoider of advertising – and a very reluctant shopper – I can strongly empathise with her argument. Apparently the thing that seems to make us truly happy is time for friends, family and leisure. This becomes a problem when today, the large proportion of our leisure time is consumed by – you guessed it – watching advertisement-impregnated TV programmes, and shopping.

Annie Leonard's book comes hard on the heels of Tristram Stuart's "*Waste*", a comprehensive assault on the wastage that occurs at every stage of the food chain – from farm to fork as they say in the food industry. With an encyclopaedic

command of data from around the world, Stuart makes clear both the inefficiencies and the gratuitous and deliberate wastefulness that causes so much strain on the world's food supply system – and points towards steadily rising food prices in the years ahead. His is a story of spinach crops left to rot because laboratory samples showed traces of harmless grass mixed in with the spinach; of around 30m tonnes of fish discarded every year, and another 12m tonnes spoiled; of tomatoes, carrots, potatoes and legions of other fresh vegetables banished from supermarket shelves not because they are contaminated or inferior, but because they are not “visually perfect”; of “sell-by” dates designed not to protect us from food that would sicken us, but to encourage us to discard food – and replace it with a fresh visit to the supermarket – as quickly as possible.

With so many millions of jobs around the world dependent on our hyperconsumptive and wasteful ways, it is perhaps not surprising that as US and European consumers are forced to rein in on their excesses because of the sorry plight of their national economies after the 2008 global crash, they are calling on us here in Asia to save less and consume more. It seems impertinent to ask what is so wrong with consuming and wasting less – and saving more. If this wastefulness and hyperconsumption sits at the heart of our global resources crisis, surely it would make sense to pause, remember that human happiness seems not to be correlated with the accumulation of consumer goods, and consider other ways of measuring our progress as our planet heats around us.

As in all matters, it seems China sits at the epicenter of this challenge. Starved over past decades of the consumer chattels that seemed to mark the success and superiority of “developed” western economies, there are millions in China who are only too eager to rally behind the call to consume. This is entirely understandable, even if it is unhelpful as we wrestle with the rapid depletion of the world's natural resource base. It would seem to make sense for China's

leaders to discourage the development of this cult of consumption – or at least to ensure that consumption does not become the main measure of the success or progress of the society. It is worth remembering that in spite of the US's colossal consumer wealth, the US still has 35m poor people who go to bed every day undernourished, with more than 40m lacking any insurance providing access to health care. As with other countries, resources poured by China into education, comprehensive health care, and care for the elderly may well contribute more strongly to China's "national happiness" than encouraging a consumer explosion.

And apart from China's leaders, what am I doing personally? My New Year resolution is definitively to waste less, and to resist wherever I can the siren call of the advertisements that surround me. And yes, I will invest more time in my friends and family. With so many horrid things still overshadowing us in the economic sphere, this seems as good a way of securing happiness in 2010 as I can imagine.