

Consumption is Good ? !

It seems that it's natural to use energy, and the more the better.

Ecologists like Lotka (1922) and Odum and Pinkerton (1955) suggested that the biological systems that survive are those that develop the most power inflow and use it to best meet their needs for survival. Schneider and Kay (1994) proposed that a better description of these "power laws" would be that biological systems develop in a manner as to "increase their degradation rate, and that biological growth, ecosystem development and evolution represent the development of new dissipative pathways."

As ecosystems develop or mature they tend to increase their total dissipation, and develop more complex structures with greater diversity, more cycling, more energy flow and more hierarchical levels.

So ecological theory shows us that a complex adaptive system like the current industrial system will inherently evolve to maximise throughput of energy and materials.

I'm not disputing the benefits of efficiency, or the limits to growth. But there does seem to be a lot of (in my view) futile effort directed at encouraging people to consume less.

People are natural-born shoppers. I defy anyone reading this to claim that they have deprived themselves of that hifi, boat, shoes, camera, etc. that they really fancied.

You also can't solve environmental problems by simply using less.

There is a fundamental package of food and goods that a household requires, and while it's possible to make the footprint of that package smaller, we're still looking at about 7 tonnes of stuff per household per year, which is about 140 tonnes including embodied energy and mass.

You can avoid this shooting up to 10 or 15 tonnes of stuff by renting and buying durable products and so on, but even the thriftiest household will still have a basic consumption requirement. The focus for improvement must therefore be on changing product and process design so that materials flow is more systemic.

All products are ultimately disposable. We just need all of them to be designed to go back and become food for another system. So don't feel guilty about buying the products you have to get. Buy with caution and respect for the materials used. And divert the energy of your concerns into action -- tell the manufacturer of your new camera / car / bed etc. about how they can make it better. Most manufacturers think they are doing perfectly OK if they are complying with the law and have no-one demonstrating outside their head office. Going 100% cyclic solar and safe simply isn't on the agenda yet.

So what if every member of every environment group (that's about 5 to 50% of the population, depending what country you live in) asked the manufacturers of the myriad of products that they buy, from doorhandles to lipstick, to become 100% cyclic, solar and safe?