



ENVIRONMENT ISSUES: Ethical Consumerism

Ethical consumerism

Consumerism is really buying and using services or goods. To do this 'ethically' means buying products (or services) that do not harm the environment, and are made without harming the environment or exploiting workers. You can be a 'conscious consumer' by keeping this in mind when buying products, and getting to know where products come from and how they are made. The idea of shopping ethically can range from buying organic produce, fair trade goods, or ensuring your goods are not produced by exploited child labour.

Shopping ethically is about choice - choosing products you know are produced 'ethically' over others that are not. This choice could also see you 'boycotting' a particular product (refusing to purchase it) based on the grounds that you do not agree with how it is produced. Boycotting can have a huge impact on producers if it is widespread, and is a key way for consumers to have a voice about products in the market.

Case study: Bananas

Towards the end of 2009, a large supermarket chain in Britain decided to cut the cost of the bananas they sold from 99p/kg to 46p/kg. Top management at the supermarket said they were doing this to help families in the UK with their weekly shopping, by making it more economically feasible during the recession. However, whilst this was positive for shoppers in the UK, the knock-on effect on the banana producer has to be considered. Whilst the supermarket chain attested that this drastic drop in price would not harm producers, the competition it triggered with other supermarkets could. If other supermarkets lowered their prices too, this would put pressure on the producers to provide bananas for even less, and reduce their costs. This could lead to reducing wages paid to workers. These are already less than £1 a day in some cases, according to the Fairtrade Foundation. Is saving 50p a week in shopping worth the risk to banana producers' livelihoods?



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Fair trade

One way of shopping ethically is buying fair trade goods. This ensures that products have come from an 'ethical source' - a place where the workers (such as the farmers) are treated fairly. This may include things such as making sure they have been paid at least minimum wage and have good working conditions. Fair trade also ensures that producers are supported rather than exploited. The Fairtrade Foundation certifies products that meet these standards and their certification slogan 'guarantees a better deal for Third World producers', so look out for it the next time you are in the shop. This is not just for coffee and chocolate, but also many fruits and vegetables, dry goods and even cotton (in clothing) can have this symbol.



Fairtrade Schools

Schools can also promote ethical consumerism by becoming a Fairtrade School, a status approved through the Fairtrade Foundation. The certification ensures students learn more about how fair trade works, taking action in the community to promote it and also for the school to use as many Fairtrade certified products as possible. The Fairtrade Foundation website provides more information on how to apply.



Did you know?

- Buy Nothing Day (celebrated on the last Saturday of November in the UK) challenges consumers to not shop for a day, and highlights the environmental and ethical consequences of shopping.
- 80% of the world's resources are consumed by only 20% of the world's population.