

The Ecological Debt

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I went to one of those “Everything’s a Dollar” store and saw 10 ounces of frozen mango chunks for \$1.25. I bought four bags and opened one at home to eat. I started to think about where mangoes were grown and what it took to get this package of frozen mango chunks to me. How is it possible for these mango chunks to only cost \$1.25? I thought of all the people’s labor who went to produce this: those who grew the mangoes, picked, cut them up, processed, shipped, and worked in the store where I bought them. The only way that this package could cost so little had to be that some of the workers in production of this package were not being paid a living wage.

Where do the consumer goods we buy in the United States come from? I started looking at the labels on my clothing, food, and other items. Articles of clothing often say the country that produced them: China, Venezuela, Bangladesh, India, etc. But what about other goods? I bought a grow light that I thought was produced in our local area only to realize it was assembled in our local area, but the pieces came from China. Our consumer goods and the natural resources used in production here come from around the world. Often in the U.S., we have no knowledge of the working conditions for those who produce the consumer goods and raw materials. We are also unaware of the environmental destruction caused in the mining of raw materials.

The lifestyles of those in the U.S. and other wealthy nations result in fundamental inequalities. Low-income countries consume six times less material and generate 10 times fewer climate impacts. The global minority has roughly 25% of the world's population but earns 80% of the wealth and tends to dominate the global majority, both politically and economically.

Since much of our food and raw, natural resources come from the global majority where most of these workers live in poverty, the global majority is subsidizing the lifestyles of the global minority. Pope Francis refers to this as a true “ecological debt.” An ecological debt is owed to the global majority since the natural resources and labor that give the global minority inexpensive consumer goods and food come from the global majority.

Furthermore, the overuse of consumer goods has caused the Earth, in the words of Pope Francis, to begin “to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”

The places where this “filth” is deposited or left behind are in poor neighborhoods and poor countries with fewer enforceable environmental regulations. In the United States, landfills are found in poorer neighborhoods. In other countries, mining companies, after taking the available raw resources, leave behind dispossessed humans and environmental damages such as deforestation, polluted waters, and barren, poisoned land. These raw resources are used for cell phones and other electronic devices among other consumer goods. The multinational companies, producing consumer

goods and raising capital in wealthy nations, are able to operate with little restraint on their activities among the global majority.

Villages, once self-sustaining in raising their own food, can no longer do so; the people migrate to the larger, over-crowded cities or to other countries in search of life for themselves and their children. The warming of the Earth means that a rise in temperature, along with the resultant drought, has made farming less productive or even impossible.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls us to an ecological conversion to be protectors of the Earth. He states that this is “not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (*Laudato Si'*, 217). This conversion must result in efforts to move our political and economic systems to policies and practices which protect the Earth, our common home. This effort is particularly important, as the next administration plans to roll back current U.S. regulations which protect the earth.

As individuals, we can purchase goods from Fair Trade companies and participate in efforts to change systemic inequalities.

[Use It and Lose It: The Outsize Effect of U.S. Consumption on the Environment | Scientific American](#)

[Rich countries use six times more resources, generate 10 times the climate impacts than low-income ones](#)