

Annie Leonard

... and *The Story of Stuff*



*In December 2007, Annie Leonard released the online video [The Story of Stuff](#), which, in a lively graphic style, sums up her past 20 years in global pursuit of the truth about the things we buy, use, and throw away. Written by Leonard, and filmed in partnership with [Free Range Studios](#), *The Story of Stuff* has been viewed by millions. The video's Web site averages 10,000 hits per day, and Leonard gets close to 300 e-mails daily in response to her message about the planetary impact of a consumption-based lifestyle.*

*Employed as a teaching tool in thousands of schools and shown in public meetings and at private parties in homes across the globe, the film has also generated controversy that continues to grow. Early in 2009, a teacher in Missoula, Montana was threatened with dismissal for incorporating *The Story of Stuff* in her curriculum. In September 2009, conservative pundit Glenn Beck took aim, accusing the filmmaker of indoctrinating America's children with an anti-consumption, anti-American agenda.*

*Leonard, whose new book *The Story of Stuff* (Simon & Schuster) is scheduled for release in March 2010, is happy to challenge her attackers with her vision for a sustainable future.*

– Noelle Robbins

Is the message in *The Story of Stuff* – a critique of the impact of consumer lifestyles on the global environment – only for American audiences?

We were planning a film that included a more international look at the issues, but it was too long, at 40 minutes. The experts at Free Range Studios felt audiences would only watch online for 20 minutes, max. So the international portion was cut. But the message resonates internationally. Many people I've heard from – from 200 countries and territories – are getting the same message, the same pressure to consume and buy to help boost their economies.

Are there also those in other countries who are saying, “It’s our turn. We want to consume. Don’t tell us we can’t. Don’t put your value system on us just because you’ve overdone it”?

You see that playing out in the climate debate for sure. China and India are saying, “Who are you to tell us not to build our coal-fired powered plants?” To me that says, all the more reason we have to reduce our consumption, here in the over-consumptive regions. Right now, in the US, we are five percent of the world’s population and are consuming 30 percent of the world’s resources. We as a nation have no moral credibility to go around saying everybody else needs to tighten their belts.



The Story of Stuff stirred controversy this past year – there seems to be a real fear of people being told our way of life is not good, and you have been called un-American.

That really fascinated me because I feel like I was being pro-American in the film. I said that I believe in government for the people, by the people, and of the people. I have strong faith in the potential of government. I also think our country has gone astray.

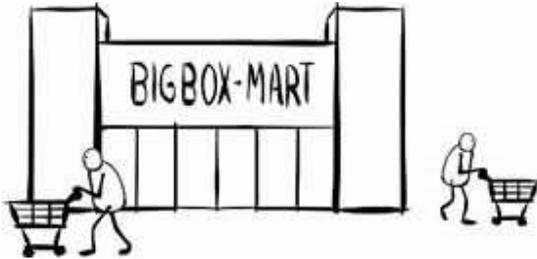
If you look at the quality-of-life indicators for countries around the world, we are doing very poorly on health, on environmental impact, on literacy, on so many indicators of a high quality of life. The [Happy Planet Index](#) by the [New Economics Foundation](#) in London crunches two different kinds of numbers. One is about quality of life and happiness. The data they use is about life satisfaction and life expectancy. Then they look at the quality of life over amount of resources consumed. So it is a measure of how effective a country is at converting resources into well-being. It’s your nation’s life happiness over your national footprint. And the US rates frighteningly low; the only industrialized country lower than us in 2009 was Luxembourg. All of Asia, all of Latin America, all of the Pacific, all of the Caribbean, all of Europe is doing much, much better than us at converting natural resources into happiness.

In our country, we have a dual crisis. There’s the environmental crisis: We are absolutely trashing the planet, we’re using up our water, we’re releasing all this carbon. But we also have this social crisis – communities are eroding, income inequality is up, obesity is up, diabetes is up. It seems to me, to not raise these issues and say we could do better, that would be anti-American. True patriotism and true loyalty to this country require standing

up and pointing out when we're going astray. If you're in a ship, and it's sinking, and pointing out that it's sinking is considered disloyal, then you're going to sink.

Do people feel personally threatened by your message? They seem so angry.

I was giving a talk last year about the digital television conversion deadline. We had to switch over, so tens of millions of televisions were thrown away. They each contain four to seven pounds of lead. They were perfectly good, working televisions. But you had to buy this small converter box. The box cost \$50 (although coupons made them practically free), and you had to go to Best Buy and buy a converter box. So a lot of people just said, "Oh what the heck, I'll buy a new television." It was a good excuse to buy one anyway. There were organizations pushing converter boxes, and trying to get places like Best Buy to push them, rather than a new TV.



So I was giving this talk, and one person in the audience said, "The problem is, the way our entertainment centers are built, there isn't a convenient place to put the converter box. So what do you have to say about that?"

And I said, "Quit your goddamn whining. There isn't a place in your entertainment center to put your converter box? In other communities that I see, their problems are that they have to walk ten kilometers to get fresh water; their problems are that they can't get a doctor once a year for their kid." I mean, we've got to get some perspective on the extreme privilege and wastefulness we have in our society. I am not saying we have to live like people in Bangladesh, or in caves, or anything like that, but the amount of wastefulness is so extreme.

Overall, does Western Europe consume less and know how to do better with less, than the US?

Oh, they do, it's not just my opinion. If you look at the data, the per capita waste production, energy consumption, everything is so much lower in Western Europe. And



when you go there, they're not having a bad time.

I've lived in Bangladesh and I loved it there, but I am not going to compare that to here, because most people in the US don't want to live in Bangladesh. But in Western Europe, they're sitting in cafes, eating good sandwiches, and taking six-week vacations. There are two big differences there: Culturally they just aren't as wasteful as we are. They have clotheslines and carry their own bags to the store. Those things are just not a big deal. And structurally, they have great public transportation, they don't all need cars. Homes are smaller; and neighborhoods are more condensed, so they can easily walk to their local market each day. They don't have to drive to Costco once a week. The public transportation is so good there that people routinely take trains. Taking a train in the US is expensive and inconvenient. So it is cultural stuff, and structural stuff, and the government really takes the lead in facilitating a more ecological lifestyle.

Would you say there is a role for government to promote the ecological message?

I think there is a huge role for government to do that. I was asking some Europeans why they were so willing and welcoming of the government to take the lead, and here's what someone told me that I thought was interesting: Because they had been through the post-war experience, and they were so devastated, there is just a more socially oriented awareness that they really had to pitch in and help each other. You see it in everything. There are more food co-ops, nationalized healthcare.

Maybe what is happening in the United States with communities becoming so disconnected means people are just less aware of what's going on with other people?

As the community is broken down, the kinds of services the community has historically provided – help with childcare; recreational opportunities that don't cost money; help moving; watching your house when you're on a trip; bringing in your mail – as our communities have been eroded, these services have been privatized, so rich people can still afford them. Rich people can pay people to walk their dogs and bring in their mail. They can go to private schools and buy books. So it's creating a two-tier society here. I have to call it resource apartheid.

You've said we shouldn't be measuring the economy; we should be measuring the ecology? How do we do that?

There are so many ways. It's so fascinating to me that we don't. We think that what we need to survive is the economy, but we forget that what we actually need is the environment.

The [Global Footprint Network](#) is a great resource for looking at the footprint of different countries. Their data tracks our resource consumption, and, right now, we are using 1.4 planets' worth of resources every year globally. That's a problem. We only have one planet, and a lot more people need to use a lot more just to get up to their basic needs. We have more people hungry on the planet right now than any time in history. If we're using 1.4 planets that means we're eating into the natural capital that's been stored up all these years. Not only are we using more than the planet is producing, we're undermining the ecological systems that will be producing in the future.

They also calculate a day every year, called Earth Overshoot Day, that's the day by which we have used that year's worth of the planet's productive capacity. So from Earth Overshoot Day until the end of the year, we are consuming on credit. In 2009, it was



That is a huge crisis, and it's not getting press. Another great indicator is the Genuine Progress Index. One of the problems with the GDP [Gross Domestic Product] as a metric is that all it's measuring is economic activity. It doesn't differentiate between economic activity that makes life better, and economic activity that makes life worse. So for example, a car crash adds to the GDP, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill adds to the GDP. Getting cancer adds to the GDP. Getting divorced adds to the GDP.

Volunteering, or having clean air don't add to the GDP. But they add to the quality of life. So there are some other metrics that people have been trying to develop that take a more comprehensive view of how we're doing. And the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) is a good one.

There's a chart in *The Story of Stuff* book that shows for a long time GDP and GPI rose together, but after a point they diverged. A lot of stuff that adds to the GDP is undermining our health and well-being. We need to pay attention to what we measure. And right now what we are measuring is not what makes life better.

I like to remind people that economic activity should be in service of making life better. It's not an end in itself, it's a tool, and in many places it is a very effective tool to make life better, but not always.

Tell me more about your book.

The book looks in more detail at the extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of all our stuff, with a lot of personal stories – it puts the meat on the skeleton of the film, with more analysis and recommendations on ways we can turn things around.

Do you have plans to put out the other 20 minutes of *The Story of Stuff* geared toward international communities?

First we're making a bunch of little films that I am really excited about. *The Story of Stuff* Web page is still getting about 10,000 hits per day from all over the world, and we're doing no outreach. Since we're getting so many views per day, and it's not slowing down, we felt like we should continue to provide information. Now we're working with a whole spectrum of environmental and health groups to make new minifilms. So when you watch *The Story of Stuff* these little icons will pop up that say there is more to the story, and a viewer can click on it, and go deeper. We're going to make a story of bottled water, story of electronics, story of cosmetics and personal care products. This should all be online when the book comes out (March 2010). I do want to make another 20-minute film about solutions. We're thinking of calling it *The Story of Change*.

http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/annie_leonard/