

Today's oxymoron: the green consumer

Doing it right means having less, not tossing stuff and buying eco-friendly replacements

Monica Hesse, Washington Post

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Congregation of the Church of the Holy Organic, let us now buy.

Let us buy Anna Sova Luxury Organics Turkish towels, \$58 apiece. Let us buy the eco-friendly 600-thread-count bedsheets, milled in Switzerland with U.S. cotton, \$570 for queen size.

Let us purge our closets of those sinful synthetics, purify ourselves in the flame of the soy candle at the altar of the immaculate Earth Weave rug, and let us buy, buy, *buy* until we are whipped into a beatific froth of free-range fulfillment.

And let us never consider the other organic option - *not* buying - because the new green consumer wants to consume, not make do with hand-me-down baby clothes and out-of-date carpet.

There was a time when buying organic meant Whole Foods and farmers' markets. But in the past two years, the word has seeped out of the supermarket and into the home store, into the vacation industry, into Wal-Mart. Almost three-quarters of the U.S. population buys organic products at least occasionally; between 2005 and 2006, the sale of "organic" non-food items increased 26 percent, from \$744 million to \$938 million, according to the Organic Trade Association.

The privileged, eco-friendly American realized long ago that SUVs were Death Stars - now we see that our gas-only Lexus is one, too. Best replace it with a 2008 LS 600 hybrid for \$104,000 (it actually gets fewer miles per gallon than some traditional makes, but, see, it is a *hybrid*).

It feels so good. It looks so good. It feels so good to look so good, which is why conspicuousness is key. *These countertops are pressed paper.*

When renowned environmentalist Paul Hawken is asked to comment on the new green consumer, he says, "The phrase itself is an oxymoron."

Oh?

"The good thing is people are waking up to the fact that we have a real (environmental) issue," says Hawken, who co-founded Smith & Hawken but left in 1992, before the \$8,000 lawn became de rigueur. "But many of them are coming to the issue from being consumers. They buy a lot. They drive a lot."

They subscribe to a destiny laid out in 1955 by economist Victor Lebow: "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction ... in consumption. ... We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate."

The culture of obsolescence has become so deeply ingrained that it's practically reflexive. Sweaters with holes get pitched, not mended. Laptops and cell phones get slimmer and shinier. We trade up every six months, and to make up for that, we buy and buy and hope we're buying the right *other* things, though sometimes we're not sure: When the market research firm Hartman Group asked devout green consumers what the USDA "organic" seal meant on a product, 43 percent did not know. (The seal means the product is at least 95 percent organic - no pesticides, no synthetic hormones, no sewage sludge, no irradiation, no cloning.)

Which is why something gets lost in translation.

Polyester bad. Solution? Throw out the old wardrobe and replace with natural fibers!

Linoleum bad. Solution? Rip up the old floor and replace with cork!

It's done with the best of intentions, but that "bad" vinyl flooring was probably less destructive in your kitchen than in a landfill (unless it was a health hazard). Ditto for the older, but still wearable, clothes.

And that's not even getting into the carbon footprint left by a nice duvet's 5,000-mile flight from Switzerland. (Oh, all right: a one-way ticket from Zurich to the East Coast, never mind that final push cross-country produces about 1,500 pounds of carbon dioxide.)

Really going green, Hawken says, "means having less. It does mean less. Everyone is saying, 'You don't have to change your lifestyle.' Well, yes, actually, you do."

But, but, but - buying green feels so *guiltless*. "There's a certain thrill that you get to go out and replace everything," says Leslie Garrett, author of "The Virtuous Consumer," a green shopping guide. "New bamboo T-shirts, new hemp curtains."

Garrett describes the conflicting feelings she and her husband experienced when trying to decide whether to toss an old sofa: "Our dog had chewed on it - there were only so many positions we could put it in" without the teeth marks showing. But it still fulfilled its basic role: "We could still sit on it without falling through."

They could still subscribe to the crazy notion that conservation was about ... conserving. Says Garrett, "The greenest products are the ones you don't buy."

There are exceptions. "Certain environmental issues trump other issues," Garrett says. "Preserving fossil fuels is more critical than landfill issues." If your furnace or fridge is functioning but inefficient, you can replace it guilt-free.

Ultimately, Garrett and her husband did buy a new sofa - but only after finding another home for their old couch.

Chip Giller, editor of enviro-blog Grist.org, applauds the efforts of the green consumer. He loves that Wal-Mart has developed an organic line.

"Two years ago, who would have thought we'd be in a place where terms like locavore and carbon footprint were household terms?" says Giller, who views green consumption as a "gateway" to get more people involved in environmental issues. The important thing is for people to keep walking through the gate, toward the land of reduced air travel, energy-efficient homes and much less stuff: "We're not going to buy our way out of this."