

# OUR CONSUMER SOCIETY

## WHAT WE CONSUME

Ten curriculum units dealing with issues of environment and development



UNIT

**3**



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# THE PROJECT'S KEY QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTS

## A ECONOMIC PRODUCTION

- A1 What natural resources are being used or conserved?
- A2 For what purposes are they being used or conserved? By whom, how and why?
- A3 What is the impact of economic production on the environment? What environments does it produce?
- A4 Is the production ecologically sustainable?
- A5 Is the production socially useful? Does it meet people's basic needs?
- A6 Who owns and controls the natural resources and technology used in economic production?
- A7 What power do workers have to decide what is made and how it is produced?
- A8 In what ways is economic production changing and how is this likely to affect the use of nature in the future?
- A9 How does the society's history and present position within the world economy shape its production, development and use of nature?

*Sample concepts:* nature, ecosystem, land, land use, natural resource, renewable resource, non-renewable resource, resource conservation, labour, energy, capital, technology, alternative technology, ecologically sustainable production, economic development, industrialisation, needs, wants, ownership, economic power, economic democracy, division of labour, capitalism, profit, market, socialism, economic planning, state collectivism, world economy, interdependence, commodity chains, multi-national company, colonialism, imperialism, terms of trade, global division of labour, dependent development, economic recession, product cycle.

## B DISTRIBUTION AND REDISTRIBUTION

- B1 How are the benefits and costs of economic production distributed and redistributed? What principles determine this and what methods are used to bring it about?

- B2 What is the level of inequality in society? Are differences in wealth and environmental well being increasing or decreasing?
- B3 Is poverty a cause of environmental damage?
- B4 Does wealth result in wasteful production and environmental damage?
- B5 What amount of wealth is used for environmental research, management and conservation? How is the charge for this distributed?
- B6 Would redistribution of wealth, and greater equality within society, assist a transition to ecologically sustainable production and development?
- B7 How is the society involved in transfers of trade, investment, technology, loans and aid?
- B8 Do these transfers help or hinder the society in moving towards ecologically sustainable production and development?
- B9 Would a redistribution of wealth and greater equality between societies assist moves towards ecodevelopment?

*Sample concepts:* wealth, waste, poverty, environmental poverty, equality/inequality, scarcity/surplus, supply, demand, population, consumption, conservation, trade, investment, aid, social welfare, justice, environmental management, international economic order, competition/co-operation, arms trade.

## C POWER AND DECISION MAKING

- C1 How is the society governed?
- C2 How does government regulate the use of nature?
- C3 How does government plan and manage the environment? What institutions and procedures exist for this? How are decisions made? How are conflicts over the environment resolved or managed?
- C4 What power do people have to participate in political decision making? How



is political power distributed in society? According to what procedures and rules is it used?

- C5 In what ways does environmental politics reflect the power and interests of different groups in society? What policies and strategies do environmental groups adopt in seeking to influence the political process?
- C6 What forms of economic development does the government support? In what ways are the government's economic and foreign policies related to the society's role in world economy?
- C7 In what ways do the government's economic, foreign and other policies shape its policies on the environment?
- C8 In what ways does the international political system seek to resolve global environmental problems? Does competition between nation states prevent international action on environmental problems?
- C9 In what ways do environmentalists seek to influence the national and international political system?

*Sample concepts:* politics, power/powerlessness, nation state, local state, international politics, government, forms of government, parties, pressure groups, law, force, authority, manipulation, reason, co-operation/conflict, representation, democracy, consultation, corruption, participation, bureaucracy.

## D SOCIAL ORGANISATION

- D1 What distinct groups exist in society and what amounts of economic and political power do they have at their disposal?
- D2 Are there movements working to extend democracy; to give more people some control of economic production and political decision making?
- D3 What form do these movements take? What are their aims and tactics?
- D4 Do the movements incorporate environmental goals? What issues do they tackle? How effective are they?
- D5 What groups work with environmentalists in such movements? What part do women play? What part do ethnic minorities play?
- D6 Which groups in society oppose such movements for greater democracy and what actions do they take?
- D7 What have the movements learnt from their campaigns?

- D8 Do the movements co-operate at all levels, including the international level?

*Sample concepts:* individual, family, community, class, racism, patriarchy, social order/disorder, consent/dissent, social control, social movements, environmental movement, voluntary groups, pressure groups, trade union, consumer organisations, social responsibility, appropriate technology, co-option, alienation.

## E CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

- E1 What are the accepted ways of interacting with, and thinking about, nature and the environment?
- E2 In what ways is the society's culture and ideology being changed by economic development? What role do external forces play in this?
- E3 How does technology reflect and shape people's relations with nature? What alternative or appropriate technologies would alter these relations?
- E4 How do ideas from the natural and social sciences, and from other areas of knowledge, reflect and shape our relations with nature? What ideas are taught in schools? What ideas are not taught? What ideas act as ideology?
- E5 What ideas are used by groups and parties engaged in environmental politics? How do these ideas reflect material interests?
- E6 What messages about nature, the environment and the world does popular culture transmit? What role does popular culture play in consumerism and imperialism?
- E7 To what extent do news media explain the real causes of problems relating to development and the environment?
- E8 What elements of traditional, minority and alternative cultures could be useful in creating an ecologically sustainable society?

*Sample concepts:* cultural needs, communication, language, custom, tradition, religion, myth, values, moral code, world view, knowledge, science, social science, advertising, popular culture, consumer culture, political culture, education, environmental education, culture contact, cultural imperialism.



EXAMPLES OF HOW THE PROJECT DEVELOPS POLITICAL LITERACY				
This figure should be read in conjunction with Figure 3. Numbers in brackets refer to the units in <i>What We Consume</i> .				
ATTITUDES & PROCEDURAL VALUES	SKILLS	Communication Skills	KNOWLEDGE	Practical Knowledge and Understanding
<div>1. Willingness to be critical of estimates of the deforested area in Amazonia (5).</div> <div>2. Willingness to give reasons why one agrees, or disagrees, with the policies of the Tigray Liberation Front (6), or uses private rather than public transport (8).</div> <div>3. Respect for evidence that the Soviet Union has attempted to clean up Lake Baikal (7).</div> <div>4. Willingness to change one's attitudes and values when confronted with new evidence on the causes of famine in Ethiopia (6).</div> <div>5. Value fairness when reaching a decision on whether or not to buy goods from a firm which imports hardwoods from Brazil (5).</div> <div>6. Value the freedom of trade unionists to influence the nature of work and economic production (10).</div> <div>7. Tolerate a diversity of ideas, beliefs, values and interests about possible futures for the UK countryside (4).</div>	<div><b>Intellectual Skills</b></div> <div>1. Ability to interpret and evaluate information and evidence from different sources on acid rain (9).</div> <div>2. Ability to use political concepts &amp; ideas to organise information about the Countryside Commission (4).</div> <div>3. Ability to apply reasoning skills to the problems of food surpluses &amp; construct sound arguments for restructuring the CAP (4).</div> <div>4. Ability to perceive the consequences of taking or not taking, direct action in order to prevent the felling of forests (10).</div> <div><b>Action Skills</b></div> <div>1. Ability to participate in a group decision concerning migration in Brazil (5).</div> <div>2. Ability to use local government in order to create a "greener" town (8).</div>	<div>1. Ability to design a newspaper page supporting or opposing government policy on acid rain (9).</div> <div>2. Ability to participate in a discussion on the real value of Band Aid (6).</div> <div>3. Ability to perceive and understand the interests, beliefs and views of environmentalists supporting different political parties (1).</div> <div>4. Ability to exercise empathy with a school pupil in China (8) a shopper in Moscow (7) or a family in Brazil (5).</div>	<div><b>Propositional Knowledge</b></div> <div>1. The structure of power within the UN system as it affects the review of the Antarctic Treaty (9).</div> <div>2. How disputes over access to farmers' land are settled in the UK (4).</div> <div>3. How disputes over economic policy &amp; development are settled in China (8).</div> <div>4. Where the resources of UNEP come from and how they are used (9).</div> <div>5. The possible consequences should dockland communities in London be given resources to plan and develop their own environment (10).</div> <div>6. How some local government authorities in Britain have spent more on the environment and job creation than the national government considers necessary (10).</div> <div>7. How some rubber tappers in Brazil have promoted sustainable development policies for forest areas (5).</div>	<div><b>Practical Knowledge and Understanding</b></div> <div>1. The differing values, goals &amp; methods of the CEEB, UK government and Greenpeace, in the dispute over acid rain (9).</div> <div>2. The possible danger of pesticide residues on our food &amp; the failure of politicians to impose and enforce adequate controls (1).</div> <div>3. How poverty and desertification in Ethiopia is linked to the foreign policies of other nations, including those of the USSR (6).</div> <div>4. How to lobby one's MEP in an attempt to influence the restructuring of the CAP; knowledge of how to use the local press to draw public attention to one's views (4).</div> <div>5. A developing understanding of the decision-making process in a state collectivist economy, and the meaning of democracy within such societies (6, 7, 8).</div> <div>6. Knowledge of how to obtain information about environmental pressure groups and their policies (several units).</div>



# KEY IDEAS

- 1 All economic activity depends upon the use of energy and materials supplied by natural systems. The production, use and disposal of the goods and services we consume have an impact on these systems and on the human environments in which we live. These impacts can be reduced or regulated by changes in the behaviour of individuals, communities, companies and governments. Governments can use economic instruments and legislation to ensure that development takes a more sustainable path.
- 2 The period between 1945 and 1975 was one of sustained growth in Britain's economy resulting from increasing mass production and consumption. Economic growth served the needs of capital (profits, markets, capital accumulation), workers (full employment, rising material living standards, expansion of welfare services) and the state (taxes, political support) and provided the foundation for a consumer society. This form of development was not ecologically sustainable and did not eradicate poverty and inequality. An alternative form of sustainable development, based on an extension of economic and political democracy, could find wide support amongst the poor and those concerned about the environment and social justice.
- 3 Despite economic growth, Britain continued to decline relative to its major competitors. Failure to modernize its economy meant that it was severely affected by the global recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and that it was ill prepared to take advantage of the opportunities which new technologies and changes in the world economy then made available. Appropriate investment could enable Britain to maintain a world lead in emerging technologies like biotechnology. These could play a key role in the transition to sustainable development.
- 4 Green consumerism and ethical investment can limit the impacts of consumption and investment on natural systems and human environments. While legislation could encourage green consumerism and ethical investment in ways which individual consumers, companies or financial institutions are unable to do, government action is constrained by the actions of other governments or the need to preserve international competitiveness.
- 5 Britain lacks a coherent and comprehensive environmental policy which regulates society's relations with the natural world and promotes sustainable development. In the 1980s the politics of transport, electricity privatisation and waste recycling illustrated the Government's failure to integrate the environment with other areas of policy and its readiness to favour short-term economic interests over long-term environmental goals.
- 6 Social movements, like the womens' movement and the environmental movement, challenge dominant forms of economic and social development. They argue and work for sustainable development which requires new kinds of relationships between people and between people and nature. Women can play a key role in the transition to sustainable development provided that all work is shared more equitably between men and women. New technologies could also reduce the amount of work which people have to do and allow them more time for community development.
- 7 Consumerism is encouraged by marketing, advertising and popular culture and exerts a considerable influence over young people. It offers material benefits, but these may fail to meet people's needs or compensate adequately for the lack of fulfilment they may experience in their everyday lives. Environmentalists seek to increase support for sustainable development by focussing on the environmental costs of consumerism and real benefits to be derived from changed lifestyles and patterns of consumption.
- 8 The growth of environmental awareness, green consumerism and a new middle or service class seeking a distinct identity, mean that images of nature are increasingly used in marketing and advertising. Many of these images serve to conceal the true nature of the relationship between our consumer society and the natural world.



**FIGURE 1**

**THE CURRICULUM MATRIX**

ACTIVITY	KEY QUESTIONS	KEY IDEAS	GEOGRAPHY NATIONAL CURRICULUM
3.1 The Real Cost	A1-5, A8, B1, C6-8, E3	1	AT5 5b, 7c AT4 6b, 9b
3.2 Living on the Treadmill	A4-5, A9, B1-4, B6, D1, E2	2	AT5 8a, 10a AT2 6a
3.3 What Chance for the Sunrise Seven?	A6, 8 & 9, C6, E3	3	AT5 7a AT4 8c, 10a
3.4 Shopworker	A1-5, A7, B1, D4 & 5 E5 & 6	4, 8	AT4 6c AT2 4c
3.5 Investing in the Environment	A4 & 5, B1, B5,	4	AT4 8d
3.6 Making the Connections	C1-7, C9	5	AT4 9c AT5 6a
3.7 Wealth from Waste	A1-2, B4, C1-7, C9	5	AT5 2c, 7a
3.8 Women's Work	A7 & 8, B1, B6, C9, D1-5, E8	6, 7	AT2 5b, 7a
3.9 Rethinking School Uniform	A1-5, D2 & 3, E2, E5	7	AT2 5b, 6a
3.10 Advertising with Nature	E1, E4, E6	8	AT4 8d

The activities also support many of the aims and objectives outlined in the NCC's Curriculum Guidance documents on environmental education, citizenship and economic and industrial understanding.

The module's curriculum framework of Key Questions and Concepts can be found on pages 12 and 13



Source: Mark Edwards/Still Pictures/WWF UK



**What We Consume** is one of two curriculum modules which together make up WWF United Kingdom's *Global Environmental Education Programme*.

- **What We Consume** examines what children consume and the environment.
- **Where We Live\*** is a further project looking at the environment and where we live.

**What We Consume** consists of a Teachers' Handbook and ten curriculum units sampling environment and development issues around the world.

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| Unit One*   | <b>Society and Nature</b>  |
| Unit Two    | <b>The Rise of Industrial Society</b>  |
| Unit Three* | <b>Our Consumer Society</b>  |
| Unit Four * | <b>The United Kingdom:</b> Agriculture and Wetland Drainage                            |
| Unit Five*  | <b>Brazil:</b> Rondonia's Cattle Frontier and the Destruction of Tropical Moist Forest |
| Unit Six    | <b>Nigeria:</b> Environment and Development  |
| Unit Seven* | <b>The USSR:</b> Lake Baikal and Water Management                                      |
| Unit Eight* | <b>China:</b> Beijing - A Livable City?  |
| Unit Nine   | <b>Multi-lateral Action and the Environment</b>  |
| Unit Ten*   | <b>The Environment and Democracy</b>   |

\*Already published

For information on these and other teaching materials produced by WWF, contact WWF United Kingdom, Weyside Park, Catteshall Lane, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR.

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