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Ethical Consumption

Nicole Shannon

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Nicole Shannon

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Ethical Consumption

Climate change and environmental destruction have become topics of interest both in politics and in the day-to-day lives of consumers. Widespread media makes people hyper-aware of events going on around them, and it seems like there's a new environmental crisis every month. Amidst this chaos, many everyday people take it upon themselves to do what they can to help out. Large companies have taken note of this sentiment and hope to raise their profits by targeting consumers who care about the environment. Many of them start carrying what are referred to as ethically produced items— things like organic produce, goods made of recycled material, and energy-efficient lightbulbs. Some corporations even offer discounts to their customers who use reusable items such as bags and cups. While these actions can help consumers feel better about current environmental issues, small-scale attempts at ethical consumption— such as a vegan diet, buying fair trade goods, or living a plastic-free lifestyle— do not actually make a difference in the long run.

The first, and arguably the most notorious method of ethical consumption is veganism. Individuals can decide to go vegan for many different reasons— as a way to protest animal cruelty, to reduce their carbon footprint, or simply to live a healthier life. There are varying levels of veganism as well; there are vegans who only follow the dietary aspect of veganism, vegans who both follow the vegan diet and also avoid products such as leather and silk, and even vegans who not only follow the vegan diet, but also avoid any foods that have been processed

(Ciocchetti 406). Seemingly, the only true requirement to be considered a vegan is to eat a plant-based diet. Plant-based diets consist mostly or entirely of foods derived from plants. This includes vegetables, grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, and fruits. An individual who follows a plant-based diet cannot eat any kind of animal product, such as meat, dairy, eggs, or honey.

This sounds like it should be beneficial to the environment, and to an extent, it is. However, many vegan-friendly food items are produced in small, politically unstable countries that make the vast majority of their limited wealth through the sale of a specific crop. In these countries, indigenous farms and farmers are being exploited for foods that were once produced and consumed moderately (Carrier and Luetchford 46). This includes foods like chickpeas, quinoa, avocado, cashews, and coconut, which are now needing to be mass-produced to meet the demand of corporate supermarkets who supply these foods to so-called ethical consumers. This practice not only has a devastating effect on the price of said plants, but the welfare of the crop workers and the land itself.

Another popular method of ethical consumption is buying goods that have been certified as Fair Trade. The Fair Trade system is an institutional arrangement designed primarily to help small farmers and workers in developing countries achieve better trading conditions. Any product with a Fair Trade emblem must be made according to the social, environmental, and economic standards set by the four certified Fair Trade organizations— Fair Trade USA, Fair Trade America, Fair Trade Federation, and Fair for Life. Peter Luetchford, an anthropologist from the University of Sussex, states that “By offering shoppers a relationship with those people and places... development outcomes are attached to an ethic of consumption” (60). In addition to this, Luetchford also states that “The higher price paid by consumers to cover the extra cost is justified through moral claims about benefits to producers and environments” (Carrier and

Luetchford 60). So, even though certified Fair Trade goods are significantly more expensive, consumers continue to buy them because of the sense of moral justice they receive for doing so.

One of the main purposes of the Fair Trade system is to give small farmers a fair price for their products— but is it really fair? No, according to a study done by three University of California students. In their study, they found that the farmers who are involved in the Fair Trade system are required to pay to receive their fair price, as well as meet many other standards such as ownership of their land and democratic management of their farms. While this sounds good, it actually creates a barrier that does not allow the poorest farmers to benefit from Fair Trade. Many farmers in the poorest parts of the world work on for large plantations or as migrant workers, meaning that since they do not own the land, they cannot benefit from Fair Trade (Janvry et al. “Fair Trade and Free Entry: Can a Disequilibrium Market Serve as a Development Tool?”). So, even though Fair Trade does help many small farmers, its certification fees and requirement of land ownership does not allow the most impoverished farmers to benefit from their system.

The newest method of ethical consumption is the plastic-free movement. The plastic-free movement was started by the Plastic Free Foundation when they launched their Plastic Free July campaign in 2011. It began as an effort to encourage everyday people to reduce global plastic waste by not using single-use plastics for one month of the year. However, many take the movement further by completely giving up common single-use plastic items such as grocery bags, straws, and bottles. These items are relatively easy to avoid, which is one of the reasons why the plastic-free movement has gained so much media coverage. Perhaps the most talked-about single-use plastic item is the plastic straw. Plastic straws have gained a lot of attention in 2019, through articles from news outlets, such as CNN and The Washington Post, and popular

Twitter hashtags, such as #refusethestraw and #stopsucking. Even major U.S. cities such as Seattle, Oakland, and Miami Beach have partially or entirely banned the use of plastic straws.

This media coverage has encouraged many everyday people to stop or heavily reduce their use of single-use plastics, which is a step in the right direction. However, these efforts are insignificant in the face of the fishing industry. According to a study done in 2018, The Great Pacific Garbage Patch— a giant collection of floating trash more than the size of Texas— is comprised of 46% fishing nets (Lebreton et al. “Evidence that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is Rapidly Accumulating Plastic”). Some of the nets are lost, others damaged and abandoned. No matter how they end up in the oceans, they pose a significant problem for aquatic life who are easily trapped and strangled by the disregarded nets.

Many argue that when consumers refuse to buy products that are not cruelty-free, sustainably-sourced, or vegan-friendly, they make their voices heard. This sentiment, often referred to as a consumer’s ability to vote with their wallets, is both powerful and pervasive. It is powerful because it gives consumers a feeling of control. While it is true that some companies do make changes in response to their customer’s demands, there are always going to be far more, far larger companies that don’t. Chances are unless consumers are incredibly dedicated and thorough researchers, they will never know all the ethical or environmental issues that exist in large companies. Research done during a 2012 study at the Corvinus University of Budapest found that “even when consumers act in an environmentally aware manner, their carbon footprint or ecological footprint may still change only slightly” (Csutora 6). The study also concluded that targeting what consumers buy cannot counter the impact of the pollution caused by major corporations. In addition to this, Csutora’s study also showed that many working-class citizens cannot afford many environmentally friendly products due to poverty, lack of accessibility, and

long working hours (6). Besides, how can individual consumers make a difference when British Petroleum, for example, can dwarf any and all everyday efforts by dumping millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, consequently devastating aquatic life in the region, and only suffer mild repercussions?

In reality, it does not matter if every person was able to go vegan, buy fair-trade or stop using plastic products. These individual-based solutions may make consumers feel better about current environmental issues, but they do not really address the root cause of exploitation and environmental destruction. Of course it's important to acknowledge how everyday actions can affect the planet; however, it is impossible to keep ignoring the systemic design flaws that are creating the problem in the first place. Until major corporations are actively held responsible for their heinous acts of exploitation and pollution, no individual-based attempt at ethical consumption will ever truly matter.

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