
"Shrink": A new campaign to stop the madness of paper over-consumption

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Since the early 1960s, world consumption of paper and paperboard has increased by almost seven times. Every year, each person in the UK gets through an average of more than 200 kilogrammes of paper. In the US the figure is almost 300 kilogrammes. Global paper consumption is massively inequitable. In Laos, for example, people use on average less than one kilogramme of paper a year. Yet rural communities in Laos are currently faced with the rapid expansion of eucalyptus plantations to meet the global paper industry's demands for raw material.

Much of the paper consumption in the North is unnecessary. Office workers in the UK print out 120 billion sheets of paper a year, enough to create a pile more than 13,000 kilometres high. Two-thirds of this paper ends in the bin before the end of the day. North Americans get through 130 billion paper cups a year. The cups are thrown away after 15 minutes of use.

This month sees the launch of the "Shrink" campaign, which targets paper waste. "Paper production causes a wide range of harmful environmental impacts," explains Mandy Haggith, the co-ordinator of the Shrink campaign. "By using less of it we can reduce our pressure on forests, cut energy use and climate change emissions, limit water, air and other pollution and produce less waste. There are also negative social impacts and human rights abuses linked to paper production, particularly in southern countries." The "Shrink" project, which is backed by more than 50 European environmental NGOs, invites people to pledge to cut their paper consumption on its website: www.shrinkpaper.org.

The website suggests several ways that people can reduce their paper consumption. "We can stop using paper unnecessarily, like information we can easily read on screen, or picking up paper napkins we don't need," says Haggith. "We can find ways to use less where paper is necessary, like printing double-sided or re-using envelopes. And we can try to resist paper that is thrust upon us by signing off junk mail, asking to be taken off mailing lists and databases, refusing free news or leaflets and avoiding highly packaged goods."

The Shrink campaign also aims to persuade corporations and institutions to reduce their paper use. "Organisations and companies can try to understand where most paper is wasted, for example in office systems, communication efforts or short-term packaging, and encourage and reward staff to come up with ideas for saving paper: changing the way people work so they make better use of paperfree technology, finding more efficient designs for packing goods, and so on," says Haggith.

In June 2008, the campaign wrote to the CEOs of 20 UK-based companies: five catalogue companies; five supermarkets; five magazine publishers; and five banks and insurance companies. "We chose them because they represent four of the biggest paper-using sectors and are a cross-section of those sectors with a diversity of policies on paper," Haggith explains.

Each of these sectors is, of course, not only responsible for wasting paper. Supermarkets undermine farmers' livelihoods, destroy biodiversity by demanding homogenous products, are responsible for an enormous increase in food miles, build their massive shopping centres outside town centers leading

to increased car use and the destruction of the countryside, and they finish off local shops by undercutting prices. Banks finance all sorts of environmentally and socially destructive projects. Magazines are financed through advertising, a major driver of over-consumption. Catalogues exist only to promote ever more consumption. But as Haggith points out, "The forests and people who suffer the negative impacts of the paper industry can't wait for all the other wrongs to be righted before we tackle over-consumption of paper."

The campaign aims to support the struggles of movements in the South against the expansion of the pulp and paper industry there. "When we ask colleagues in the global South what they think our priorities should be in our work with the pulp and paper industry their answer is that we should tackle over-consumption in rich countries and try to reduce demand for the products of the industry," says Haggith.

Last year, Haggith travelled by train and boat from her home in Scotland to Sumatra, Indonesia, to research her book "Paper Trails: From Trees to Trash - The True Cost of Paper". "I was horrified by how destructive our paper footprint is," she says. "I met Indonesian villagers fighting a land-claim with a paper company that is growing acacia on their community land to make copy paper for sale in European and North American markets. I asked them what I could do to help their fight, and they told me to ask people in Europe to use less copy paper. To show real solidarity with people struggling with multinational extractive industries, it is not enough for us to shift our consumption from one brand to some other, hopefully slightly less obnoxious, brand. That only displaces the problem. Consuming differently is not good enough, we need to consume less AND differently."

Pledge to reduce your paper use here:

<http://www.shrinkpaper.org/take-the-pledge.htm>

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>