

Paper, paper everywhere....

Paper is a material many people in industrialised countries take entirely for granted. Millions of trees are felled, pulped, made into paper, printed on, then binned without even being read. Why is it that we treat cotton, linen and other fabrics made from plant fibres with great respect – laundering them carefully, even mending them when they tear – yet we toss barely used sheets of paper into the rubbish bin that are pulped from trees, the oldest living organisms on the planet?

Part of the reason is because so much of the paper we encounter is given to us for free, often without us asking for it. We consume paper mostly as a side-effect of buying other commodities that we really want: magazines, newspapers and books are sources of information, packaging keeps the goods we desire clean or unsquashed, and so on. Comparatively little of our paper consumption is the result of buying paper products directly; notebooks and toilet rolls are the exception rather than the rule. Junk mail, catalogues and free newspapers encourage us to perceive paper as a material with little or no value; you wouldn't give out 4 million free newspapers a day in London alone if this stuff was actually worth anything, would you?

Paper's low value is coupled with a sense that it is a natural, safe and fairly benign product. It is not exactly uranium, but the sheer scale of this product makes it a serious environmental and social issue. Paper consumption has quadrupled in the past four decades and its production uses almost half of the planet's industrially logged timber, more water than any other industrial product and as much energy per tonne as steel. Each tonne of paper requires 98 tonnes of other resources to manufacture and it is the single biggest contributor to the waste stream of most consumer countries. To reduce our impacts on the planet, using less paper is a good place to start.

The global pulp and paper industry is fuelled by money from those who buy its products, and most of us are in the high consumption countries of the global North, so our purchasing power is an important lever for bringing about systemic change in the industry. Curtailing demand for its products should reduce some of the money-supply that is fuelling its expansion in the global South. At least bringing about a reduction in demand for paper in Europe would help to offset the growth in demand that is likely in other parts of the world. If the fifth of the world's population that currently use most of the world's paper were to cut their paper use by half, that would create a lot of room for people whose current paper use is very low to increase their consumption without a need for any global expansion of paper production capacity.

Identifying ways to cut paper use is easy. The new website www.shrinkpaper.org invites individuals to make a pledge to adopt their choice of several suggestions from using a cotton handkerchief to shifting to an electronic filing system. Organisations and businesses can easily save paper too. Many already have already taken some steps in the right direction – after all, they can save money by cutting their paper costs and associated expenses (printing, postage, storage etc). Many companies find they can swiftly reduce paper use by 30% or more by simple changes to office practices.

So if it is so easy, why has reducing paper consumption not been at the heart of every forest campaign agenda for years? There is a resistance to campaigning about reducing consumption,

which is expressed sometimes in terms of ‘not wanting to give the impression that paper is worse than other materials like plastics’ or ‘not wanting to make people feel guilty about their lifestyles’ or ‘worrying about seeming anti-growth’. As a result, many paper campaigns appear to imply that using paper made from more sustainably sourced fibres is what really matters, regardless of what quantity is used. In reality, both fibre sources and quantity matter.

A key question to ask is why our paper consumption keeps on increasing. One suggestion is that it is rooted in cultural insecurity: our lack of trust in each other leads society to red tape, bureaucracy and ever expanding paper trails; our fear of contamination drives excessive packaging; our worries about disease cause fetishistic levels of tissue use for hygiene; our weakening cultural identities make us susceptible to brand advertising. Perhaps, therefore, promotion of paper saving could have beneficial cultural effects?

The debate about global climate change means that for the first time in my life, possibly since the start of the industrial revolution, it is possible to talk in polite company about using less of something – energy – without being considered anti-progress. This creates a great opportunity to promote an ethos that is positive about reduction, makes thrift a virtue and treats ‘less’ as a positive concept. I hope promoting paper saving will contribute in a small way to promoting a cultural change that values efficiency more than growth and gets people into mental habits to perceive using less of things as a good thing to do.

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