

## **Just what would 9 billion sustainable lifestyles look like?**

By PROFESSOR A KNIGHT OBE

*Single Planet Living Ltd and Commissioner, Sustainable Development Commission,  
PO Box 1525, Southampton SO19 9DZ, UK*

### **Summary**

There is a simple logic to sustainable consumption – we should all live a ‘one planet life’. The problem is that no-one has identified or has helped us to visualise what a one planet, low carbon, poverty free lifestyle looks and feels like. This is a challenge; we, governments, business and individuals, all need to debate how we will live in, say, 2050, when about nine billion people will inhabit the globe. What will nine billion sustainable lifestyles look like? This visualisation, of how we will live and why it should be debated, is relevant and challenging. Within the UK, the government’s sustainable development framework aims to deliver a ‘strong, healthy and just society within global limits’. The challenge is for all of us to catch this vision for ourselves and to move to patterns of consumption that achieve both principles at once. Economic growth is still rapid in China and the political imperative remains growth. Such growth means a tremendous pressure on natural resources. However, China does not see sustainable development as a barrier to growth. Quite the opposite, it sees it as essential for success. It is important to realise that our consumption helps fuel China’s economic growth and hence its environmental impact. Retailers are now sensitive to consumers environmental (and other ethical) concerns. However, the evidence suggests that, historically, the green consumer has not been the tipping point in driving green innovation. Instead, manufacturers, retailers and regulators have made decisions that take away less sustainable products from our consumer view, raising the standard for all. If we all grasp the challenge, I believe that modern lifestyles and sustainability can be achieved. If you don’t agree, then put forward your vision for a 9 billion sustainable lifestyles and let’s all discuss it together.

**Key words:** One planet living, policy-making, choice editing, sustainable consumption

### **Introduction**

All the stuff we use to maintain our quality of life doesn’t only cost money, it also leaves our footprint on the natural environment. But have we ever stopped and asked – just how much land is needed to make all this stuff? Knowing how big our footprint is can help us decide whether any improvements are enough to make it worth the effort. Growing food uses land, but so does burning energy. Trees can offset that carbon but how much forest would be needed? How much would be needed to absorb all our waste and finally how much land is needed to grow all the food and timber we use? In other words what is our “eco footprint”? The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has assessed the current footprint of our lifestyles. WWF estimated that the average person in the UK would need 5.4 hectares of land to provide all the stuff they use to live their lives. In the US it was as high as 9.7 hectares and by stark contrast in the countries where millions are caught below the

poverty line, the figures are frighteningly low – an Ethiopian uses only on average 0.5 hectares (WWF 2008). We cannot build another planet. So just how much capacity does our planet have? We have 11.4 million hectares of productive land. There are currently 6.6 billion people on the planet, and that number is rising. WWF says that if the entire 6.6 billion had the same lifestyle as we enjoy in the UK, then it follows that we would need 33 million hectares of productive land. This means we would need three planets to supply us. If we average the consumption of everyone on the planet from the US to Ethiopia we find that we are already using 1.1 planets! In other words we are using the planet's ecosystem at a faster rate that it can replenish.

This is why organisations like WWF now talk about the concept of 'one planet living'. Academics and government officials call it 'sustainable consumption' but the meaning is the same – it is all of us living within the ecological limits of our planet. There is a simple logic – we should all live a 'one planet life'. This means us in the richer countries living a high quality life but in a way that uses much less stuff whilst we welcome people in the developing world using much more stuff so they can move out of poverty. Consequently, there's a general belief that for us in the UK reducing our footprint means having less; sustainability means wearing a hair shirt and going without comforts and luxuries. However, for the world to achieve our sustainability goals, the journey has to be attractive, whether for businesses (in making a profit) or you and I (enjoying our lives and having a sense of wellbeing). The problem is that no-one has identified or has helped us to visualise what a one planet, low carbon, poverty free lifestyle looks and feels like. This is a challenge; we, governments, business and individuals, all need to debate how we will live in, say, 2050, when about nine billion people will inhabit the globe. What will nine billion sustainable lifestyles look like? This visualisation of how we will live and why it should be debated, is relevant and challenging.

### **Visions of Sustainability**

Headlines scream about climate change, food and fuel security and millions dying of starvation leading us to an impression of chaos. Thoughts, ideas and efforts in the name of sustainability veer in all kinds of directions. From these headlines we can get the idea that sustainability is about the ultra greenie, rose-tinted view of living on a plot of land, raising your own animals and vegetables (which is great for the few but impossible for the millions of people that live in the UK alone) and also at the same time about claims by companies for greener food or fuel (which are disparaged in next weeks headlines). There are also those sterile indicators (KPIs) carefully considered by business and governments which are difficult to interpret in the context of wider society and which also don't seem to encourage excellence. We don't seem to be making any great headway towards a recognisable destination of what sustainability means in practice.

This is not to say that people are sitting around doing nothing. There have been many exemplary papers and discussions by governments and non-governmental organisations. Business is getting to grips with the impact it makes on society. Millions of individuals are doing their bit through recycling, cutting down on waste and growing fruit and vegetables in their garden. Within the UK, the government's sustainable development framework aims to deliver a 'strong, healthy and just society within global limits' (HM Government 2005). The challenge is for all of us to catch this vision for ourselves and to move to patterns of consumption that achieve both principles at once.

### **What's Happening in China?**

Economic growth in China is 10%. This is solving poverty, China's economic boom has already lifted 490 million people from poverty, but 18% of the world's poor still live in China so the political imperative for China remains growth. In 2010, the population of China is likely to reach

1.5 billion. The average Chinese citizen earns just over \$1,000 a year but by 2020 this will have trebled. China will have grown from a low-income economy to a middle-income economy, meaning less poverty. More money means people having the means to buy more things. In China, there are already 40 million mobile phone owners with two million new owners every month. China already has 26 million cars on its crowded roads. Many new affluent young in China increasingly aspire to western lifestyle, they like the western brands. They seek Nike trainers, they eat at McDonald's and buy their music from HMV. The ultimate is the top designer labels and a high street in Beijing will have the same designer brands you would see in London or Paris. With that, however, comes an increasing unprecedented pressure on natural resources.

Nothing can be more basic than water. Wang Shucheng, China's Minister of Water Resources, said in 2004, "Water shortage and water pollution will be major challenges for the country to realise its goal of building up an affluent society in 20 years." China's water challenge is three-fold – some areas do not have enough water, others suddenly have too much resulting in floods and thirdly, the water they do have is becoming increasingly polluted. Around 110 cities in China report water shortages. It is estimated that more than 70% of China's rivers and lakes are polluted and more than 360 million rural Chinese lack access to drinking water. Then there is energy. China's carbon emissions have increased by 33% since 1990 making it the world's second largest emitter. It is building 30 new nuclear power stations and has some the world's largest dams under construction. It is already beginning to feel the impact of climate change, Yao Tandong, Chinese Academy of Science has said, "As much as 64% of China's glaciers may disappear before 2050." Pan Yue, Director of China's State Environment Protection Agency, recently said: "An environmental crisis is no longer a risk we predict for our children, it is a problem that our generation must face. The 1990s was the warmest decade in past 100 years for China, and since 1950 there has been a gradual reduction in rainfall nationwide. Since 1960, the volume of our six main rivers has steadily declined. Since the 1980s, our northern provinces has suffered intermittent droughts and flash floods. On the coast, sea levels are rising and inland our vegetation is moving to higher latitudes."

All this production and consumption produces mountains of waste. China is the world's largest waste generator; solid waste will grow from 190 million tones in 2004 to 480 million tonnes per year by 2030. Again they are responding:

- some regions of China have banned the use of disposable chopsticks. It seems like a small action but the country was using over 300 million a day!
- there have been debates about whether polystyrene and plastic carrier bags should be banned
- several cities such as Hangzhou are campaigning to ban all forms of plastic packaging. Campaigners recently gave out 50,000 straw bags
- local resident grassroots organisations such as Global Village in Beijing are working to implement community recycling campaigns.

However, China does not see sustainable development as a barrier to growth. Quite the opposite, it sees it as essential for success. This is best demonstrated by its attitude towards climate change. Unlike the USA, China has no ideological rejection of the concept of climate change. It is happy to embrace a low carbon economy but it wants ways to do this that helps its growth. China's latest five-year plan places emphasis on sustainable growth, or as the Chinese say "living in harmony with nature". National targets include increasing the amount of energy coming from renewable sources to 12% by 2020 and there are policies to improve energy efficiency. Local officials also have the power to close enterprises that fail to meet emission standards and those powers are used; thousands of polluting factories and unsafe mines are being closed across the country. China is also building the world's first eco-city, situated on an island in the Yangtze - it will be three times the size of London. China's economic boom is good for China. It is helping to address poverty but finite natural limits will slow this growth down unless we all embrace a more sustainable way of life.

## **Retailers and the Consumption Problem**

It is important to realise that our consumption helps fuel China's economic growth. Last year, China made over 70 million new television sets. Thousands of shipping containers packed with products leave the ports of China every single day. Power tools, Christmas decorations, toys, toilet sets, light bulbs, T-shirts, you name it... it is likely to have come from China. Last year Wal-Mart, (of which Asda is a part) bought \$100 billion worth of products from China, Tesco in the UK is estimated to have bought over \$2 billion worth. But we can help reduce the environmental impact of creating millions of new consumers through our impact on the shops we buy from. The more pressure we put on retailers to take these issues seriously, the more pressure they will put on manufacturers to produce products in a more environmentally sound way. Retailers are now sensitive to working conditions in factories and are increasingly scrutinising their supply chain to eliminate exploitative child labour and wages that are below minimum standards. They can do the same for environmental protection. However, the evidence suggests that, historically, the green consumer has not been the tipping point in driving green innovation. Instead, choice editing for quality and sustainability by government and business has been the critical driver in the majority of cases. Manufacturers, retailers and regulators have made decisions that take away less sustainable products from our consumer view, raising the standard for all.

Many retailers are genuinely getting to grips with complex CSR and sustainability issues but I wonder if any retail Chief Executive Officer or Sustainable Development specialist has imagined what their stores and range would look like if we created a truly sustainable economy. Even the best case studies I can find don't tackle the embarrassing elephant in the room as far as retail is concerned: the need for customers to buy more and more stuff to maintain a healthy balance sheet, versus a sustainable economy which means using less stuff. Retail is only one contributor to this excess but it is the most visible, so there is a responsibility to face up to it. Retailers can be more creative about responding to the new "credit crunch" dynamics and the longer term need to help customers to live more sustainable lifestyles. They can provide products which are designed for longevity (quality rather than quantity), help consumers conserve energy or use it more efficiently, introduce new ranges which help consumers to 'make do and mend', offer 'green' services and work with suppliers to find technical solutions to energy hungry manufacturing. Some retailers are already on this road, but it is long and complex one.

### **Principles of sustainable lifestyles**

The way we choose to live our own lives will make a difference. The designer labels and brands are now appearing in Beijing or Shanghai because many of the new affluent young Chinese aspire to our "Western" lifestyle. Therefore the more mainstream we make living a great life using only products with a good environmental story, the more likely it is that the new Chinese consumers will as well. I have listed 10 key descriptors of sustainable lifestyles (Table 1). The first 8 are ambitious challenges but they are principles or ideals that are in the public domain and are an integral part of discussions which take place within many learned groups of people. Although targets and indicators exist for these, they tend not to be discussed as a collective whole in debates on sustainable lifestyles. The last two are set apart from the previous eight. Discussions about these topics are not widely aired and yet there is an argument that we should be debating them as much as climate change. They deserve the same level of profile because of the hurdles they represent in achieving the goal of sustainability. If not faced head on, outcomes from owning too much 'stuff' (impacting on the use of our natural resources) and the destruction of oceans, forests and our landscapes, could have a devastating impact. If we could look at these descriptors honestly and the understanding that we need to change, using technological advances as well as changing our own behaviours, we can surprise ourselves by changing what we think is acceptable and what is not.

Table 1. *Descriptors of sustainable lifestyles*

- 1) I manage my own self-esteem and health
- 2) I live within my financial limits
- 3) The products I buy help local and international trade
- 4) I only use clean and renewable energy
- 5) I am active in a vibrant community
- 6) I live in a high trust society in which I talk with, rather than at, people
- 7) I have found the right balance between technology and simplicity
- 8) My leaders (political and business) have courage
- 9) I use much less stuff but get the same level of service from the stuff and buy and use
- 10) The true value of nature is protected by economics

### **It is no Different for Food**

The descriptors of sustainable lifestyles apply to food, just as much as to other consumer goods. The evidence is clear that sustainable consumption and better nutrition can, and should, go hand-in-hand (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2005). Seasonal produce, extensively farmed meat in lower quantities, and a shift away from over-exploited white fish to sustainably-harvested oily species, are all changes that are desirable from a nutritional and sustainability perspective. Given the market share of the supermarkets, it is reasonable to explore what more they can do to 'edit out' unnecessary food miles, packaging and waste, and to prioritise more seasonal produce. However, there is also a role for farmers, food producers, indeed everyone along the food chain.

### **Conclusions**

In an article I wrote a couple of years ago, I pointed out the difficulty of predicting something that may or may not happen 10 or more years hence. For example, who would have thought 10 years ago that smoking would be outlawed in public places? Who would have thought that supermarkets would be fighting about who was greener? Who would have thought that creosote would be banned and that patio heaters would be a secret vice? Will there be 9 billion sustainable lifestyles in 2050? Who knows? But I believe that we are beginning to move in the right direction. People, business and government each have a role in enabling, engaging, exemplifying and encouraging change and each is informed by and sensitive to the media. No one, or even two groups, can lead alone on sustainable consumption. Each leads at different times by doing what they can do best. None of this is easy and these groups may sometimes pull in different directions. Until now moves towards sustainability have often been accidental and always uncoordinated. But increasing coordination is developing an increasingly shared vision of sustainability in practice;

the result should be that we will be able to give people an insight into the future and how we will all benefit from moves towards sustainability. If we all grasp the challenge, I believe that modern lifestyles and sustainability can be achieved. If you don't agree, then put forward your vision for a 9 billion sustainable lifestyles and let's all discuss it together.

### References

**HM Government. 2005.** *Securing the Future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy*. London: The Stationery Office. .

**Sustainable Consumption Roundtable. 2005.** *Double dividend: promoting good nutrition and sustainable consumption through healthy school meals*. Accessed via <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/delivering-a-double-dividend-better-nutrition-for-more-sustainable-diets.html> on 01/08/09.

**Worldwide Fund for Nature. 2008.** *Living Planet Report*. Accessed via [http://assets.panda.org/downloads/living\\_planet\\_report\\_2008.pdf](http://assets.panda.org/downloads/living_planet_report_2008.pdf) on 31/07/2009.