



To the left is the famous cardigan worn by Jimmy Carter in the oval office, when he urged Americans to turn down their thermostats to save energy. In reality, the most important ways of saving energy (such as cogeneration by industry, better insulation, etc.) don't involve any discomfort. It turned out that the American people weren't inclined to endure uncomfortable rooms in order to save energy, and the net result was probably to give energy conservation a somewhat unpleasant Puritan overtone.

However . . . while sustainability doesn't necessarily have to involve discomfort, it may require changes in consumption patterns in wealthy countries. A [new book](#) from the Worldwatch Institute explores the issues of consumption and sustainability. This is a tricky problem. On the one hand, it's clear that high levels of consumption don't seem to make people either happier or healthier (as opposed to escaping from poverty, which has both effects). On the other hand, ascetism is never going to be a mass lifestyle choice, at least not for very long. So if people aren't going to be engaging in high levels of consumption, society needs to find other ways of making people feel enjoyment.

One reason I suspect that society will shift toward different lifestyles is simply strain that will be placed on resources by economic growth in China, India, and elsewhere. For instance, gasoline prices are likely to shoot up as cars multiply in the next decade. In addition, although it's easy to imagine substitutes for some resources such as industrial raw materials, others such as water and arable land are harder to replace. So some move toward sustainability in consumption seems plausible. But how we will get there remains to be seen.

In case you'd like to know more about the book, here's what a reviewer on Amazon had to say:

*This book is a significant contribution to understanding the process of sustainable development worldwide. It is a courageous contribution in that things are said that many people still do not want to hear. Specifically, it is about cultural values and the kinds of cultural changes that (with high probability) will be required in order to reverse consumerist human behavior that is destroying the human habitat. The linkage between behavior modification and ecosystem services is not clearly articulated. A more explicit explanation of this linkage would have been useful. Another issue that would have deserved more attention is the negative role that most religious institutions are playing in the struggle for gender equality, which is a precondition for sustainable development. This is of course a controversial issue, but it needs to be faced. Overall, however, the book is an*

*outstanding piece of work and a reassuring message of hope for the future of humanity.*