

As discussed in a fascinating [new book](#) by Derek Bok, psychologists have been busily researching a new set of issues relating to happiness. As a result of this research, psychologists are beginning to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that control well-being. Well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that includes objective factors such as health, but a key factor is subjective happiness. People tend to overestimate the effect that life events like winning the lottery will have on their happiness. For example, studies by psychologists show that increased wealth produces surprisingly modest improvements in happiness; in contrast to education, which according to some studies produces a greater sense of well-being than its cost. Social capital is also directly connected with well-being. In addition, there is clear empirical evidence of all kinds of social connections with well-being. The message is the buying less does not necessarily mean having a poorer quality of life.

Why does this matter for the environment? that current consumption trends are unsustainable. With only one-twentieth of the world's population, the United States consumes a fifth of the fossil fuels, produces a quarter of the carbon dioxide, and a third of the paper and plastic use. From 1900-1990, U.S. population tripled, while the use of raw materials multiplied seventeen times. The average American consumes over fifty times as much as a Chinese consumer.

It seems clear that world resource use can't increase by a factor of fifty, and American use can't increase by another factor of sixteen. Technological advances, especially in the energy sector, will help — but it's very optimistic to assume they will allow unlimited consumption. That means that a sustainable world has to involve some moderation in consumption trends. Most people aren't ascetics, and they can only be expected to moderate consumption if they can be shown that they can still have equally satisfying lives.

As the research on the psychology of happiness shows, that's not impossible. There are many activities that make people happy without burning carbon. The government cannot mandate those activities, at least not in a democracy, but it can give people information and opportunities about sustainable consumption. It can also foster sustainable communities in which people can more easily spend time with their families and connect with their friends.

In the meantime, it's worth reflecting a little on our own lives, and whether we're buying more goods will give us more happiness. Maybe it would feel a little better to donate a bit of that money to a church, charity, political party — or even to help support a worthy environmental law program at UCLA or Berkeley!