TECHNOLOGY, LIFE-STYLE AND GREEN CONSUMERISM AS MEANS TO RESOURCE CONSERVATION

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The need for resource conservation has been highlighted by the earlier speaker in his very succinct presentation. He also painted a clear picture of how resources could be conserved and asked a number of pertinent questions we should all think about very seriously.

Several ways to conserve resources were given, not least among which was technology application or usage.

Technology is often treated as the 'white knight' to find ways to reuse and recycle products and hence conserve material resources. The new catch phrases today are 'waste prevention strategies' and 'sustainable industrial practices' that would bring about sustainable economic growth and environmental well-being.

Let me address this issue with reference to three most commonly used natural resources - metals, petroleum and trees.

In a recent newspaper advertisement, a company promises one cent for every aluminium can returned to it and as a bonus, will contribute another cent to a nature inventory project.

Aluminium recycling is an environmentally sound and sustainable industrial practice. Consider this:

1. Making a new aluminium can from the ore uses 90% more energy than making one from recycled aluminium.
2. In the US, manufacturing companies make some $3.6 million a day from recycling aluminium.

3. There appears to be no limit to the number of times aluminium can be melted down and reused.

Although 65 billion aluminium soda cans are bought every year throughout the world, Singapore has had a very small volume of such cans and hence recycling did not make much economic sense. However, the situation may be changing as environmental factors become part of a manufacturer's costing estimates.

Other metals like iron and steel have a long history of being melted down and recast into new products. Have you given much thought to the spanking new car you saw in a showroom? Some of the parts are probably made from recycled materials and before the end of the decade, the whole metal chassis of a BMW or even the entire car is more than likely to be made from recycled materials.

Besides metals, the other major natural resources that are in insatiable demand are petroleum (for energy consumption and plastics manufacture) and trees (for paper, paper products, building materials and furniture).

Technology has found ways to recycle waste plastic into polyester, nylon and other product fibres for making carpets or as stuffing for furniture, bedding and sports garments. A company called Wellman Inc in South Carolina USA, earned $50.2 million on sales of $623.4 million in the first nine months of 1990, selling the converted plastic wastes.

Other companies are looking into ways in which plastic can be recycled the way aluminium is; for example, if plastic soda bottles can be recycled as such over and over again, instead of ending up in a product like carpeting which can be worn out and become waste.
Paper is the product from trees which we take for granted most of the time. We have the technology to recycle paper.

In the US, where several companies took the lead in producing recycled paper, only 24-26% of this was bought by industry over the past few years. Why not more? The recycled paper is accumulating in the warehouses.

Here is a lamentable tale of the early bird not catching the worm. Which manufacturer would jump in to reduce the growing paper garbage by recycling it if the market for this product is not growing?

Eight states in the US have legislated to ensure more recycled paper is used by government and industry. Incentives have to be provided to encourage corporations and individuals to purchase recycled paper.

In other words, several technologies are in place (and more are yet to come) that are able to help conserve the precious natural resources which human civilisation relies upon so heavily.

The question is, how can industry be persuaded that investing in such technologies will bring handsome returns to both the businessman and the environmentalist?

Technology usage as a means to resource conservation is largely in the hands of industry but we the consumers can influence industry through the choice of lifestyles we adopt and the products we purchase or consume.

Do we exercise that prerogative or is the inertia too great? Do we care enough about the environment to re-examine the way we do things that consume more resources than necessary? Have we the will or determination to change those habits of ours that rate poorly in the environmental context?
How did you come to this Conference this morning? By public transport or private vehicle? Were you the sole occupant in the vehicle or were you part of a car pool? Fuel saving could be substantial if this is a daily habit among the majority of commuters.

Saving energy can cause various degrees of inconvenience but by car pooling, you also cut down on carbon monoxide and hydrocarbon emissions since fuel combustion is reduced. Furthermore, think of the lifespans of the tyres and engines of the cars which were left in the parking lots. These are extended.

At work, can paper, lighting and cooling unit usage be optimised. Another way to conserve resources is to minimise wastage.

At home, can our plastic bags, packagings for food/non-food items and old shoes be recycled? Do we waste food? Is the garbage being disposed of in a manner that allows the rubbish collectors to send to respective recycling plants or for proper disposal?

All these practices are easier said than done. But to be socially responsible citizens, we have to try to adopt environmentally friendly lifestyles.

How often do you ladies and gentlemen stick earphones right against your eardrums and turn up the volume of your walkmans much more than necessary? First of all, the batteries (which by and large are still mercury or cadmium based) run down faster, are discarded and add to the wastage and pollution. A reasonable decibel level will not only prolong the battery life but also save you from loss of hearing!

Do you reuse the other side of the paper you write your lesson notes on?

The point I am emphasising is - reduce wastage wherever possible. Naturally it is not easy to change one’s habits overnight. It needs a conscious effort.
Even more difficult than adapting to new lifestyles that are environmentally desirable, is the choice we as consumers have to make in the purchase of goods or products.

Are we green consumers? Do we buy products that we believe to be environmentally safe, recyclable, reusable, non-toxic, refillable, degradable or compostable? How we define these terms is another matter.

Would you buy a compact disc sans outsized perspex casing or a non-pressurised hair liquid dispenser? Can demand for pressurised aerosol cans be diminished? Could we substitute most of the throwaways commonly used with reusable or washable ones? e.g. cloth nappies for disposable baby diapers.

The real issue for green consumerism however, is not in deciding which products to buy that Company P, Q or R says is green.

Company P may sell you recycled white paper but do you know whether they had to use a pollutive bleaching agent to treat the original paper mix (made up of coloured as well as white paper)?

Rather, the consumer should be asking (and we have the right to) whether the companies examine every step of their manufacturing process from the choice of raw materials to the final packaged product to ensure the 'environmentally friendly' label on the merchandise means what it says.

Questions the companies should address are:

1. Were the technological processes involved in producing every stage of the product appropriate i.e. non-pollutive?

2. Was there any unnecessary wastage in the production process?
3. Were the manufacturing processes energy efficient?

4. Do the products meet a basic or some specific need?

5. Was resource conservation considered?

There is a higher price of course to the companies if they include environmental factoring into their manufacturing costs. Is this justifiable in terms of market demand?

'Green' consumer products made up just 0.5% of all new products in the US in 1985. Four years later in 1989, the figure climbed steadily to 4.5%. But six months later, by January 1990, the figure doubled to 9.2%. American consumers spent $3.3 billion in 1990 on so-called green products. It is predicted that there will be an eight-fold increase by 1995. The answer would appear to be yes, there is a market.

The surprising thing however, is that this growing market, while enthusiastically supported by some 88% of Americans surveyed in July this year; only 21% said they would be willing be pay a 15% premium for environmentally friendly products. And less than a third felt guilty about using products that are harmful to the environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to end by leaving you to ponder about the power you have, either to accelerate the greening process or to discourage the growth of environmentally friendly products and processes. Your purchasing action will tell the companies which path they must choose. Don't let inertia or marginal costs rob you of that influence to save our finite resources.