

Introduction

Being part of the European Union and one of the so-called developed countries gives us access to a tremendous range of goods and services that make our lives easier and more enjoyable. However, it is now clear that we need to live sustainably within the capability of our planet's natural resources.

Sadly, we live in a culture of rampant consumerism. We even measure our nation's wealth by Gross National Product that effectively says the more we produce (and therefore someone somewhere has to consume) the better we are doing! If you have been immersed in a culture constantly persuading you to consume more all of your life making changes to consume less can be quite challenging.

As consumers we have the possibility to make choices in favour of sustainability. The issues are often quite complicated with many different and often conflicting factors needing to be considered. For example, do you buy an organic apple from New Zealand or a locally produced one that might have had dangerous sprays applied?



One of the first questions that you might ask yourself when considering a purchase is simply, "Why am I buying this?" It sounds almost too obvious but the answers can be quite interesting. The natural question to ask next is "What are my choices?"

Most of the actions in this section focus on these choices. By trying out different purchasing actions you will be training yourself to become a conscious consumer.

The effectiveness of your actions will be much greater if you discuss them with the rest of your household and get them involved. One of the principles of GAP is that mutual support and encouragement both at the meetings and in the home is a great help in changing our lifestyle patterns.

Why act?

Become a conscious shopper

Each time you buy a product you are effectively giving a seal of approval to the materials and processes used to make it, the way it is packed and how and from where it has been transported. You are also endorsing the chain of supply and demand from the producer through all the middle traders to you the consumer and all the political issues connected to this chain. In our lives we have to consume things but we have a huge choice about what we consume. Our choices can make a real difference to sustainability and equality.

Action!

When shopping for goods follow the QPEE guidelines:

Quality (Q)

- ⇒ Choose products of the best quality because they will last longer.
- ⇒ Choose reusable rather than disposable items e.g. batteries, razors, dish cloths (or use rags)

Packaging (P)

- ⇒ Is there an alternative with less packaging?
- ⇒ Is the packaging made from re-cycled materials?

Environmental cost (E)

- ⇒ Are the materials that the product is made from sustainable sources?
- ⇒ Is the product made from re-cycled materials?
- ⇒ Can it be re-cycled when its useful life is over?
- ⇒ Is it energy efficient?
- ⇒ How far has it travelled?
- ⇒ What were the by products of its production?
- ⇒ How much energy went into making it?

Ethical (E)

- ⇒ What were conditions like for the producers?
- ⇒ Did they get a fair price for their labour and materials?
- ⇒ Does the producing company have ethical policies about the environment?
- ⇒ Is the company using the profit for something you believe in?

Why act?

Tell a producer/retailer about your QPEE purchasing principles

Producers and retailers want to know what the customer wants. It is the nature of supply and demand that they will respond to consumer pressure. By making your voice heard you are really contributing towards sustainable consumerism. Examples Easter Eggs & Cereals – less packaging. Re-fills e.g. Kenco, Ecover.

Why act?

Purchase locally produced products

Sometimes local might mean choosing to support a local farmer rather than a multinational supermarket. Other times it might mean buying Irish rather than something made far away. Reducing the miles that products have travelled saves energy and buying locally helps to boost the local economy and employment.

Why act?

Choose organic products

Chemical fertilisers, pesticides and animal medicines can be damaging to the human body and to the environment. They require energy to produce and of course there are waste issues in their production. There is plenty of evidence that continued usage depletes the soil of its fertility and that chemical residues can affect land and water eco systems including the creatures within these systems.

Action!

Buy as much food as you can organically. Some of the extra expense can be offset by bulk purchasing. (See set up a food buying club).

- ⇒ Eating less meat and cooking more basic meals will offset the extra expense. (See next two actions)

Why act?

Eat fewer meat meals

It takes 16 kilos of grain to produce one kilo of beef. Animal production also uses lots of water and for these reasons it is an inefficient way of producing food. Meat, dairy and egg production all have their place as a part of integrated organic farming systems but most of us would be helping the environment and probably healthier if we ate less meat and dairy produce especially if it is factory produced.

Action!

Try substituting one meat meal a week for a vegetarian meal. (How about a 'Meat-Free Monday'? www.meatfreemondays.ie also check our Cork Food Policy Council, www.corkfoodpolicycouncil.com)

Why act?

Cook more basic meals

Home cooked soups and stews virtually eliminate packaging and they can be cheaper, tastier and more nutritious than pre-made convenience food with its box and plastic wrapper! Even the issue of preparation time can be tackled by cooking a large amount and deep-freezing meal sized portions. Then instead of reaching into the supermarket deep freeze you reach into your own. Remember you have to earn the money for expensive 'convenience' food, how inconvenient is that?

Why act?

Choose fairly traded products

Many of the products we buy such as tea, coffee sugar, bananas and timber come from 'developing' countries. These countries need to trade in order to afford to develop. Too often the developed nations have used trade to exploit the people and degrade the environments of these countries in effect stopping them from developing. There are now many initiatives to address this situation and as consumers we play a big part. Do you want your purchasing power to work for or against exploitation of people and the planet?

Action!

Look out for Fair Trade logos and support companies that have ethically sound policies.

- ⇒ Ask your local library to stock Ethical Consumer or New Consumer Magazine and spread the word that there are choices available.
- ⇒ Look out for the Fair Trade Logo on tea, coffee, sugar, chocolate and bananas.



Why act?

Purchase from gift catalogues from charities

Many groups including the Irish Peatland Conservation Council (www.ipcc.ie) and Amnesty International (www.amnesty.ie) raise funds by selling gift items to supporters. You may not feel that you want to join these organisations but if you need to buy gifts anyway wouldn't it feel great to know your money was doing some good?

Action!

Order catalogues from your favourite charities and start to support them by purchasing from them

- ⇒ Lend the catalogues to friends and neighbours, they may never have thought of such a simple way to influence change for the better.

Why act?

Set up or join a whole-food buying club

Buying in bulk offsets some of the expense of buying healthier organic food. It also reduces packaging and might even save you driving to the shops so often.

Action!

Get a catalogue from your nearest whole food distributor. Get together enough friends and neighbours to put together an order of minimum value (usually €300-500). When a regular system has been established consider involving more people.

- ⇒ See if there is interest in setting up a Community Supported Agriculture scheme in your area. Local communities directly contract local farmers to grow enough oats, potatoes, vegetables etc. for them, saving both producer and consumer money and cutting out unnecessary packaging and transport.

Why act?

Try out alternatives to purchasing

Unless the item you intend to purchase scores well using the QPEE guidelines above the chances are that by avoiding purchasing you have made a contribution towards sustainability and have probably saved money.

Action!

Lend and borrow items that you don't need all the time. Make clear agreements about how long items are being borrowed for and establish guidelines for if something gets damaged.

- ⇒ Set up a lending 'library'. This community action works very well with children's toys, it reduces demand for new toys but the kids get a much better choice! It also works well with tools if set up properly.
- ⇒ Consider buying items with your friends, neighbours and family. Rather than three families buying three cheap, badly made lawnmowers that would be idle most of their short lives imagine how much better it could be if they pooled their resources and brought a decent one that would do the job better and last longer. With just a little trust, respect and a few common sense 'rules' everyone wins from this kind of thinking.
- ⇒ Purchase second hand items. It reduces demand for a new one.
- ⇒ Give away or sell things you don't need. This allows someone else to reduce demand. Try 'Freecycle'!
- ⇒ Get broken things mended.

Why act?

Choose eco-friendly products

In your house, garage and garden shed there are probably products that can cause harm to your family and the environment. There are now many alternatives to these products. Remember you are the consumer and you can choose!

Action!

Go through your kitchen, bathroom garage and shed and make a list of all the products that could potentially have negative health and environmental implications.

- ⇒ These might include cleaning materials, old medicines, paints and varnishes, fertilizers and weed killers. Read the labels and then try to inform yourself about these products. It's quite amazing how much we don't know about things we use so often! Next investigate what the alternatives are and try using some of them. Finally, find out the proper procedures for disposing of dangerous products.

Why act?

Choose natural building materials and furniture

Sick building syndrome is associated with chemicals contained within building materials, paints, furniture and carpets. Often there is a choice of materials that could be used and they all have different energy inputs, production, disposal and recycling issues associated with them. For example, approximately 10% of all Ireland's contribution to global warming can be attributed to the cement industry.

Action!

When replacing household items, redecorating, building extensions or making home improvements you might factor this into your purchasing decisions. There is now a lot of information and choice around these issues.

Why act?

Choose recycled products

Recycling your waste is very important but the other half of the cycle is to buy products that are made from the stuff that you have taken!

Action!

Purchase recycled stationary products, toilet roll and other paper items.

- ⇒ Look out for recycling logos on other recycled products such as fleece clothing.

ACTION	I WILL TRY THIS ACTION BEFORE THE NEXT MEETING	ACTION TAKEN
Discuss these actions with the rest of your household		
Ask the questions Why am I buying this product? What are my choices ?		
Become a conscious shopper and use the QPEE guidelines (Quality, Packaging, Environmental cost, Ethical)		
Tell a producer/retailer about your Q.P.E.E purchasing principles		
Choose a fair trade product		
Choose locally produced products/consider product miles when purchasing		
Choose good quality re-usable items rather than disposable		
Purchase a battery charger and some NiMH batteries		
Choose organic products		
Substitute a meat meal with a vegetarian meal		
Prepare meals rather than eating pre-made meals		
Set up a food buying club		
Buy recycled paper products		
Lend and borrow items that you don't use all the time		
Jointly purchase items with other people		
Buy something second hand		
Give away or sell things you don't need		
Get broken items mended		
Make a list of dangerous household, garage and garden products and consider safer, greener alternatives		
Choose natural building materials and furnishings		
Talk to someone about GAP		
Take a community action		
<p>Thank you for participating in this course. You can find links to other resources and further information from each session at www.cef.ie/projects/greenerliving/</p>		