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Responsible Consumption

In mid-July, Wal-Mart announced its plan to develop a sustainable product index. Products from over 100,000 different suppliers will be analyzed under a 15-criteria framework to determine their products' life-cycle sustainability, and each rating will be clearly placed beside the products' price tags. The index and resulting database will be developed jointly between Wal-Mart, participating universities, and government and non-government organizations. The project has been motivated by a growing demand by consumers for greater transparency regarding the environmental impact of the products they purchase and consume.

The index is expected to be completed in the USA over the next three years and should be deployed in Canada thereafter. Clearly there will be significant methodological difficulties in creating and implementing an index which is applicable to over 100,000 suppliers and which serves the informational needs of over 200,000 million customers a week in 15 different countries. However, regardless of these difficulties, the project should be lauded for its efforts to increase the flow of accessible information regarding product life-cycles.

A similarly motivated project, Fredericton Green Shops, is already operational in Fredericton. The Green Shops program is designed to assist local businesses in reducing their environmental footprints while informing the consumer community of their progress and commitment. The program assesses businesses annually across five environmental improvement sectors and over 30 distinct actionable items. Participating businesses are identified by a Green Shops window decal and their progress and commitment can be followed online through the program's webpage (www.frederictongreenshops.ca).

Programs such as these are not designed to promote consumption but more so to facilitate responsible consumption. Responsible consumption is a rather ambiguous notion as it refers to both the quantity and quality of our consumption habits and is based on personal values, morals, and beliefs, all of which may not be shared across an entire community.

With greater transparency regarding products' environmental footprints, consumers are able to make decisions which better reflect their values. Sustainability indices and certification programs themselves will not help reduce environmental footprints, however they do provide consumers with the power to do so themselves by selecting products and suppliers with higher sustainability ratings. Such flexibility lies at the heart of an enduring voluntary environmentalism.

A principal reason why the debate continues over certain environmental issues, such as climate change, is that environmental values are not uniform across all peoples. We are each embedded in unique combinations of socio-cultural-economic situations which shape our experiences and perspectives. Political regulations, when implemented, necessarily lock in one particular set of values at the exclusion

of others, which is why environmental regulations are slow to be developed and often become political quagmires.

Yet, as many environmental issues escalate, we cannot always wait for political leadership and regulations, which is why fostering an enduring voluntary environmentalism is important in attaining a more sustainable balance between the natural and lived environments.

Voluntary and sustained environmentalism requires that citizens have access to information on which to base their decisions, which is precisely what programs like Wal-Mart's sustainability index and the Fredericton Green Shops program seek to provide. These programs are not designed to force consumers to choose more sustainable products and services, but instead are designed to support consumers in making more informed decisions. Every single choice we make, no matter how small or large, has consequences and it is only by considering all available information that we can exert some control over the nature of these consequences that will ultimately shape our future.

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