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Global Environmental Change and the Politics of Sustainable Consumption in New Zealand

by

Joanna Alice Lewin

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Abstract

Consumption has emerged as a pivotal concept in environmental sustainability debates. Since the 1992 Earth Summit, there has been an increasing focus on the role that consumption and consumer lifestyles play in global environmental change. Agenda 21 called on countries to promote more 'sustainable consumption' patterns and lifestyles. Despite these recommendations, there are significant political and ideological challenges to implementing effective sustainable consumption policies at a global and national level.

This thesis explores the politics of sustainable consumption in New Zealand. Using critical discourse analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine consumers, I employ post-structural and cultural geography theories to unpack the problematic nature of sustainable consumption. In particular, I examine dominant environmental and consumption discourses to explore why barriers to sustainable consumption exist. It is important to examine these issues from a socio-cultural perspective, as the dominant hegemonic discourses relating to the environment and sustainability shape both policy responses and public understandings of environmental change and sustainability issues.

Prevailing policy responses to environmental change in New Zealand construct the 'environmental problem' in narrowly scientific and economic terms. Concern has centred on 'managing' carbon emissions, rather than addressing the underlying drivers of environmental degradation which lie in current political-economic structures and consumption levels. As such, environmental policy has been embedded within an ecological modernisation discourse which links sustainability with notions of 'progress' and efficiency. Under this discourse, the consumer has been repositioned as an important 'political' agent responsible for fostering sustainable consumption and environmental care. Through largely non-political and non-regulatory measures, consumers have been encouraged to reduce their 'carbon footprints' by considering the environmental impacts of their daily personal consumption habits. This approach has individualised and depoliticised environmental issues, obscured the complexities of personal consumption and sustainability, and left limited options for participation in processes of change.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Table of Contents iv

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1

A changing environmental discourse 3
People as polluters: the emergence of ‘sustainable consumption’ 7
Defining sustainable consumption 8
The New Zealand context 9
Beyond the ‘buzz’ words 11
Thesis outline 12

CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW 15

Introduction 15
‘New’ cultural geography 16
Postmodernism and post-structuralism 17
Postmodernity and the rise of the ‘consumer culture’ 19
Geographies of consumption 20
Power and the politics of consumption 21
The construction of nature, the environment and climate change 24
Power and the politics of the environment 28
Sustainable development 29
The challenges of sustainable consumption 32
Consumption, morality and the environment 34
Conclusions 35

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY 36

Introduction 36
Qualitative research methodology 37
Critical discourse analysis 37
Recruiting participants 41
Semi-structured interviews 42
Interview analysis 44
Text analysis 46
Situated knowledge, positionality and reflexivity 47
Conclusions 48

CHAPTER FOUR: CONSTRUCTING THE ENVIRONMENT 50

Introduction 50
The environment as climate / the climate as science 51
Science, power and politics 53
Scientific (un)certainty in (post)modernity 55
Globalising the climate 60
Climate change, what climate change? 63
Localising the climate: selling the ‘clean, green’ myth 65
Sustainability as ‘progressive’: the discourse of ecological modernisation 67
Conclusions 71

CHAPTER FIVE: CONSTRUCTING CONSUMPTION 72

Introduction 72
Confronting (over)consumption 73
Consumption as sacrosanct 75
Addressing sustainable consumption in New Zealand 77
Selling the Earth: corporate environmentalism and the rise of ‘green consumerism’ 84
Conclusions 90

CHAPTER SIX: CONSTRUCTING THE CONSUMER 91

Introduction 91
The individual as consumer / the consumer as rational decision maker 92
The complexities of personal consumption 95
Whose environment, whose morality? 98
Simple, cheap and painless 100
The political consumer? 104
Debating consumer power 106
Conclusions 110

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS 111

Implications and future research 115

APPENDICES 118

Appendix One: Semi-structured Interview Schedule 118
Appendix Two: Information Sheet 120
Appendix Three: Consent Form 122
Appendix Four: Participants’ details 123

BIBLIOGRAPHY 124

List of Figures

Figure 1: Human dimensions of climate change 5
Figure 2: Three-dimensional conception of discourse 39
Figure 3: Applied discourse model 40
Figure 4: Average temperature anomalies in the Northern Hemisphere 52
Figure 5: The greenhouse effect 60
Figure 6: The Only Planet Guide, Greenpeace New Zealand 61
Figure 7: The Energy Rating label and the Environmental Choice NZ label 78

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The struggle to save the global environment is in one way much more difficult than the struggle to vanquish Hitler, for this time the war is with ourselves.
We are the enemy, just as we have only ourselves as allies.
- Al Gore (1992, 275)

In 2006, former Vice President of the United States Al Gore released a documentary on climate change, entitled *An Inconvenient Truth*. Heralded in its promotional trailer as ‘by far, the most terrifying film you will ever see’, the documentary attempts to persuade ‘ordinary citizens’ that humanity is sitting on a ticking time bomb which, if not defused, could send the planet into a ‘tail-spin of epic destruction’ (*An Inconvenient Truth* official website, 2008). Gore’s argument is unequivocal. This ‘planetary emergency’, he states, is not a political issue, but rather the biggest moral challenge facing global civilisation: a battle of wills that only ‘we’ can fight.

At the conclusion of Gore’s film, the credits roll and ‘ordinary citizens’ are presented with a list of the changes they can make and things they can do to help alleviate the climate crisis. The message is clear: taking small, daily actions to lessen people’s impact on the earth is vital in the crusade against climate change.

It is this ‘moral’ framing of the solutions to climate change that prompted me to investigate the concept of environmental sustainability for my Master’s research. In 2007 I spent five months on a working holiday in the United Kingdom. I noticed while abroad that the debates regarding environmental protection were centred on consumer responsibility and moral obligation. Popping across the Channel in a carbon-emitting aeroplane was frowned upon, buying imported produce was campaigned against and using plastic bags was discouraged. ‘Doing your bit’ for public and planetary good, it seemed, had gained popular acceptance. On arriving back in New Zealand, I was curious to find out whether similar discourses had

emerged here, and I decided to delve deeper into the issues of sustainability, consumption and the environment.

This thesis is an original investigation into the politics of sustainable consumption in New Zealand. I examine the way consumers, consumption and the environment have been constructed in dominant discourses. In doing so, I expose the complexities of consumption and environmental sustainability, and show how these are intimately bound up with issues of power and politics. I argue that current responses to sustainable consumption are largely apolitical, drawing upon an ecological modernisation discourse and neo-liberal framework which individualises and depoliticises environmental issues. Thus the root causes of environmental degradation and unsustainability are ignored, making 'solutions' to sustainable consumption both challenging and unrealistic.

This research makes a contribution to cultural and environmental geography by seeking to (re)politicise understandings of consumption in relation to environmental change. Indeed, I take a deliberately political and critical approach to this research. Given current environmental pressures and increasing economic globalisation, consumption can no longer be viewed as an innocent activity; rather it is part of an interrelated and complex system of processes and practices which connect and impact on people and places across the globe (Featherstone, 2007). Geographers are well placed to critically address these connections, and it is important to do so. My research is an attempt to draw out the often taken-for-granted discourses surrounding consumption, the environment and sustainability, and to look at the implications and effects of these discourses on people and policies.

As with all social science research, the issues examined in this thesis are in constant flux. In 2008, the world witnessed the consequences of free-market politics and entered a deep economic recession. In New Zealand, a new government was elected, ending nine years of a Labour-led coalition; and in the United States a new President talked of (and embodied) 'change'. Environmental policy discourses will evolve with

these changes, and this is what makes the topic contemporary, challenging and important.

In this introductory chapter I provide some background information and context to my research topic. I explain how global environmental change concerns have made their way onto public and political agendas, and indicate how 'sustainable consumption' has emerged as a key issue in these debates. I go on to illustrate how New Zealand governments have attempted to embrace a 'sustainability' agenda and encourage responsible 'sustainable consumption' practices. Finally, I introduce my three main research questions and provide an outline to this thesis.

A changing environmental discourse

An Inconvenient Truth helped propel the issue of global warming into living rooms worldwide. Climate change has arguably become one of *the* defining themes of the new millennium. There has been widespread agreement among scientists that global temperatures are on the rise and that natural systems are, and will continue to be, affected by these changes. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report clearly states that 'warming of the climate is unequivocal' and that most of the detected increase in global average temperatures since the mid-20th century is 'very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations' (IPCC, 2007, 2-5). As a result of human activities, concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane (CH_4) and nitrous oxide (N_2O) have increased markedly since pre-industrial times, with an increase in all GHG emissions (measured in CO_2 equivalence) of 70% between 1970 and 2004 (IPCC, 2007, 5). The IPCC concludes that climate change presents an immediate threat to the global environment and its ecosystems, and that urgent action is required to prevent further effects.

These IPCC 'facts' continue to be hotly disputed by climate change sceptics, who form the minority of climate 'experts'. Many contend that global warming is a result

of natural changes in the earth's ecosystem, while others claim that governments are adopting an alarmist attitude, even suggesting there may be a political and scientific 'conspiracy' (Seitz, 1996; Singer, 1996). Regardless of, or perhaps because of these debates, 'The Environment' – and in particular the *global* environment – has been firmly placed on intergovernmental and national government agendas. Environmental problems have become legitimate, even mainstream, concerns entering the public consciousness at a newly heightened level.

Not that this surge in environmental anxiety is new. Although the 'first wave' of environmental concern occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, modern environmentalism in Western countries can be traced to around the 1960s and early 1970s when issues such as pollution, population control and the environmental consequences of chemical pesticide use were brought to the public's attention. Rachel Carson's best-seller *Silent Spring* published in 1962 has been credited by some observers as helping to launch this 'second wave' of environmental activism. In 1972, the Club of Rome released its report *Limits to Growth,* which measured population growth against resource use, supporting a view that the world's rapidly increasing population could not be sustained by its finite resources. The 1973 energy crisis also brought home the pressures of human action on the environment. In the same year, E.F. Schumacher published *Small is Beautiful,* a collection of essays highlighting the world's economic unsustainablity and the earth's limited capacity to resist pollution.

By the 1980s, the environmental movement was alive and well. Yet despite increasing public awareness of environmental issues, they still remained politically marginal (Luke, 1997). While national governments were happy to acknowledge such concerns, and even set up separate environment ministries and the like, it was commonly believed that air pollution, toxic waste and poor water quality were direct side effects of production, and subsequently, that the way to resolve environmental woes was to regulate industry (Cohen, 2005b). Environmental policy was about controlling quality and focused on pollution permits, abatement strategies and 'end-of-the-pipe' technologies (Hajer, 1995). Issues were regarded as 'minor, technical,

soluble and politically uncontentious': any claim by the green movement that environmental problems required social and economic change was almost always politically rejected (Jacobs, 1997, 3).

In the late 1980s, however, rumblings about the role that human action played in ecological degradation began to surface in a more political way. It was becoming harder for the political mainstream to side-step the pressing global issues presented by environmentalists. Mol (2001) describes this shift as the 'third wave' of environmental concern. While comparisons could be made between this new wave and the environmental upsurge of the 1970s, its main difference lay in the growing attention given to global environmental issues, such as ozone depletion, diminishing bio-diversity and the enhanced greenhouse effect. The focus of anxiety had turned from national and regional concerns to longer-term global 'threats' (Blowers, 1997): a shift in debate from 'limits to growth' to 'global change' (Mol, 2001).

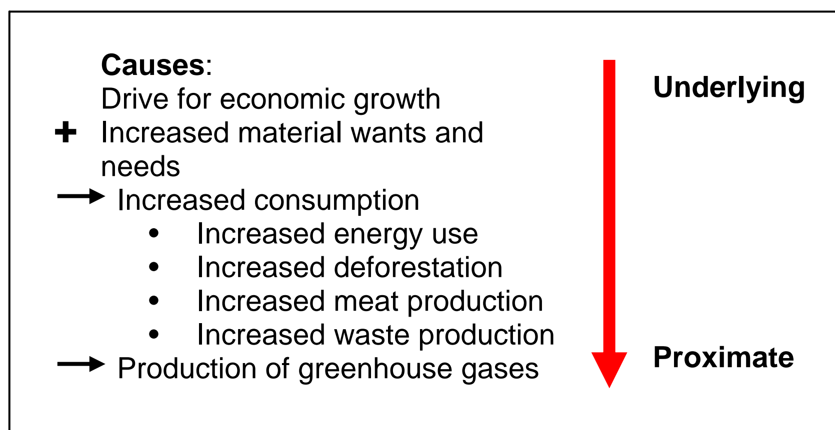

Figure 1: Human dimensions of climate change
Source: John Campbell (2008), Department of Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning, University of Waikato [personal communication]

Issues such as climate change turned attention towards the impact of global production and consumption systems, and the interconnectedness of economic growth processes and environmental change (Figure 1). While the proximate causes of greenhouse gas emissions were identified as resulting from energy generation, transport, and food and waste production, the *underlying* drivers of these emissions

were recognised as stemming from dominant socio-cultural systems and the global political economy.

Thus global environmental problems began to appear on public and political agendas as a changing formulation of the relationship between the environment and society was emerging. The 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland report, is viewed as a defining moment in this new relationship. It popularised for the first time the notion of 'sustainable development', an idea first developed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the World Conservation Strategy in 1980. It was defined as 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987, Part 1, Section II.49).

This 'new' concept was a move away from the dominant viewpoint that positioned the environment as a separate entity, removed from socio-economic issues. It provided a position which supported continued economic growth while also ensuring environmental protection: growth was still 'good' but 'sustainable growth' was even better. An underlying assumption of this discourse was that economic growth and ecological problems could and should be reconciled, primarily through the management of the environment and its resources. This emerging discourse shifted concern for the environment onto 'polluters', not just the damaged or prosecuting party, and in doing so created new actors in the 'environmental crisis', among them citizens and consumers (Hajer, 1995). People, especially those in affluent nations, were considered for the first time as major players in the environment debate, and their consumption practices were up for increasing scrutiny. Consumption was to become a key concept within the sustainable development paradigm.

People as polluters: the emergence of 'sustainable consumption'

The WCED set the scene for a major realignment of international agendas. Chapter 4 of Agenda 21, the key policy document to come from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 (also known as the Rio Earth Summit), highlighted that 'the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries' (UNCED, 1992, section 4.3). Furthermore, the objectives stressed that action needed to be taken to promote more 'sustainable consumption' patterns (UNCED, 1992, section 4.8).

Consumers had not only become implicated as a primary cause of environmental degradation and unsustainability, but also seen as part of the solution: a change from corporations and industries as 'dirty' to people as polluters (Luke, 1997). 'In effect, the Rio Conference provided a far-reaching mandate for examining, questioning and revising consumption patterns – and, by implication, consumer behaviours, values, expectations and lifestyles' (Jackson, 2006, 3). Environmental problems had become serious issues, and governments throughout the industrialised world on both the left and right of the political spectrum acknowledged that the 'solutions' required to alleviate such issues may not just be technical, and may not be available at all without significant social and economic change (Jacobs, 1997).

Since 1992, a host of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations have jumped on the sustainable consumption bandwagon. In 1995, the United Nation's Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) launched an international programme on changing production and consumption patterns. At the Earth Summit in 1997 (Rio+5) it was announced that consumption was an over-riding issue in the sustainable development debate, and in 1998 the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP's) Sustainable Consumption Network (SC.net) was launched. Along with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), they became a lead agency in the promotion of sustainable consumption (Jackson 2006).

Defining sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption has thus emerged as a new political and academic domain for examining linkages between 'affluent lifestyles and environmental quality' (Cohen, 2005a, 407). However, deciding exactly what sustainable consumption involves has proved challenging. As Seyfang (2004a, 4) points out, 'a precise definition is as elusive as that of its predecessor on the environmental agenda, sustainable development'. Jackson (2006, 4) contends that the broad idea 'has been defined around a kind of double negative': the idea that the unsustainability of existing patterns of consumption need to be reversed. Several organisations have sought to define the term, each taking different positions regarding the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in behaviour and lifestyle (Jackson, 2006).

The UNDESA defines sustainable consumption as:

> The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, whilst minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations (quoted in Hobson, 2004, 282).

The UNEP definition asserts that:

> Sustainable consumption is an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as meeting needs, enhancing quality of life, improving efficiency, minimizing waste, taking a lifecycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension; integrating these component parts in the central question of how to provide the same or better services to meet the basic requirements of life and the aspirations for improvement, for both current and future generations, while continually reducing environmental damage and the risk to human health (quoted in Jackson, 2006, 5).

What is evident from these and various other definitions is that there is no one consensus about what sustainable consumption exactly entails. As Jackson (2006, 4)

argues, ‘While some definitions insist that sustainable consumption implies consuming less, others assert that it means consuming differently, and in particular consuming more efficiently, and that it categorically does not mean consuming less’.

The dominant institutional view, however, is one which prefers to settle for a meaning that emphasises consuming efficiently rather than insisting upon major lifestyle changes: sustainable consumption means the consumption of (more) sustainable products, not the absolute reduction in overall consumption. The Plan of Implementation signed at the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 reflected this ‘weakening’ of position. As Cohen, (2005b, 25) observes, the ‘commitments to grand ideals of sustainable development prominent in Rio ten years earlier had dissipated’ and the focus was placed on ‘improvements in technology and the supply of more eco-efficient products, services and infrastructures’ (Jackson, 2006, 4). The original ideas of sustainability have been marginalised to allow governments to adopt more ‘politically and socially acceptable and economically rational tools for changing consumption patterns such as cleaning up production processes and marketing green products’ (Seyfang, 2004a, 4).

The New Zealand context

New Zealand governments have been swift to embrace the sustainability agenda. There are more than 170 central government programmes focused on environmental and economic sustainability (Ministry for the Environment website, retrieved 2/05/2008). In February 2007, then Prime Minister Helen Clark spoke of her vision for New Zealand becoming the first ‘truly sustainable’ and carbon-neutral country, announcing six new flagship sustainability initiatives to help move New Zealand towards this goal. These included the Household Sustainability programme, which focuses on helping New Zealanders take practical action in and around the home to make their lifestyles more ‘sustainable’. As the Environment Minister at the time, David Benson-Pope enthused in May 2007:

> At an individual level, it is easy to think that problems like climate change are so huge that there's nothing we can do about them. But there are many things that people can do that will make a difference, and this programme will help them take action (The official website of the New Zealand government [media release], retrieved 28/04/2008).

The 2007 Budget allocated the Household Sustainability Programme $6 million of funding over three years (2007-2010). The programme has three main elements: building partnerships with regional and local organisations to promote sustainable action; developing an online sustainability portal; and developing an information programme (Ministry for the Environment, 2007b). The purpose of the public information campaigns is to 'provide practical advice about how families can make their homes more energy efficient and healthier to live in, cut down on their waste and water use, and protect New Zealand's clean green image' (The official website of the New Zealand government, retrieved 28/04/2008). Related programmes include the Warm Homes Project which targets home insulation and clean heating to make homes more energy efficient and better for the environment; as well as a number of websites providing information on climate change, sustainability and personal action.

Funding was also set aside for an Enhanced Eco-Verification programme which will 'identify the standards, tools and verification infrastructure that will support a drive towards the development, use and export of eco-friendly goods and services', as well as the Towards Zero Waste initiative which aims to cut down on waste and improve resource recovery by introducing a network of public recycling facilities and by supporting schemes to reduce solid waste (Ministry for the Environment website, retrieved 28/04/08).

Reflecting the recent trend towards encouraging sustainable consumption practices and personal responsibility, the latest *Environment New Zealand* report, released in 2007, added a new chapter on household consumption. New Zealand also had the honour of hosting World Environment Day on 5 June 2008, the theme of which was climate change and encouraging people to move towards a low-carbon economy and lifestyle. In a recent *Household Sustainability Benchmark* survey by Research New

Zealand, it was revealed that just over half the respondents stated that they were 'deeply' concerned that New Zealanders are not doing enough to protect their environment for future generations (Fryer *et al*, 2008, 7).

Beyond the 'buzz' words

Sustainability has certainly become a popular buzz word. Yet despite all the rhetoric, there has been a lack of critical social science academic work regarding consumption practices, environmental understandings and climate change especially in the New Zealand context. Work on sustainable consumption and ethical and green consumerism has emerged mainly from Europe and the United States (for example Cohen, 2005a, 2005b; Jackson, 2006; Princen *et al,* 2002; Seyfang, 2004a, 2004b; Wilk, 2002). An exception is geographer Kersty Hobson (2003a) who has questioned the lack of research regarding consumption and environmental sustainability from a geographical perspective in Australia. Hobson (2003a, 150) argues for an improved understanding of the relationship between consumption and the environment, because, 'it is only when we know why and how individuals consume and how they link their consumption to the environment, that consumption practices can be realistically changed'.

Taking a lead from Hobson, my research focuses on three main research questions. My initial and overarching question asks: *how are consumers, consumption and the environment constructed in dominant discourses in New Zealand?* I draw on participant interviews, critical discourse analysis and relevant literature to explore the inconsistencies and intricacies of these constructions, and examine the role that power plays in sustaining them.

I argue that consumption and environmental issues are inherently political. Indeed consumption and environmental change (and the relationship between the two) need to be firmly placed upon the political (geography) agenda. Thus, my second question asks: *how have consumption and global environmental change issues been brought into the New Zealand political arena?* Through the analysis of texts such as policy

documents, government speeches and releases, media texts and interviews, I consider if and how consumption and environmental change issues have been individualised and (de)politicised.

Finally, I am seeking to find out: *how do New Zealanders link their consumption to the environment?* To address this question, I have conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine participants, exploring their lived experiences in relation to their consumption practices, and their thoughts and opinions about environmental matters both locally and globally. My aim here is to provide a more nuanced understanding of consumption and explore the often conflicting and multiple realities of the relationship between people, consumption and their environments.

Thesis outline

In this introductory chapter, I have explained the intentions of this thesis. I have provided a brief overview of environmentalism, showing how global environmental change and sustainable development have emerged as dominant environmental discourses over the last two decades. I have highlighted how consumption has become a pivotal concept in global environmental sustainability debates.

I have also explained why this research is important: firstly, because the relationship between consumption and environmental change is a contemporary and increasingly important concern both nationally and globally; secondly, because there has been a lack of critical, and politically focused, research into these issues in New Zealand; and finally because exploring the relationship between consumption and environmental change, and exposing the contradictions, complexities and power relations embedded in current discourses will provide a more sophisticated understanding of the issues.

In Chapter Two I examine a range of literature from within geography and the social sciences that contributes to my research. I draw together postmodern and post-

structural geographical work on consumption and discuss how geographers have dealt with issues of power and the politics of consumption. I discuss the social construction of the environment and the relationship between science and politics. I also review the critiques of ecological modernisation, sustainable development and sustainable consumption and suggest why these concepts can pose barriers to (effective) sustainability solutions.

I explain my use of qualitative, post-structuralist methodology in Chapter Three. I discuss how I have approached my research using critical discourse analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews. In this chapter, I explain the rationale for using these methods, and reflect upon, and offer a considered critique of these techniques.

In the subsequent three chapters, I discuss the results of my research and address my three main research questions. I divide my discussion and analysis into three parts. Chapter Four focuses on the construction of the environment. Here, I examine how dominant discourses relating to the environment and climate change are (re)produced and maintained both globally and in New Zealand. I draw on discourse analysis in particular to show how environmental constructions shape both public perceptions and policy decisions. I argue that environmental policy has been located within an 'ecological modernisation' paradigm which neglects to address the fundamental drivers of environmental degradation.

In Chapter Five, I examine the way consumption, and in particular over-consumption, has remained absent from political agendas. In order to safeguard the sanctity of consumption, I argue that governments have favoured 'soft' policy instruments which focus on consumer awareness, energy efficiency, information provision and ways to 'green' consumer behaviour. Popular understandings of 'sustainability' have thus been weakened and mainstreamed. I show how these understandings have been sustained through discourses of green consumerism, contributing to a discourse which constructs consumption as a solution to environmental problems.

Chapter Six looks at the way consumers are constructed as important actors in sustainable consumption ideology and policy discourse. Drawing on participant interviews, I suggest that this construction does not reflect the diversity of New Zealand consumers, or match the 'realities' of their everyday lives. As such efforts to 'green' consumer behaviour are ineffective and misplaced as solutions to sustainable consumption. Consumers have limited power in a marketplace that does not support 'green' consumption or alternative routes to 'sustainability'. I argue that a shift of focus from production to consumption has universalised notions of morality, and individualised responsibility for environmental care.

In the final chapter, I draw my thesis to a close and summarise my main arguments. I also provide a brief discussion on the implications of this research and possible avenues of further research. I argue that there is a need for more critical geographical research on the connection between consumption and environmental change.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The 'environment', in all its geographical scales, has remained a central focus in almost all areas of geographical inquiry, for it is impossible to talk about geography without discussing space and place. The connection between consumption and space, or 'geographies of consumption', has emerged as an area of interest within the last two decades. What has been largely neglected from this research, however, is investigation into the relationship between consumption and global environmental change, and how power and politics shape this relationship. My research attempts to address this gap by critically examining dominant consumption and environmental (policy) discourses in New Zealand.

In this chapter I demonstrate how my research is theoretically positioned. I also provide a review of relevant literature regarding consumption and environmental sustainability. I show how the cultural turn helped transform cultural geography into a more critical field, influenced by postmodernist and post-structuralist positions. 'New' areas of inquiry such as consumption have been opened up for exploration. I outline geographical work on consumption, and pay particular attention to debates regarding power and the politics of consumption. Drawing on Hartwick (2000), I show how, in a globalised and resource constrained world, consumption needs a 'political revival'.

Following this, I turn my attention to 'the environment' and examine debates regarding the social construction of nature, the environment and climate change. Again, of central concern to this research is the complex role that power and politics play in conceptualising and addressing environmental problems, and these issues are teased out here. I discuss, in particular, the emerging discourse of 'ecological modernisation' which has gained increasing attention among policy makers and

social commentators since the 1980s. This reform-based discourse draws on the idea that the economy and environmental protection can be profitably combined.

Finally, I engage in the debates surrounding the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable consumption, drawing in particular on Michael Redclift (1989, 1993) to illustrate how these ideas have been critiqued. I argue that there are significant challenges in the implementation of effective sustainable consumption initiatives in Western countries. I end by discussing the role that morality and ethics play in the relationship between consumption and environmental change.

'New' cultural geography

From the 1970s, geographers, along with other intellectuals, began to question the positivist traditions and political-economic approaches ingrained within the social sciences. This questioning reflected the global changes at the time. The oil crises of the 1970s illustrated that that world was interconnected in ways it had not been in the past. This new wave of 'globalisation' caused fundamental changes world-wide, and caused people to reflect upon their own place in the world, on power structures, justice, changing family relationships and employment (Shurmer-Smith, 2002). Following this transformation, scholars began to seek new ways of finding meaning and value, placing less emphasis on the 'science' of social science, and recognising instead the importance of 'culture'.

This 'cultural turn' was to have a significant impact on the field of geography. Through the 1980s, geographers became increasingly aware of the 'cultural' dimensions of their field of study and questioned the way cultural geography had been reduced to the study of the visible landscape, a way of thinking that had stemmed from the influential modernist traditions of American cultural geography (Mitchell, 2004). Carl Sauer and his Berkeley School colleagues focussed on the physical expression of culture in the landscape. Their work rested on the assumption that 'geographic areas, or landscapes, could be identified and described by mapping

visible elements of material culture produced by unitary cultural groups' (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987, 96).

This conventional view of culture was redefined by Peter Jackson in his best known and most influential book, *Maps of Meaning* (1989, 1992). It introduced a variety of new perspectives on the geographical study of culture besides the landscape approach, and was an attempt to re-theorise culture (Jackson, 1992). Jackson advanced the need for a more expansive view of culture, one which included its less tangible aspects, such as symbolic forms and everyday social practice. He contended that cultures are '*maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible' (Jackson, 1992, 1). Jackson emphasised a plural definition of culture as 'whole ways of life' associated with various forms of social difference, such as those expressed through 'race', gender and sexuality (Jackson, 2000, 141).

Cultural geography had opened up into a new, dynamic field, adopting a more sociological and political approach (Duncan *et al*, 2004). As Schein (2004, 18) explains, one of the characteristics of the cultural turn was to 'expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices'. The interconnection between the cultural and the geopolitical became important. Jackson believed that cultural geography had to shift its emphasis from culture itself to a domain of cultural politics and to understanding how the 'cultural is political' (Mitchell, 2004, 196). He argued for a need to explore the ways in which culture sustains spatialised power relations (Hubbard *et al*, 2002), and to expose how cultural constructions help to perpetuate inequalities of power within society.

Postmodernism and post-structuralism

These ideas were closely aligned with postmodernist philosophies. Although a debatable and slippery label, postmodernism is characterised by a general scepticism towards the grand narratives and predominating epistemological and theoretical frameworks of the modern 'era' (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernists question the notion

of universal knowledge and the key commitments of the Enlightenment. Any theories or ideologies that claim to have universal application, they argue, are perceived to be reflecting the arrogance of a hegemonic and totalizing world-view (Lyotard, 1984). Under postmodernism, any such ‘truth claims’ are more appropriately understood and developed within a local context: ‘reality’ is a social product.

Postmodern positions embrace pluralism, placing focus on eclecticism and decentralisation, and an openness to a range of voices and perspectives (Ley, 2000). Dear (2001) claims that since the 1980s, postmodernism sparked a renewed interest in social theory among geographers, shifting focus towards examining the relationship between space and society. While space was once relegated to the periphery of social investigation, geographers have shown that space, in fact, ‘matters’ (Natter and Jones, 1993, 166).

Postmodernism is closely associated with post-structuralism, both sharing anti-foundational characteristics. While they are not easily separated, postmodernism could be viewed as an overarching philosophy which encompasses more specific perspectives, such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism (Pratt, 2000). By its very nature, postmodernism eludes definition and is ‘anti-theory’; whereas post-structuralism provides a more definitive approach and offers social scientists the ‘tools’ for tackling postmodern research. Post-structuralism thus enables some direction to the often criticised nihilistic tendencies of postmodernism.

A central focus of post-structuralism is language. French theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard and Lacan have been influential in rejecting the ‘formalisation of linguistics and the epistemological subject’ (Pratt, 2000, 625). Language, they contend, is negotiable and constitutive, having no essential meaning independent of culture. I take on board these assertions, and am influenced by Derrida who believes language needs to be ‘deconstructed’ to uncover binaries and expose relations of power that exist within it.

Postmodernity and the rise of the 'consumer culture'

Dear (1986, 2001) classifies postmodernism into three categories - style, method and epoch. Style refers to architecture, while method refers to deconstruction, as discussed above. Epoch, however, refers to the suggested historical shift or break from modernity which is associated with the postmodern turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Lyotard (1986-7) prefers to view this shift as more of a change of mood, or better state of mind, rather than a periodisation, which is a modern ideal. In any case, the culture of postmodernism is taken to be evidence of linked social shifts, referred to as 'postmodernity' (Lyon, 1994, 70).

Postmodernity is associated with a prominence of new information and communication technologies, the growth of mass media and the creation of an image society (see Baudrillard, 1975, 1988). Consumption is viewed as one of the key characteristics of a postmodern society; a society where 'consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the waking lives of its members' (Lyon, 1994, 56; also see Harvey, 1989; Featherstone, 2007). This 'culture of consumption', or the way individuals become 'enmeshed in the process of acquiring commodities', could be viewed as a 'way of life' particularly for those in affluent nations (Mansvelt, 2005, 2). The impact of new technologies, the ever-expanding force of economic capitalism, the rise of multi-national corporations and cheaper mass production has led to changes in consumption practices worldwide.

The rise of the 'consumer culture' caused social scientists to reassess the role of consumption, not as subordinate to production, but as a force of its own. Consumption was originally conceived as secondary to production. Production was the source of commodities that people consumed, and consumers were manipulated by the industries that produced and marketed these commodities, having little or no active role or agency in the process (Goss, 2005). The 'era' of postmodernity, symbolised by the advent of the shopping mall, credit cards, the internet and increases in the range of goods and services, caused academics to consider that people are not

passive consumers. Rather they are active agents, making their own meanings from products, constructing lifestyles and forming multiple identities.

Geographies of consumption

The recognition of the power of consumption has led social commentators to suggest that 'consumption, rather than production, is now the driving force in contemporary society' (Mansvelt, 2005, 1). Following the 'cultural turn' it is not surprising that consumption has become an increasingly significant field of inquiry under the broad umbrella of cultural geography. Previously an area of relative neglect, research in human geographies of consumption flourished in the 1990s when geographers began to explore the ways commodities and their meaning were intertwined, and in particular how they 'interweave with particular kinds of social activity in specialized spaces, in the process producing new forms of identity' (Thrift, 2000, 109).

Initial research concentrated on the 'socio-spatial organisation of retailing and practices of shopping' (Goss, 2004, 370). Peter Jackson was again an influential figure in geographical work on consumption. Along with other colleagues, Jackson researched the role of shopping and how it has become a 'central practice in fashioning identity and the production of cultural meaning' (Mitchell, 2004, see Jackson and Holbrook, 1995; Jackson *et al*, 1998). Jackson claimed that culture and commerce are interlinked, and he sought to 'transcend the cultural and economic' divide (Mitchell, 2004, 198). He stated:

> My argument seeks to challenge the kind of dualistic thinking that separates production from consumption, the local from the global, or the culture from economy – by emphasising the mutual constitution of these very terms and investigating their fundamental inseparability (Jackson, 2002, 4).

Jackson argued that the market is embedded in a range of cultural processes (Jackson *et al*, 2000). The mutual entanglement of the cultural and the economic meant that

consumption was not just a momentary act of purchase, but a *process* shaped by a range of factors (Jackson, 1993).

Geographers have also explored commodity chains and commodification, and how consumption is a practice that partly determines national and international political and economic relations (Hobson, 2003a). David Harvey (1990) argued that consumers are distanced from the social relations underlying the products they buy. People consume their meals 'without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad of social relations embedded in the system that puts it on the table' (Harvey, 1990, 442-3). This 'distanciation' between the product and the consumer, Harvey argues, needs to be uncovered by academics (Kneale and Dwyer, 2004).

Consumption, then, is a 'complex sphere of relations and discourses which are actively (but not always knowingly) assembled, reproduced and expressed in diverse ways in place' (Mansvelt, 2005, 9). In a globalised world, consumption practices confront ideas of 'here' and 'there' and 'global' and 'local' to show how these concepts are not fixed but are fluid and interrelated (Kneale and Dwyer, 2004). Dinner at McDonald's is not just a trip to a fast food restaurant but a clash of economies and cultures, of symbolism and meaning, space and place both real, imagined, local and global. As Mansvelt (2005, 5-6), explains:

> Through studying consumption, geographers have sought to explain how and why economy and culture, the symbolic and the material, collide, demonstrating how the complex meanings and expressions of consumption in place are in turn connected to other spaces and scales, and making a critical contribution to the relationship between society and space.

Power and the politics of consumption

Not surprisingly, geographers have also grappled with debates about power and the politics of consumption, providing important insights into how power operates in the

process of production and consumption in different contexts. While not a geographer, Karl Marx was influential in introducing the concept of 'commodity fetishism'. He suggested that 'the value of commodities lies not in their inherent nature, but in the human labour they embody' (Goss, 2005, 257). Commodities obscure the social and geographical processes of production meaning they cannot simply be taken at face-value (Goss, 2005). Marx's ideas can be used by geographers to expose class power relations, 'to think about notions of freedom and constraint in consumption, to explore hidden commodity relations in commodity chains and systems of provision, and to examine the hegemonic construction of landscapes of consumption' (Mansvelt, 2005, 25).

Following on from Marxian thought, Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony can be used to show how the capacity to control consumers can arise through institutions such as the state, media and retailers (Mansvelt, 2005). Dominant ideologies are reproduced and operated through production and consumption. Power becomes taken-for-granted, is subtle and hidden so that its effects are 'accepted and reproduced by citizens unknowingly' (Mansvelt, 2005, 24). These ideas tend to suggest that mass consumption is part of the maintenance of a capitalist society, with power wielded in ways that oppress the consumer and reinforce the dominant ideology.

A poststructuralist approach, however, sees power as productive rather than just repressive 'with people being subjects of and subject to powerful discourses' (Mansvelt, 2005, 26). Drawing on Foucault, power is a process which becomes incorporated by institutions and expressed in discourses. These discourses – the different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice – reflect as well as construct social relations (Fairclough, 1992). Power is thus implicit within the everyday social practice of consumption. It does not work negatively by dominating those that are subject to it; rather, power incorporates everyone and is developed and distributed at every level in all domains of life (Fairclough, 1992). Foucault (1984, 110) writes: 'Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of

domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized'.

As touched on earlier, the rise of the postmodern 'consumer society' caused social scientists to (re)consider consumption as an area of academic inquiry. Postmodern geographers sought to show how consumers are agents who play active roles in shaping the consumption landscape (Crewe and Foster, 1995; Jackson and Thrift, 1995). While the concept of 'consumer sovereignty' has much merit, I agree with Elaine Hartwick (2000) who argues that postmodern study, focused on sign and image theorising (Baudrillard, 1975), retail geographies and identity, lacks critical political edge, particularly in regard to examining the connections between consumption and production. Hartwick (2000, 1177) asserts that geography needs a 'political revival'; that radical geographers need to return to an activist relation to the world, especially given current issues of resource depletion and the widening gap between rich and poor. Although postmodern geographical work on consumption has been valuable in illustrating the intricacies of consumption and the connections between shopping and identity formation, critical attention needs to be given to commodity chains, and the human lived realities behind production and consumption processes. Hartwick (2000) believes that geographers should (re)focus their understanding of consumption, criticise the apolitical 'turn' of the 1990s, and return to questions of justice, poverty, exploitation and the environment.

Following Harvey (1989) and Sack (1997), Hartwick (2000) argues that consumers exert power and influence which cannot be ignored when theorising the postmodern consumer. Consumers can play a part in politics, influencing economic markets and corporate behaviour as well as policy (Goss, 2005). It is not surprising that in an effort to ward off recession, both President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair urged consumers to 'go out and shop' following the events of 11 September 2001 (Jones, 2001). Furthermore, consumption in a globalised world can no longer be viewed as a harmless act, but as part of an interdependent network of production and consumption that connects people and places together across the world (Featherstone,

2007). As Sack (1997, 242) observes, these chains need to be understood because 'the greatest source of transforming the earth is mass consumption'. Thus everyday practices *are* political, having ramifications not only at an individual level, but at a global one as well. Indeed, consumption has become a powerful global economic activity. International trade of commodities is the most important component of economic growth for many countries, including New Zealand. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was established in 1995 to oversee international trade negotiations, promote free trade and stimulate economic growth.

Geographical work on consumption shows that consumption in a (post)modern society is complex and contradictory. Consumption can be individualist as well as collective, oppressive as well as liberating, and has impacts socially, economically, politically *and* environmentally. Consumption is rooted in everyday acts yet contributes to complex and interrelated global systems of extraction, production and distribution. Consumption is held up as an individual right yet is also increasingly regulated by the state. Exploring the 'politics of consumption' and the relationship of discourse and power is therefore crucial in examining contemporary consumption practices.

The construction of nature, the environment and climate change

While research on geographies of consumption is a relatively new domain within cultural geography, the cultural turn also had an impact on more conventional geographical fields of inquiry. Cultural geographers have traditionally been concerned with human/environmental relationships, but in more recent decades have renewed debates about 'how nature is constituted and understood across different human societies' (Duncan *et al*, 2004, 2). Recent focus has been centred on the consideration of situated knowledges, environmental ethics, popular understandings of environmental issues and the unsettling of the nature/culture divide. Cultural geography has also been central in efforts to reconceptualise nature and critically examine environmental policy (Duncan *et al*, 2004).

The concept of ‘nature’ is central to cultural geography and has received considerable attention (for example Castree, 2003a; Castree and Braun, 2001; Soper, 1995). These geographers have shown that nature has no uniform definition, but is instead contestable and changeable. Knowledges about nature are produced in multiple domains and influenced by a range of factors. Nature, they argue is ‘socially constructed’ and, as Castree (2003a, 35) claims, geographers discuss ‘not nature, but what they *call* nature’.

The view that nature is socially constructed has come under considerable criticism from within the social and natural sciences. Critics of constructionism claim that viewing nature as a purely social construct is bordering on relativism (Proctor, 1998). These ideas, it is argued, undermine the value of knowledge and leave no room for solutions to environmental problems to be reached. I lean towards a critical realist position that rejects the nihilistic tendencies of extreme constructionist positions, but accepts that nature, environmental issues and how we think about them are socially defined and constructed. As Proctor (1998, 361) explains, critical realists believe that ‘ideas are social concepts that have an ontological basis but are understood via a particular, socially predisposed framework’. There are always environmental threats that exist ‘out there’ but how they are perceived, represented and responded to depends on the social, cultural and historical context. What we know about them is thus never objective, but mediated by subjective experience: ‘real’ world conditions alone do not make them ‘social problems’ (Williams, 1998, 477). As Grove-White (1997, 109, emphasis in the original) puts it:

> The particular ‘objective’ environmental problems and issues which society recognises at any one moment are shaped and determined by processes of human judgement and social negotiation, *even in their very definitions*. In this particular sense, such issues are human ‘inventions’, their physical manifestations being mediated through human cultural ‘filters’ of many kinds.

Climate change is a contemporary example of the ‘social construction’ of an environmental issue. As Eden (2005) explains, the issue of global warming has been

differently constructed over time. In the 1970s, it was explained as a problem of global cooling and in the 1980s through the concept of a 'nuclear winter'. It was only in the 1990s that it become known as 'global warming' – a shorthand term for the complex ideas regarding the rise in worldwide temperatures. So while 'global warming' has been an environmental issue for some time, it is only within the last two decades that it has been transformed into a 'subject of widespread public anxiety and international regulatory interest' (Demeritt, 2001, 307). The reasons for this are multiple; involving not only 'improved' scientific knowledge and authority, but also reflecting increased public awareness, media coverage and vested political interests. The relationship between these factors is complex and changing; even since beginning this research in March 2008, the prominence of climate change has dropped from the public radar slightly, as issues of economic security and recession dominate the headlines.

What is evident, however, is that the construction of climate change has remained centred around hegemonic discourses of science and scientific 'knowledge'. In his article on the construction of global warming and the politics of science, Demeritt (2001) shows that the prevailing construction of global warming 'embodies contentious judgements and assumptions' at every turn. Anthropogenic climate change is constructed as a global-scale environmental issue, rather than a political or economic problem, which is caused by greenhouse gases, as opposed to underlying political structures or moral failings. This construction of climate change within a scientific framework presents the problem of global warming as requiring wholly technical solutions, which, according to this discourse, can be found within the workings of the main institutional arrangements of (Western) society (Hajer, 1995). Scholars have termed this discourse 'ecological modernisation'[1] (Christoff, 1996; Hajer, 1995; Mol, 2001).

[1] The concept of ecological modernisation was first introduced by Joseph Huber and Martin Jänicke, two German political scientists. According to Hajer (1995), Huber and Jänicke allocated technological innovation and economic development a central role in ecological modernisation. However, Hajer (1995) and Blowers (1997) argue that the conceptual change associated with ecological modernisation stretches into many other domains including policy discourse and even belief systems.

Ecological modernisation acknowledges the existence of global environmental problems but assumes that 'existing political, economic and social institutions can internalise the care for the environment' (Hajer, 1995, 25). According to Backstrand and Lovbrand (2007, 124), since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the climate debate has been 'dominated by the market-driven and cost effective narratives of ecological modernisation'. These narratives conceive environmental deterioration as a '*challenge* for socio-technical and economic reform, rather than the inevitable *consequence* of the current institutional structure' (Mol, 2001, 56, emphasis added). Ecological modernisation is about environmental management; involving flexible and cost-effective environmental problem solving, management practices and technological advancement. The idea that environmental degradation can be decoupled from economic growth is the appeal of ecological modernisation as a policy discourse. This 'positive-sum game' proposes that pollution prevention pays (Hajer, 1995). Importantly, ecological modernisation narratives readily accept that environmental problems are the result of current systems of production and consumption, but also claim that the solutions to these problems lie directly within these systems. The same actors involved in creating the 'environmental problematique'[2] are required in resolving it.

Thus ecological modernisation theory suggests that the main obstacle to more effective protection of the environment is collective action. If every individual, consumer, firm or country would participate in addressing global environmental problems, then there would be no fundamental obstructions to an environmentally sound organisation of society: what is required is one big united – and global – effort (Hajer, 1995). However, framing environmental problems, such as climate change, as wholly global matters is problematic, as many social scientists have pointed out. Although 'we' share one global environment, 'we' do not share one social understanding of environmental problems and their solutions. Furthermore, over-consumption of the world's resources is uneven, and the impacts of global

[2] The Club of Rome called the suite of global environment problems facing humanity the 'environmental problematique' in their 1972 *Limits to Growth* report (Hajer, 1995).

environmental degradation unequally distributed. Castree (2003b, 435) asks 'in what sense is global warming "global"'? While the consequences of climate change will affect the whole planet, just who is causing it, who should pay and who will win or lose in the process is more complex. It appears that Western industrialised nations have played a major role in contributing to worldwide temperature increases, yet the issue remains framed as a 'global' concern, which subtly (and not so subtly) incriminates major developing nations such as India and China. As Castree (2003b, 436) concludes, no fundamental challenge is made to current inequalities in world economic power, 'nor the ecologically destructive practices on which those inequalities are based'.

Power and the politics of the environment

Environmental problems then are also political, involving complex webs of power and interest. Williams (1998) argues that the role of power in framing environmental issues needs to be considered, and that powerful vested interests do have the ability to shape the discourse about environmental problems. This can be done in obvious ways, such as through media sources, or more subtly, through reinforcing hegemonic cultural beliefs about progress, science and capitalism. For example, energy producers in the United States have attempted to influence public opinion about global warming by forming their own environmental organisations and 'reframing' the issue in ways that are consistent with existing cultural norms regarding the demand for cheap carbon-based fuels (Williams, 1998).

The media play an important role in the construction of climate change and in the maintenance of scientific authority. As Hansen (1991, 452) contends, 'media discourse on the environment is, to a large extent, a 'science' discourse drawing on scientists as the primary arbiters of right and wrong, true and false, real and imagined'. Whenever scientific uncertainty regarding global warming is presented, therefore, it is more readily accepted, turning the debate into a 'science versus science' argument, rather than a discussion about accountability and action. Dispensa and Brulle (2003) conducted research which indicated that media in the United States

were more likely to report on the scientific uncertainties of climate change in comparison to New Zealand and Finland. Climate change sceptics were given ample coverage despite evidence suggesting they remain a small minority of international scientists. Dispensa and Brulle (2003) attribute this uneven coverage to the political and economic vested interests of the United States' fossil fuel industry.

The conventional view of science as separate from politics also means that scientists are viewed as the only people capable of presenting knowledge about global warming to policy makers, because they are believed to embody 'objectivity' (Demeritt, 2001). Yet, as Forsyth (2003) rightly argues, and the above discussion indicates, science and politics are mutually related. Environmental issues such as climate change are complex, socially constructed and thoroughly embedded in social and political practices.

Sustainable development

Environmental issues are complex for the very reason that they are never wholly 'environmental' but involve a myriad of political, social, cultural and economic factors. As Castree (2002, 357) muses, 'In the present context, what does it mean to write a report on "environmental issues" when those issues are never simply or only environmental?'

In an attempt to bridge the gulf between the socio-economic and the environmental, the concept of sustainable development was advanced in the 1980s (see Chapter One). Central to the concept of sustainable development is the idea that we can live within ecological limits without foregoing 'progress' (Redclift, 1993). The idea seems simple enough: people need to do more with less now so that future generations can live as well as current ones. The concept has staying power because it is believable: both 'sustainable' and 'development' are rational and enlightened concepts (Kirkby *et al*, 1995; Pearce, 1995). As Morris (2002, 8) quips, 'sustainable

development is, like motherhood and apple pie, not a concept to which many would object'.

On closer inspection though, sustainable development is fraught with contradictions (Redclift, 1989). As Giddings *et al* (2002, 188) state, 'It can be interpreted to mean almost anything that anyone wants, so that beneath its covers lies a multitude of sins'. The looseness of the concept, Hopwood *et al* (2005) claim, leaves the door open for governments and big business to be in favour of sustainable development without making any fundamental changes to their present course. As Grove-White (1997) argues, while sustainable development speaks of empowerment and democracy, it too often looks like the same old government business. Sustainable development can be used to justify the economic status quo.

Redclift (1993) asserts that sustainable development represents a renewal of modernism, ensuring the continued economic hegemony of northern, industrialised countries. The very idea of 'development' used in this context is Eurocentric, related to progress and economic advancement. Sustainable development is thus closely related to ecological modernisation. Nature is seen as a resource which can and will be 'managed' to suit society's requirements, and this should be the end goal. There is little room for alternative definitions of development. 'Our willingness to authenticate sustainability by reference to societies which possess no such concept, is both historically and intellectually revealing' (Redclift, 1993, 5). This singular view of development does not allow for the fact that there are many environments, societies and economies, which are always changing (Giddings *et al*, 2002). Ignoring the diversity of development and environmental objectives that exist within the global economic system only further endorses dominant, Western ideals (Redclift, 1989).

Sustainable development is a clever concept in that it attempts to 'humanise' development by adding elements of morality and ethical responsibility. 'It provides a moral force, which we have seen as essential to Modernist discourse, that seeks to engage our emotions as well as our minds' (Redclift, 1993, 11). It links development,

an economic ideal, with the environment, which is perceived as an emotive and subjective concept. Redclift (1993, 7) writes:

> By incorporating the concept of 'sustainability' within the account of 'development', the discourse surrounding the environment is often used to strengthen, rather than weaken, the basic suppositions about progress. Development is read as synonymous with progress, and made more palatable because it is linked with 'natural' limits expressed in the concept of sustainability.

The way sustainable development is presented as a linking together of three separate entities – the environment, society and the economy – is also critiqued by Giddings *et al* (2002). They argue that this separation is limited because it reinforces the idea that the environment lies outside of humanity and that solutions to sustainable development issues can be resolved with technocratic fixes. Pollution can be solved by higher taxes, energy consumption by emissions trading and waste production by recycling. The deeper issues are ignored as are the connections between society, economy and the environment (Giddings *et al*, 2002).

Redclift (1993) also takes issue with the way sustainable development is 'needs focused'. As he points out, how needs are defined depends on who is doing the defining: they change over time and are culturally constructed. The needs of the future will be different from the needs of today. Furthermore, no consideration is given to the idea that the needs of those in affluent nations may actually be too high. He writes '…attention has focused on the future costs of development to our societies, as if the satisfaction of our future needs is the principle bone of contention, rather than the way we currently satisfy our needs at other people's expense' (Redclift, 1993, 8). The economy remains prioritised over other issues. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is still seen as an indicator of progress towards sustainable development, even though inequalities between rich and poor have only increased over time (Giddings *et al*, 2002; Seyfang, 2004a). In this sense, nature is also viewed as a commodity and sustainable development can be achieved through replacing or trading-off aspects of the environment using technical solutions.

The challenges of sustainable consumption

In the past decade, consumption has become a central issue in the sustainable development debate (see Chapter One). Agenda 21 argues that addressing and reducing the impacts of consumption practices will be vital in making sustainable development a realistic goal (UNCED, 1992, Chapter 4). Reduction in consumption levels is also seen as crucial for environmental sustainability. While there is general international agreement on the need for more sustainable consumption practices, how these should be implemented, where and by who seems less clear.

It is not difficult to see why the challenges to achieving sustainable consumption are immense. Much criticism by scholars has been directed at the fact that Western society relies on an economic system which considers economic growth as its main objective (Cohen, 2005b; Hobson, 2003a; Jacobs, 1997). This framework has been responsible for current levels of unsustainability, and reversing this trend requires an upheaval of both economic and political systems. Achieving sustainable consumption may be economically and politically undesirable.

Hobson (2003a) argues that consumption has become not just a means of provisioning but deeply rooted in values and lifestyles, and in the daily, often taken-for-granted habits of everyday life. This makes finding successful initiatives aimed at changing consumption practices difficult because consumers have different motivations for their actions, dependent on time, place and social difference. Scholars have also increasingly recognised that commodities 'have lives' or 'biographies' and these lives take shape 'as a result of the diverse encounters between people and things as they move through time and space' (Bridge and Smith, 2003, 259). 'Things' have social lives of their own; are plural and contested and change depending on time and context (Bridge and Smith, 2003; also see Appadurai, 1986). Therefore, commodities play a symbolic as well as practical role in people's lives, and are valued 'not just for what they can do, but for what they represent to us' (Jackson, 2006, 12). Patterns of material consumption, Seyfang (2004a, 11) claims, 'embody more meanings than simple provisioning'. They can signify group formation, allegiance to (as well as

distance from) particular ideals, retail therapy, self-expression, a political statement, brand association, and identity (Jackson, 2006; Seyfang, 2004a). Consumers may purchase 'unsustainable' goods in spite of their 'rational' concerns for the environment or society (Seyfang, 2004a).

Although the concept of sustainable consumption has been formulated at an international level, it is national governments who will be responsible for implementing sustainable consumption policy programs (Cohen, 2005b). Cohen (2005b) and Hobson (2006) both argue that there is little investigation into how this will be achieved and no consensus on the solutions for achieving sustainable consumption. Subsequently, there is a lack of 'hard' policy initiatives coming out of Western governments. They have instead opted for 'weak sustainability', preferring to adopt neo-liberal based policies which focus on consumer behaviour. The prevailing tendency, Cohen (2005b, 26) states, 'has been to examine, from an apolitical perspective, a handful of technical devices, such as ecological taxation and eco-labelling, and to assess the potential of these approaches for 'greening' consumer behaviour'.

The idea that individual consumer choices can have an impact on macro-scale environmental problems is dismissed by many, especially because the framing of these problems into 'good' and 'bad' consumer choices can misrepresent the complexity of sustainability issues. When responsibility for environmental problems is individualised, Maniates argues (2002, 45), 'there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society'. The result is the depoliticisation of environmental problems. Blame is shifted from 'state elites and powerful producer groups' to 'human nature' or 'all of us' (Maniates, 2002, 57). A discourse is created that pushes for individuals to bear the brunt of environmental 'bads' (Hobson, 2006, 310), and 'solutions' rely on consumer responsibility and moral obligation.

Consumption, morality and the environment

Indeed, debates around consumption and morality have become heated in recent years as global atmospheric change has emerged as a key environmental issue. A widely quoted statistic claims that 20 per cent of the world's population are responsible for 80 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases, making consumption one of the most 'urgent and fundamental environmental issues that we face' (Wilk, 2001, 256).

The irony of this statistic is not lost on social scientists. As Clarke *et al* (2007, 233) observe, 'Just at the moment when 'the consumer' seems to have triumphed as the epitome of modern living, so *consumption* itself has become an increasingly problematic realm of contemporary governance'. The issue of morality is certainly central to the issue of consumption. Consumption is itself a moral activity, one which 'strengthens particular forms of social solidarity and which is symbolic of collective values' (Seyfang, 2004b, 324). For Wilk (2001), morality and consumption cannot be separated: each person's consumption affects others either directly or indirectly. 'Given this burden of meaning, how could we expect to discuss consumption without raising issues about the state of the world and the direction it is taking, requiring value judgement at every turn?' (Wilk, 2001, 253). The discourse surrounding sustainable consumption and climate change, Jackson (2006, 1-2) states, 'embodies a profoundly ethical dimension in which rights and responsibilities are deeply entwined, in which both present and future generations are implicated'.

A wider debate, then, is whether the current levels of consumerism should be challenged. Evidence suggests that consumerism does not equal 'happiness': 'Consuming more, simply put, does not make us happy, healthy, wealthy or wise, and this view, for a long time considered 'taboo', is finally starting to be heard in mainstream forums' (Seyfang, 2004a, 10). Yet the levels of material consumption continue to rise despite recognition of the issue and its failure to satisfy well-being (Jackson, 2006). Are current levels of consumption 'good' or 'bad' for us? Who is benefiting and who is losing out in the process?

Conclusions

Since the cultural turn of the 1980s, exploring geographies of consumption has gained increasing popularity among geographers, particularly as consumption has been recognised as a driving force, and key characteristic, of contemporary, (post)modern society. In this chapter, I have highlighted how geographers have exposed the complex nature of consumption, showing how people are not merely passive consumers, but agents who actively shape and construct consumption landscapes. Consumption is not just a personal practice or process, however, but has increasingly apparent economic, social and environmental impacts, at both a local and global level. Drawing on Hartwick (2000), I have argued that consumption is at once personal *and* political, and it is the political aspects of consumption, especially given current environmental pressures, that need further exploration.

Power plays an integral role in the relationship between consumption and environmental change. While environmental issues have an ontological basis, how they are constructed, perceived and responded to is dependent on social and cultural contexts, and involves complex webs of power and interest. I have illustrated how the mutual entanglement of power, politics and science has been influential in socially constructing climate change, and embedding environmental policy within an ecological modernisation discourse. Thus, while achieving 'sustainability' has become a central focus of governments, the dominance of economic growth politics and the lack of recognition given to the complexities of consumption and consumers, means that achieving sustainable consumption remains challenging. In order to address these issues, and uncover why barriers to effective solutions exist, it is crucial to look at dominant environmental and consumption discourses and at the relationship between people and their (consumption) environments. A qualitative methodological research framework, situated within post-structural cultural geography, allows for critical analysis and in-depth discussion of these issues. In the following chapter, I discuss this framework.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In human geography, the use of qualitative methods was a move away from the positivist 'spatial science' traditions of the 1960s which tended to conceptualise people as rational actors (Robinson, 1998). Geographers acknowledged that human behaviour was often complex and contradictory, and that using quantitative techniques was not always useful when exploring social worlds because simple 'cause and effect' relationships did not exist. Geographers instead looked for methods which allowed them to 'explore meanings, emotions, intentions and values' that make up people's taken-for-granted lifeworlds (Clifford and Valentine, 2003, 3).

Qualitative methods are commonly employed by cultural geographers who wish to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and experiences across space, place and time. They provide a more nuanced understanding of the research area, 'drawing out social distinctions and diverse cultural meanings' (Hoggart *et al*, 2002, 65). It is important to note that quantitative and qualitative research methods are not always contrasting opposites and can be utilised together; what remains important is to employ methods that are appropriate to the research area. Due to the scale, scope and nature of my research, qualitative methods work best because they provide a way to explore the contradictions and complexities of consumption and environmental issues.

I have several objectives in this chapter. First, I explain my use of qualitative methods further, highlighting in particular the importance of critical discourse analysis and explaining the process of conducting semi-structured interviews. Secondly, I provide some critical reflection on what I have found to be the strengths and weaknesses of these methods. Finally, I suggest how my positionality shapes this research and how power and situated knowledge influence the research process.

Qualitative research methodology

Methodological approaches and theoretical approaches are inextricably linked and interdependent (McDowell, 1997; Tolich and Davidson, 1999). My research is informed by poststructuralist and postmodern theories, and the methods I have employed are influenced by and reflect this theoretical positioning. The use of multiple methods is compatible with poststructuralist investigation. Combining two or more methods or techniques to investigate the same issue is known as triangulation. Triangulation has enabled me to gain deeper insight into my research problem, and provide more considered explanations. As Berg (2007, 5) asserts, every method reveals slightly different facets of the same symbolic reality; 'every method is a different line of sight directed toward the same point, observing social and symbolic reality'.

Poststructuralist theory has had a significant influence on qualitative research. Poststructuralists stress that there is no single 'reality' waiting 'out there' for researchers to find (Hoggart *et al*, 2002, 61). Instead 'reality' is 'seen, conceived of and understood in different ways by different groups and individuals' (Robinson, 1998, 409). Qualitative methods provide a way to examine the conflicting and multiple realities of everyday life and to explore the complexities of social issues. Emphasis is placed upon an 'analysis of meanings in specific contexts rather than with a formulation of generalities' (Robinson, 1998, 409). Indeed, reliability and generalisation are not the goals of qualitative research; rather it seeks to provide a description of what people said in the research context and allow otherwise silenced voices to be heard (Tolich and Davidson, 1999).

Critical discourse analysis

A common technique employed by poststructuralist, qualitative researchers is discourse analysis. The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are widely used within the social sciences. The ready adoption of these terms can be partly attributed to French philosopher Michel Foucault. As Waitt (2005) explains, Foucault did not

use the common linguistic meaning of 'discourse' – written or spoken communication – but instead used it to conceptualise the connection between the production of knowledge through language and what we do or practice. In this sense, a discourse is broadly accepted to refer to an institutionalised way of speaking or thinking, or systems of knowledge and practices, which function to exclude or close off other ways of thinking, speaking and behaving.

Discourse analysis looks at how the meanings embedded in text[3] are produced and exist within a wider social context. It is concerned with the *effect* of texts on what people do or think. Discourse analysis can be used to describe how certain narratives are produced, privileged, naturalised and asserted over other narratives (Wylie, 2006). Thus, of central concern to discourse analysis is the connection between knowledge and power, making it a useful method for geographers. As Waitt (2005, 166) summarises, 'The methodological strength of discourse analysis lies in its ability to move beyond the text, the subtext, and representation to uncover issues of power relationships that inform what people do and think'.

I draw on Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992) to inform my approach to discourse analysis. Fairclough has been influential in illustrating the connectedness between power and language. The exercise of power in modern society, he writes, 'is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language' (Fairclough, 1989, 2). Language cannot be ignored; it plays a role in the domination of some people by others and is part of society as well as a social process. Fairclough sees language 'as discourse and as social practice', and it is discursive practice which not only contributes to reproducing society as it is, but also contributes to transforming society (Fairclough, 1989; 1992). Language analysis is a method for studying social change.

[3] Text is commonly referred to as written or spoken language, but more recently has been broadly defined to include other types of cultural production such as landscapes, maps and paintings (Johnston *et al*, 2000, 824).

Fairclough's conception of discourse is illustrated in his three-dimensional discourse model (Figure 2). It shows how text is situated within the context of its discursive practice. For example, text can be produced by a newspaper, distributed through a speech, and consumed in a book. These discursive practices in turn operate as part of the larger social practice (Rogers-Hayden, 2004).

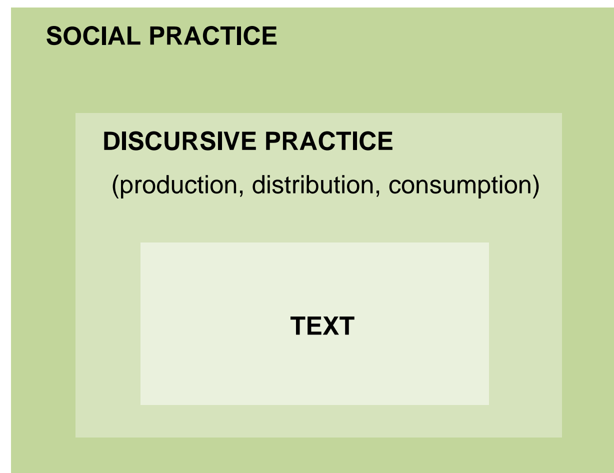

Figure 2: Three-dimensional conception of discourse
Source: Rogers-Hayden (2004) adapted from Fairclough (1992)

Models have often come under criticism from poststructuralists for presenting ideas in a reductionist manner. In his more recent work (Fairclough and Chouliaraki, 1999; Fairclough, 2003), Fairclough chooses not to present discourse using a three-tiered model. However, I believe that despite its simplistic nature, Fairclough's model can be utilised to illustrate the connectedness between language and power. I have applied his original model to my research (Figure 3). The texts I have analysed include articles from popular media, government documents and policy statements, political speeches, advertising and interviews. These texts are produced, distributed and consumed by such bodies as governments, media and corporations, and operate within the wider conditions of (post)modernity. I have chosen to use brackets around the word 'post' because there remains some debate about the conditions of postmodernity, and the degree to which society has 'moved on' from modernity. Lyon (1994, 7), for example, proposes that postmodernity has to do with social

changes: that either ‘a new kind of society is coming into being, whose contours can already be dimly perceived, or a new stage of capitalism is being inaugurated'. Fairclough and Chouliaraki (1999) refer to this new phase of social life as ‘late modernity’. In regard to consumption, I would argue that consumption has its roots in modernity, but that the ‘culture’ of consumption (consumerism) is symbolic of postmodernity (see Chapter Two).

Figure 3: Applied discourse model

Critical discourse analysis is particularly important because it is through analysing language, its production and context that power struggles can be investigated (Rogers-Hayden, 2004). Critical discourse analysis does not simply examine what is being said, ‘but also includes the institutional context in which this is being done and which co-determines what can be said meaningfully’ (Hajer, 1995, 2). Employing the technique of critical discourse analysis in this research has enabled me to explore and uncover how dominant discourses regarding sustainability, consumption and the environment are produced and operate within society. Discourse analysis adds vital insights to the examination of contemporary environmental politics (Hajer, 1995).

Recruiting participants

Recruiting participants for my research was not challenging. Given that everyone 'consumes' and that no one lives outside the environment they inhabit, I could have interviewed almost anyone for this thesis. However, rather than approaching people in an ad-hoc manner, I decided to use the snowballing technique to recruit interviewees. Using my already existing networks both at University and beyond, I asked a range of friends and acquaintances if they would be interested in being interviewed and/or if they knew anyone in their networks who might be willing to take part. The recruiting soon gained momentum and I emailed or passed on information sheets to those who expressed interest. If they agreed to be interviewed, I then arranged a suitable time and place to conduct the interview.

One of the possible drawbacks of using the snowball technique is the 'risk' of recruiting people with similar backgrounds. Eight out of the nine participants were (Pākehā) New Zealanders; the remaining participant was from overseas but had lived in New Zealand for several years. This was not a conscious choice but I acknowledge that ethnicity, along with other subjectivities, shape a person's world view and that this will have a bearing on the type of information gathered. The small, qualitative scale of my research, however, meant that I could never draw conclusions or make generalisations about participants based on their identities; indeed people's identities are multiple, changing and contested. In the context of this research, I did attempt to interview a range of household and/or family types because this would have some bearing on consumption practices. A person with a family, for example, is likely to purchase and consume differently from a person who is living alone (see appendix four). I found that one benefit of using the snowballing method to recruit participants was that I had some prior knowledge about their life experiences, employment histories and household structure. Knowing a person's job or family unit, for example, meant I could tailor my questions to them and explore their experiences and thoughts in more detail. The interviews were thus more personal and had relevance to them.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. They provide a way for researchers to generate data or information about people's social worlds by asking them to talk about their lives, their stories and their experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Interviews can be defined as an exchange, a dialogue, or as Berg (2007, 89) contends, 'simply as a conversation with a purpose'.

Initially, I thought I would also conduct focus groups for this research, and this information was included on information sheets and consent forms. After conducting the first five interviews, however, I realised that focus groups would not necessarily provide me with any extra information for this research. I decided to concentrate on conducting individual interviews. I chose in-depth semi-structured interviews because they provided me with some degree of structure and order, while also allowing flexibility. I prepared a set of questions (see appendix one) which I used as a guide during the interviews. To test the quality and ordering of questions, I first conducted a pre-test with a friend. This was useful because it gave me an idea of how I might be able to reframe my questions to improve data collection.

I wanted the interviews to develop in a conversational manner so that the participants felt comfortable and able to express their opinions openly. For this reason, I used the interview guide as a way to introduce topics of conversation, letting the participants bring up issues that were important to them. Each interview thus unfolded differently depending on the participant's experiences and knowledge. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length and were conducted in the participant's home, providing a sense of informality and familiarity. I gave each interviewee a copy of the information sheet (appendix two), consent form (appendix three) and interview schedule before beginning the interview. This gave them a chance to find out more about my research, what types of questions would be discussed and their rights as participants. I also went over the information sheet verbally with them and asked them if they would allow me to tape record the interview. I asked them to sign two

consent forms, one for them to keep and one for my records. All of the participants were happy for me to use pseudonyms instead of their real names for this research.

I was conscious of emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions; I was interested in finding out about their thoughts and experiences. I wanted the informants to view the interviews as a 'dialogue rather than an interrogation' (Valentine, 2005, 111), but soon discovered that this was more challenging than I anticipated. The use of information sheets and consent forms gave the process an 'official' feel, and the initial presence of the tape recorder made the interview seem formal. It was also difficult at first to gauge how interviewees would respond to my questions and discussion about climate change, sustainability and consumption. While some were adept at discussing the issues, others were more hesitant and worried they *should* know about these issues but did not feel they did. In the latter cases I did my best to reassure them that all answers are valid; I was not trying to find out *what* people knew, but *why* and *how* they developed their knowledges.

In this light, it was interesting to reflect upon the actual *process* of interviewing, not just upon the answers that were generated by the questions asked. The way people answered questions, the language they used, and their concerns regarding their knowledge of environmental issues were, in many cases, just as revealing as their actual answers. This helped me to form an impression of how environmental discourses are constructed and maintained. The interviewing process also forced me to consider my position as researcher, and how people responded to me. I was anxious for participants not to view me as a 'greenie' or pro-environmentalist so that they did not tailor their answers to suit or please me, but recognised that I could never know what they thought of me or how my role – in their lives or as an academic researcher – would influence them.

Hoggart *et al* (2002) asserts that we can only ever touch the surface of interviewee's views: there is always a gap between lived experiences and communication.

Throughout the interviews I had to remind myself that I could not expect to find out everything I needed; we only ever tell parts of stories. Indeed the purpose of the interviews for this research was to uncover unexpected thoughts and ideas about the research topic. The interviews provided me with an initial platform to examine the way people connect their consumption to the environment, and explore how discourses are constructed. Although I had completed a literature review of the topic, I did not know what information would be produced by the interviews and where conversations would take me. In hindsight, there were certain areas that would have been useful to probe further. For example, it could have been valuable to ask participants to talk more about the New Zealand environment, and how they related this to issues of environmental change. However, these areas only become apparent during the analysis stage of this thesis, long after my interviews were completed.

Several of the interviewees expressed surprise to find out that I was only interviewing eight to twelve people for my research, wondering how I could draw conclusions from such a small sample. Qualitative research, however, does not seek to be objective or representative, instead it is used to 'uncover stories and unravel contradictions and complexities of lived experiences' (Hoggart *et al*, 2002, 205). I can never expect to make generalisations about how New Zealanders connect their consumption to the environment, even by questioning a large number of people or using a questionnaire. The value of in-depth interviewing, which proved especially important for this research, is to gain a deeper picture and allow for unexpected and unanticipated issues to be raised. 'Research cannot provide the mirror reflections of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to the experiences and social worlds' (Miller and Glassner, 1997, 100).

Interview analysis

The analysis process began as soon as I completed my first interview. Not only did I reflect upon the usefulness or wording of the questions, I also started to explore how

the responses and information gained linked to (or did not link to) my literature review. Interview analysis was thus a continual process, not a distinct period separated from the 'fieldwork' stage of my research.

I tried to transcribe each interview as soon as possible after it was conducted and before the next one commenced. This way the conversation and associated 'feelings' about it were still fresh in my head. I typed the interviews verbatim[4] to ensure that the participant's thoughts were accurately recorded. Once I had full transcripts of all the interviews I printed several copies of each, ready for focused analysis. I used what Crang (2005) refers to as 'open coding' in the analysis of my interviews. I worked slowly through the transcripts and as ideas emerged, I noted these alongside the text. On a separate page I wrote down any recurring or dominant thoughts. I then used these notes to tentatively determine the main themes. Going back over the transcripts again, I highlighted parts of text that related to the themes, using a different coloured pen for each theme. Some themes overlapped and in those cases, I used two or more colours. I continued to re-read the transcripts which helped me to make comparisons and draw out similarities and contradictions.

This method of interview analysis allowed me to focus my research and pull out purposeful segments of information from the large amount gathered in the interviews. However, the drawback of compartmentalising the information in this way is that some issues may be overlooked. There is also the danger of essentialising the participants' experiences and opinions, effectively drawing generalisations from the data where none exist. I tried to be conscious of these limitations, reminding myself of the diversity of people's experiences. It was also important to bear in mind that, like all research, the process of interview analysis is subjective; information will be interpreted differently depending on the researcher.

[4] The transcribing codes I used are as follows: *italics* indicate a participants' emphasis on a particular word or phrase; three full stops […] indicates a pause; a double slash [//] indicates an interruption; (…) indicates a removal of text. I have also inserted words in square brackets [ ] where explanations are needed to make the sentence or statement make sense.

Text analysis

In order to investigate how consumers, consumption and the environment are constructed in discourse(s) in New Zealand, it was important to examine a range of texts, from policy documents, to media texts such as newspaper and magazine articles and advertisements. The process of acquiring texts began as soon as I started my research. Once I had decided upon my topic, I became acutely aware of any news items, articles, advertisements and even passing references to or comments about climate change and sustainability. The process of collecting texts was extensive and continual, and involved thorough analysis. The texts used in this thesis represent only a small percentage of the total texts collected; however, all were useful in forming an impression of dominant discourses and debates regarding the research topic.

The majority of my information from the government was gained through the Ministry for the Environment website (www.mfe.govt.nz). Here, publications, reports and information brochures can be accessed freely. Political speeches and media releases were accessed through the official website of the New Zealand government (www.beehive.govt.nz). It was important in this research to look at the programmes, initiatives and policies proposed or implemented by the government in regard to sustainable consumption and climate change. As Backstrand and Lovbrand (2007, 125) state, 'policies are not neutral tools, but rather a product of discursive struggles. Accordingly, policy discourses favour certain descriptions of reality and hereby empower certain actors while marginalising others'. Thus, questions to ask when analysing policy and political statements include: In what institutional context is the policy/statement being framed and how does this determine what can be said meaningfully? What discourses are being created or maintained? What power relations are embedded in this discourse? Who is being marginalised and why?

The above questions can equally apply to the analysis of other texts such as newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements and commercials and visual texts such as photographs and images. As illustrated in my applied discourse model (Figure 3), text is situated within the context of its discursive practice, and these

discursive practices in turn operate as part of the larger social practice of (post)modernity. Again, I draw on Norman Fairclough (1989) to inform my approach to textual analysis. In analysing texts, he says, 'one's focus is constantly alternating between what is 'there' in the text, and the discourse type which the text is drawing upon' (Fairclough, 1989, 110). Thus context and choice of wording as well as the actual language used are all considerations in discourse analysis. It is also important to think about what is *missing* from the text; what or who is not being addressed, and the possible implications of this.

I used a database to search for newspaper articles related to my research topic, but also found many through my own reading. I did not use many of these articles explicitly; rather they helped build a picture about how narratives of sustainability, climate change and consumption are discursively (re)produced. I selected magazines and advertisements in a similar way, and watched television programmes and well-known documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour* by Leonardo DiCaprio. Obviously, this process of selecting texts is highly subjective and dependent upon what was available and what I considered to be useful. However, the purpose of this research was not to provide a representative analysis of sustainable consumption: indeed it would be impossible to do so. Rather I have used the material to support my interviews and illustrate how current and hegemonic discourses are (re)constructed and operate.

Situated knowledge, positionality and reflexivity

A poststructuralist approach acknowledges that research is inevitably subjective. All research is conducted within not only a geographical context, but historical, political, social and cultural ones as well (Hoggart *et al*, 2002). A researcher can never be an objective bystander separated from his or her 'subjects'. After all, I do not sit outside of this research. I am a consumer and a New Zealand citizen: I am a subject of and subject to powerful discourses. Researchers always remain part of the world they are studying and can only attempt to understand that world from their experiences of life

(Tolich and Davidson, 1999). It is therefore important to recognise one's 'positionality' and to reflect upon who we are and how our identities shape the interactions we have with others (Valentine, 2005, 113).

I am aware that my positionality informs and influences this research. The questions I have formulated, how I frame them and how I interpret the answers are intimately bound up with my view of the world. My choice of research area reflects my interest in environmental issues, geography and politics. I am also young, Pākehā and female, and my experiences and identities inevitably bring preconceived ideas and knowledges about consumption, consumerism and environmental matters. During this research process, I tried to constantly question my assumptions, and along the way I realised that this was an important part of the 'learning process'. Sometimes you learn just as much about yourself as you do about your 'subjects'.

'Situating' yourself in your research is indeed a crucial goal for critical geographers (Rose, 1997). Interviews are not neutral procedures, but 'social interactions replete with power relations' (Hoggart *et al*, 2002, 212). As I discovered during my interviews, these relations shift from one interview to the next, depending on positionalities, personalities and subjectivities. What is more, we can never fully know how they play out: power and knowledge are inextricably connected. I agree with Hoggart *et al* (2002) who contend that, while we can make our values explicit as researchers, this does not mean that one sided investigations are acceptable. Being a medium through which others can 'speak' and have their stories told remains an important part of social science research.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explained my rationale for using qualitative, post-structural methodologies in this research. Critical discourse analysis is crucial in examining language, its production and context, and in exposing the power relations embedded in discourse. The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews enabled me to explore

how people connect their consumption practices to the environment, and reveal unexpected contradictions and complexities. I have also outlined and reflected upon the challenges I faced during the research process. Like all research, the process involved in creating this thesis was not value-free, uncomplicated or neutral, and acknowledging this along with my positionality is important in critical geographical study.

In the following three chapters, I draw on participant interviews and critical discourse analysis to address my three research questions and discuss how the environment, consumption and consumers are constructed in dominant discourses in New Zealand. I combine these findings with relevant literature to offer a critical and in-depth analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONSTRUCTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

It was not until the late 1980s that global climate change emerged as a serious environmental concern. In a relatively short space of time, it has come to be defined as one of the most important problems, and biggest challenges, facing humanity. Over the last decade in particular, it is increasingly difficult to avoid discussion about this looming 'climate crisis' – a flick through the environment section of the newspaper, a glance at the six o'clock news, and even a passing conversation about the particularly hot weather, indicates that climate change has become entrenched in normative public debate.

In this chapter, I critically examine how discourses relating to the environment and climate change are (re)produced and maintained. I argue that climate change has been identified as a wholly global, scientific and intergovernmental issue, requiring the reduction of global carbon emissions. While accurate in one sense, I show that this discourse has affected the way climate change is conceptualised, perceived and responded to in both the policy and public arenas. I highlight the need for a re-examination of the issue to include science 'experts', policy-makers *and* citizens in order to make climate change more meaningful and tangible to an uncertain public.

Following this, I turn my attention to New Zealand as a means to illustrate how successive governments have utilised dominant representations of the New Zealand environment to justify climate change and sustainability policy decisions. I argue that in doing so governments have placed environmental policy within an economic, rather than environmental or social framework, conforming to an 'ecological modernisation' discourse. This discourse does little to challenge the underlying causes or drivers of environmental degradation, or address the links between consumption and environmental change.

The environment as climate / the climate as science

Global warming has come to dominate environmental discussions both nationally and internationally: so much so that in many cases the term 'climate' has become almost interchangeable with the term 'environment'. In the run up to the New Zealand general election in November 2008, the first televised leader's debate (14 October 2008) featured a segment on environmental questions labelled 'climate concerns'. Questions posed to then Prime Minister Helen Clark and National Party leader John Key focused solely on climate change and sustainability. Talking about the environment, it seems, has increasingly come to mean talking about the climate, and talking about the climate has invariably come to mean discussing carbon emissions. As Hinchliffe (1996) argues, the current discourse constructs climate change as a CO_2 problem, requiring the reduction of greenhouse gases. 'Saving the planet' is about reducing the potential for global warming and therefore reducing people's 'carbon footprints'. As discussed in Chapter Two, this construction of climate change as a carbon issue has centred on hegemonic discourses of (Western) science and scientific 'knowledge'.

This scientific construction of global climate change is not surprising considering that evidence of global warming was initially identified by scientists, and that ongoing predictions about changes in the global climate system require science-based monitoring, projections and modelling. Organisations such as the IPCC and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) rely on scientific and technical research and literature to develop their reports on the observed and projected impacts of human-induced environmental change. The IPCC's reports played a major role in the negotiations leading to the Kyoto Protocol, and in setting targets for greenhouse gas emission reductions. In signing the Kyoto Protocol, New Zealand is committed to achieving a specified target (to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions back to 1990 levels by 2012), which has been based on national and worldwide monitoring and reporting systems. The Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) has been developed to help New Zealand meet its obligations under the UNFCC and the Kyoto Protocol.

Thus science has been accorded a central – and privileged – role in global, and therefore national, environmental policy decision making. Subsequently, the task of many governments and environmentalists has been to convince an 'uneducated' public that the science behind climate change is valid, objective and sound. The central premise of *An Inconvenient Truth,* for example, was to convince 'ordinary citizens' of the realities – and scientific certainty – of global warming. Throughout the film, Al Gore used a considerable number of graphs, statistics, diagrams and models to show that global warming is a real and serious threat; that it is 'fact rather than theory' (see Figure 4). Gore stressed that the information he presented was based on robust and reliable science. What was crucial in the climate change debate, it was argued, was separating 'truth from fiction' (Guggenheim, 2006). However, while environmentalists have come to depend on science, and on rigorously scientifically produced measurements, predictions and models, framing climate change within a scientific discourse has, in many ways, counteracted their cause.

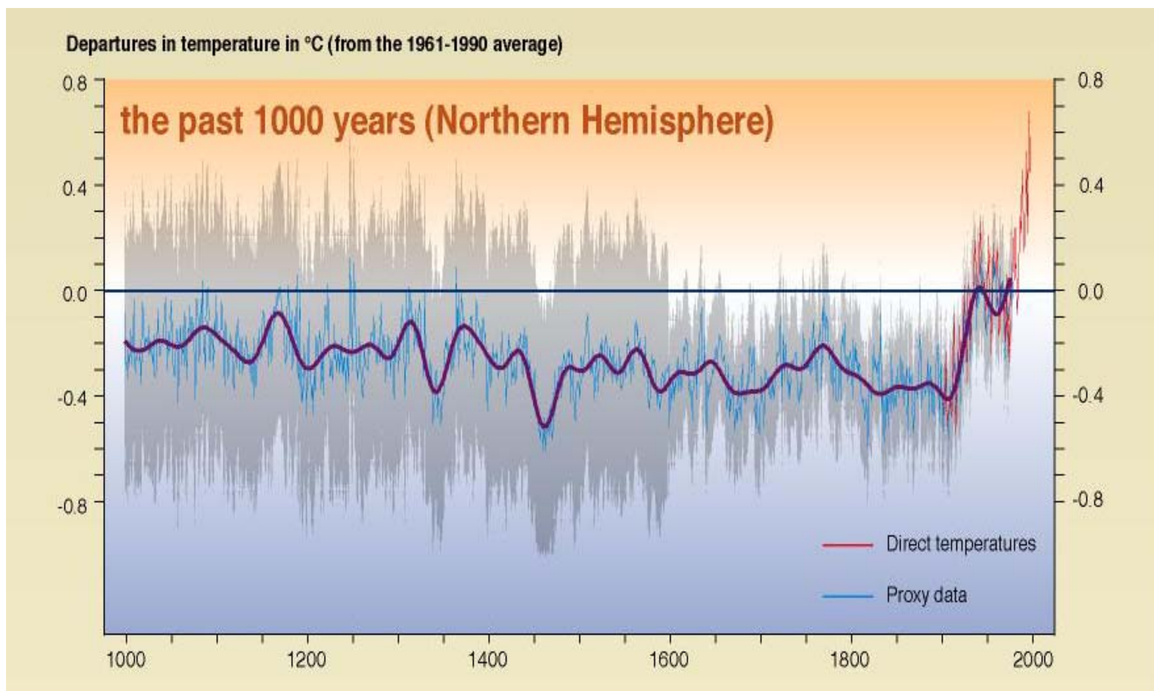

Figure 4: Average temperature anomalies in the Northern Hemisphere since 1000 A.D. This graph shows the temperature fluctuations over the last 1000, indicating a dramatic increase in temperatures in the last 50 years. Gore used a similar graph in his film. *Source*: IPCC (2001, 49, Figure 2-3)

Science, power and politics

As highlighted briefly in Chapter Two, constructing climate change as a scientific issue has meant that climate change debates have been dominated by the idea that anthropogenic global warming needs to be either scientifically proven or unproven. Demeritt (2006) explains that this is what has happened in the United States, where debate has been fixated on the narrow scientific question of whether global warming is empirically detectable or not. In New Zealand this debate has had less vigour but has nevertheless been given adequate attention (see de Freitas, 1994, 2002, 2007).

The debate has been reignited by the ACT Party, a minor coalition partner in the new National-led government, following the 2008 general election in New Zealand. They have successfully pushed for the formation of a special climate change select committee to review the emissions trading scheme legislation and carbon taxes, and to look at the 'scientific debate' regarding anthropogenic global warming. The committee's first term of reference is to:

> Identify the central/benchmark projections which are being used as the motivation for international agreements to combat climate change; and consider the uncertainties and risks surrounding those projections (Climate Change Select Committee Terms of Reference [media release], The official website of the New Zealand government, retrieved 9/12/2008).

Thus one of the aims of the committee, made up of a group of appointed politicians, is to question the scientific projections assessed by the IPCC. This is due to the fact that, as explained earlier, these are the central projections used as the basis for international agreements. This will be no easy task. Climate science is complex and multidisciplinary and the IPCC draws on hundreds of scientists and 'experts' across various fields. The treatment of uncertainties is therefore equally complex and involves a broad framework to assess material from different disciplines and diversity of approaches (IPCC, 2007, 27).

Assessing the science of climate change may not only be beyond the capacity of a small group of politicians, but by reviewing scientific knowledges in this manner, significant uncertainties about human-induced climate change become reinforced and even promoted. Much of scientific knowledge is provisional and incomplete, and relies on assumptions, judgements, values and projections: uncertainty is at the heart of scientific endeavour (Shackley and Wynne, 1996). However, exposing scientific uncertainty does not always make an issue 'more balanced', or enable an 'objective truth' to be uncovered.

Demeritt (2006) shows how the IPCC graph (Figure 4) has been used to discredit climate change and sustain public scepticism. This graph (first published by Mann *et al,* 1998) has been the basis for the claim that most of the global warming over the last 50 years can be attributed to human activities. Behind this graph 'stands the congealed labour of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of scientists' who have been involved in assembling multiple pieces of data across various places and regions using complex statistical techniques (Demeritt, 2006, 461-465). Two climate change sceptics, Willie Soon and Sallie Baliunas (2003) drew on some selective pieces of proxy data to counter the conclusion that Mann *et al* (1998, 1999) and colleagues had reached. These new 'findings' were released by the American Petroleum Institute, who helped fund the study, and led the Republican majority Congress to subpoena public testimony from Mann *et al* and demand they provide further evidence of the sources, methods and analytical judgements behind their climate reconstructions (Demeritt, 2006). Although still disputed and debated, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page story and editorial about the 'hockey stick' graph, and in 2003 the White House removed the graph from the Environmental Protection Agency's report (2003) on the state of the environment.

Demeritt (2006, 464) argues that it is difficult to see how such a campaign to discredit the science of climate change is 'reflexive and enlightened', or opens up space for unbiased and objective debate. This example also illustrates how the boundaries between science and politics are becoming increasingly blurred. Miller (2001) argues

that with the formation of new organisations such as the IPCC, who mediate between the institutions of 'science' and 'politics' and mix elements of each, the relationship between science and politics has become sophisticated. The discourses that populate these domains are 'hybrids, complex mixtures of facts and values', which are constantly being questioned and debated (Miller, 2001, 495). Given the complicated relationship between science and politics, it remains difficult to see how a group of politicians can attempt to be 'objective' assessors of climate science. Uncovering the scientific 'truth' about climate change is futile and, in any case, power does not always listen to 'truth', especially when 'truth' does not fit its political agenda (Haas, 2004).

Concentrating on whether anthropogenic climate change is scientific fact or not is problematic in another sense: it removes the need to debate the reasons for environmental policies themselves. When policies are wholly science-led, their purpose is to 'solve' the scientific 'problem' at hand, rather than to address the underlying economic and social structures that may be causing them. Thus instead of asking questions about the way society operates, climate change policies tend to be concerned with reducing carbon emissions to meet specified targets usually by the most cost-effective means possible. In New Zealand, the predominant response to climate change has been to reduce greenhouse gases primarily through an Emissions Trading Scheme (Bührs, 2008). In order to 'protect' the economic and export interests of New Zealand, the agricultural sector, the largest single contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and also a major income earner, is exempt from the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) until at least 2013[5] (Ministry for the Environment, 2008d).

Scientific (un)certainty in (post)modernity

As I have detailed, a narrowly scientific construction of climate change has meant that debate has been trapped within an endless argument over whether human-

[5] The ETS will be reviewed under the special select committee on climate change.

induced climate change is happening or not, even though the definitive answer to this question remains continually out of reach. Despite efforts by mainstream environmentalists to convince the general public of the 'scientific certainty' of global warming, uncertainty and scepticism remain significant parts of climate change debates and individual understandings.

For example, this research revealed that people have a multiplicity of perspectives regarding the connection between consumption and climate change. While some participants believed that climate change was a definite 'reality', others said that although they could see a connection between human activity and pollution, they were less certain about the link to global warming. This appeared to be not only due to the widely publicised debates on the scientific uncertainty of global warming, but also because climate change was perceived to be an unknown quantity with no obvious material reality.

Maria and Lucy believed that there was a definite link between consumption and a changing climate. Maria summed up her feelings by using the example of Beijing:

Maria: I just sort of immediately … I was thinking if you stick a whole lot of people together in a city like Beijing and you drive a lot of cars and produce a lot of air pollution, and … I can't understand why you *wouldn't* see that as altering your climate (interview 24/07/2008).

Lucy thought that the evidence Gore presented in *An Inconvenient Truth* was convincing:

Lucy: That [*An Inconvenient Truth*] actually was an eye opener, I mean some people say, oh, that was humbug, but I mean when you put up evidence like he [Gore] did … I believe in him, to be honest, it made me think, it made me worry, not for me but in case I have children in the future and stuff like that (interview 22/07/2008).

Samantha and I also talked about *An Inconvenient Truth* in our interview, but as opposed to Lucy, she remained unsure about the certainty of climate change. Although she said she did not understand the entire argument against anthropogenic climate change, it appeared that knowing that there was debate was enough to cast doubt on Gore's claims:

Samantha: … you only hear about the stuff [on climate change] in the media and I don't really know really what is going on (…) you know, he [Gore] was showing all the graphs and things like that so it looks all, you know 'this is happening and its happening really fast' but I know there's another side, you know other people have the opposite argument, and I don't know what that is, you know I only know the very basics, that they think its just a change, a normal change in the Earth, you know in the heating up and cooling down that sort of thing anyway, but that's all I know (interview 30/06/2008).

I asked Scott whether he found the issue of climate change very confusing. He replied:

Scott: Oh yeah, very, very confusing, yeah, and head in the sand sort of thing, um, I don't think I make a conscious effort apart from the planting of native trees (…)

Joanna: Why do you think it is so confusing?

Scott: Um, I guess the more you drill into anything, the more complex it gets, I guess it's a matter of not seeing things at face value which is very easy to do … and yeah and I've been reading a little bit about how the history of New Zealand and climate change and that (…) and um, you know that was prior to human beings using fossil fuels so yeah, I'm not … I haven't looked into it enough to make an educated decision on that (interview 02/08/2008).

The conversations with Scott and Samantha were interesting because they revealed the paradoxical nature of knowledge formation. On the one hand, both believed that there are uncertainties surrounding climate change and were not prepared to make a judgement either way. Yet they also appeared to believe that obtaining an objective 'truth' about climate change is possible – all that is required is more (trusted)

knowledge. Samantha suggested that the media has a monopoly on presenting knowledge about climate change, and in her view this was cause for scepticism. In a similar way, Scott believed that finding the 'truth' about climate change was a matter of digging deeper into the issue and not just accepting things at 'face value'.

Scott also alluded to the idea that climate change is overwhelming, a 'head in the sand sort of thing', referring again to the complexities of the issue and suggesting that this makes it difficult to make any lifestyle changes. In our conversation, Liam also discussed the way climate change is an intangible and unknown risk. He believed that when people cannot see specific cause and effect relationships between their actions and the environment, they may find it harder to understand the issue. Interestingly, he also expressed that there will never be certainty about climate change and this only further compounds the issue:

Liam: … if you can't see a specific cause and effect then you probably won't understand, it either won't have specific relevance to your specific tasks that you do everyday, but it'll … and you'll probably find it harder to understand … and I mean I guess when you read into it doesn't help because its typical in academia that you won't have 100% consensus on the issue so even though you hear more and more about the science saying you know, you hear that more and more scientists are backing the idea, you'll still have those that don't (interview 30/7/2008).

Climate change, therefore, could be described as an incalculable risk, one which is not only distant and complex, but also one which is constantly being contested and undermined by media discourse, new knowledge and uncertainties. Beck (1992) developed the theories of risk society and reflexive modernisation to explain the transition from Western societies with modern, 'calculable' risks to ones with manufactured, incalculable mega-hazards (Backstrand, 2003). Beck (1992) argues that the modern dependence upon scientific and technical knowledge has meant that risks and hazards have been identified which extend over space and time, and whose consequences and impacts are difficult to assess. Instead of placing trust in science to absolve risk (as society may have done in the past), people are more likely to reflect

upon knowledge, especially when scientific authority is constantly undermined by 'disasters' such as Chernobyl, and controversies such as genetically modified organisms and the BSE ("mad cow") outbreak. There is a growing lack of confidence in scientific management and trust in the institutions of modernity. This is reflected in reduced public faith in governments, industry and 'experts'. However, as Scott and Samantha show, while uncertainty is an increasingly recognised and even expected part of society, this is countered with the (modern) idea that certainty is an attainable state (Jasonoff, 2007). The paradoxical predicament of reflexive modernisation makes deciphering the magnitude and importance of environmental risks such as climate change, and allocating appropriate responsibility, all the more difficult.

Perhaps, therefore, as Demeritt (1998, 188) suggests, the task may not be to convince the public of the scientific certainty of global warming and appeal to an (assumed) universal sense of 'global citizenry', but to find a way to make climate change meaningful to a differentiated international public. Engaging in wholly scientific debate only serves to make uncertainty all the more certain. The way science has been assigned the privileged role of identifying environmental problems also means that only science, and a limited number of 'experts', can conceptualise appropriate 'solutions' to the problems they have defined (Blowers, 1997). The lay person is left unqualified and distanced from policy. Furthermore, as Backstrand (2003, 30) explains, 'when the public experiences that science can be both contested and uncertain, the policy-process, which relies on purportedly objective knowledge, loses credibility'. Thus, while climate change is about science, it is also about more than science, and must involve more than scientists and experts. I agree with Backstrand (2003) who argues for a reframing of the science-politics interface that includes the triangular interaction between policy-makers, scientific experts *and* citizens. After all, 'the citizen is not just the recipient of policy but an actor in the science policy nexus' (Backstrand, 2003, 25).

Globalising the climate

The past two decades have seen the focus of environmental anxiety and attention shift from regional and national concerns to macro 'threats' such as ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity and the enhanced greenhouse effect (Figure 5). This changing environmental discourse has meant the environment has not only been framed as 'scientific' but also as 'global'. Miller (2004) provides an overview of the way the IPCC globalised the atmosphere by constructing a discourse that framed climate change as a risk to the global environment. Miller (2004) shows how before the early 1980s, the climate was simply another way of describing the weather, and climate change was framed as having consequences for regional locales. This began to change when climate scientists increasingly used computer models to represent the Earth's climate as an integrated, global system, linking atmospheric dynamics to the world's oceans, vegetation, glaciers and ice caps (Miller, 2004). When the IPCC was formed in 1988, it drew its understanding of the climate from the work of climate modellers, and in a relatively short period of time, the global climate had become their central metaphor.

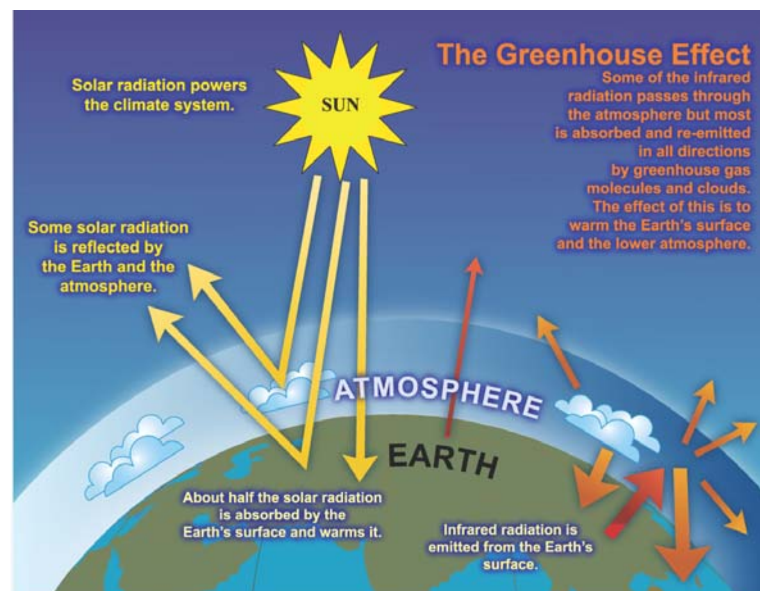

Figure 5: The greenhouse effect
Source: IPCC (2007, 98, FAQ 1.3 Figure 1)

This image of the Earth as an integrated system of weather patterns, and climate change as resulting from the release of global greenhouse gases, has been maintained through the use of representations of the Earth as a singular mass of continents, oceans and clouds. Perhaps the most famous photograph of the earth was taken on 7 December 1972 by the crew of Apollo 17. The 'Blue Marble' image (Figure 6) captured the Earth in its entirety and is credited with changing the human perspective of the earth as one which is globally integrated. This 'bird's eye' view of the Earth has been used as the basis for illustrating the process of global warming: of a planet and global atmosphere affected by the release of global greenhouse gases (Figure 5), and to symbolise a 'fragile' and solitary planet. This 'one planet' concept has been widely utilised by environmentalists, from the conception of the modern environment movement in the 1970s right through to present day (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The Only Planet Guide, Greenpeace New Zealand[6]

This 'one Earth' discourse coincided with, and reinforced, an emerging view of the world as one that was increasingly interconnected, not just environmentally but also economically, socially and culturally. The globalisation of production and consumption systems and worldwide economic, development and energy concerns led the World Commission on Environment and Development to describe contemporary problems as ones of 'common concern' (WCED, 1987). Indeed, their seminal report was entitled *Our Common Future* and its purpose was to present the

[6] Reprinted with permission from Greenpeace New Zealand, www.greenpeace.org/newzealand, retrieved 15/12/2008

Earth as a damaged planet which was suffering from a series of 'interlocking crises'. The report proposed that the environment and development should be discussed as one single issue and that environmental problems are not only a common concern of humankind, but should be addressed multilaterally.

Thus the IPCC and the WCED have helped contribute to a now widely held belief that global political cooperation is needed to prevent worldwide environmental degradation. Indeed, while it may be true that issues such as climate change transcend the local and national level, and that production and consumption systems stretch beyond the power of nation-states, there are underlying problems associated with the continual focus on the global and internationally managed environment.

Firstly, global environmental problems marginalise other environmental concerns that may affect people more directly (Hajer, 1995). These may include industrial toxic pollution, desertification, soil erosion, and in New Zealand's case, river and lake water quality. A focus on the global environment is disempowering of more situated environmental needs, and of local social understandings of the environment. A narrow focus on global greenhouse gas emissions displaces attention from what may be more pressing concerns (Demeritt, 1998).

Secondly, the global view of the world treats everyone as a citizen of planet earth and elides the major differences among, and within, human populations (Miller, 2004). Diversity and inequality remain persistent features of a globalised world (Blowers, 1997), and the climatic changes associated with global warming are not universal, nor are they expected to be experienced evenly across socio-spatial divisions. Despite calls for integrated responses, countries in the South remain critical of the IPCC's ability to accommodate the differences between developed and developing countries, especially when research has originated out of laboratories and research centres in North America, Europe and Japan (Miller, 2004). Issues of global inequality existed long before the issue of global warming was identified: climate change is the not the root cause of global problems (Thomas and Fitzgerald, 2008). Solving the problem of

gases in the atmosphere will not change the uneven patterns of production and consumption and lead to a fairer world. The construction of climate change by those in the North as a global, intergovernmental and pressing issue may mean that other global problems affecting those in the South are conveniently avoided in what has been viewed by some as a new form of ‘environmental colonialism’ (Agarwal and Narain, 1991; Parikh, 1992; Parikh and Painuly, 1994).

Climate change, what climate change?

Demeritt (1998) argues that the globalisation of the climate and a narrow focus on greenhouse gas emissions divorces the issue of climate change from its social context. This is compounded by the fact that people believe its effects will not be felt for a generation or more. As discussed in the previous section, this is one of the factors that contributes to the idea that global warming is an intangible and unknown risk. As Hajer (1995, 10) states, ‘problems like ozone depletion or indeed the greenhouse effect seem to lack a material reality. We do not experience them; they are pointed out to us by experts that use high-tech devices such as colourful computer graphics to facilitate our understanding of these global threats.’ While their message is apocalyptic, the major social changes they say are needed to avert ‘disaster’ seem impossibly out of reach.

During our interview, Alex talked about how the construction of climate change centred on the idea of ‘the future’. She reflected many of the participants’ views that the broad scale and globalised nature of climate change meant that people would be more reluctant to make changes:

Alex: … we are talking a hundred years or whatever, thinking about a sustainable future that might affect my children’s children but its not something that you can actually see that’s like a tangible sort of … something that’s affecting your day to day life now … (interview 14/06/2008).

We continued a similar discussion later on in our conversation. I asked Alex whether she thought people may be more likely to change the way they think or act if the effects of climate change were more severe. She replied:

Alex: Yep, definitely, if people, I mean, I think the main problem is that people aren't really proactive until something happens, they are more *reactive* in their approach to most things so you know if you see (…) the effect of climate change and how this might be affecting your personal life but … honestly I just think for most people it comes down to not being able to see the … //

Joanna: // Bigger picture?

Alex: Yeah.

Maria also agreed that people are more reactive than proactive:

Maria: … people might not change until it impacts them (…) So when the rubber hits the road, and people actually notice, then there is an impotence to change (…). It is a bit reactive … (interview 24/07/2008).

The conversations with participants revealed that despite increased public consciousness and media hype, the dangers of climate change seemed too far away, lacking any direct reality to their lives and unlikely to happen in their lifetime. Perhaps this is the reason why, despite increased *awareness* of climate change, people do not readily adopt pro-environmental behaviours as a direct result of concerns for global warming (as discussed in Chapter Six). The issue may be *too* global, *too* scientific and *too* distant – ironically, the central concepts used in dominant constructions of climate change. Thus, being asked to 'think globally, act locally'[7]

[7] The phrase 'think globally, act locally' has been widely attributed to René Dubos, a French-born American environmentalist and microbiologist. The idea behind the phrase is said to have emerged at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment where Dubos was an advisor. In her biography of Dubos, Moberg (2005) claims that Dubos preferred to use the conjunction 'but' in between the two ideas in order to emphasise the idea of personal involvement. Dubos believed legislation was futile unless it was implemented through local action. Moberg (2005) suggests Dubos used the phrase cautiously because he had a distrust of slogans. The 'think globally, act locally' maxim, however, has been widely utilised by environmentalists in various ways to suggest that local (and individual) actions can impact on wider-scale environmental problems.

quickly loses its appeal if the connections between the local and the global appear flimsy. Furthermore, as I highlighted earlier in the chapter, people do not necessarily see environmental issues as uncomplicated and incontestable. There is uncertainty about whether climate change is happening, what it might imply for their lives, as well as doubt over the ability of global political institutions and national governments to carry out effective strategies for change (Miller, 2004).

Hobson's (2006) research on the government's 'Action at Home' initiative in the United Kingdom revealed similar results. This programme encouraged people to make 'environmentally friendly' changes to their lifestyles. Hobson (2006) showed that one of the drawbacks of the programme was that environmental issues were presented as definitive, yet those taking part in the initiative did not view issues as 'black and white'. Lifestyles were thus being forced into a 'narrow, one-dimensional frame of reference that had little to do with the day-to-day experiences of interviewees' (Hobson, 2006, 318). While environmental issues were being distilled and framed as having 'easy-fix' solutions which require individual small changes and minor lifestyle adjustments, people were not convinced these actions would make a difference to complex, global environmental problems.

Localising the climate: selling the 'clean, green' myth

In New Zealand, the idea that climate change solutions involve individual action is mobilised by emphasising the link between personal responsibility and New Zealand's natural environment. The Ministry for the Environment has attempted to draw attention to what New Zealand risks to lose. Appeals are made to a (supposed) sense of nationalism:

> As New Zealanders, we have a great deal worth protecting: our precious natural resources, unique flora and fauna – our taonga [precious things], world-renowned scenery and way of life. At the same time we need to continue to grow our economy, improve living standards, and enhance our reputation as a country that consistently punches above its weight (Ministry for the Environment, 2007d, 1).

This idea of 'togetherness' is repeated time and again by the government, local councils, environmental groups and the popular media. Mirroring the 'one world' vision of the IPCC and WCED, this discourse plays on the idea that as citizens of New Zealand and a nation of people who 'care about their environment and are concerned about climate change' (The official website of the New Zealand government, retrieved 13/04/2008) we not only need to take action, but want to. It is time to 'invoke that old Kiwi spirit' (*Good* magazine, 2008, 14) and 'together we can really help the environment – the more of us that step up, the bigger the difference we'll make' (Ministry for the Environment, 2008c, 1).

Drawing upon the discourse that constructs New Zealanders as having an innate concern for the environment, and upon New Zealand's supposed 'clean, green and beautiful' persona is not new. In her book *Inventing New Zealand: everyday myths of Pākehā identity* (1996), Claudia Bell describes how a national (Pākehā) identity has been developed based on the centrality of nature. She writes:

> In New Zealand, we can see that nature and landscape have become a powerful identity 'myth'. 'Green' is a splendid example of this; myth transforms nature into history and political expediency. We can then sell it to tourists as national identity; and half-believe it ourselves (Bell, 1996, 48).

The powerful concept of nature has been used to promote New Zealand overseas and sell a particular image of New Zealand to tourists (Tourism New Zealand's *100% Pure New Zealand*[8] promotion is a well-known example, see www.newzealand.com). Bell (1996) claims that this construction of national identity has become New Zealand's 'claim to fame', for the country is far less notable for what it has in terms of 'everyday cultural creations' such as 'intellectual property, service, or glamorous or interesting towns' (Bell, 1996, 34). This set of ideas about New Zealand, and the idealisation of the New Zealand 'lifestyle' within nature, has become reified both

[8] Tourism New Zealand would not allow me to include an example of their *100% Pure New Zealand* advertisement in this thesis.

overseas and within New Zealand so that it has come to be accepted as a 'truism' (Campbell, 1999, 238).

'Green', it seems, has become an easy way to describe New Zealand. This image is readily authenticated by any travel around the country. Rolling hills, native bush and great expanses of ocean lie within easy reach of all urban centres. Yet evidence suggests that New Zealand's environment is not nearly as 'pure' as the promotion suggests. The latest *Environment New Zealand* report released in 2007, a follow up to the first *State of the Environment* report in 1997, found that pressures on the New Zealand environment were increasing, and that steps needed to be taken to address water, air and land quality. Greenhouse gas emissions continued to increase and New Zealanders were consuming more goods and using more energy. Many commentators have suggested that New Zealand's 'clean, green' image is far better sustained than its land and environment (Bell, 1996; Stewart, 1996).

Sustainability as 'progressive': the discourse of ecological modernisation

Indeed, the 'clean green' *brand* has been carefully cultivated and used as a core concept in discussions of sustainability and climate change in New Zealand. The government has repeatedly stated that New Zealand must hold onto its 'clean, green' reputation if it is to compete in an international market. At the Sustainable Business Awards evening on 10 October 2008 then Prime Minister Helen Clark spoke of New Zealand's image and the need to give meaning and substance to the 'clean green' slogan. Through innovation, she maintained, New Zealand needs to 'live our country's brand'. Without a commitment to sustainability, 'New Zealand would be stuck with an increasingly old-fashioned economy – and a polluting one at that.' A win-win scenario was advanced – for the economy, for business and for the environment. She continued:

> We need to be bold in our commitment to sustainability to protect New Zealand's reputation as a country with a clean environment, smart and innovative people, and an inclusive community. We are a small nation, but that is no reason not to stand up and be counted on the most pressing environmental issues the world faces today (The official website of the New Zealand government [speech], retrieved 22/10/2008).

Being green in New Zealand, it seems, can mean ‘more’ rather than ‘less’ (James, 2007, 13). Capitalising on New Zealand’s ‘clean green’ image, ‘good old Kiwi’ ingenuity and innovation is presented as a way to negotiate the challenges that a changing global environment might bring. Furthermore, there is money to be made from it. Former Deputy Prime Minister Michael Cullen enthused in his Federated Farmers’ speech:

> I believe that pursuing sustainability is an enormous economic opportunity for New Zealand. We have a real chance to be an example to the rest of the world on how to deliver more jobs, higher wages and higher profits, all while protecting the environment (James, 2007, 13).

This narrative is consistent with the discourse of ecological modernisation which has gained ground since the 1980s. As mentioned in Chapter Two, a distinct feature of ecological modernisation is the compatibility and mutually supportive relationship between economic growth and environmental protection. This discourse puts a different spin on the ecological crisis, rejecting the doomsday scenario and instead suggesting that technical innovation and sophisticated management can more than provide the answers (Dalby, 2003). As Hajer (1995, 32) states, ‘What first appeared a threat to the system now becomes a vehicle for its very innovation’. As the New Zealand government has maintained, there is business to be made from the ecological crisis – whether it be waste management or new technologies, or through promoting a ‘green’ export brand.

Ecological modernisation discourse thus enables Western governments to ‘promote environmental protection as being economically responsible’ (Christoff, 1996, 483). In New Zealand, this conveniently ties in with both the ‘clean green’ image brand and the idea that policy responses should be in line with ‘national (economic) interests’

(Bührs, 2008). This position allows a critique of old bureaucratic practices, but does not challenge free-market principles or call for structural change. Rather it calls for a shift in the way existing systems operate. Thus, ecological modernisation is about *transition*, rather than transformation. Blowers (1997, 847) claims ecological modernisation is 'at once, a technical theory, a policy discourse and, for some, a belief system as well'. New stakeholders such as environmental movements, community groups, businesses and consumers are encouraged to take lead roles in stimulating environmental 'renovation'. Hajer (1995, 30) argues that ecological modernisation is 'not hegemonic in the sense that no other discourses are to be found in the environmental domain' but that ecological modernisation has become 'the most credible way of "talking Green" in spheres of environmental policy-making'.

A way for the New Zealand government to 'talk green' has been the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), arguably the keystone effort to address climate change in New Zealand.[9] The premise of an ETS is to create a market in which carbon credits can be bought and sold. In this sense, the climate is commodified, a price is placed on carbon, and industries can trade 'carbon credits' among themselves or sell them on an international carbon market. The ETS and other climate change strategies are viewed by the government as being part of a broader commitment to sustainable development and sustainability. Bührs (2008) argues that while these schemes may lead to the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, there is reason to believe that New Zealand's climate change efforts have not been placed within a sustainable development agenda. Bührs (2008) contends that New Zealand has no explicit sustainable development strategy, or overarching policy framework that positions sustainability at its core. The adoption of a sustainability discourse, therefore, appears to have more to do with economic rather than environmental concerns.

The worldwide financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic recession have served to reinforce the idea that the economy should take priority in policy decision

[9] Other climate change schemes include the New Zealand Energy Strategy (NZES), Energy Efficiency and Conservation Strategy (EECS), New Zealand Waste Strategy, New Zealand Sustainable Land Management Strategy, and New Zealand Transport Strategy.

making. The new government, formed in November 2008, has been eager to assert that, above all, economic growth should be the platform on which policies are based. They have been careful to position themselves as economically responsible and practical when it comes to environmental policy. One of their six key environmental principles states that: ‘economic growth and improving the environment can and must go hand in hand’. Their proposed amendment of the ETS thus seeks to ‘strike a balance between New Zealand’s environmental and economic interests’ (New Zealand National Party, 2008). In his first speech to parliament on 9 December 2008, Prime Minister John Key said:

> My Government believes that New Zealand, as a responsible international citizen, and as a country that values our clean, green environment, must act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to confront global climate change.
>
> In this area, as in others, it will pursue an appropriate balance between meeting our environmental responsibilities and taking up our economic opportunities.
>
> The purpose of the ETS review will therefore be to ensure the reduction of emissions in ways that result in the least cost to New Zealand's society and economy (The official website of the New Zealand government [speech], retrieved 19/12/2008).

Climate change ‘solutions’ and policy options, therefore, are embedded within an economic rather than environmental framework. Rather than recognising the links between environmental problems, New Zealand governments have set up the ‘climate problem’ in a narrowly technical, managerial and economic way (Bührs, 2008). Emphasis has been placed on the reduction of carbon emissions without addressing the underlying causes or drivers of environmental problems which can be found in political-economic structures. Such an approach divorces environmental problems from their social context, and abstains from broader discussions about political-economic systems, inequalities and long-term sustainability concerns. Ecological modernisation expressed in strategies such as Emissions Trading Schemes could be viewed as an extension of the process of modernism, or as Blowers (1997, 854)

states, merely a continued ‘celebration of contemporary capitalism with a greener face’.

Conclusions

From its inception, climate change has been constructed in narrowly scientific terms as a problem of global atmospheric carbon emissions, which require intergovernmental management. In this chapter I have challenged this notion and construction. I have argued that a continued focus on the scientific question of global warming has fuelled scepticism among a diverse public who are constantly challenging scientific authority and ‘expert’ knowledge. Attention has been directed towards a search for a ‘scientific certainty’ that does not exist within the hybrid and increasingly blurred boundaries of science and politics. Framing climate change in a wholly global and scientific way not only disengages citizens from processes of change, but also reinforces a (Western) idea that solutions to climate change lie in the management of carbon emissions through technocratic fixes. In New Zealand, the adoption of an emissions trading scheme is evidence of this emerging ecological modernisation discourse. While New Zealand governments have been swift to embrace talk of sustainability, evidence suggests that they are more concerned about the sustainability of an environmental *image* of New Zealand, rather than the sustainability of its natural environment. Environmental policies have not been integrated within wider sustainable development approaches, but placed within an economic framework. This obscures from analysis the political economy responsible for greenhouse gas emissions in the first place, and does not confront the underlying issue of resource (over)consumption.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONSTRUCTING CONSUMPTION

Introduction

Although the economy remains the priority of national governments, environmental pressures such as climate change appear to be a catalyst for renewed debates regarding ethical and 'green' living, the work-life balance and connections between consumerism and happiness, at least in the public forum. Concern over consumerist lifestyles has been expressed in books such as Juliet Schor's (1998) *The Overspent American* and Tim Kasser's (2002) *The High Price of Materialism.* Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss' (2006) book *Affluenza* exposes the 'epidemic' of overspending, overwork and indebtedness that is rampant in Australian society. In New Zealand, television programmes such as *WA$TED*, *Off the Radar* and *Homegrown* have advanced the idea that the 'good life' can be achieved through the 'downshifting' of lifestyles.

Yet, despite increased public debate and growing recognition that economic growth and high consumption levels do not necessarily contribute to enhancing well-being, issues of (over)consumption remain absent from political agendas. I assert in this chapter that while consumption has been identified as a driving force behind unsustainablity, efforts to address sustainable consumption in New Zealand have fallen short of confronting the high levels and impacts of resource consumption. Initiatives have instead focused on consumer behaviour, resourcefulness, energy efficiency and 'green consumerism'. Any radical change agendas which challenge the scale of material consumption and the sovereignty of consumer lifestyles have subsequently been marginalised, particularly as the environmental cause has been increasingly mainstreamed, co-opted and redefined by big business and the marketing departments of major corporations.

Confronting (over)consumption

It is widely recognised that continuing environmental degradation is the result of the ongoing pressures on natural resources of production and consumption practices. Agenda 21 clearly states that the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, particularly in industrialised countries, are the major cause of environmental deterioration (UNCED, 1992, section 4.3). It suggests that developed countries should take the lead in addressing consumption and lifestyles, and strive to promote more sustainable consumption patterns (UNCED, 1992, section 4.8).

Agenda 21 proposes that changing consumption patterns will involve the development of a better understanding of the role of consumption, and require a 'multipronged strategy' which meets the basic needs of the poor, 'while reducing wastage and the use of finite resources in the production process' (UNCED, 1992, sections 4.5 and 4.7). Indeed, tackling consumption and environmental change in a globalised economy will only be possible with the implementation of wide ranging and overarching strategies and policies that recognise the links between consumption and environmental problems, and acknowledge the effects of material consumption on resource use.

While the contributing causes of environmental change and degradation have been identified and have become increasingly apparent, recognising environmental limits and confronting issues of consumption remain major ideological and political challenges. A large part of the problem, Bührs (2008, 69) argues, is that governments, big business and most individuals continue to believe in the 'convenient myth that economic growth and environmental protection are compatible or even complementary'. As shown in Chapter Four, this idea has been sustained in New Zealand through the adoption of an ecological modernisation discourse which assumes that environmental protection does not need to come at the cost of the economy, and can be internalised by, and managed through, existing political, social and economic institutions.

Bührs (2008, 69) argues that while economic growth and environmental protection can be compatible if growth is measured in monetary value, this is not currently possible because economic growth is 'based on or accompanied by an increase in material "throughput" and growing resource consumption, and thus growing environmental pressures'. Despite some gains made through energy and transport efficiency, and the development of new technologies, demand for resources continues unabated worldwide. Although some European countries have been successful in reducing domestic pollution levels and energy consumption, there is evidence to suggest that this pollution has simply been 'displaced' overseas by moving resource intensive industries to poorer nations and through the promotion of imports (Bührs, 2008; Christoff, 1996). National eco-efficiency improvements have been offset by absolute growth in levels of consumption. In New Zealand, there is no sign of a decline in the demand for resources or energy (Ministry for the Environment, 2007a). Thus Bührs (2008) argues that while it may appear that steps towards sustainability have occurred domestically, the only true way to assess the environmental performance of countries is through their levels of *resource consumption,* including the environmental impact of both imports and exports.

Resource consumption is largely determined by levels of income or affluence: wealthier populations consume more resources (goods and services) than poorer ones (Bührs, 2008). Improving income levels through encouraging growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a top priority of New Zealand governments. Finance Minister Bill English stated on 23 December 2008 that recent GDP figures 'confirm the need for the government's robust economic plan to lift New Zealanders' incomes through sustainable medium to long-term growth' (The official website of the New Zealand government [media release], retrieved 05/01/2008). Given this core focus, it remains difficult to see how efforts to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection are possible when resource consumption ultimately drives economic growth. As long as levels of resource consumption continue to rise, and the nature of the New Zealand economy remains resource-based and export driven, becoming 'truly sustainable' is not feasible (Bührs, 2008). As Princen *et al* (2002, 1) comment,

‘everyone has become adept at talking about sustainability without having to wade into the treacherous waters of consumption’.

Consumption as sacrosanct

Discussing consumption is even more difficult because of the power it commands not only as an economic activity, but as a lifestyle issue. Consumption is entrenched in values and routines, and in the daily habits of everyday life (Hobson, 2003a). Furthermore, the ability to ‘consume’ – to earn an income and purchase commodities – is widely seen as a measurement of success and affluence. Consumption is held up as a ‘sovereign right’; and addressing it means questioning values and behaviours, and making judgement calls about the way people live and how society operates.

Raising issues of over-consumption with participants sometimes felt awkward, as though making any suggestions about changing the way people live was viewed as slightly ‘naïve’. Although all participants believed that Western societies consume too much, many found the idea of challenging or changing consumption patterns difficult to fathom. Liam thought that levels of consumption were a major problem that needed to be confronted, but felt that this would be hard to tackle:

Joanna: So do you think levels of consumption should be challenged?

Liam: I think it has to be challenged in some way. Like it’s such a … how would you challenge it? It’s a really tough question. But yeah I think it has to be challenged at some point if people are going to realise the effects of their lifestyle … going back to the question about the link between consumption and environmental harm, it does have to be challenged, but how you challenge it? ... I don’t know (interview 30/07/2008).

When asked whether the amount people are consuming should be changed, Alex replied:

Alex: Um, yeah I think so. That’s quite a difficult thing to ask for. I think most people don’t realise, they don’t have any sort of idea

about the whole consumer society … like they don't have any idea about the smaller details of what they're consuming and where it goes and waste and that sort of thing…

Joanna: Do you think then it's a complete … there would need to be a complete shift in the way we think about everything?

Alex: I think it's got to be a *massive* shift in the way people think … and I can't really imagine how that will ever happen (interview 14/06/2008).

Both Liam and Alex expressed a sense of futility about confronting consumption, believing that changing consumption patterns or challenging the way people consume is unattainable within current economic and cultural systems. In their book *Confronting Consumption*, Princen *et al* (2002) discuss the way consumption, consumerism and the sovereignty of consumers is taken as given and uncontested. The dominance of economic reasoning and growth politics, they argue, insulates environmental policy from scrutiny. The result is that an entire set of questions about consumption cannot even be asked. 'No one in public life dares – or needs – to ask *why* people consume, let alone to question whether people or societies are better off with their accustomed consumption patterns'(Princen *et al,* 2002, 5, emphasis in original). Consumption becomes sacrosanct, left unchallenged and politically 'out of bounds'.

This discourse makes it easier for decision makers to side-step the 'consumption juggernaut' in sustainability, environmental and economic policies. There is little incentive to address consumption when it becomes constructed as a matter of 'individual consumer rights'. The 1999-2008 Labour-led Government's attempt to ban incandescent light bulbs and replace them with energy-efficient bulbs, for example, was criticised by some for infringing on the rights of individuals. The ban on traditional light bulbs has since been lifted by the National Government, with Minister of Energy and Resources Gerry Brownlee saying that people should not be 'told what to do' in their own homes. He said that the government is committed to energy efficiency in the home, but that lighting is a 'matter of consumer choice' and the government's role is to provide 'good, credible information' about the different

lighting options that are available to them (The official website of the New Zealand government [media release], retrieved 16/12/2008).

Addressing sustainable consumption in New Zealand

Despite efforts by Agenda 21 to promote a mandate for examining and questioning consumption practices and existing institutional frameworks, little has been done to politically address resource consumption nationally. While New Zealand is obligated by the Kyoto Protocol to reducing greenhouse gas emission levels, no *binding* guidelines for reducing or reviewing resource consumption levels have been set by an intergovernmental body. Cohen (2005b) and Hobson (2006) claim that because the concept of sustainable consumption has been formulated at an international level, little discussion has taken place on how to implement effective sustainable policy solutions at a national level. As a result, Cohen (2005b) argues, Western governments have favoured 'weak sustainability' initiatives which concentrate on energy efficiency, ecological taxation, eco-labelling and approaches which attempt to 'green' consumer behaviour.

In her analysis of sustainable consumption policy and practice in the United Kingdom, Seyfang (2004a) highlighted that the *scale* of consumption is very rarely questioned in mainstream policy discourse. The assumption remains that 'green growth' achieved through resource efficiency and cleaner production is the best and only way to respond to the challenges of sustainable consumption. In New Zealand, scant mention is given to the reduction in overall levels of consumption. The Household Consumption section of the *Environment New Zealand* report released in 2007 does acknowledge that both the *volume* and the kinds of things people purchase can influence the effect that consumption has on the environment. Towards the end of the report it goes on to say that:

> Even when improvements are made in energy efficiency, reductions in environmental impacts may be offset by the overall increases in the volume of goods and services consumed (Ministry for the Environment, 2007a, 72).

The bulk of the report, however, stresses the importance of consumer choices and environmental awareness as opposed to considering ways for New Zealanders to reduce overall consumption levels. The report focuses on marginal behaviour changes while simultaneously acknowledging that these may be inadequate.

The New Zealand government's main sustainable consumption initiative in terms of individual consumption and lifestyles is the *Household Sustainability Programme* which was launched in 2007. Its aim is to raise awareness of the steps people can take to reduce the impact of climate change, improve energy and water efficiency and reduce waste. It encourages sustainable choices around the home and when purchasing products. Initiatives under this scheme include the Energy Rating label which indicates energy efficiency on whiteware and heat pumps, and the Environmental Choice New Zealand which is an eco-labelling scheme where products can achieve an Environment Choice label if they meet certain 'environmental preferability' criteria (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: The Energy Rating label and the Environmental Choice New Zealand label
Source: Ministry for the Environment (2008a) and Ministry for the Environment (2007a)

These labels are promoted as a way for consumers to make informed choices about the products they buy. In doing so, it is hoped consumer preference will be guided towards products which save energy or are made by manufacturers who have

considered the environmental impacts of their products. A similar European-wide eco-labelling scheme was introduced by the European Commission in 1992 as part of an environmental action plan in response to Agenda 21. Erskine and Collins (1997) reviewed this labelling scheme and found that, although the concept was positive, the practical application of the scheme was troublesome. There was also little evidence to suggest that the scheme had any environmental benefits. Luke (1997) argues that labels and seals are not effective measures for informing consumers, or assessing whether a product is 'environmentally friendly'. In a consumer society that draws on resources from all over the world, he argues, a label tells the consumer very little about how a product is produced and distributed. Moreover, labels simultaneously suspend the need for 'environmental consciousness or ecological reasoning' (Luke, 1997, 131). Although the Energy Rating labels are mandatory on whiteware and heat pumps, the Environmental Choice programme is a wholly voluntary scheme. There are very few everyday household products licensed to carry Environmental Choice labels (www.enviro-choice.org.nz), and products on New Zealand shelves are not required to display country of origin labels.

Several participants expressed scepticism over labels and labelling schemes. James said that buying a product depended on the trust you had with that brand. He commented, 'You know, a little sticker, what's behind a sticker that says its eco-friendly?' (interview 02/08/2008). Samantha discussed the difficulty of knowing whether a product is 'green' or not, indicating that a label cannot tell you the life-cycle of a product:

Samantha: … to know about whether it [a product] is actually environmentally friendly or green, you need to know so much (…) there is the actual product itself, what its wrapped in, and all of those kinds of things (…) you know I don't think you could put something on a…ah unless there was some kind of Body, you know like that Healthy Heart Tick, but then that's not what we all think it is either. I just recently saw that it doesn't mean it's healthy (…) you know like meat pies, it doesn't mean it's healthy for you, it's just the best meat pie you can buy, kind of thing … (interview 30/06/2008).

Interestingly, Samantha was reluctant to trust established labelling schemes, such as the Heart Foundation's 'Pick the Tick' programme (referred to as the Healthy Heart Tick), indicating that it may not be what it first appears. In our conversation, Lucy also spoke about her lack of trust in labels and the ability of companies to use labels as a marketing ploy:

Lucy: Its becoming so popular that the producers, you know, you never know what's green and what's not, you never know what's organic, they put a label on it, they might be organic, but one third of it, or something like that, so they might twist it around (interview 22/07/2008).

Despite people's reservations over labels, labelling schemes and companies' motives, informing the public about products and 'sustainable' choices appears to be the government's chosen response to sustainable consumption. It has set up a number of websites to provide information about climate change, sustainability and individual responsibility. The Ministry for the Environment has developed a sustainability website (www.sustainability.govt.nz) to assist New Zealand consumers with 'smarter living' solutions. Their sustainability advertisements run on mainstream television stations as well as in cinemas around the country. The site claims that it will 'help you reduce your impact on the environment and save money, without compromising your lifestyle. You'll find useful tips on how best to use energy and water, and what to do with your rubbish'. People can sign up to a 'Next Step' plan which creates a list of personally selected steps to living 'sustainably'.

The '4 Million Careful Owners' website (www.4million.org.nz) has been established to provide information on climate change, water and reducing waste. As the title suggests, the premise of this website is to encourage people to be a careful and responsible New Zealanders. The home page enthuses:

> We can all help protect New Zealand's environment by making changes in the way we lead our lives and participate in our communities. Explore this website and become one of the 4 million careful owners your country needs and deserves (Ministry for the Environment, 2008b, retrieved 16/10/2008).

Appeals are once again made to a sense of nationalism and togetherness. The website draws on the idea that everyone 'owns' New Zealand and therefore has a responsibility to protect it: to achieve sustainability the country needs '4 million careful owners'. The website concentrates on the 'carbon problem' and what individuals can do to reduce their 'carbon footprint'. The site provides links to carbon calculators so that users can assess their own greenhouse gas emissions. A quiz is provided which tells people how their choices affect the environment. Users can share stories about how they are trying to be 'careful owners', and various tips and hints are provided which give information on the small ways consumers can save energy (and money), and reduce emissions. In this website, being sustainable is about being resourceful, considerate and efficient.

Other government supported websites include *energywise* (www.energywise.govt.nz) which encourages people to be wise about energy use around the home, on the road and at work; *SmarterHomes* (www.smarterhomes.org.nz) which provides advice on making homes warmer, drier and more energy efficient; and *Choke the Smoke* (www.chokethesmoke.govt.nz) which gives information on vehicle emissions and how to reduce your car's carbon footprint.

While these types of government initiatives, campaigns and websites may provide some useful information and tips to New Zealanders, they fail to question or challenge current levels of resource consumption in any meaningful way. Crucially, these types of policy discourses speak of sustainability in terms of collective efficiency and resourcefulness, but not in terms of consumption *reduction*. Emphasis is placed on a narrow definition of what is required to reduce people's 'carbon footprints'. Rather than looking beyond immediate causes, reducing carbon emissions is about consumers being more careful and considered in the everyday choices they

make: through turning off switches, recycling, or using more efficient appliances. This discourse does not threaten consumption as a practice or recognise that the 'environmental problematique' lies in political and economic systems. Instead it seeks to incorporate a 'new preference without impinging upon individual's (supposedly) sacred and deeply entrenched lifestyles' (Hobson, 2006, 309).

Underscoring this discourse is the notion that 'being sustainable' can occur within the parameters of affluent lifestyles. The government has emphasised that achieving 'sustainability' does not need to come at the cost of people's lifestyles; it is simply about making better choices and being more determined. The Ministry for the Environment's *Understanding climate change: get a grasp of the facts* brochure (2007d, 12) states that:

> Taking action will require a shift in the way we are all accustomed to doing things but it may be easier than you think. Being truly sustainable doesn't mean sacrificing our living standards, but being smart and determined about how we do things.

This message is repeated in the Ministry's *Small acts big impacts* information brochure (2007c, 6) which says that 'cutting back on greenhouse gases doesn't mean that we have to give up all the luxuries we are used to'. The *Green guide* published by the *Sunday Star Times* (2008, 3) for World Environment Day 2008, states that, '*Green Guide* is not about making you feel guilty or daunted – our aim is to inspire you to live a greener life without radically changing your lifestyle'. Being 'green', is presented as easy and 'normal' and does not involve giving up material values or possessions: you can have your cake and eat it too.

Even mainstream environmental organisations make little attempt to challenge over-consumption or question the dominance of today's materialistic values. Greenpeace New Zealand does encourage political campaigning and lobbying, and is outspoken against the government's ETS scheme, but refrains from promoting a radical change agenda in regard to sustainable consumption. Instead they stress in that solutions to climate change lie in clean and renewable energy, new environmentally sound

technologies and in consumer actions (Greenpeace New Zealand website, retrieved 12/11/2008). Taking action is about becoming a 'cyber activist, 'greening your life', reusing and recycling and using 'consumer clout' to protest against unethical or unsustainable practices and products.

A number of scholars have suggested that the mainstream environmental movement, and even the more radical ones, do not explicitly challenge the system (Blowers, 1997; Crompton, 2008; Rowell, 1996; Tokar, 1997). Crompton (2008) claims that such movements no longer have a distinct agenda, but conform and reinforce broader, conventional discourses which frame solutions to the environmental crisis as technocratic, consumer-led and apolitical. Hajer (1995, 57) argues that consumption is not discussed within environmental discourse because the environment is being framed within a discursive practice which positions it as an issue of economics. He contends that the disciplinary force of discursive practices is so forceful that 'speakers' can only answer within the same discursive frame. Even if they do try to challenge the dominant storyline, they are 'expected to position their contribution in terms of known categories' (Hajer, 1995, 57).

In this sense, it could be argued that the mainstream environmental movement is bound within dominant discourses which frame the 'environmental problem' and its solutions as carbon-focused and managerial. Challenging hegemonic discourses may not only be difficult, but seen as detrimental to the cause. The mainstreaming of environmental concern marginalises more radical forms of environmentalism; and being marginal may not be seen as a good way to keep the environment on political agendas. The environmental movement, Hajer (1995, 57) believes, is 'haunted by the dilemma of whether to argue on the terms set up by the government or to insist on their own mode of expression'.

Selling the Earth: corporate environmentalism and the rise of 'green consumerism'

Rowell (1996, 5) claims that mainstream environmental groups have been steadily 'co-opted, compromised and corrupted', which has in part been due to the increasing influence of transnational corporations (TNCs) and big business in the environmental movement. With the emergence of climate change as a core global issue, TNCs and major industries can no longer deny their role in environmental degradation. Increasingly, the private sector, TNCs and big businesses are embracing environmental imperatives, claiming the cause as their own and co-opting its concepts and terminology.

According to Greer and Bruno (1996) and Tokar (1997), the appropriation of 'the environment' by the private sector, supranational organisations and non-government actors, and the emergence of 'corporate environmentalism' began in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. Here the Business Council for Sustainable Development played a behind the scenes role and intervened to dampen down discussions on the role that transnational corporations played in environmental degradation. Likewise, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and its members pressed hard to 'keep any language calling for regulation of the TNCs out of Agenda 21 and the Earth Charter' (Greer and Bruno, 1996, 25). The result has been the gradual weakening of the concept of sustainable consumption. Aligning with prevailing political discourse, focus has shifted towards the promotion of *efficient* consumption rather than consumption reduction: an idea which does not encroach on the economic interests of big business.

In New Zealand, major energy generators such as Genesis Energy[10] have gone to considerable lengths to promote themselves as socially responsible and environmentally conscious. Genesis has been quick to recognise itself as a contributor to environmental change, and has engaged in a range of 'voluntary' initiatives to

[10] Genesis Energy is a state-owned enterprise (SOE) who own New Zealand's largest thermal power station at Huntly, as well as hydro stations at Tongariro and Lake Waikaremoana, the Hau Nui Wind Farm in the Wairarapa and co-generation facilities at large industrial sites at Te Awamutu and Kinleith (www.genesisenergy.co.nz).

mitigate the adverse effects of its activities and resource consent processes. These include blue duck and kiwi restoration projects, grants and sponsorship schemes in collaboration with Ngati Tuwharetoa, and water quality enhancement projects. They have also been initiators of a number of programmes to educate the public about energy efficiency and environmental issues. Their 'Hello Tomorrow' programme is about working with groups in local communities and 'looking after the natural ecology around our generation assets' (Genesis Energy website, retrieved 8/11/2008).

The 'Hello Tomorrow' brand message is used in Genesis Energy's public advertisement campaigns, inferring a sense of 'forward thinking' and suggesting that Genesis is concerned about the future of the environment and energy production. Its campaigns also stress the importance of 'working together' with communities and consumers to achieve 'sustainable' outcomes. Genesis's Tree People website (www.treepeople.co.nz), promoted in one of their television advertisement campaigns, encourages people to adopt a virtual tree and pledge to do small things everyday to reduce their carbon footprint. Their well-known 'Pukeko' advertisements show a Pukeko[11] mother and her fluffy chicks 'doing their bit' for climate change by entering a house and turning off lights. The tag line states that, 'we can all do our bit for climate change if we make it part of our everyday lives. Together we can make a big difference to tomorrow.'

Environmentalism and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has thus become a major part of Genesis Energy's public image. This is not surprising given that the coal-fired Huntly power station, which accounts for 50% of their energy production, is the single biggest source of carbon dioxide in the country (Greenpeace website, retrieved 20/01/2009). While Genesis Energy claims to be addressing climate change, this appears to be contradicted by efforts to develop a gas-fired plant in the Rodney district, north of Auckland. In December 2007, the Court of Appeal gave permission for the plant to go ahead, overturning a High Court decision which ruled that climate

[11] The Pukeko, or New Zealand Swamp Hen, is a New Zealand native bird which is abundant in grassland areas and swampy location. Their deep blue plumage and red beaks have made them iconic New Zealand birds (www.nzbirds.com, retrieved 14/11/2008).

change and greenhouse gas emissions could be a consideration in consents under the Resource Management Act (RMA) (*New Zealand Herald*, 2008). Despite an appeal by Greenpeace, in December 2008 the Supreme Court reaffirmed its decision. The ruling meant that local authorities deciding on non-renewable energy projects could not consider climate change under the RMA, thus removing any legal control over polluters' greenhouse gas emissions (*Scoop: Independent News*, retrieved 19/01/2009).

Thus while corporate environmentalism and CSR have gained popularity in the face of growing environmental concern, such efforts can often be viewed as symbolic rather than participatory. Munshi and Kurian (2007, 442) argue that although CSR should not be dismissed as a way to encourage businesses towards more sustainable practices, CSR cannot help to make any *fundamental* changes to wider environmental issues or the structures of politics. The subtext of CSR, they argue, is one of capitalism, modernity and sovereignty. As long as corporations continue to enhance profits through the use of natural resources, ‘neither ecological sustainability nor social responsibility is likely to materialise’ (Munshi and Kurian, 2007, 442).

Indeed, selling the environment has become good for business. A Management Magazine-ShapeNZ survey (2007) revealed that nearly two-thirds of business managers, proprietors and self-employed believe that ‘green consumerism’ – the purchasing of ‘environmentally friendly’ products – will have a significant role in the future of New Zealand business (New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2009). *Ecostore*, an Auckland-based maker of household and personal care products, has bucked current growth trends to secure distribution into the United States (Hembry, 2009). A range of ‘environmental’ products now grace New Zealand shop shelves. Television and newspaper advertisements feature environmental themes and firms claim to support environmental causes in an effort to boost sales and maintain a credible brand image.

McDonald's, one of the most recognised international brands, recently began promoting the use of Rainforest Alliance Certified™ coffee at McCafe's® and McDonald's® restaurants in New Zealand. A four-sided promotional advertisement for their coffee was attached to the Sunday Magazine section of the *Sunday Star Times* on 3 August 2008. The front cover featured a large image of planet Earth showing the American continent and atmospheric system. Along side this image, the text read:

> Global warming.
> An ozone layer in tatters.
> Disappearing rainforests.
>
> What are we going to do?

Turning inside the brochure, bold words at the top of the next page exclaimed: 'We could always go for a coffee'. The advertisement text continued by stating that 'you've probably had moments when all this environmental stuff has seemed a bit too hard'. By going for a coffee, however, McDonald's suggests that it is easy for people to 'do their bit for a tired planet'. The text continued:

> Together, we can start saving the planet the same way we've been destroying it – with millions of people doing such a tiny bit that we barely notice we're doing it.
>
> Even the coffee you drink can make a difference. Especially if it's Rainforest Alliance Certified™.

The advertisement tries to make a connection between purchasing coffee at McDonald's, and helping to solve complex environmental problems. Consumerism is presented as a way to 'make a difference'. For the small price of a coffee 'you'll be doing your bit to help farmers, farm workers and their families have a better quality of life. You'll also be contributing to protecting the environment'. The advertisement attempts to present a united front in the 'fight' against environmental degradation. Responsibility for environment protection is thus subtly abdicated to consumers, even

though it could be argued that as a large multinational, McDonald's plays a significant role in the production and consumption of resources.

The Warehouse[12], one of New Zealand's largest retail stores, has gone to considerable efforts to promote itself as a responsible and 'green' retailer. It has invested in an advertising campaign outlining its commitment to the environment and ethical sourcing. In the *Sunday Star Times* on 7 September 2008, The Warehouse ran an advertisement entitled 'Going green is old news' (this can also be accessed on their website www.thewarehouse.co.nz). The premise of this advertisement is to show that The Warehouse has committed itself to many initiatives which address social and environmental impacts over the last seven years. Interestingly, these initiatives are not detailed in the advertisement. Instead the advertisement points out that The Warehouse staff are committed to making daily improvements to help the environment:

> Each and every day we're constantly striving to find new ways to reduce our footprint and protect the planet. We've received a lot of recognition for our work in responsible retailing and it's all thanks to the systems we've put in place over the last seven years. And because it's vitally important, we will continue to grow our team of like-minded thinkers, stretching across the globe. All working towards the same goal – a sustainable future for New Zealand and the world.
>
> We're not there yet, but we've made a start and with your help we'll get there sooner rather than later. Then hopefully, going green won't be old news, it will be the way of the future.

Again, the consumer is constructed as a key player in the quest for sustainability. The advertisement suggests that, with the help of consumers who buy products from The Warehouse, the global goal of a sustainable future will be within easier reach. Here, the advertisement draws upon the idea that, by being environmentally responsible, the

[12] The Warehouse is a New Zealand owned and operated company which has 85 stores across New Zealand and employs over 8,500 people. The Warehouse sells a wide range of products at competitive prices, from clothing, entertainment and technology, to sporting equipment, gardening, and groceries. One of its stated core aims is to 'make the desirable affordable' (www.thewarehouse.co.nz).

Warehouse is also ‘progressive’. ‘Going green’ is presented as being the ‘way of the future’. The well-known Warehouse slogan, ‘The Warehouse, where everyone gets a bargain’, has been replaced with a new ‘greener’ phrase: ‘The Warehouse, where everyone can make a difference’.

These two examples illustrate the way large corporations are utilising the environment in order to promote and sell their products. By aligning themselves with mainstream environmental concerns, they not only hope to be seen as ‘responsible and compassionate’ retailers, but as providing consumers with ways to ‘help the planet’. Such campaigns also have more subtle effects. They help to reinforce a discourse which constructs environmental problems as one-dimensional and consumer-driven. Attention is turned towards what consumers can do on a daily basis. The responsible consumer is encouraged to purchase ‘eco-friendly’ products, or buy from ‘green’ retailers on the premise that the more such products are purchased, the better ecological processes will become (Maniates, 2002) ‘Green consumerism’ is presented as a way for individuals to shop their way to environmental activism.

Thus while consumption has been identified as the major cause of environmental degradation, it has simultaneously been constructed as part of the solution. It may be bold to suggest that green consumerism is inherently ‘bad’, but any claims that it can help to solve complex environmental issues need careful consideration. After all, green consumerism assists in the creation of more products, and thus exists as a type of oxymoron. Luke (1997, 129) argues that green consumerism, which allegedly began as a campaign to subvert and reduce mass marketing, now ‘ironically assists the definition and expansion of mass marketing by producing new kinds of consumer desire’. In this way, Sandiland (1993) claims, green consumerism masks more problems than it solves, and is part of a process of environmental privatisation whereby environmental issues are individualised and depoliticised.

Conclusions

Despite calls in Agenda 21 for countries to address consumption and production practices in the light of increasingly environmental pressures, little has been done to confront issues of (over)consumption by New Zealand governments. I have argued in this chapter that the dominance of growth politics and hegemonic discourses of 'consumer sovereignty' have insulated policy from scrutiny, and mainstreamed ideas of what it means to be 'sustainable'. Addressing underlying issues of unsustainablity have thus been sidelined in favour of approaches which are more socially and politically palatable. Prevailing sustainable consumption initiatives in New Zealand have focused on consumer awareness and responsibility, labelling schemes and the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' mantra. The result has been the steady weakening of the concept of sustainable consumption to mean consuming *efficiently* rather than consuming less. Subsequently, individual consumption has been constructed as a solution to environmental problems. The re-adaptation of 'sustainability', along with corporate environmentalism, 'greenwash' campaigns and the rise of 'green consumerism', has contributed to the creation of a discourse which seeks to convince people that environmental problems can be adequately addressed by means which lie entirely outside the political sphere (Tokar, 1997).

CHAPTER SIX: CONSTRUCTING THE CONSUMER

Introduction

Failing to challenge the structures of existing political-economic systems has invariably meant that responsibility for environmental problems has been displaced externally. Rather than addressing underlying issues of resource consumption, prevailing environmental discourses embedded in ecological modernisation narratives suggest that the answer to global environmental problems lie in the (collective) hands of individuals. Indeed, a key characteristic of sustainable development and ecological modernisation theory is the idea that actors such as consumers, community groups and environmental movements should be encouraged to take a lead role in stimulating environmental 'transformation' (Hajer, 1995). Dominant representations of the 'environmental problematique' have thus centred on the idea that the issue is one of *moral*, rather than political concern. Targeting consumers and attempting to influence their behaviour is seen as an appropriate response to sustainable consumption.

In this chapter, I critically examine the way consumers have been framed in dominant sustainable consumption discourses. While consumers can no longer be regarded as insignificant 'polluters', I argue in this chapter that a continued focus on the role of consumers in the quest for 'sustainable consumption' might be misguided. I show how consumers have been constructed as rational, moral decision makers, responsible for both environmental care and market transformation. Drawing on participant interviews, I argue that this framing elides the complexities of personal consumption and the diversity of consumption practices. As such, this discourse universalises notions of morality and environmental responsibility, and closes off alternative avenues to 'sustainability'.

I then debate the extent to which consumers are 'political agents' free to make decisions about their consumption habits. I suggest that consumers have limited

power in transforming the marketplace, especially when options for effective ‘green consumption’ are not yet available. I argue that the shift of environmental focus from production to consumption has obscured the role of production, absolved governmental responsibility and neglected to address the *processes* of consumerism embedded in political and cultural systems. As such, attention might be better placed on the role that environmentally motivated citizens can play in sustainability debates.

The individual as consumer / the consumer as rational decision maker

‘The consumer’ has come to epitomise (post)modern living. Consumerism – the way individuals are enmeshed in the process of acquiring commodities, and the way they ‘formulate their goals in life in relation to this acquisition’ – has become an ever-present ‘reality’ in contemporary societies (Mansvelt, 2005, 2). Consumers are also valued for the role they play in sustaining economic growth. As detailed in Chapter Five, New Zealand governments have fostered consumerism through their efforts to promote economic growth and increase levels of income and affluence. With fears of an economic recession looming in late 2008, for example, concern quickly focused on how the government could reignite consumer spending and stimulate the economy. Avoiding policies which encroach on (supposed) consumer rights and the hallowed domain of consumption has become paramount. With the spread of neo-liberalism and free market politics, Hobson (2006) explains, individual consumer choice has been championed by Western governments. Freedom and consumption have been inextricably linked so that a state of ‘consumer sovereignty’ exists (Hobson, 2006, 309).

The framing of individuals as consumers is an essential component of the ideology of sustainable consumption (Hobson, 2006). Along with the recognition of consumption as a primary cause of environmental deterioration, ‘the consumer’ has emerged as a key stakeholder in environmental sustainability debates. As detailed in Chapter Five, governments and wider environmental discourses have encouraged consumers to adopt a ‘sustainable lifestyle’ wherein they consider the environmental impacts of

their personal consumption and day-to-day actions (Hobson, 2003b). By providing consumers with information, fostering awareness and mainstreaming environmental concern, it is assumed that consumers will make good (moral) decisions about their consumption habits, and that this will have flow-on environmental effects.

The Ministry for the Environment (2007a) has recently added a new 'Household Consumption' section to its latest report on the state of the environment, reinforcing a belief that people's lifestyles and the way they consume have an impact on environmental change. Household consumption has been placed alongside energy, transport and waste as a key sector which puts pressure on the environment:

> Consumption by households affects the environment. Our lifestyle choices, the goods and services we consume, and how these are produced and disposed of all affect the extent and manner of our impact on the environment (Ministry for the Environment*,* 2007a, 59).

Part of the government's role, it seems, is to guide consumers towards a better understanding of these consumption and lifestyle choices. Then Minister for the Environment, David Benson-Pope stated in 2007 that 'people want to know what they can actually do' to reduce climate change. He noted that:

> Recent surveys have shown that most people think they need to make lifestyle choices to reduce global warming, and the government want to make it as easy as possible for people to understand the choices they have and make the changes they want (The official website of the New Zealand government [media release], retrieved 10/10/2008).

An underlying assumption of this message is that 'helping the planet' is primarily a knowledge problem. By providing people with more information about the options they have in regard to environmental protection, it is assumed this new awareness will create behavioural change. This practice of 'learning and taking action' is constructed as the outcome of a 'linear and ultimately rational process' (Burgess *et al*, 2003, 271). The idea of the 'rational consumer' emerged in conversations with participants. Amanda in particular talked a lot about awareness and knowledge during our interview. She believed that if she had more information about the steps she could

take to save energy and be more environmentally conscious, then she would act accordingly:

Amanda: … I think also that we are aware that we have the recycling bins and we are aware of doing that, um the whole saving electricity bit (…) but I think there's a lot more that people can do but we've got to have that knowledge, you know, I must admit like I don't have the knowledge of what else I could do, and if I did I think I would.

Joanna: Do you think that's something that's missing, like more information to consumers to know what they are doing and how it can have an impact?

Amanda: Yep, yep, 'cause you know they bandy around, you know 'oh climate change, oh we've got to do things to prevent it' and all the rest of it, and they say some of the few obvious things, such as changing the light bulbs, but I think there's probably a whole lot of other things (…) I think we need to be made more *aware* (interview 20/06/2008).

I asked Samantha whether she thought information campaigns would be effective in changing people's behaviour. She related them to the more common alcohol and driving awareness advertisements:

Joanna: But do you think that maybe campaigns about environmental care, about things like that, do you think they're effective ways of changing people's behaviour?

Samantha: It must play a part in it because it does … other kinds of campaigns, like the road ones and the drinking ones, surely they have some kind of impact, surely they must do so wouldn't an environmental one? (interview 30/06/2008).

The framing of sustainable consumption as a public knowledge problem presents difficulties, however. Unlike drinking and driving campaigns, which are backed up by legislation, efforts to 'green' consumer behaviour rely entirely on moral suasion. The assumption that people will suddenly awaken to a new sense of environmental responsibility simply by providing them with more information neglects to consider the complexities of personal consumption, and the differences among people's

resource use, consumption habits and conceptions of morality. This response ignores the multiplicity of views, practices, values and beliefs people hold in regard to environmental care and consumption.

The complexities of personal consumption

In Chapter Two, I highlighted how scholars have shown that consumption embodies more than simple provisioning, and goes well beyond notions of 'rationality'. Jackson (2006), for example, argues that people value commodities not just for what they can 'do' in a practical sense, but for what they represent to them. A new pair of made-in-China Nike sneakers might be purchased for an upcoming marathon, for brand allegiance, or in order to belong to a particular social group. Similarly, driving a hybrid car might have little to do with the desire to reduce one's carbon footprint and more to do with social status or an aspiration to be associated with a particular lifestyle.

Indeed, lifestyle plays a major role in consumption practices, and this was evident in my research. In my conversations with participants I found any changes they made for environmental reasons were balanced against what they were willing to compromise in terms of their lifestyle. Even though a bus stop was located directly outside Maria's house, for example, and petrol prices were increasing, she did not use the bus because of the value she placed on her job. She needed to have the freedom to come and go, and be there for her clients in emergency situations:

Maria: I feel a bit embarrassed sitting in my car all by myself (...) it's just me thinking 'this is not really how I would like to be doing it'… what would it be like if I could pick up my work colleagues, go to work and we actually all finished at the same time, and we could all come back in one car? You know, what if we could do that … but actually the way we work doesn't actually fit with that, it's a bit all over the place (interview 24/07/2008).

However, Maria had 'greened' other aspects of her life; she did not use a dishwasher or clothes drier, was a conscious recycler and only put out one rubbish bag every month. James believed that expensive petrol prices do not necessarily cause people to change their driving habits. Instead, he suggested that people would compromise on other aspects of their lives which had less importance to them:

James: But you know, people, its going to take something massive to change their love of driving their car, sure petrol prices are increasing but they'd rather just not spend on something else and still have the convenience of the driving, so they just won't go out to a restaurant on the weekend, so they won't get 10 channels of Sky TV or whatever, they'd cut that back as opposed to cutting their fuel consumption back … (interview 20/06/2008).

It also appeared that many participants connected their consumption practices to the environment in ways that reflected their personal values and had meaning to them. 'Pro-environmental' activities were not based on awareness or new knowledge, but on individual or family 'ideals', or were influenced by place and context. Scott, for example, enjoyed planting native trees on his property. When asked whether he did this for environmental reasons, he replied:

Scott: Yeah, I, it's ah … a little bit of giving back to the environment I suppose in a way … um, it's for your own self pleasure as well having native trees around you … (interview 02/08/2008).

Maria noted several times during her interview that she had grown up with 'environmental values'.

Maria: … it's partly because of my family, I suppose, so my mother for instance always had us recycling when we were kids when it wasn't really … when that idea wasn't generated by local governments or anything, so we've all grown up like that (interview 24/07/2008).

Social and cultural context played a role for Lucy, who had lived in a number of countries in Europe as well as in New Zealand. She commented that place had a lot to do with environmental values:

Lucy: Once I'm here in New Zealand I'm sort of a different person (…) I think a bit more green and its so much more laid back (…) and I don't consume as much, you know, I think its also the social behaviour of each culture, I think that initiates how much you consume as well.

Joanna: So do you think that it has to do with values, environmental values or … depending on where you live and who you are?

Lucy: Oh, yep. I think, I mean, socially, where you live sort of creates who you are. Not necessarily 100% but it definitely has to do with the value you put on it, what environmental issues you have in the country and so on (interview 22/07/ 2008).

These comments and observations expose the contradictory, fluid and personal nature of consumption, and suggest that consumption decisions are closely linked with values and social meaning. Participants weighed up information against their values and beliefs and made decisions that 'made sense' to them. What one person might see as detrimental to the environment, another person might see as essential to their lifestyle, and vice versa. These comments indicate that people's consumption practices are varied and complex: there is no 'typical consumer'. Thus presenting information about the choices people can make in relation to their consumption practices may not be enough to change behaviour, or at least in sustaining long-term or collective change. Indeed, evidence from overseas consumer campaigns have been paradoxical: the rapid increase in public awareness of environmental issues is coupled with virtually no substantial changes in consumer behaviour (Burgess *et al*, 2003; Hobson, 2006).

As discussed in Chapter Four, there is also a perceived disconnect between local and global environments. The construction of climate change as a global and scientific issue serves to mystify and disengage people. Participants did not necessarily make 'pro-environmental' changes because of direct concerns for global warming as it was

still perceived as an intangible and unknown risk. Evidence suggests, therefore, that ecological modernisation and neo-liberal policy approaches do not work because they rely on a 'neo-classical economic model of consumption as an individual, rational and utility-maximising act' (Hobson, 2003a, 153). These approaches ignore the inconsistencies of personal consumption and environmental perception, and fail to acknowledge that social and economic choices are never wholly 'rational', at least not in a universal sense. Rationality is always 'culturally grounded' (Redclift, 1993, 16).

Whose environment, whose morality?

Prevailing approaches to sustainable consumption are themselves situated within an institutional, cultural context. These approaches not only tend to ignore the complexities of consumption, but also fail to account for the heterogeneous nature of consumers themselves. They take for granted the idea that environmental problems have resonance with individuals, and that people should and do want to 'green' their lives (Hobson, 2006). They also assume people have the desire, means and ability to engage in 'pro-environmental' behaviours. 'Doing your bit' for the environment, however, might fall a long way down some people's list of priorities. In our interview, Meg commented that, for many people she knew, caring for the planet simply did not have meaning in their day to day lives:

Meg: You know, I was just thinking about it in relation to some people I know, you know, they don't care at all about the environment because they can't afford to. They have so many other problems in their lives, you know, like how to get food on the table for their kids, or domestic problems … recycling and buying green products is the least of their worries (interview 13/06/2008).

Lousley (1999) argues that current pushes towards recycling and green consumerism are responses to 'middle-class problems', and are only relevant in areas where families have sufficient income to over-consume; places where people can afford the luxury of worrying about quality of life, both economically and socially. In her analysis of school environment clubs, she contends that by shifting the focus of

environmental activism from public policy to household management, and from social and political actors to 'a rhetoric of universal blame', the 'lifestyle environmentalism' engaged in by school clubs appears to serve more as a way to relieve middle-class guilt (Lousley, 1999, 300). These practices conform to, rather than challenge, middle-class values.

Jacobs (1991), however, warns against viewing environmentalism as a 'middle-class' issue. Although many 'poor' people cannot afford to buy a 'good quality of life' this does not mean they do not want one. Consumers' desires, Jacobs (1991, 16) argues, do not 'always match the resources they have for meeting them'. Furthermore, evidence shows that the poor are more adversely affected by environmental problems than the affluent, and may therefore have a higher stake in environmental protection. Particularly in the South, environmental movements are often driven by the poor, and even in the United States, environmental justice movements have countered mainstream 'white' environmental agendas. These groups have attempted to address the system of racial injustice that has helped to sustain the existence of powerless communities forced to bear disproportionate environmental burdens (Bullard, 2005).

Yet the pervasive nature of current environmental and 'green' discourses tends to shut off alternative interpretations of what the environmental 'problem' is and what its solutions require. As argued in Chapter Four, environmental discourse has largely become a climate discourse. Climate change has been constructed as a problem of greenhouse gas emissions best solved through the reduction of people's 'carbon footprints'. Prevailing discourses, Hobson (2006, 306) claims, have become 'privileged narratives that tell one story about the cause and solutions to environmental problems'.

During my research participants were adept at rattling off lists of 'do's and don'ts' in regard to environmental protection and energy efficiency: changing light bulbs, recycling, carpooling, biking to work, not using plastic bags and turning off mobile phone chargers. These 'simple steps' were well-recognised and familiar. Popular

media abounds with information and moralised messages about 'doing the right thing' to reduce your carbon footprint. The *Sunday Star Times*, for example, published two 'green' focused issues in 2008, which included lists of steps people can take in order to make a 'daily difference to the planet'. They also have a permanent 'Goodies' segment in their *Sunday* magazine section which profiles a different 'environmental crusader' each week. The recently launched *Good* magazine bills itself as New Zealand's first magazine dedicated to sustainable living, and provides readers with advice on 'good products' to buy and how to make 'good choices' for the environment. As discussed in Chapter Five, the government has attempted to inform people about appropriate 'steps to sustainability' through websites, information campaigns and initiatives.

It is this moralised framing of solutions to the 'climate problem' that Lousley (1999, 299) believes 'mystifies the causes and agents of environmental degradation'. Although environmental problems are complex issues, involving interconnected social, economic and political dimensions, their solutions are being set up in a narrow, one-dimensional frame of reference as 'common sense' and 'logical'. Solutions are conceptualised in term of 'good choices' based on a universal conception of morality and reasoning. Lousley (1999, 299) argues that this framing of sustainable consumption into 'good' and 'bad' choices deflects questioning and analysis away from the more fundamental causes of environmental harm, and 'deceptively universalises the different positions individuals have in relation to the distribution of environmental resources, risks, responsibilities, and decision-making power'.

Simple, cheap and painless

As shown, individuals have been constructed as a homogenous group of 'consumers' in current sustainable consumption discourses. This delineates certain sets of responsibilities, practices and identities. An underlying assumption is that 'consumers' are solely concerned with acquiring products, achieving social status and ultimately saving money (Crompton, 2008). It is not surprising, therefore, that

attempts to promote 'pro-environmental' behaviour are frequently framed within a market-based model. Increasingly, individuals are encouraged to change their behaviour, not for purely environmental benefits, but for reasons of financial self-interest. The Ministry for the Environment's information sheet on their *Household Sustainability Programme* (2007b), for example, claims that living sustainably can have a combination of positive results:

> Smart actions – such as switching off the lights when you leave the room, walking to work, or installing insulation – can save money and improve health, while fighting climate change and protecting local environments.

Throughout the interviews, saving money was regarded as an important component in efforts to change people's behaviour. Many participants believed that things needed to be 'cheap and easy' if people were going to do them. Alex believed that messages about the environment needed to be framed in a way that appealed to consumers:

Alex: … I think most of the messages also need to come down to, you know, 'it's for a sustainable future' but also, 'you will save this much money off your energy bill!' and things like that at the same time, so that people have something they can relate to a bit more (interview 14/06/2008).

Meg also thought that law changes, along with making things affordable and easy were the only way to alter public consumption levels:

Meg: Well, I guess the only way that seems to have an effect on changing public consumption is law changes as well as … for things to be affordable, in terms of products and that sort of thing, and for things to be easy and that sort of thing, if you're talking about recycling … things have to be easy for people and they have to be given a reason to do them (interview 13/06/2008).

Alex and Meg's comments aligned with broader messages about environmental motivation. They believed that people needed a reason (either financial or otherwise) to change their behaviour: environmental concern alone was not enough. Indeed, the

success of domestic recycling is evidence that cost, practicality and convenience play a role in determining whether people will participate in environmental initiatives. Amanda talked about recycling being the 'easiest and most obvious' thing to do; something that for her was effortless and convenient. She joked that she and her husband are not 'very good recyclers, as in washing it out and preparing it for them', but she figured that at least it was going in the bin (interview 20/06/2008). Domestic recycling might owe its success to the way it is easily incorporated into people's daily routines. Liam commented that 'it's not hard to put things in a recycle bin (…), you know it's just another form of getting rid of your rubbish' (interview 30/7/2008).

A recent report by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in the United Kingdom, however, criticises the emerging discourse which relies on a marketing approach as a way to promote environmental action. Crompton (2008, 5-6) argues that current emphasis on the 'simple, cheap and painless' steps message may be a distraction from the approaches that will be needed to create more systemic change. Encouraging people to adopt pro-environmental behaviours through economic incentives is not inherently wrong, Crompton (2008) claims, but such behaviours are the wrong *focus* for behavioural change strategies. If people are not motivated to make changes for environmental reasons, then sustaining long-term solutions might become difficult. While recycling has become a normalised behaviour in New Zealand, it is difficult to know how much this has to do with environmental reasons and how much it has to do with other factors. As Liam noted, recycling is just another way of throwing away rubbish; it fits into people's (middle-class) lifestyles rather than contests them. Once the recycling bin leaves the curb, there may be little regard given to what happens to it next. These types of activities, Sandilands (1993) contends, do not lead to broader social or environmental transformation, or involve deeper questioning of economic and political systems.

Crompton (2008) argues that mainstream environmental movements are yet to take a leading role in responding to the challenges of climate change and consumption. They too have adopted a marketing approach, hoping that by encouraging people to make

economically-based behavioural changes in their consumption habits that this will lead to other larger and more environmentally beneficial steps. Greenpeace New Zealand promotes the ‘simple steps’ message. Their *How you can change the climate* brochure (Greenpeace New Zealand, 2008) reads like a marketing leaflet, with a list of actions people can take to reduce their carbon footprint along with the potential savings they can make in dollars terms. The brochure claims that:

> Simply by making a few changes to your lifestyle, you will reduce the amount of resources you use, decrease the amount of greenhouse gases released as a result of your actions, and save yourself some money.

Changes people can make include: using heated towel rails for only four hours a day; sealing draughty gaps in windows and doorways; fixing leaky taps; and inflating car tyres. While for easy and relatively ‘simple’ behavioural changes such as these, financial incentives might work, Crompton (2008) argues that for more difficult decisions, such as flying less, economic motivations will be less effective. This may be particularly true if these decisions encroach on lifestyles or values. Such a discourse which promotes saving money discourages reliance upon environmental motivations.

This ‘small steps’ discourse also relies exclusively on the voluntary actions of individual consumers. Through placing emphasis on consumer sovereignty, no challenge is made to political or economic systems. Luke (1997) writes that the current push for individual responsibility and calls to ‘save the planet’ are not only futile, but based on non-political, non-social and non-institutional solutions to environmental problems. Inherent in this discourse is the belief that the inconsequential actions of millions of individuals are the issue. ‘My trash, your use of inefficient cars, someone else’s water use – all make the planet less liveable for the children of today and tomorrow’ (Luke, 1997, 119-120). In this way, environmental issues are both privatised and individualised.

The political consumer?

These sustainable consumption strategies take a particular view of the role of the individual and the role of the state. Individual consumers are presented as powerful agents who can really 'make a difference', while the state is afforded the role of the information provider. Interestingly, my interviews revealed that the strength of the 'small steps' message lay in the way it constructed individuals as crucial actors in the 'fight' against climate change. Despite recognition by participants that their small actions may not have direct impacts on the environment, many believed that making small changes (or even thinking about them) was both 'political' and participatory. There was a belief that consumers and individuals had the collective means and power to influence the way products are made, and over time, the way people think and behave. Meg, for example, had started purchasing 'green' cleaning products and had slowly starting incorporating other items and behaviours into her lifestyle. Although she realised these actions alone would not make a huge impact, she saw it more as a way to make a difference on a broader scale. She related the environmental cause to the recent 'smacking debate'[13] in New Zealand, believing that over time, a cultural shift in the way people *think* about the environment will occur:

Joanna: Do you feel that the purchase of these ['green'] products will have some sort of impact?

Meg: I don't really believe that *my* purchasing has any sort of an impact over all because its obviously a tiny drop in the ocean [laughs], but I do believe that … that small changes … or that individuals can make a difference over all, you know, I do think that big changes are not an individual's responsibility, you know they need to be governmental law changes and that sort of thing, but you know I do believe like with all the law changes around smacking, what was normal last year, you know to smack your child, will one day in 20 years time be horrifying to us when we look back. You know, I kind of think the environmental thing will become like that (interview 13/06/2008).

[13] In May 2007, the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Bill was passed by New Zealand Parliament. The purpose of the Bill is to 'stop force, and associated violence, being inflicted on children in the context of correction and discipline' (www.parliament.nz, retrieved 23/08/2008). The repeal of Section 59 has received extensive media attention and public debate.

In a similar way, Maria talked about the environmental movement as reminiscent of the nuclear free protests of the 1970s and 1980s. She believed that as soon as more people move in a particular direction, a 'tipping point' would be reached and things would start to change:

Maria: … but I was thinking about how I think that [environmental] movements like that work inductively, they work from the bottom up. They kind of, I even believe that way back in the 70s, 80s when New Zealand decided [to be] nuclear free, it actually was a movement of word of mouth

Joanna: Grassroots?

Maria: Yeah. And although it looked like it was the people at the top who spoke for us, before we'd spoken, I think that's not really how it happened (interview 24/07/2008).

Maria and Meg recognise themselves as crucial actors who have the capacity to contribute to change. This discourse of 'people power' has extensive roots. As Maria suggested, social movements often reflected a growing desire among people for change, and were not necessarily prescribed by governments or those in authority. This idea of (collective) individual responsibility is a consistent feature of current environmental policy discourse in New Zealand (see Chapters Four and Five), and plays a significant role in sustainable consumption narratives. Sassatelli (2006) argues that the consumer is increasingly posited as active, productive and political, responsible not just for him or herself, but also for wider society and the environment. Daily purchasing decisions and consumer choices are increasingly viewed as a way individuals can intervene in the workings of the global market: to shop is to 'vote' (Sassatelli, 2006, 220). As Meg and Maria touched on, this idea is portrayed as a 'bottom-up' cultural revolution: the more consumers who take onboard responsibility, the more likely market transformation will occur. Consumers are presented as having the duty – and the power – to uphold fair economic distribution and the natural environment (Sassatelli, 2006).

As discussed earlier, governments are assigned only a minor role in sustainable consumption responsibility. Prevailing sustainable consumption strategies in New Zealand position the government simply as a provider of credible information. The (rational) consumer is expected to use this information to make the right and most appropriate decisions. In regard to the debate regarding banning energy-sapping plasma televisions, Gerry Brownlee told the *New Zealand Herald* that: 'Our view is the information about appliances should be given to consumers and consumers should then make their choice' (Gibson, 2009). The current government believes it should have little role in regulating consumer choices or behaviours.

In their research on 'green consumers', Moisander and Pesonen (2002) found that many consumers fed into a discourse which supported a view that governments could not realistically be expected to contribute significantly to sustainable development. This was constructed as a 'taken-for-granted fact, an unfortunate but nevertheless normal reality of life' (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002, 333). Any 'radical' green consumers, alternative or overtly political discourses were sidelined. The launch issue of the *Good* magazine (June/July, 2008, 14) also commented that governments and industry cannot be trusted to set the agenda for change: people need to do it for themselves. The editor stated:

> We have waited too long for government and industry to do this for us. Now it's time to invoke that old Kiwi spirit and do it for ourselves. As consumers, as householders, as parents and citizens, we need to set the agenda. The others will follow.

Debating consumer power

While the idea that consumers can influence systems of power, production and consumption is a noble one, scholars have argued that the consumer's role both individually and collectively in regard to sustainable consumption needs further consideration. Seyfang (2004a, 2004b), Clarke *et al* (2007) and Burgess *et al* (2003) argue that consumers have limited power in the marketplace because consumption is largely a political issue, determined by the organisation of collective infrastructures

of provisioning. Only those products domestic consumers use and have access to can be subject to pressure or control by consumers. Thus while 'green' consumers might worry about their daily purchasing decisions, the vast majority of consumption decisions actually lie outside their hands (Seyfang, 2004a, 2004b). This 'institutional consumption' includes public consumption such as purchasing by the state of buildings, roads and infrastructure; and consumption by institutions of capitalism such as factories, machinery and packaging (Seyfang, 2004a). These choices are largely invisible to the end-consumers.

Seyfang (2004a) also argues that consumers are not 'free to choose' because their options are limited by the market itself. Consumers can only buy what is offered to them, and the market does not allow consumers to step beyond the materialistic world and make alternative choices in regard to lifestyles, consumption or the environment. So while an eco-efficient dishwasher is presented as the 'best choice' for the responsible and 'green' consumer, the best choice for the environment may be not using a dishwasher at all. The market, Seyfang (2004a, 14) states, only offers an 'illusion of choice' and consumers are 'effectively locked in to particular consumption patterns by the overarching social structures of market, business, working patterns, urban planning and development'. Luke (1997) further argues that the average consumer is not presented with hundreds of opportunities to do much to 'save the planet' every day.

These sentiments were reflected in this research. Participants sited availability, cost and accessibility as major barriers to buying 'green' products and adopting 'green' behaviours. Samantha commented that although she used to buy organic food, she said cost and availability were factors for her:

Samantha: Like I said, if you've got to drive somewhere else to get it, um, its just not as available … I know the other Pak 'n' Save [supermarket], I'm sure I saw some organic fruit and vegetables there but that is across the other side of town. I'm not going to drive there to get it either. I would maybe if I was over there (…)

> but at the same time, would I buy the organic stuff? No, because of the cost (interview 30/06/2008).

In our conversation, Liam and I talked about New Zealand's 'car culture'. He suggested that New Zealand towns have been built to support, and even encourage, car use. In his job at a District Council, Liam found that assumptions about car parking and car use were incorporated into urban plans:

> Liam: … Like, it's the way our towns have been planned, its why we have big complexes like The Base [shopping complex] and big supermarkets with huge car parks (…) now its just 'get in for convenience, park your car, run into the shop, run out and go'(…)
>
> Joanna: Yeah, looking at The Base, it's so huge you've got to decide what end to park at depending on what you want to do, and you're almost tempted to park down one end and then get in the car and park … //
>
> Liam: // Yeah, you'd do that, yep, and it's that alternative of, 'I'd rather go to the Base because I don't have to pay for parking and there's so much of it so I'm probably going to find one' (…) bigger car parks and those more dispersed sort of shopping complexes are encouraging [car use]. In the job that I'm doing it's very regulatory, you have to have such and such car parks per activity (…) The assumptions are woven into the rules (…) (interview 30/7/2008).

Scott did not believe people had many options to engage in 'green consumerism' or that people thought much about where and how products were made:

> Scott: I don't think people care too much where it [a product] is made, um, I don't think people care how its made, I don't think people care what's in it even' (interview 02/08/2008).

Jacobs (1997) and Wilk (2002) argue that affluent consumers are so far down the commodity chain, they are removed from the consequences of their consumption. Thus social and moral controls have little force because, even with the best intentions, 'most people simply have no access to the information they would need to make

moral choices about their own consumption' (Wilk, 2002, 256). Consumers are forced to rely on information provided by the media, governments, industry and producers, whose trust, as highlighted in Chapters Four and Five, is frequently questioned and contested. Crucially, such an approach operates within the same market framework responsible for current patterns of unsustainability and does not question the scale or impacts of over-consumption.

Rather than affording consumers a meaningful role in solutions to sustainability, the shift of focus of environmental activism from production to consumption has closed off alternative or radical avenues for action. Luke (1997, 135) argues that this type of environmentalism is a meaningless program for social reform because it serves an 'agenda of conservative ideological containment'. During my research, I found talking beyond the mainstream 'small steps' discourse difficult. For example, I asked Liam whether he thought the mainstreaming of environmentalism (such as recycling) might serve to distract people from bigger issues. He believed that the normalisation of 'pro-environmental' behaviours can only be a positive thing:

Liam: If it means that more people are open to and listening to that ethos, and are willing to incorporate it into their lives, I would probably view as more of a positive … (interview 30/7/2008).

Samantha found it difficult to imagine what other changes people could make apart from small ones. In our discussion regarding eco-efficient light bulbs I asked her whether she thought this idea was an example of getting caught up in the small details, and whether bigger changes might have more impact. She replied:

> Well, yeah, I guess … but what kind of bigger changes? Because what can just the individual do? I mean they can only do little things (interview 30/06/2008).

A continued focus on the role of consumers in sustainable consumption discourses not only tends to obscure the role of institutional consumption, but also the role that people can play in bringing about changes to consumption patterns. The dominant

model of sustainable consumption through market transformation, Seyfang (2004a, 11) argues, ‘represents governance not by citizens, but by consumers’, and this is a crucial distinction. Given the inconsistent and complex nature of personal consumption, consumer choice is not the appropriate route to environmental protection. Rather, Jacobs (1997, 51) argues, environmentally sustainable consumption will only be achieved through regulatory policies collectively decided and imposed by the state, and to these, ‘the public must be appealed to, not as consumers but as voters.’ There may be a need to engage active and political *citizens*, rather than apolitical and generally powerless consumers in sustainable consumption debates.

Conclusions

In prevailing environmental and sustainability discourses, consumers are increasingly viewed as responsible and rational agents whose role it is to foster sustainable consumption. In this chapter I have questioned this construction. I have argued that the shift of focus of environmental activism from production to consumption has depoliticised environmental issues. The representation of consumers as major stakeholders in the fate of global markets and the state of the environment overlooks the complexities of personal consumption and the constraints that consumers face within the current political and economic system. I have questioned the dominant ‘small steps’ discourse and suggested that a different set of questions need to be asked about the ‘environmental problem’, its solutions, and the role that consumers can play in addressing it. These questions need to reflect the differences people have in regard to the environment, morality and responsibility, and include a reassessment of the role of consumption and the collective power of consumers. Although questions of environmental responsibility have been increasingly ‘politicised’, by contrast the solutions remain individualised and non-political. A continued focus on the role of consumers, rather than citizens, in the quest for sustainability may defer attention away from the approaches required to create more systemic and long-term change.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

Unless we change direction, we are likely to end up where we are heading
- Chinese proverb

At the beginning of this thesis I talked about the importance of going ‘beyond the buzz words’. Climate change, sustainability and consumption have emerged as pivotal concepts in contemporary environmental debates. This research has reflected a desire to go beyond dominant discursive representations of these ideas and to engage in more critical and politicised discussion. Throughout this thesis, I sought to show how power and politics play an integral role in sustaining dominant environmental and sustainability discourses. In doing so, I have argued for a reconsideration of the way the ‘environmental problematique’ and its solutions are currently discursively constructed and politically addressed.

Discourse analysis has formed a large part of this research. Through the analysis of texts I have been able to consider the ways in which ideas regarding environmental change and consumption are produced and operate within wider social practice. This method has been integral in addressing my overarching research question which was: *how are consumers, consumption and the environment constructed in dominant discourses in New Zealand*? The analysis of this question was spread across my three substantial discussion chapters. Chapter Four, showed how current discourse has constructed the environment as a global ‘climate problem’ which requires a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, rather than a reappraisal of political and economic systems. As such, concern has centred on the ‘scientific question’ of anthropogenic climate change, and in convincing an ‘uneducated’ public of its scientific certainty. A narrowly scientific construction of global warming, however, has tended to invite debate rather than close it off. Conversations with participants revealed that climate change remains a contested and incalculable hazard. Making sense of climate change and allocating appropriate responsibility becomes difficult in a society where trust in

scientific authority is constantly undermined, and the boundaries between science and politics converge and overlap.

The way the climate is increasingly represented in global terms further compounds the issue. Participants spoke about the difficulty of being ‘proactive’ when climate change had little meaning or material reality in their day-to-day lives. Thus being appealed to as global and responsible citizens fails to resonate when the links between local and global environments seem disconnected. A global focus maintained through ‘one world’ discourses also overlooks and disempowers more local and social understandings of environmental problems, and elides the differences among and within populations.

A narrowly scientific and carbon-focused conception of the ‘climate problem’ has also obscured from analysis the underlying drivers of environmental change. Despite calls in Agenda 21 to promote more sustainable consumption practices, (over)consumption remains ideologically and politically unchallenged. In Chapter Five I argued that this is due to the way consumption is valorised not only as a driver of economic growth, but also a signifier of affluence and success. Consumption is held up as a sovereign right, inextricably linked to values, lifestyles and everyday activities. Thus confronting consumption means addressing the core ideals that underpin the capitalist system.

The way consumption has been constructed as ‘sacrosanct’ means it has been largely confined to the fringes of ‘sustainability’ discussions. Instead, debate has drifted towards a moralised framing of sustainable consumption. Consumers have increasingly been encouraged to consider the environmental impacts of their daily consumption decisions. Chapter Six showed how moral obligation and financial incentives are mixed to form a discourse which pushes for consumers to bear the brunt of environmental care. In this way, consumers are also constructed as political agents whose role it is to foster sustainable consumption. However, the concept of ‘consumer power’ needs further consideration. My research suggests that consumers

hold limited power in a marketplace which does not currently provide adequate options for ‘green consumption’. Furthermore, a consumer-led discourse only reflects the ideals and values of those able to participate in it. Prevailing sustainable consumption discourses universalise notions of morality, and marginalise other conceptions of environmental protection.

In addressing my overarching question, I have also gone some way to answering my second research question which was: *how have consumption and global environmental change issues been brought into the New Zealand political arena?* One of the objectives of this research was to examine the way consumption and environmental change issues have been addressed politically. This is important because it is through policies that discourses are (re)constructed and sustained. Thus policies are not ‘neutral tools’ but tied to the production of knowledge and the maintenance of power. Policy discourses favour particular representations of reality while marginalising others (Backstrand and Lovbrand, 2007).

There is a mutually constitutive relationship, therefore, between the way consumers, consumption and the environment have been constructed in dominant discourses and how they are represented and responded to in policy. Following Bührs (2008) I argue that prevailing climate change policy responses, such as the Emissions Trading Scheme, interpret the ‘climate problem’ in a very narrow and managerial way. New Zealand governments have neglected to embrace a wider sustainability agenda and address underlying drivers of environmental degradation. In the ‘national interest’ of protecting New Zealand’s ‘clean green’ image, sustainability has instead been addressed in terms of economics and tied to notions of ‘progress’. Successive governments have adopted an ecological modernisation discourse which assumes environmental protection can (and must) be compatible with economic growth.

Embedding environmental policy within an economic framework has sheltered issues of resource consumption from close examination. While claims that energy efficiency, emission trading schemes, recycling and waste reduction are all moves

towards sustainable development, ‘true’ sustainability can only come about through the reduction in overall levels of resource consumption. Linking sustainability to growth is impossible in a resource-based economy which promotes personal consumption as one of its most important objectives. Rather than consuming less, therefore, I have argued that sustainable consumption has come to mean consuming efficiently; an idea which is not only more economically and politically feasible, but also shifts the locus of power onto consumers.

Prevailing policies have thus centred on largely non-political and non-institutional routes to sustainable consumption. New Zealand governments have favoured ‘soft’ and unregulated policy initiatives which focus on information provision, consumer awareness, eco-labelling and energy efficiency. Such approaches individualise care for the environment, and leave little room to question institutional consumption, the role of producers and the nature and exercise of political power. On the contrary, they construct consumption as a solution to environmental problems. Through the deconstruction of advertisements, I have shown how this idea is reinforced through corporate environmentalism and ‘green consumerism’ campaigns. Although consumption and questions of environmental responsibility have become increasingly ‘politicised’, the solutions presented in dominant discourses are apolitical.

Addressing my third research question proved a much more challenging task. This question asked: *how do New Zealanders link their consumption to the environment?* My initial reason for posing this question was to explore if and how people made connections between their consumption practices and concern for the environment. In doing so I hoped to gain a more sophisticated understanding of personal consumption, for it is only through understanding the role of consumption in people’s lives, that consumption patterns can be addressed and changed. Although this research only touches the surface of this issue, conversations with participants were useful in drawing out the inconsistencies and contradictions of personal consumption. People had a variety of opinions about climate change and environmental protection, and connected their actions and behaviours to the environment in diverse ways, often

related to personal values, social meaning and context. Perhaps importantly, this research indicated that current constructions of the environmental problem leave limited room for people to meaningfully participate in climate change, sustainability and environmental debates. Despite pushes towards personal environmental responsibility, there remain few options for effective participation at an individual level. Thus although people might hold valid concerns for the environment, these are often inadequately reflected in their everyday lives, especially when personal action seems futile in the face of intangible global environmental risks. The way environmentalism has been tied to lifestyles and household management, therefore, may serve to disengage people, rather than foster any cultural or grassroots movements.

Implications and future research

This research suggests that consumption is a complex and multifaceted issue which deserves more academic and political attention particularly in regard to environmental change. Therefore, the implications for this research are two-fold. Firstly, given that this thesis critically examined environmental policy discourse, it makes sense to comment further on the political and economic factors which, at least thus far, have served as barriers to effective climate change and sustainable consumption strategies. In regard to global environmental change, political attention in New Zealand has centred on managing the ‘carbon issue’ primarily through an emissions trading scheme. While there continues to be talk of a ‘sustainability’ agenda, sustainability remains rhetoric rather than reality. Indeed, the meaning of sustainability appears to have been ‘lost in translation’. Bührs (2008) argues that sustainability should not be confused with carbon-neutrality. While reducing carbon emissions through trading schemes and energy efficiency might be achievable, this alone may not lead to a sustainable reduction in emissions unless the underlying drivers are addressed (Bührs, 2008). Solving the atmospheric ‘carbon problem’ will also not ‘solve’ uneven global patterns of production and consumption, or tackle

issues of social justice, poverty and exploitation. These can only be addressed through a reappraisal of political structures and a reassessment of economic growth.

Policy approaches to sustainable consumption have avoided any critique of the scale of consumption, or questioned the processes underpinning current levels of consumerism. Perhaps a wider question facing society is: does consumerism actually lead to increased levels of comfort, security and 'happiness'? Seyfang (2004a, 2004b) claims that the purpose of economic growth is not to increase production and consumption as widely assumed, but to increase quality of life and well-being. Once this is recognised, she argues, it may be possible to conceive of ways to achieve this while reducing levels of material consumption and resource use (Seyfang, 2004a). This may be a lofty goal, but opening up space for debate is a good start. This research suggests that the 'lay' public are distanced from both policy and public debates regarding climate change and consumption. Bringing people into political discussions might stimulate a different kind of debate, one which looks beyond dominant conceptions of 'morality' and sustainability, and allows for a wider framing of 'what people can do' to contribute meaningfully to processes of change.

Important academic implications have also emerged from this research. My intention has not been to 'demonise' consumption or suggest that consumerism is inherently 'bad'. It has also not been my objective to critique the work of geographers who have made important contributions to geographies of consumption. Certainly for geographers, the fairly recent shift of focus from production to consumption has been beneficial in challenging the privileged role of production, and in examining the mutually constitutive relationship between economy and culture, and the complex meanings of consumption in place and space. It might be valuable, however, to open up this 'space' to include a critical engagement with the global environment, bringing together the critical elements of postmodern research with issues of environmental change. In doing so, a better understanding of the 'cultural politics' of consumption might be developed which includes recognition of the complex links between consumers and their environments, the diversity of environmental understandings,

and the multiplicity of consumption habits and motivations. At a time when the flaws and consequences of conventional economic growth have been exposed, and the negative effects of environmental change are becoming increasingly apparent, there is a growing urgency for geographers to develop a critical 'political ecology' of consumption.

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Introduction

Environmental issues such as climate change have become important topics in recent years. People are encouraged to live more 'sustainable' lives, to think about their consumption practices and 'do their bit' for the environment.

- Have you heard about the term 'sustainability'? What do you think it means? Have you heard the term used in any particular context? Have you heard about any sustainability initiatives promoted by the NZ government?
- What do you think sustainability has to do with climate change? Why do you think issues of sustainability have become more important in recent years?
- Do you think there is a link between consumption and environmental harm? Can you explain?
- Do you find issues such as climate change and sustainability confusing? Why?
- Have environmental concerns made you think differently about the things you buy or the way you consume? If so, how?
- If so, what kind of changes have you made? Have these changes affected your lifestyle?
- Do you buy products that are deemed 'green'? (For example, eco-friendly, biodegradable or recyclable products, energy efficient appliances, organic produce, etc) If so, can you give examples of the kinds products / services you buy?
- Do you think that buying these products / services can reduce your impact on the environment? In what ways?

- Do you think about where and how a product is made? Does this concern you?
- What might prevent you from buying more ‘green’ products?
- How do you know if a product is ‘green’?
- Do you think that there is enough information available to consumers to help them make choices about which products and services to buy? What kind of information should be made available?
- Do you believe that buying ‘green’ is a way to show others that you care about the environment? In what way?
- Do you think that if we all buy more ‘green’ products, we will influence how and what is produced?
- In your view, do you think individual consumers can make a difference in helping to solve environmental problems? Do you think we should all be ‘doing our bit’?
- Who else should take responsibility for environmental problems?
- Do you think that consuming differently is important (i.e. the consumption of ‘green’ products) or that consuming less is more important? Why?
- Do you think current levels of consumption should be challenged or changed? If so, why?
- Do you think NZ is doing enough about climate change, the environment and sustainable development? What more could be done? Do you think more ‘radical’ action needs to take place?

Appendix Two: Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
FACULTY OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Change a light bulb, save the planet? 'Green consumerism' and the politics of sustainable consumption in New Zealand[14]

I am a geography graduate student at the University of Waikato. As part of my Masters thesis I am undertaking **research on climate change and consumption in the New Zealand context.** The aim of my research is to explore the issue of sustainable consumption, and I will focus in particular on the growing phenomenon of 'green consumerism' – the sale of products and services deemed 'environmentally friendly'. I am interested in examining people's views on climate change and sustainability, if and why people buy 'green' products, and how they connect their consumption practices to the environment.

Interviews and focus groups
For this research I hope to conduct several interviews and 2-4 focus groups. The interviews will be approximately half an hour to an hour in length. Your opinions and thoughts are important so you are welcome to bring up any issues which you view as important to my research. Focus groups are more like informal discussions between 5-8 people where you can offer your views about the topic and also hear what others have to say. Each focus group will take approximately one and a half hours.

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview and/or a focus group. I would like to audio record the interviews and focus groups so that I have an accurate account of your views and opinions.

What are your rights as participants?
If you choose to participate in my research, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any particular question(s)
- Withdraw from the research up to a month after the interview
- Decline to be audio taped and request that tape be turned off at any time
- Request that any material be erased
- Ask any questions about the research at any time during your participation

Confidentiality
I will ensure, to the best of my ability, that all interviews and discussions remain confidential and a pseudonym (fake name) will be used in any publications so that you will stay anonymous. All written notes and transcripts will be kept in a locked

[14] This was the original title of this thesis. As the research progressed, I focussed more on green consumption, rather than green consumerism per se.

cupboard in my office at the University of Waikato. Any information stored on a computer will only be accessible through a regularly changed password. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the transcripts and electronic information.

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

The results
The results of my research will be used as part of my Masters Thesis. As such, four copies of my thesis will be produced, three hard copies and one accessible online. The findings may also be used in presentations and journal publications.

What Next?
If you would like to take part in the research, I will contact you in the next week so we can organise a time to meet. If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor.

Joanna Lewin
07 850 4398 or 027 2273735
jal7@waikato.ac.nz

Assoc. Professor John Campbell
07 838 4466 x8089
jrc@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix Three: Consent Form

Description of project: This research aims to examine the issue of sustainable consumption in New Zealand. I am interested in exploring the phenomenon of 'green consumerism' and how people connect their consumption practices to the environment.

I have read the information sheet and understand that:

- I can refuse to answer any question, terminate the interview and can withdraw from the research up to a month after my interview.
- All information will remain confidential.
- My identity will remain anonymous and be protected by a pseudonym unless I state otherwise
- All information collected will remain secure in a locked cupboard or on a computer accessible by password only
- Information will be used for a Master's thesis, presentations and journal articles

I consent to our conversation being audio-recorded YES / NO (please circle)

I (your name)______________________________________ agree to participate in this research and acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form and the research project information sheet.

________________________________ (to be signed and dated by participant)

________________________________ (to be signed and dated by Joanna Lewin)

Appendix Four: Participants' details

Participants' Pseudonyms	Age	Occupation Area / Household
Lucy	28	Student / living with partner
Scott	37	Commercial Sales / married, father of one
Alex	25	Marketing / flatting
Amanda	28	Teacher / married, mother of one
Maria	50	Social Services / living alone
James	26	Retail Sales / flatting
Samantha	38	Researcher / mother of one
Meg	29	Social Services / married, mother of two
Liam	24	District Council / flatting

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