

# How Local Can You Be?

Allissa Morson – *Carleton College*

What do Fruit of the Loom underwear, Del Monte corn, a yellow tape measure, and a flute all have in common? The answer: all the items are normal day-to-day uses in my life. However, whilst using these items, I never stop and think about their impact on my life, the economy, or environmental politics. When looking through my list of collected data from the past four days, I have realized that many things go unnoticed about the items that I, and the entire United States, purchase on a daily basis. Where is the item from? How was it produced? Where was it designed? These questions are all valid when analyzing one's place in environmental politics through a consumer stance. The position as a consumer can be one of the most significant roles in our society today, but one that is not acknowledged in many people's lives.

As Lipschutz points out, "consumers are key to the contemporary capitalism; without them, the system will crash" (99). Because of this key point, many products (Barbie, Mercedes-Benz, big screen TV) are advertised as a necessity to lead a happy life in our society. Many American citizens have become so involved in the capitalist way of thinking that they believe that many things are necessary and continuously consume new products. This act of continuous consumption leads to a lack of curiosity about the products being consumed. This lack of curiosity may lead to a product being bought without full knowledge of its background.

When examining the three simple items from my daily life, one starts to understand how complicated it can be to really pin down where a product is produced. Starting in the 16th century with the conquistadors, globalization has taken over our world in every industry. Companies search for the cheapest place to develop their product, which may lead to a cell phone having small parts being made all over the world, even if it is a company based in Korea or the assembly takes place in China. Because it is hard to track down the exact point of production, some irresponsible practices in production may slide under the radar of governments and activists. These irresponsible practices may lead to catastrophic environmental issues that are difficult or impossible to reverse.

When acknowledging this point, it becomes apparent that no matter what an individual's purchasing habits are, they are global in some shape or form. In other words, nothing can have an origin of purely local production. This reinforces the idea that the different International Environmental Regimes (IERs) must cooperate in order to make a difference in the way our food, paper, electronics, etc. are produced. Environmental Politics is not a type of politics that is isolated to one country or one continent. As I will prove when analyzing my three items, locally grown or imported from Brazil, every product is directly connected to a different country in some way.

The three items that I will be taking a closer look at are: my orange composition notebook, my green LG AX300 cell phone, and a simple apple from Fireside Orchard. Students around the country commonly use related items daily without ever thinking about what it may mean to the global economy or to the environment.

Firstly, my most commonly used articles throughout the day are my two composition notebooks. They contain all of my daily class notes and doodles. The notebooks I own are Norcom, Inc Composition Notebooks, which are from a fairly large name brand in school supplies. Based in Georgia, they oversee the production of office, school, and art supplies that are shipped around the Americas.

Notebooks are a supply that are used in large quantity and hence many people focus on the price of a notebook when purchasing the item, rather than the origin or company. In this case, I bought this notebook at the local Wal-Mart store when shopping for other everyday items, such as shampoo and soap. Even though I realize that Wal-Mart may not have the best practices when it comes to trade, with my current budget, it is the easiest place for me to buy the necessities of everyday life. According to a May 2008 edition of U.S. News and World Report, I am not the only one feeling the need to stick to a budget. According to the article on Wal-Mart, as the American economy sinks, Wal-Mart surges ahead in both the stock exchange and their retail sales (Shinkle). Even though this is perhaps good for the American pocket book, it may lead to further damage in the environment. As Lipschutz points out, "Environmental damage does not simply happen; it is a result of the ways in which production and consumption are organized under capitalism and the ways in which those patterns do or do not take into account the damage being caused" (87-88).

The reason for this accusation is the fact that many items that are sold at low prices may not be produced in the most environmentally friendly way. Take, for example, my Norcom notebook. This notebook was produced in Brazil, which has ample forests for the production of paper and other resources. In fact, production of paper has gone up in Brazil from 1981 with 337,000 tons to 1,815,000 tons in 2000. This is a substantial increase in production, bringing in \$3.22 billion per year to their economy. While this may benefit their economy, it also causes numerous setbacks in environmental terms. When looking at the forestry business in the Brazilian Amazon forest, there are not many standards for sustainable use. Brazil contains over 50% of the Amazon forest, but only 1,000,000 acres are deemed sustainable by the Instituto de Manjo e Certificacao Florestal e Agricola (IMAFLOA), which is a part of Rainforest Alliance's "Smart Wood" project ("Brazil Forestry").

This lack of responsibility in sustainable forestry will soon affect the entire world. Without the photosynthesis of the entire rainforest, less carbon dioxide will be taken out of the atmosphere and replaced with a fresh supply of oxygen. Plus, the fumes that may be created by the factories that manufacture paper could also add to the atmospheric problems. This is only one example of how this process involves the entire world and is not just isolated to one place.

After the process that involves thousands of trees and employees, the product is shipped to the United States or its other predetermined destination. This process will take machinery to move it from the warehouse to the truck or ship that it will be transported on. All of the tools used for transportation require the use of fossil fuels that may be produced in Venezuela, the Middle East or even the United States. Either way, it is a global effort to move the large quantities of items being shipped.

The next step in this chain is where we arrive at the Wal-Mart or other store where the consumers will purchase the item. In this setting, there must be employees to sell the item, electricity for the checkout process, and marketing skills. Prices must be low and the design must be aesthetically pleasing to the consumer. There must also be shelves for the items to be displayed and perhaps a shopping cart provided for the consumers' convenience. Many things are provided at these stores to entice the customer into buying the product.

One question I would like to raise is: does the low cost and importation decrease the paper that ends up in the recycling bin? Because paper and notebooks are so cheap to use, some consumers may believe that it is easier to throw away paper instead of recycling. After all, one has to pay for recycling as well, so why pay for both? When the production of most paper is outside the U.S., does this affect the amount of paper that is reused in the United States? In my

opinion, the U.S. does not really push for recycling of paper and other products as much as they should and perhaps this does lie on the basis of having it imported so cheaply.

Everywhere one walks on Carleton's campus, they will see a student or professor using their cell phone. It is a "want" that has turned into a necessity on a college campus. For this reason, I decided to investigate where my stylish LG AX300 phone originated.

LG is an electronic company based in Korea and has grown immensely since it was founded in 1958 as GoldStar. It now employs over 82,000 people around the world and has 114 operations under its control. It has two main headquarters, one in Korea and the other in the United States. LG now has alliances with large name brands, such as Prada, Toyota, Dolby, and Sun among many more. These alliances help the company advertise their product as high end and luxurious, which helps in their marketing.

In regards to my cell phone, it started its life in Korea, where a design team thought of the design and marketing that the phone would need in order to be a success across the globe. In the headquarters, it was also decided where parts would be produced or purchased from and where the final product would be assembled. They came to the decision of buying parts from independent suppliers in Korea and other Asian countries. The actual assembly was then done in China. Here they not only assemble the phone, but they package it for its long trip to its final destination. In this trip, the same principle applies for transportation as it did for the notebook.

In my case, the final destination was the Mankato, Minnesota Alltel store, where I purchased a new phone to replace my nonfunctioning one. In this store, they have many sales people, large electric lights and trendy decorations to catch the consumer's eye. This is all strategic reasoning. Even though the phone has a retail value of \$170, it can be purchased for \$1-\$30, depending on the contract that the phone company gives you.

The low pricing of cell phones may be good for poor college students, but perhaps it will lead to consumers not realizing the true value of the phone. If the true value is not realized, it may lead to a consumer replacing it more often than need be. This excess consumption then creates a larger demand for phones that may be produced by underpaid employees or made with materials that are non-recyclable. Even though some companies may request that you recycle the phone, one may simply forget to do so.

Even when one believes that they are buying locally and supporting the "Ecoanarchist" way of life, it turns out that these products also have some connection to the global economy. When eating an apple from Fireside Orchard, which is located a few miles west of Northfield, Minnesota, I think I am doing the world a favor. I am eating locally, which promotes the producers in this area, and I am not affecting what may happen outside this small circle. But when looking closer, this assumption is wrong. Even when purchasing products locally, there still may be an effect on the other side of the planet.

At the Fireside Orchard, according to the owner, they try to keep a very stable ecosystem open to most plants and animals that will not harm their apple harvest. In doing so, they grow their apples organically, which means that all products used on the trees are natural or non-synthetic. When they must get rid of insects or pests, they use small amounts of pesticides on only the area affected, meaning that not all apples are sprayed with dangerous products that could harm the consumer and ecosystem. Traps are also used in controlling unwanted species, such as worms or moths. Though the owner could not name the exact countries, he mentioned some are produced in Europe or other parts of the United States. When working with the trees in the orchard, machinery such as tractors, lawn mowers, sprayers, and trucks are used. The tractor is a John Deere so it is manufactured in Iowa, but the trucks that haul the product to its final

destination are all foreign made. These products also require the use of fossil fuels and oil. Even though the products used are from all over, the employees are all from the area and the owner lives in Northfield.

Locally grown foods do help cut down on excess transportation, which helps to cause global warming. Fireside Orchard delivers their apples to a 50-mile radius, compared to thousands of miles (which many orchards from Florida or California do). The furthest south they deliver is Owatonna and the furthest north is St. Paul. They deliver to many sorts of institutions, colleges, grocery stores, and local markets. This allows their products to be accessible to the normal consumer. This may help consumers learn to enjoy locally grown foods and to incorporate them into their everyday lives.

Even though locally grown items are a growing trend, the United States and its citizens must realize that they should not only focus on the local part of the production. They must look at the larger picture and accept that it is impossible for the United States to thrive on purely local items. This just confirms my opinion that all countries need to take a more active role in environmental politics. If it is only left up to those that signed the Kyoto Treaty or those small grass root groups, changes will happen, but not on the scale that is necessary for global change.

Environmental politics are strong and thriving in most small communities and local locations. Now we must strive towards the same vigorous enthusiasm in the national governments and work towards goals that are aimed towards all nations. The future must be looked at and faced head on. The sooner we include positive changes in industry and society's life, the sooner the future can get back on track economically and environmentally.

## Works Cited

“Brazil Forestry.” 2007. *Nations Encyclopedia*. 21 September 2008.  
[www.nationsencyclopedia.com](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com).

Lipschutz, Ronnie D. *Global Environmental Politics: Power, Perspectives, and Practice*.  
Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2004. 99.

Schinkle, Kirk. “Wal-Mart Surges as Economy Sinks.” 13 May 2008. *U.S. News and World  
Report*. 28 September 2008. [www.usnewsandworldreport.com](http://www.usnewsandworldreport.com).

“Sustainable Forestry.” 2008. Rainforest Alliance. 21 September 2008.  
[www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org).