

A few years ago I learned of a group in Cheyenne that began as the gleam in the eye of a Wyomingite who spent decades in Madison, Wisconsin, an ecology-minded city in a state that takes seriously its environmental health. My friend had come back to Cheyenne for a high school reunion that brought her the love of her life—that is, of the second half of her life. She returned to marry and resettle in the place of her birth. Soon she determined to awaken her fellow Wyomingites to the principles of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” To this end, she organized the group “Sustain Cheyenne.”

I joined her eagerly, for I, too, was troubled by the reckless uses and abuses of resources that I observed all around. This is no peculiarity reserved for the “rugged individualism” mentality of the West; rather, from California to Michigan I saw men and women scrub their dishes under running water, only to place them in a dishwasher that is set on another complete wash cycle. When it’s daylight outdoors they keep the shutters closed and the electric lights burning—as if plain daylight, like tap water, were plebeian commodities that can’t begin to compete with the glamorous stuff we buy. I have seen a school bus idle for 30 minutes while the drive conferred indoors with an administrator. (In Germany, all buses feature printed reminders to their drivers to turn off their engines for any stop that lasts more than one minute.) Compared to my native country, people here disdain frugality and stewardship. Perhaps this is because the United States, unlike European countries, is rich in resources like water, electricity, and gasoline. To a visitor from another country, it seems that Americans have the tap running as if there were no tomorrow.

Tomorrow is fast approaching; in fact, it has already arrived. “Conflict over critical water supplies is an ever-present danger,” writes Laurence Smith in “The World in 2050.” By conflict he means extensive water wars. Resource depletion via agriculture has ushered in the unsustainable consumption of water and petroleum (and petroleum-based products such as fertilizer) that spells coming scarcity. Meanwhile, global warming portends further water troubles. In the American West, mega droughts have been taking their toll for the past several years. In addition, warmer winters and earlier melt-seasons often bring winter rains that merely run off where, in the past, snow naturally stored the water until it was needed later in the season. Further, geologists and climate scientists have observed that most glaciers, those vast storehouses of fresh water, are beating hasty retreats worldwide. In Montana, Glacier National Park is projected to be glacier-free by 2030. This doesn’t just mean diminished tourism for Montana; it means that a vast storage system of fresh water will have dissipated into the ocean, where it will raise sea levels to the point of washing away shorelines from California to Massachusetts—not to mention inundations in countries like Bangladesh and Thailand.

In my childhood, water was a precious commodity. The post-war, Soviet-occupied, rural subsistence in the East Germany where I lived until age eight featured no running water, much less central heating. I still remember harsh winter days when we primed a pathetic hand pump to coax forth a measly few liters of water. These memories have made me a lifelong water conservationist. Even today I save my kitchen’s gray water to use on my compost heap. Had I grown up in a household of plenty, I might never imagine having to do without.

When Sustain Cheyenne was in its infancy, Jeffrey Wiggins, Greenway Coordinator for Cheyenne, showed us “Affluenza,” a one-hour CBS film that explores the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption. Its online definition is as follows: Af-flu-en-za n. 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste, and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth. 4. A television program that could change your life.

Jeff also alerted us to “The Story of Stuff” that can be viewed online, a saga of mountains of things bought and thrown away. Ditto “Adbusters,” an online magazine devoted to challenging the roots of consumerism, that is to say, the ever-present advertisements that make us think we can be loyal to the American ideal only so long as we shop until we drop. Adbusters has launched international campaigns such as “Buy Nothing Day” and “TV Turnoff Week.”

Generations of Americans have had the good fortune not to live through a war that’s waged on their home turf. If they had, they’d be a whole lot less inclined to send troops overseas to fight for “American interests,” e.g., Middle Eastern petroleum. Instead, they’d embark on a program of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” Stewardship is but a small step in the arid territory of overuse and depletion; still, if each of us, from Wyoming farmers to state legislators, began to take one step, the overall savings would turn into something formidable.