

Consumption, civilisation and carbon

In the light of devastating forest fires, alarming deforestation, accelerating glacial and polar melting and the recent UN Climate Change Summit, I feel compelled to add 'consumption' into the climate change debate.



VIEWPOINT by MPA Chief Executive
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None of what you're about to read is "denialist", far from it. The era of conjecture about whether and why climate change is taking place must give way to the era of how we respond, both by mitigation and adaptation.

Consumers need to admit they share the responsibility. That is all eight billion of us – or at least those of us in richer countries – who have consumption choices. The primary resources needed to satisfy our cumulative demands for food, water, energy and non-energy mineral products are the foundations for civilisation and, like it or not, consumption unlocks carbon. Amongst the calls for carbon to be cut there is barely an acknowledgement of this critical link.

If we aim our wrath solely at those activities we think harm the planet most, we are only tackling part of the problem. We are all responsible for placing demands on essential products, and then we compound the issue by also consuming, frankly, more frivolous products. The inconvenient truth is that there is an environmental cost of our need and desire to be 'civilised'. You cannot separate demand from supply.

We now know about environmental costs and where they arise, but our Government response is ridiculously inconsistent, parochial and misleading. This is where the real denial lies. In the UK we believe we are cutting our carbon footprint more than we truly are because we are excluding the 'too difficult' calculations on consumption of imported goods, shipping, aviation, etc. On this point youth activists have, like our industry, found our Government wanting.

So how does a Government admit the truth and respond properly? More importantly, how does it change its thinking and see the economy as a whole through a clear environmental lens? A good start might be to listen to industry more, understand what we are doing and what we are capable of doing.

Contrary to popular belief, our industry has been making evolutionary, and sometimes revolutionary, improvements in reducing energy and carbon impacts both in production and during products' lifetime. Products such as concrete and asphalt are consumed in homes, schools, roads, railways, hospitals and power plants, without which we cannot operate day-to-day. This essential fabric of our way of life is not negotiable. We have to have it. And that carries an inevitable environmental cost.

This balance between economy and environment underpins the pillars of sustainable development. To understand how to mitigate the environmental effects, we have to appreciate the economic causes. Given that the UK is a comparatively small contributor at the global level, at less than 1.5% of total greenhouse gases, even if we max out on innovative mitigation and influencing other countries – which incidentally we should continue to do – we will see our efforts outweighed by global growth in emissions. This means we will have to adapt quicker and more intensely, and that requires mineral products too.

For example, river and coastal defences require concrete, manufactured from aggregates and cement, both of which ultimately originate from the land like food and water. I often wonder why our products are taxed and heavily regulated, while other activities that use much more land and emit more carbon are subsidised and supported. We need a whole economy 'balanced scorecard' approach which is sensitive to need, demand and supply chains, and a consistent approach which incentivises all sectors to innovate on reduction, mitigation and adaptation.

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With the next UN Climate Change Summit headed for our shores in 2020 we must decide whether we want to just feel good by indulging in inconsequential greenwash or change the debate to more action and less hot air. We will make our voice heard and offer practicable, workable solutions. We will engage with all stakeholders with open minds, emphasising the link between consumption, civilisation and carbon.