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OPINION: 'Tele-coupling' and why your choice matters for the planet

by [Ibrahim Thiaw and Achim Steiner \(/profile/?id=0033z00002ZVl1wAAD\)](/profile/?id=0033z00002ZVl1wAAD) | United Nations

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*** Any views expressed in this opinion piece are those of the author and not of Thomson Reuters Foundation.**

The new freedom of consumer choice is destroying both the Earth and the future of our children

Ibrahim Thiaw is the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Achim Steiner is the Administrator of United Nations Development Programme.

The past 50 years has seen unprecedented exploitation and destruction of the land, which produces the food that sustains each and every one of us. Over one third of the earth's land is severely degraded and fertile soil is being lost at the rate of 24 billion tonnes a year, in part due to unsustainable agriculture and climate change.

Not only is fertile land becoming unusable, it is impacting livelihoods severely. Over 1.3 billion people live off degraded land.**[1]** Over 3.2 billion people**[2]** – close to half of the global population – are impacted by it. The fact that more than one quarter of the world's productive land is no longer usable is a major force behind the conflicts in Africa or mass migrations in Central America, and beyond.

We are undermining the entire natural infrastructure on which our modern world depends through irresponsible use of the land. Is there anything we can do to help reverse these worrying trends when it comes to our land? Consumers have the power to take action and make simple action to help protect our land -- especially when it comes to "tele-coupling".

"Tele-coupling" is a modern-day "Butterfly Effect". It refers to how connections between nature and human beings are growing ever tighter in a more globalized world both for good and for ill.**[3]** For instance, the price of soy and the rate of deforestation are linked. A palm oil consumer in Africa may be causing a tree to be cut down in Asia.**[4]**

Unsustainable agricultural practices -- driven by the demands of rich consumers -- do more than degrade the land. They put enormous pressure on resources like water. 2,000 litres of water are needed to produce one kilogram of avocados -- four times the amount needed to produce one

kilo of oranges.[5]

As the supply of productive land dries up and the population grows by more than 1 billion in the next 15 years, competition is intensifying for land within countries and globally. Many countries are grappling with the very basic problem of how to feed their populations, forcing countries to invest and secure land for agriculture, forestry and fisheries in distant regions, in part to feed their populations.

This situation is compounded by a range of interrelated challenges. **A new report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (<https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ipbes.net%2F&data=02%7C01%7Cjack.kavanagh%40undp.org%7>)** that *one million species* are now threatened with extinction, many within decades.

However, *The Global Land Outlook* by United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification's (UNCCD) shows that, "informed and responsible decision-making, improved land management policies and practices, and *simple changes* in our everyday lives, can help to reverse the current worrying trends of land degradation."

Tele-coupling means that there is a widening gap between what we consume and where it is produced. The globalization of the economy means that in New York City or Bonn, Germany -- where we both live --- we can have a fresh, daily supply of oranges and kiwis from any part of the world.

This new freedom of consumer choice works well for our pockets. However, it is destroying both the Earth - faster than any other process in the history of mankind - and the future of our children as we watch on.

But you can make an easy, straightforward change in your daily life that will help you to speak-up and vote with your wallet. Supermarkets pivot to the demands of the consumer so when possible, buy produce that is sustainable. Products that are in season or grown locally fall at the top of this list.

Your personal choices in the supermarket can have a ripple effect that will make a massive difference.

People are now rejecting plastic bags or produce that is excessively wrapped in a plastic -- massively reducing the amount of plastic that goes to landfill. Likewise, in the supermarket, examine closely the labels of consumer products -- fruits, vegetables, electronics, everything -- and avoid those whose origin is difficult to trace. They are designed to make us irresponsible consumers.

By making smart choices you can help to jolt producers, supermarkets, fellow consumers and politicians to promote more sustainable land practices. You can also help to promote indigenous produce that is more sustainable and develops local markets as industries.

Last year's coordinated Beat Plastic Pollution campaign and the global children's and the ongoing youth campaign on climate change energized by Greta Thunberg show that the power of individual consumer choice is alive and well. These two successful campaigns mounted globally, largely through people's movements, show that change is, in fact, possible.

The youth of today are characterized by a break with traditional practice. They may be our best hope of a new consumption and production system that is responsible, accountable and sustainable.

The simple choices that you make as a consumer will particularly help people living on degrading lands, including the drylands that are home to the world's poorest and most marginalized people. More importantly, you can help to ensure that other regions do not fall victim to desertification.

On this World Day to Combat Desertification on 17 June, let us make a pledge to reject harmful tele-coupling -- and do our part to protect the land on which our very lives depend.

[1] 2017, The Global Land Outlook.

[2] 2018, IPBES Land Degradation Assessment Report.

[3] <http://science.time.com/2011/02/23/the-new-science-of-telecoupling-shows-just-how-connected-the-world-is%E2%80%94for-better-and-for-worse/>
(<http://science.time.com/2011/02/23/the-new-science-of-telecoupling-shows-just-how->

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**[4] <http://science.time.com/2011/02/23/the-new-science-of-telecoupling-shows-just-how-connected-the-world-is%E2%80%94for-better-and-for-worse/>
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**[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/17/chilean-villagers-claim-british-appetite-for-avocados-is-draining-region-dry>
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Thomson Reuters Foundation

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The pioneering cap-and-trade scheme would kick off in 2021 - but still needs backing by the state senate

By Sebastien Malo

NEW YORK, June 18 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Lawmakers in Oregon have voted to price climate-changing emissions from large polluters across the state's economy, in the latest move by a local government to fight global warming despite reluctance from the White House.

The Oregon "cap-and-trade" system would reward those who slash their planet-warming emissions with credits they can sell to others who produce higher emissions and exceed government-mandated limits.

"Oregon can be the log that breaks the jam nationally" in adopting more such systems, said Governor Kate Brown in a statement prior to the vote late Monday in the Oregon House of Representatives.

The bill still must be passed by the state senate, but Brown has said she would sign it into law if it reaches her desk.

Oregon would be the second U.S. state to put in place such an economy-wide trading system, following California in 2013, said Brad Reed, a spokesman for Renew Oregon, a green energy advocacy group that campaigned for the bill.

Oregon's climate-changing emissions in 2017 accounted for well under 1 percent of the total U.S. emissions, according to estimates by the Oregon Global Warming Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But the passage of the bill could help advance similar, or even more ambitious, policies in other states, said Jeff Mauk, executive director of the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators.

"State lawmakers feel a heightened urgency to act in the Trump era," Mauk said.

The Oregon bill is just the latest in a range of efforts by U.S. states and cities to develop environmental policies that advance action on climate change.

President Donald Trump has vowed to pull the United States out of a 2015 global accord to fight climate change and has backed continuing planet-warming extraction and use of fossil fuels.

But as part of the "We Are Still In" coalition, more than 3,500 mayors, governors and business leaders have promised they will not retreat from the international deal.

Oregon's cap-and-trade scheme would kick off in 2021 and aim to help the state cut its emissions by at least 45% below 1990 levels by 2035, the bill said.

It would target large emitters in sectors ranging from industrial operations to transportation and electricity.

The money Oregon would raise with its system would largely be allocated to benefit communities most impacted by the effects of global warming, the bill said.

An estimated \$535 million would be raised over the course of the program's first year, according to the state Carbon Policy Office.

While California has the only similar broad trading system in the country, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, another cap-and-trade system, targets electric sector emissions in nine northeastern and mid-Atlantic states from Maine to Maryland.

Economists view market-based mechanisms as the most cost-effective way to reduce emissions, said Matthew Zaragoza-Watkins, an assistant professor of economics at Vanderbilt University.

Still, nearly two dozen green groups opposed the bill. In a public letter, they called for fossil fuels to be phased out, saying trading could promote their continued use, Zaragoza-Watkins said.

According to the World Bank, 46 countries and 24 states, cities or other jurisdictions have put a price on carbon.

(Reporting by Sebastien Malo @sebastienmalo, Editing by Laurie Goering. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers climate change, humanitarian news, women's and LGBT+ rights, human trafficking and property rights. Visit <http://news.trust.org/climate>)

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