

# Buying a Better Planet

Spending wisely can have as much of an impact on the planet as your pocket, argues **Eve Poole**



illustration credit: Jeremy Hogarth

I wonder what you think money is? When we travel abroad, we call it currency. And it is this sense of flow, of energy, that I'd like to address. Specifically, how we can use the energy of money to help the planet, rather than to contribute towards its accelerating demise.

It is clear that the task is getting increasingly urgent. Just as we were embarking on another "hottest summer yet", Donald Trump withdrew the US

from the Paris Climate Agreement. While he fiddles, the planet burns. In the past the weather was something that God made, but we are making it now. Even with the target of a 2 degree cap on the increase in global warming, London, New York, Rio de Janeiro and Shanghai may be submerged by the year 2100. And because vast parts of the world will either be flooded or rendered too hot for habitation, world populations will be on the move. So if you think migration is an

issue now, imagine geopolitics then, when your children are grandparents. What a legacy we are leaving them.

So what could we do, and why is money part of the answer? Because money is currency. Have you ever thought about what it means when you spend your money? Is it spent? Of course not. It travels. The New Economics Foundation have devised a clever tool to track this, called the Local Multiplier 3 methodology. It varies a little by area, but to give you an example, their study in Northumberland found that every £1 spent with a local supplier was worth £1.76 to the local economy, and only 36p if it was spent in a chain-store or national brand. This is because local businesses tend to spend their money locally too. Imagine that everyone in your town had blue ink on their hands: how blue could each pound coin you spend get before it ends up in a bank vault or offshore? And supporting local supply chains would certainly shrink your carbon footprint by reducing the food miles and transportation costs involved.

Your money acts like a vote. The more something gets voted for, the more it happens, which is why over time the market tends to end up just meeting the needs of the rich and powerful. But you can use your votes more carefully than this. You can send your money on its way rejoicing, so that its energy multiplies. One example of Christian activism in this area is the story of the Fair Trade movement. Famously started in the UK in the 1970s by students from Durham, by 1998, the fair trade market in the UK was worth around £17million annually. During the noughties the

market multiplied exponentially, and is now worth over £1 billion a year. In coffee alone, Fairtrade now accounts for almost a quarter of the UK's roast and ground market. Fair trade bananas were only introduced in 1996. Now a third of the bananas we buy are Fairtrade, so in the UK we eat 3,000 fairtrade bananas every minute. It doesn't really take that long to transform whole sectors by creating an entirely new segment, if we just chose positively at the checkout. Which organisations are your green heroes and how can you "vote" for them in your weekly shop?



illustration credit: Jeremy Hogarth

And as well as spending positively, you can avoid enterprises you dislike. Consumer boycotts have a noble history, from the historical sugar and chocolate boycotts over the slave trade and indentured labour, to boycotts of Apartheid South Africa when I was a student. Modern campaigns over animal testing, the fur trade, poor environmental and fishing practices, sweatshop labour, and human rights abuses, have resulted in several company climb-downs, in the face of falling sales and negative publicity; social media has made it even easier for these campaigns to hit home. Which organisations are your eco-villains? Can you move your custom elsewhere?

You can focus hard on what you actually buy. When you throw something "away", do you ever think about where "away" actually is? On land, that place is China. We sell our rubbish to them. China is importing more than three million tonnes of plastic and 15 million tonnes of paper and board a year from the wasteful West. And we send them our landfill too, because it's cheaper to poison their water table than to poison ours. In the oceans, there are so-called "trash vortices" in each of the five major oceanic gyres, each estimated to be the size of Texas. They reckon that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the sea than

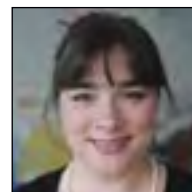
fish. The bottom line is this: if you can't reuse it or recycle it, why are you buying it?

And do you love buying presents for others? Could you buy them an experience instead? In 2006, the Comino Foundation commissioned a report from the Cambridge econometricians CEPR to model the effect on the environment, if there was a shift away from the consumption of manufactured goods towards increased consumption of services and "experiences". Their model showed that even a 10% shift towards the "weightless" economy would reduce greenhouse gases by 6%, because intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, physical and social activities, rather than the purchase of material goods, consume fewer of the Earth's natural resources. Specifically, their model suggested that the consumption of electricity would

reduce by 5%, coal by 11%, and natural gas by 8%; and that the UK's extraction of oil and gas would reduce by 17%.

As Christians, we are people in relationship – in community with each other, and with the planet. Loving our neighbour as ourselves includes this relationship too. So next time you rinse out a can for recycling, perhaps you could make it a prayer of thanks for the home God made for us to live in. Being green is a faith priority, not just a good behaviour. As part of that journey, could I invite you to undertake a new financial project? I call it "greening" your bank statement. It is the process of redeeming each and every transaction you make. One day, when every transaction on it is a positive vote for the planet and for global flourishing, we will finally become the kingdom builders we were designed to be.

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Eve Poole writes about theology and capitalism for the William Temple Foundation and the St Paul's Institute. Her most recent books are *Capitalism's Toxic Assumptions* (2015) and *Leadersmithing* (2017) both with Bloomsbury. <http://evepoole.com/>