

Columnists

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Nations should share green consumer ideas

"Green" consumerism has quietly entered the mainstream in the U.S., powered by the enthusiastic support of legions of consumers and businesses...

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

"Green" consumerism has quietly entered the mainstream in the U.S., powered by the enthusiastic support of legions of consumers and businesses. It's not just a fad anymore.

But our American shade of green is only part of the spectrum. As we celebrate Earth Day this weekend, let's broaden our horizons and look at how the green consumer experience in America compares with eco-consumerism elsewhere around the globe.

Q: What exactly is green consumerism?

A: It simply means that individuals have the opportunity and desire to consider environmental impacts when making purchases and other everyday choices.

Q: Before we visit other countries, what are some key trends in environmental consumerism in the U.S.?

A: American entrepreneurship and grass-roots innovation have helped spawn a vast selection of green products, services and activities. Many products now widely available, from organic foods to green building materials, were first developed by small businesses or individuals.

Currently, however, large corporations such as Home Depot, Ford and General Electric are driving the green-consumerism bus in this country. Although environmental activists still have a presence in America, their green power seems limited compared to the influence of big business. Much of that corporate influence is positive, because large companies do help make green products more available to the public.

Certain eco-consumer issues rise to the top in every nation, and food and health concerns have been paramount in the U.S.

Environmental consumerism in America varies greatly depending on location, with some regions such as the Pacific Northwest much greener than others. Many green businesses have a regional customer base, and the few eco-consumer-related regulations in the U.S. have been enacted mostly by states, not nationally.

Q: So what's going on in the rest of the world on the green-consumer front?

A: Governments play a larger role in many other countries. Regulations, legislation and subsidies help foster green consumerism, from Brazil to Australia to many European nations. Activists and political parties such as the Green Party also have significant clout in Germany and elsewhere.

Q: In the rest of the world, does environmental consumerism revolve around buying products the way it does in the U.S.?

A: Not always. In Scandinavian nations, for instance, green consumerism is more like "green citizenship" and has a strong public-health emphasis. This is illustrated by high-profile programs in those countries that provide abundant, safe options for urban cycling and walking.

Green consumer sentiment may also be heavily influenced by events. For example, interest in renewable energy has soared in Japan since the earthquake-related Fukushima nuclear meltdowns in March, 2011.

Q: How about a few more green-consumer highlights from other countries?

A: Japanese auto manufacturers, who brought the world the hybrid Toyota Prius and electric Nissan Leaf, are staying in the green-technology fast lane by focusing now on developing low-cost, zero-emissions consumer vehicles.

In green-consumer education, England and Ireland have taken a bite out of food waste, with groundbreaking national campaigns providing practical tips to help consumers stop throwing out so much usable food.

A country's overall approach to environmental protection provides the foundation for green consumerism. Peru is the most sustainable nation in the world, according to the Worldwatch Institute, based largely on the Peruvian government's efforts to protect its abundant forests and other natural resources.

Many countries, such as the Philippines, have strong traditions of home water conservation and other practical green household activities. Young consumers in China increasingly seek out electronics and other products with smaller environmental footprints.

Q: With the Internet, "smartphones" and social media, isn't it much easier nowadays to learn from other countries?

A: It's easier, but global exchange of green consumer information is still much less widespread than you might think. Many of the world's citizens, businesses and governments seem to have environmental tunnel vision, focusing only on what's going on in their own country or city.

In America and around the world, we'll all live better and greener if we share our successes and don't always try to reinvent the green wheel.

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