

The Green Notebook

How Much Does Cheap Cost?

Certainly in light of recent economic conditions, many of us are cutting back and looking for ways to save some money, perhaps leading us to buy good as cheaply as possible. But here is something to think on: what is the price of cheap?

I recently read an article in *E-The Environmental Magazine* (Jan/Feb 2010) which outlined some interesting thoughts on the environmental costs of our disposable, discount ways. Citing Ellen Ruppel Shell, author of *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*, the article contends that our "constant quest for the best deals on food, clothes and other consumer goods is contributing to a number of social and environmental ills that are inherently unsustainable."

What are some of these "ills" you ask? Let's take a look:

- * When trading quality for cost, our so-called great deals may have very short life spans—this equals having to buy replacement items more quickly. And where do the cheap items end up? You got it—landfills. The article pointed to retailers who "market flimsy items as a cool way for us to avoid getting tied down to all our stuff" and used IKEA as an example (I am aghast! I love IKEA! But there may be that question of durability lurking on the edges of their products).

- * Think about deforestation when considering wood products sold by big-name retail chains. Shell writes that this wood often comes from Eastern Europe and the Russian Far East where "wages are low, large wooded regions remote, and according to the World Bank, half of all logging is illegal."

- * Then there are the hidden costs of road maintenance for those heavy trucks that haul all the cheap stuff—that equals more gas emissions and more gas taxes. Don't forget about the economic and environmental costs of pesticides.

- * The author of the article (Jessica A. Knoblauch) also points to our obsession with cheap as a contributor to lax food safety and environmental controls. Just think about all the food recalls in recent years and you'll see what she means.

- * Finally, it really ends up costing us more when we have a disposable mindset—you have to keep replacing your stuff!

Knoblauch recommends consulting websites like Good Guide (www.goodguide.com) which is an independent group of researchers who rate products based on their environmental, social and health performance. Sounds like a great idea! Another resource is the Painless Green Book (www.painlessgreenbook.com).

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