

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

by [Ibrahim Thiaw and Achim Steiner](#) | United Nations
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The new freedom of consumer choice is destroying both the Earth and the future of our children

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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](#) warns 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/>

[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/>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/17/chilean-villagers-claim-british-appetite-for-avocados-is-draining-region-dry>