Decision-Making Topics

Food Choices

Walk into most grocery stores in the United States today, and you'll find a world of choices before you: full fat, low fat, no fat; low sodium; bulk or single servings; fresh or frozen; raw or processed; organic; vegetarian or vegan; low cholesterol; locally grown or imported; generic or name brand; packaged or loose; with or without preservatives; with or without artificial flavors and colors; recycled or recyclable; and so forth. The choices can be overwhelming. How do we decide?

The decisions we make affect not only our families but also the companies that produce the products, the communities that depend on the companies for jobs, and the communities that are affected by the manufacturing processes. For example, if we buy bananas from Costa Rica, we support that country's economy and help provide local jobs. If we buy organic apples, we send the message that we prefer products grown without synthetic chemicals, and we help promote healthy habitats for wildlife at the same time. If we buy fruits and vegetables out of season, we contribute to air pollution by encouraging the transport of goods from many miles away. And if we buy local produce, we benefit local families and the environment.

What Do You Think?

- How do you decide what to eat?
- What choices do you have in the foods you eat?
- Who buys most of the food you eat? What criteria are considered in the purchasing decisions?
- What factors do you think are most important?
- Read the labels on foods your family has recently purchased. What do the labels tell you? What don't they tell you?
- How do our decisions affect the environment?
- Are environmental costs figured into food prices? How? Should they be?
- How do you think our food purchasing decisions have changed over the past 50 years? Can you name 10 items that would not have been found in a grocery store 50 years ago?
- How important is health? Do you think Americans today are more or less healthy than 50 years ago? Explain.
- How do you think our food choices in the United States differ from choices in other nations?
- Would you be willing to pay more to protect the environment through your purchases? If so, how much more? 1 percent? 10 percent? 100 percent?
- How could you learn more about the repercussions of your choices on distant communities?

Decision-Making Topics (cont.)

Consumer Choices

Consumers have great power. The decisions we make as consumers send messages to companies and influence their future behavior. For example, when we buy recycled paper, we support companies that provide environmentally conscious products. When we buy high-quality reusable products instead of single-use disposable items, we send the message that we are not going to contribute our dollars to a throwaway society.

Our purchasing decisions can also influence the lives of people, plants, and animals many miles away because what we buy affects how the Earth is treated. For example, if we choose disposable items, we use additional natural resources and energy as we add to the mountains of trash at local or distant landfills. If we purchase clothes made of organically grown cotton and colored with natural dyes, we help reduce water pollution and promote healthier soils. If we buy things like acid-washed jeans, however, we contribute to water pollution and groundwater depletion.

And sometimes the products we purchase have a more direct effect on the communities that provide them. For example, by purchasing products that use harmful chemicals, such as some pesticides, we may affect the health of crop workers. Or, if we buy products manufactured by companies with poor human-rights records, we may inadvertently support the companies' behavior. But when we buy products produced in our own community, we are supporting our local economy.

In some cases, purchases can offer win–win solutions. If we buy fuel-efficient cars, for instance, we encourage companies to develop more efficient models, we reduce our contribution to air pollution, and we help slow global warming.

What Do You Think?

- How can our shopping decisions affect the global environment?
- How can our shopping decisions affect people in distant communities?
- Are environmental costs figured into the price of our products? How? Should they be?
- How do we feel the effects of environmental problems in other countries?
- What do you support when you purchase from megastores? What do you support by purchasing from local stores? What are the pros and cons of each?
- Look at the labels on your clothes. Where were the clothes manufactured?
- Do you shop on the Internet? What are the economic, environmental, and social consequences?
- Explore the Natural Abode website (www.thenaturalabode.com). What do you discover about their products? What factors would influence whether you purchased their products?
- Do you think consumers should be free to decide the future through their purchasing decisions, or do you believe government policies should be put in place? (For example, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is a wildlife treaty signed by more than 150 countries to regulate imports and exports of wild animals and plants that are threatened by trade.)
- Would you be willing to pay more to protect the environment through your purchases? If so, how much more? 1 percent? 10 percent? 100 percent?

Decision-Making Topics (cont.)

Community Planning

Growth places incredible pressures on communities. Many U.S. areas are under development pressure that places greater demands on already stressed natural resources. Communities struggle to meet the needs of their residents as the population increases and as people seek or require more and larger homes, schools, roads, and recreation areas. It can be a challenge to find space for people to live and work while still preserving open space and keeping ecosystems intact. How can towns and cities manage the social, environmental, and economic demands that result from growth? Communities pursue different strategies, including the following:

- Create housing of varied costs and sizes.
- Write zoning laws that allow for mixed-use development.
- Provide mass transportation.
- Offer opportunities for local employment.
- Supply within-community sewer treatment.
- Locate schools within walking distance of homes.
- Retain or create green infrastructure.
- Create shared parking areas.
- Ensure walking or biking access, or both.

Some people dislike the artificiality of planned communities. Others consider them the best solution to reduce sprawl, contain development, promote a community feeling, reduce commuting, trim carbon emissions, create diverse neighborhoods, and provide affordable housing.

What Do You Think?

- Can communities accommodate a growing population *and* preserve their natural resources? Explain.
- Does your community incorporate any of the strategies listed above?
- Do you use mass transit? Do you travel by car? Do you travel by skateboard, ride your bike, or walk? Which do you use more? Why?
- How much of your free time do you spend outdoors? Indoors? Where do you go to socialize? How do you get there? Why do you choose this mode?
- Where do you go for entertainment? How do you get there?
- Where do you go to shop?
- How do you think your personal preferences affect the environment? Locally? Regionally? Beyond?
- How does the design of your community affect other communities in your region?
- How does the design of your community affect wildlife and other natural resources in your community? Your region?
- How do other communities affect your community?
- How could your community be improved to lessen its environmental effects?
- What are your community's greatest strengths? Weaknesses?

Decision-Making Topics (cont.)

Energy Choices

How much energy do you use? Thirty-six percent of the energy consumed in the United States is used residentially to cool and heat homes, to provide lighting, and to run appliances. The energy comes from a variety of sources—largely oil, natural gas, and coal. See Table 2. Investigate data for today. Have the sources of energy for the United States changed since 1998? Why or why not? Will they change in the next 20 years?

Table 2. 1998 Energy Consumption in the United States

Source	Percentage of Total Consumption
Oil	38.8
Natural Gas	23.2
Coal	22.9
Nuclear	7.6
Hydroelectric	3.8
Geothermal	0.3
Biomass	3.2
Solar	0.07
Wind	0.04

Source: http://energy.usgs.gov

What Do You Think?

- Consider all the different ways you have used energy today. How did you get to school? What powers the lights in your classroom?
- Do you have an electrical power plant in your community?
- Where is the nearest electrical power plant?
- What is the source of energy that is used to generate the electricity?
- What are the pros and cons (economic, environmental, social) of the source of energy used in your community?
- Does a better alternative source exist for the energy for your community?
- Do you take any actions to conserve energy? If so, what?
- How do your energy choices affect your local community? The global community?
- Why do you think the United States is the largest energy consumer in the world and also has one of the largest per capita consumption rates of energy? What are some of the ways that people in the United States can reduce their energy consumption? How would this affect total energy consumption in the United States?
- India has one of the smallest rates of energy consumption per capita. What would be the economic, environmental, and social effects if all the people in India were to consume energy at a rate equivalent to that in the United States? See Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Oil Consumption in Developed and Developing Countries

Country	Kg oil used per capita per year
Developed country average	4,505
Developing country average	803
United States	7,956
India	477

Source: World Resources Institute 2003 (E).

Table 4. Population of the United States and India as of 2004

Country	Population
United States	294,000,000
India	1,087,000,000

Source: Population Reference Bureau 2004 (E)