

# Garbology Lesson: I Want It! I Need It!

Grades 7-12; 5-12 Standards

## Lesson Summary

Students evaluate the difference between the things they need and the things they want and analyze their consumption habits.

## Overview

In this lesson, students will:

- Conduct a personal inventory to determine how much of what they have is a “need” and how much is a “want.”
- Distinguish between personal wants and needs.
- Calculate their consumer spending and ecological footprint.
- Decide how they can reduce their ecological footprint in order to conserve natural resources.

## Time

60 minutes for lesson

## Vocabulary

- Survival Needs
- Daily Needs
- Natural Resources
- Unsustainable
- Sustainable
- Ecological Footprint



## Materials

- Student Notebooks
- One set of *Wants and Needs Activity Cards* for each group of five students (attached)
- One copy of *Personal Inventory Sheet* for each student (attached)
- Internet access for each student (at home or school)
- (optional) Copies of *What are Natural Resources?* Student Fact Sheet (attached)

## Preparation

- Make one copy of the attached Wants and Needs Activity Cards for each pair of students as well as Personal Inventory Sheet for each student.
- Have students read the Student Fact Sheet, What are Natural Resources?

## Background

We all have material things we want and need. Depending on who we are and where we reside, however, these might differ from someone else’s wants and needs. All humans need air, food, and water in order to survive. These are called survival needs.

There are other kinds of needs as well, called daily needs. We need things like shoes, clothing and paper to live productive and “normal” lives. Daily needs however, often turn into things we want. While we do need shoes to protect our feet, we don’t need fifty pairs of shoes in different styles and colors!

It is fine to have material wants and needs, however, it’s important to figure out the difference between the two. Fulfilling all our wants for stuff impacts the environment. That’s because everything we use is made from something originally found in nature. Natural resources come from nature and are used or turned into the things that we want and need to survive. Natural resources provide us with our survival needs, such as air, water and food, as well as things we want, such as televisions, cell phones and soda.

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When taking natural resources like trees, oil or minerals from the earth to make the things we want and don't really need, human beings destroy natural ecosystems and animal habitats. The more stuff we want and get, the more nature gets destroyed. Right now we are using natural resources in an unsustainable way. That means that we are using natural resources faster than the Earth makes them available for us.

We can determine the impact we have on nature by figuring out our ecological footprint, which identifies how much nature is needed for our lifestyle. An ecological footprint is a calculation of how many natural resources are required to produce all the things we use, and how our planet absorbs all of the things we throw away. The size of our ecological footprint here in the United States is surprising!

Our ecological footprint today is much larger than that of the population living two hundred years ago. The reason for this is that populations were smaller, plus it was harder to extract and manufacture resources into useable goods and transport them long distances. In contrast, there are a lot more people on the planet today, and we are taking too much from nature too quickly. For example, today many people live in big houses. This means more wood, metals and other materials are needed to build these big houses compared with two hundred years ago, when most people lived in smaller, simpler dwellings.

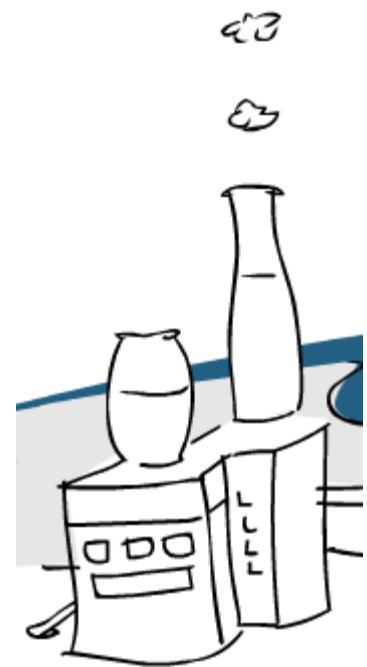
Human beings' wants and needs have changed a lot over time, primarily due to advances in technology. Starting with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, mass production techniques like the assembly line, helped make workers more efficient and allowed us to create more stuff, faster and cheaper. New technologies in the form of mines, factories, and transportation systems, allow us to buy cheap things made in far away places without having to think about the cost to the environment.

Additionally, in less than 100 years, we have seen the emergence of mass media that has created new markets, new tastes, and new popular culture that is aimed at increasing material consumption for the sake of enormous corporate profit. Television, movies, music and advertising have spread styles, raised material expectations and promoted interest in fads. Factors like the media and advertising foster a material appetite that increases demand for products. We all have the power to choose the things we purchase and use. It is important for us to be aware of the difference between our wants and needs and to think of how our consumer choices can lessen negative impacts on the environment. If we want to protect nature, then this could be a "want" we prioritize over our want of material goods we don't really need!

### Pre-Activity Questions

Ask students:

1. If I gave you \$1,000, what are the things that you'd buy?  
(Write responses on board.)
2. Okay, now, of all these things, which are things you need?  
(Mark each with an "N.")  
Which are things you want? (Mark each with a "W.")



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3. What are the differences between needs and wants? (Survival Needs are things we must have to survive; Daily Needs are not needed to survive, but are things we need to live productive and “normal” lives. Wants are things that we would like to have.)
4. What are some things that could be both a want and a need? (Shoes, jackets, water, and food are all things we need but can become “wants” when we go from using sufficient amounts of these items to excessive amounts.)
5. Do you think different people have different opinions about what they need and want? (Yes) What do you think creates those differences of opinion? (personal experience, peers, parents, advertising)
6. Where do the original raw materials for making everything we use, come from? (Everything we use comes from something originally found in nature.)
7. So, if we keep buying—without limit—the things we want, and not just the things we need, what effect will that have on nature? (Deforestation, habitat destruction, increased pollution, global warming, resource depletion)
8. How? (When we log for wood, drill for oil and mine for metals, we harm forests, oceans and other natural ecosystems that are habitat to many plants and animals. The equipment used to do these things also creates air pollution, as does the manufacturing and transportation of these goods. This pollution in turn makes global warming happen.)

### Classroom Activity – Part One

1. Divide students into groups of five, and give them a set of the Wants and Needs Activity Cards. Ask students to sort the cards according to what they consider their own wants and needs, keeping in mind that needs can be “survival” or “daily.”
2. After a few minutes of group discussion, ask students to share with the class what some of their identified “survival needs” were (list answers on board and discuss if needed).
3. Remind students that “daily needs” are not the things we need to survive, but things we need to live productive and “normal” lives. Ask students to identify some of the cards they identified as “daily needs.” (list appropriate responses and have a discussion if some answers arise like: “video games”).
4. Ask students which of the things on the cards are “wants.”
5. Have students explain within their group what they think the differences would be if they compared their wants and needs to those of someone living two hundred years ago, or the Californian indigenous tribes like the Miwok and Ohlone. Do we have more daily needs today than people did in the past? Do we have different wants? Is it easier for us to fulfill our needs and wants? Why? After a few minutes, have the groups share their answers with the class. (If students are struggling with this, ask them to think about how we get our water, how we stay warm, how we communicate with people and how we are entertained, compared to people in the past. Also, have them think about transportation and the manufacturing technologies that exist today versus two hundred years ago.)



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## Classroom Activity – Part Two

1. Divide students into pairs and give them each a Personal Inventory sheet. Ask students to check off the items that they are wearing and carrying with them that day. Then ask students to estimate how many of each item they own in total, and note it on the sheet. They should also estimate the total amount of money spent on each type of item.
2. Ask students to identify and note some natural resources used to make items on their sheet. (Ex: tee-shirts are made from cotton plants; land and water are needed to grow cotton; fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas are required to run equipment to manufacture and transport the T-shirts.)
3. Ask students to note on their Inventory sheet whether each item listed is a want or a need and why or why not they chose to buy it.
4. Bring the class back together as a group to discuss the results of their personal inventories. Ask students which of the things on their Personal Inventory sheets they noted as daily needs (list all answers on the board).
5. Ask them which of the items on their Personal Inventory sheets could be defined as a want. (List all answers on board.)
6. Ask students what they think the differences would be if they compared their wants and needs to those of someone living in another part of the world. Do we have more daily needs and wants here in the U.S. than people do in other parts of the world? (If students are struggling with this, note that 1 billion people around the world do not have access to clean drinking water—a basic survival need! [Visit <http://one.org/issues> for more information on this.] This fact alone should help students start thinking about infrastructure and economic realities that other people in the world live with—especially in undeveloped regions.)
7. Have students share their estimates for how much money they spend on their wants. Are they surprised by the results?
8. Ask students to share why they purchased some of the items on their sheet and why they find themselves buying more than one of some items. (Students answers will vary. If they are struggling with this question, ask them to think about external influences that encourage them to consume.)
9. Explain to students that through the laws of supply and demand, they can affect what is manufactured by what they choose to buy. Also, tell students it is not required that we neglect our wants, it is simply important for us to evaluate our wants within a bigger picture, so we are aware of the consequences of our choices and the possible impact they will have on our natural world and our collective future.
10. (Optional and HIGHLY effective): Have students watch this excellent online video (20 min.) explaining the global impacts of our consumption habits. Discuss. <http://storyofstuff.com/>



## Follow-Up Activity: Ecological Footprint

(\*Note: Highly recommended if students have internet access.)

1. Ask students to define “footprint.” (The mark our foot leaves on the ground after we step on it.)
2. Ask what they think an ecological footprint is. Take guesses and then explain. (An ecological footprint is how much nature a person’s lifestyle requires. It’s a calculation of how much land and water is needed to support what someone uses and throws away.)
3. Have students complete an online ecological footprint quiz and record their score in their notebook. The quiz is at: <http://www.islandwood.org/kids/impact/footprint/index.php>

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4. Ask what their ecological footprint score is and what that means to them.
5. Ask if it is larger than they thought it would be. Why? (Explain that everything we use is made from natural resources. The more we use, the larger our ecological footprint, especially when using fossil fuels for energy, or to transport ourselves or the things we buy from afar.)
6. Discuss with students that an unsustainable lifestyle is one where we use natural resources faster than nature can produce or renew them. When this happens, the resource will eventually get completely used up. In a sustainable world, we only take from nature as much as it can supply.
7. Ask students, according to their personal ecological footprint, if their lifestyle is sustainable.
8. Ask why they think their ecological footprint is bigger or smaller than that of someone living in another part of the world? (People in the United States consume much more stuff and use fossil fuels for just about everything. Fossil fuels leave a huge ecological footprint. Plus, it's much easier today for us to buy a lot of stuff we don't need (our "wants") and keep wanting—and buying—more, such as the latest fashionable clothing, the newest sneakers, and even junk food.)
9. Ask if knowing how large their ecological footprint is, makes them feel any differently about their wants and needs and the purchasing decisions they make as a consumer.
10. Ask how they can fulfill some of their wants, while having a smaller impact on the environment. (Talk about reducing, reusing, recycling and swapping clothes, video games, etc. Explain how eating less meat helps protect nature because it uses less water, energy, and other natural resources (See Wet Your Appetite lesson plan for more information about diet and water conservation). Discuss the idea that there's a growing movement where people are choosing to go a month, even a year, without buying anything new except food, health and safety items—that all things they buy are either second-hand or gotten from friends who didn't need that item anymore. Challenge students to try this for one week (or one month!) and report back to the class what happened and how it felt to not buy anything new for that period of time.)



## Extensions

- Have students compare and contrast their needs and wants with another culture studied in class. Compare what we have in our culture and the influences that we exert on each other. Determine which needs and wants of both cultures are universally found among human societies. Students can write about or discuss the differences and similarities they found.
- Help students become more consumer savvy! Have them visit these websites for information that teaches consumption awareness:
  - ***New American Dream***  
<http://www.newdream.org/>  
 This in-depth website offers good information, support and tips on how to live consciously, buy wisely, and make a difference—all while having a sense of humor.
  - ***Don't Buy It!***  
<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/>  
 This colorful and game-filled site teaches students to dig beneath the way media works—from how corporations choose what songs radio stations play, to how much work goes into fashion models looking “perfect,” to ingredients in food products.
  - **Be Different, Live Different, Buy Different**  
<http://www.ibuydifferent.com/>  
 What goes into producing a hamburger—beyond the ingredients? How do items we buy or use

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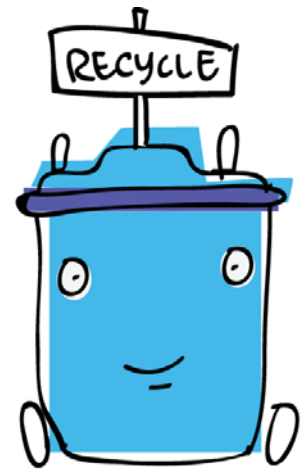
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everyday affect biodiversity and why does that matter? Visit this middle and high school oriented site to learn more about advertising and teen consumption.

- Ask students to compare the consumption of natural resources between developed and undeveloped countries by making a class collage that includes pictures of the typical “western” lifestyle and of indigenous populations in developing countries. Once the collage is complete, students can write about or discuss the differences they found.
- Conduct the “Wet” Your Appetite lesson plan, where students learn how much water is needed to produce food. Students analyze a typical American daily diet; estimate how much water is needed to produce food for a day, and design a new menu that conserves water by half.

### National Science Standards Addressed

- Grades 9-12: Abilities of technological design (12EST1)  
Natural resources (12FSPSP3)  
Understanding the basics of science and technology should precede debate about related practical and ethical challenges (12FSPSP6.2)  
Progress in science and technology can relate to social issues/challenges (12FSPSP6.3)
- Grades 5-8: Abilities of technological design (8EST1)  
Technological solutions have intended benefits and unintended consequences (8EST2.6)  
Overpopulation can result from more people or increased use of resources (8FSPSP2.1)  
Causes of environmental degradation and resource depletion vary (8FSPSP2.3)



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# Personal Inventory Sheet



ITEM	Do you have today?	How many do you own?	Cost?	Natural resource used?	Want or need? Why?
Pair of Shoes					
T-shirt					
Belt					
Sweatshirt					
Plastic Water Bottle					
Watch					
Jeans					
Hat					
Backpack					
CD Player/IPOD					
Cell phone					
Lipstick					
Book					
Gum					

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Wants and Needs  
Activity Cards  
(Cut along dotted lines)

**Home**

**Food**

**Television**

**Video  
Games**

**Car**

**Clothing**

**Heat**

**Glasses**





**Bicycle**

**Skateboard**

**Candy**

**Electricity**

**Medicine**

**Hat**

**Watch**

**Water**

**Computer**



**Radio**

**Paper**

**Plastic Bag**

**Soda**

**Books**

**Air**

**Toys**

**Shoes**

**Lots of  
Shoes**

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