

Student Worksheet 2.5

Activity 2.5 You Are What You Buy

Every product you purchase is derived from some type of natural resource and the use of these resources has impacts in locations that are often remote from where you live. With a group of two or three other students, select a product that you use often and that is distributed on at least a regional scale. Find out as much as you can about the product and the industry that produces it. The most useful sources of information (although quite biased) will be the brochures and annual reports that the industry produces and distributes. You can obtain these publications by calling or writing the consumer information departments of particular companies in the industry. Other typical sources will include newspaper, magazine, and journal articles. Lastly, many companies have their own Web pages on the Internet.

As you research your product and industry, try to answer the following questions:

- What types of natural resources are used to produce this product? Where do they come from?
- What adverse environmental impacts does this product create in its consumption of constituent materials, its processing, use and disposal? Where do they occur? Are they of the same magnitude and quality in all those places?
- What adverse social impacts are involved in the product's consumption of constituent materials, processing, use and disposal? Where might these occur? Are they of the same magnitude and quality in all those places?
- Where did the industry as a whole begin? Where is it centered now?
- What forces have caused the industry to operate the way it has in terms of its spatial expansion or movement (if any), its targeting of consumer market(s), its method of production?

Be careful not to choose a product whose material components are too complex to trace adequately in the limited time you have -- products like computers or automobiles. Such a project would take much more time and resources than you have.

As a group, write a four to five page report that answers the above questions. Include with your report a map depicting the source and use regions of your particular product. Use different colors, symbols, or arrows to identify the sources of inputs, the destinations of wastes, and locations of significant social and environmental impacts.