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**Review: Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices:
Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists**

By Michael Brower and Warren Leon

Reviewed by [Steve T. Schroeder](#)
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Brower, Michael and Warren Leon. *Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999. 292 pp. US \$15.00 paper ISBN: 0-609-80281-X.

We've probably all heard of best-selling books like "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth." And while such books are helpful, few books have accurately described *which things are the very most important things we can do as American consumers*. Fewer if any have described *why* based on an evaluation of concrete scientific evidence. Fortunately, this book does both. It accurately addresses which consumer choices and behaviors most critically affect the environment and why. Consumers today can be overwhelmed about what to do to help the environment. Some end up feeling that almost everything they do hurts the environment, while others feel that if they are at least recycling and turning off their lights at home more often then they are making an important difference. This book clearly shows which everyday consumer decisions count, which ones don't count (or matter marginally in the big picture), and why based on scientific analysis of current environmental data.

The first section of the book identifies four key consumption-related environmental problems: air pollution, global warming, habitat alteration, and water pollution. It next investigates how these environmental problems are linked to household purchases and activities. Its critical analysis yields truly interesting results. Certain widely held beliefs concerning popular environmental issues are critically examined and debunked. Some consumer choices identified as seriously damaging the environment early on by grassroots environmental groups are confirmed as such, but by real evidence rather than emotional appeal. And surprisingly, some consumer choices really don't matter that much at all in the big environmental picture. The second section's chapters on "What You Can Do" focuses on setting priorities for personal action, avoiding high impact activities, the seven rules for responsible consumption, and what the consumer can ask the government to do. All presented in a concise and easily understandable overview.

Considering the trouble the average consumer may encounter getting accurate environmental information, *The Consumer's Guide to Effective*

Environmental Choices is invaluable. Although many books have discussed recycling, snipping six-pack-rings, and arguments for using paper or plastic, etc., few expose the rationale for choosing these behaviors out of a logical rank order continuum of choices. The authors present sensible arguments backed by sound scientific evaluations and evidence. Appendices describe in detail the research methodology used and also offer a list of resources for concerned consumers. Refuted are common notions that all consumption is bad or that "to really do the right thing" consumers would have to radically alter their lifestyles. Practical advice is given on which consumer activities can really hurt or even really help the environment along with guidelines for setting consumption priorities.

The chapter on Priorities for Personal Action gives the consumer valuable information for making choices that can make the most positive impact on the environment. It even encourages consumption that has been identified to help the environment! While many people know things they can do to help the environment, few know which ones count the most and which ones are actually very trivial. This book cuts to the heart of the matter based on sound, solid, and scientific information. It sends the message to stop worrying about insignificant things and start taking care of the big ones.

This book is a must read in an era of increasing global consumption where consumer choices will be more critical than ever. This is especially true considering global industrialization of many developing nations, continued population growth, increasing fossil fuel use, etc. *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices* is well thought out, well written, and well documented. American consumers, individuals, corporations, elected officials, policy makers and others should find this book of great value in making informed, simple, and effective consumer choices to help preserve our natural environment.

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