This critical reflection will consider how our current lifestyles and the unsustainability of our consumer habits, and the energies required to power new technologies, are the biggest ignored threats to the environment and the continuation of the Earth. It will do so by examining the overwhelming rate at which new technologies are upgraded which consequently creates not only physical waste, but also mandates enormous energies to power them. By identifying why we consume and waste at our current rate, and the extent to which our everyday routines and habits are unsustainable, this reflection critically examines the impact our practices have on nature and wildlife. Finally, this critical reflection will argue that not only are consumer lifestyles the cause of climate change but also the reason we are doing very little to tackle it. Nature becomes a victim as capital grows, and the increase in market gains cannot solve the very crisis it creates (Shiva, 2008).

Manual labour has decreased in post industrial times and replaced with a significant growth in service sectors (Bell 1978; Grint & Nixon, 2015). Previously where many people once identified strongly with their job role in manual labour as their central life interest, have now lost such a connection therefore instead look to other kinds of experiences to identify within as the work-based society has been displaced to consumption-based (Ransome, 2005). With the rise of the consumer society people now identify with their consumer goods as a source for their social status (Bauman, 2005) whereby individuals place value on practices rather than productive roles. By purchasing an identity, it fulfils the alienation that is felt within the work place. We now work to consume. Baudrillard (1998) claimed all men are equal before need, before use-value of objects and good; the idea that an individual’s worth is now placed upon the possessions they own rather than the job they do. The benefits of this means it may seem that we have more choice therefore are “free” to adopt the lifestyles we desire. However, as our obsession grows with the need for the next “new thing” it causes new technologies to develop at
an unsustainable rate. The pace at which new technology is updated completely outdates past models before they become defunct leading to the growth of obsolescent societies. Ironically, “what is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an eye to its death” (Baudrillard, 1998: 46). Whereby products are no longer produced to run until they break but rather to be used until the next generation is released. Though the choices we now have may be good for consumers, it has become detrimental for the environment. Not only through the obvious physical waste and landfill that is required to dump “old” technology but also through the energy required to power and charge these devices.

It is difficult to find reports on the real amount of energy that new technologies consume, hidden by claims that charging your devices is cheaper than you think leading to a false awareness. It is only when you look to the negative impacts of the digital technology will you find that the digital economy uses a tenth of the world’s electricity (Walsh, 2013). A report by Mark Mills found a “medium-size refrigerator that qualifies for the Environmental Protection Agency’s Energy Star rating will use about 322 kW-h a year whereas the average iPhone, according to Mills’ calculations, uses about 361 kW-h a year once the wireless connections, data usage and battery charging are tallied up” (Walsh, 2013). This is particularly worrying considering in 2014 there were 18.6 million families in the UK (ONS, 2014) most of which will have both a refrigerator and at least one smartphone. But the real issue is where the energy is sourced from that is required to power such devices. Such technological advances such as the evolution of the smartphone have resulted in high carbon societies due to the amount of energy required in order to run them which are subsequently powered by electrical through national grids (Urry, 2012) that are ultimately run on coal which as we aware produces greenhouse gases that are detrimental to the earths health and future sustainability.

Though we appear to be reiterating these practices unknowingly it is necessary to state that climate change is nothing new instead just continues to be frequently ignored and distracted by the media. More often global terror is reported as the biggest threat that mankind currently faces yet over the past century global temperatures have risen by at least 0.74°C, if continued, the possibility of a global tragedy becomes increasingly likely that would cost millions of lives in wars over resources and through natural disasters (Dennis & Urry, 2009). The World Health Organisation have predicted that by “between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress” (WHO, 2015). The problem of climate change is as big a threat as any but it is still overlooked. Perhaps we are delaying taking responsibility because the idea of climate change is perceived to only exists in the future but it is happening now. Urry (2011) predicted that by 2030 mankind will have created the “perfect storm” of food, water and energy shortages fuelled by
huge population growth. However, we are already experiencing the impact of climate change 15 years before the situation becomes “critical” with destructive floods recently causing more than 43,000 homes to suffer from power cuts, while an estimated 5,200 homes have been destroyed by flooding in Cumbria and Lancashire (BBC, 2015). Reports of such disasters will all follow similar themes in that in order to prevent these floods we must manage flood risks better instead of taking responsibility that these floods come as a result of the degradation we have put upon the earth. People are still yet to connect these natural disasters with climate change.

We are more interconnected globally through these new technologies though not with the earth. We have become increasingly disconnected with the environment and how our current consumer practices create waste that threatens nature and in particular animals. We have become so detached from how our everyday practices are harmful to ecosystems which is why we are so unlikely to combat it. “The advantage of affluence—that to say, of the possession of ever more goods and individual and collective amenities—have been accompanied by increasingly serious ‘environment nuisances’ which are a consequence on one hand, and, on the other, of the very structures of consumption” (Baudrillard, 1998, pg. 39.) We are the solution to our own problem but it is unlikely we will do anything about it until it is absolutely critical. Many wildlife species are under threat/endangered, in fact “the rapid loss of species we are seeing today is estimated by experts to be between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate. Experts calculate that between 0.01 and 0.1% of all species will become extinct each year. If the low estimate of the number of species out there is true - i.e. that there are around 2 million different species on our planet then that means between 200 and 2,000 extinctions occur every year” (WWF, n.d.). These animals have no control and the least responsibility over climate change yet are arguably those who are worst affected by it (Shiva, 2008). As governments become more concerned with the need for energy as current resources become scarce, fracking is now set to become the next threat to habitats as MPs back fracking under national parks in the UK (BBC, 2015). If we continue at our current consumer habits it will not be long until the only way in which we will be able to see wild animals will be through manmade enclosure constructed to reflect their natural habitats that we were too selfish to save.

People are aware that climate change is occurring and we are still not doing anything. There appears to be the attitude that it is still to happen and it won’t affect us until in the future, in fact we are encouraged to believe so. Monbiot (Youtube, 2015) argues that it has been happening for at least a generation. It is naïve to believe that climate change is not happening now. It is not something new. The Limits to Growth (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2005) was first published 30 years ago and warned then that for more than a century the global system had been growing rapidly including through the consumption of
resources. Yet it still appears that very little has changed in order to increase public attitudes and awareness. We still live to consume. It is continually pushed aside and ignored by those in power, we are left to believe that it is not a great threat and that it will be dealt with when it is. We have become so comfortable with our practices that it is unlikely that we will change them because we are used to the positive experiences that possess, if these commodities are so closely bound up with our identities, people will strongly resist changing their consumer habits until the consequences significantly and directly impacts them. We are encouraged to be selfish, ironically, in an increasingly connected world we are also encouraged to become increasingly individualised. In Western Society wealth is measured by GDP, to grow means to consume therefore it is not in the interest of organisations and those in power to combat it as it is central to growth (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2005). In our current consumer society, it seems we will act only when it’s becomes too late.

Bibliography


