

Consumer Choices and the Environment

The article describes difficulties of applying traditional consumer models and concepts of economic rationality to environmentally relevant choices. Alternative approaches are proposed that either modify existing choice theory or view rationality from a broader, collective perspective. In the latter, environmental choice is conceptualised as a discursive procedure seeking balance between individual and collective utility.

Consumer behaviour in environmental matters has usually been discussed within the framework of individual utilitarian choice theory or its later version, the expected utility or attitude-behavior theory. These theories do not, however, pay enough attention to the nature of choice in question. To choose a behavior that contributes to a collective good is different from choosing between various private goods and activities. Choices of abstract collective goods involve not only utilitarian but also social and moral arguments. In atomistic choice situations with a very large number of actors, consumers tend to act as free riders if no social information is available.

To increase cooperation in favor of the environment, we need a broader concept of consumer rationality. Consumers can also base their action on information about collective benefits and on commitment to social goals. Moreover, information about how other actors behave is crucial for the decision to cooperate. Consumers' decisions in environmentally relevant issues require self-reflection of their own preferences and priorities as well as public discussion and consensus about which social norms are necessary and justified to improve the environment, and finally consumer's decision whether to cooperate or not with these norms. Thus, it will be argued in this paper that consumer behavior in environmental matters should be conceptualised as a discursive procedure rather than as a clear-cut choice.