

## Consumption, Status, and Sustainability

This volume addresses current concerns about the climate and environmental sustainability by exploring one of the key drivers of contemporary environmental problems: the role of status competition in generating what we consume, and what we throw away, to the detriment of the planet. Across time and space, humans have pursued social status in many different ways – through ritual purity, singing or dancing, childbearing, bodily deformation, even headhunting. In many of the world’s most consumptive societies, however, consumption has become closely tied to how individuals build and communicate status. Given this tight link, people will be reluctant to reduce consumption levels – and environmental impact – and forgo their ability to communicate or improve their social standing. Drawing on cross-cultural and archaeological evidence, this book asks how a stronger understanding of the links between status and consumption across time, space, and culture might bend the curve toward a more sustainable future.

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# Consumption, Status, and Sustainability

*Ecological and Anthropological Perspectives*

*Edited by*

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## Preface

Reports from around the world suggest that status competition is nearly as common to humans as the families that ensure our species' continuance, the songs, dances, and other arts that move us to joy or tears and the rituals we turn to for comfort and guidance in our brief presence on this planet. If status competition is common in human life, however, the intensity and behavioral forms through which people pursue it vary considerably across nations, genders, races, ethnic groups, subcultural networks, and intersectional coalitions. Among the small hunter-gatherer groups known to anthropology, status competition was extremely muted, and the overly pompous were constantly cut down to size. In other communities – the Big-man societies of New Guinea, for instance – members were actively encouraged to stand out, and those who failed dismally were dismissed as “rubbish” people. In many state-level societies, some statuses even became institutionalized, formally or informally sedimented by blood, class, and/or race.

Then there are the legion ways in which the world's inhabitants have pursued status – through hunting prowess, childbearing, headhunting, ritual purity, wealth, and academic publication, to name just a few. Numerous societies across the planet and back in time have also used material consumption – the ability to mount great feasts, decorate the body with prized ornaments, attire oneself in grand clothing, and so on – as an indicator of status. Over recent centuries, however, some systems – a small but growing number of large consumer societies – have so turbo-charged material consumption as a means of status acquisition as to threaten the environmental sustainability of the planet.

This volume examines the problematic nexus of status competition, consumption, and planetary sustainability from anthropological and archaeological perspectives. It had its origins in conversations between the editors (members of the Anthropology Department and Climate Change Institute at the University of Maine) about the relative neglect of the status–consumption–sustainability nexus in proportion to its importance as a climate-change threat and the pressing need for more investigation. The project gained momentum when the Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored a workshop, “Status Pursuits across Human Systems,” at the University of Maine that brought together a group of distinguished archaeologists and anthropologists in October 2016 to discuss the issue against a background of environmental sustainability more generally.

In pursuing this project to completion, a number of individuals and groups helped us enormously. For funding the workshop, we are deeply grateful to the Wenner-Gren Foundation; in particular, we thank the foundation’s Laurie Obbink for her advice and help in dealing with the inevitable problems that arise in assembling a group of scholars from across the world. Our thanks also to Rebecca Bliege-Bird and Douglas Holt for their contributions to the workshop’s discussions. In addition, we owe a large debt to those at the University of Maine who helped stage the workshop on the campus: Patricia Maher in the Department of Anthropology, Theresa McMannus in Conference Services, Climate Change Institute director Paul Mayewski, and our colleagues in the Anthropology Department. Last, but not least, we deeply appreciate the sterling help and guidance we received from Beatrice Rehl, our editor at Cambridge University Press.