



## *Alliance for Tompotika Conservation* *Aliansi Konservasi Tompotika*

### **ALTO Update, May 2021: A Lesson from WWII**

In the United States, this coming Monday, May 31st—Memorial Day—we will remember and honor those who fought and died serving in our nation's military. Sadly, this encompasses scores of armed conflicts and more than a million human deaths in the U.S. alone—not to mention those in other nations. But the one perhaps best remembered worldwide is World War II, in which dozens of countries lined up on the Allied and Axis sides, and battles raged on multiple fronts from 1939–1945.



Indonesian and Dutch Soldiers in Sumatra, 1942

During World War II, pretty much everyone on the planet—even those in countries not formally party to the conflict—was affected. Everyone paid attention, and everyone realized that the outcome would affect their lives in very tangible ways.

Our planetary crisis today is that way too, only more so. In this most universal crisis of our times, there is not a community anywhere that is not being affected, not an individual whose life has not been altered, in one way or many ways, because of the changes taking place on our planet: climate change, mass extinction, deforestation, oceanic collapse, pollution, and so on. And of course it is not just humans: our planetary crisis is literally affecting *all life on earth*.



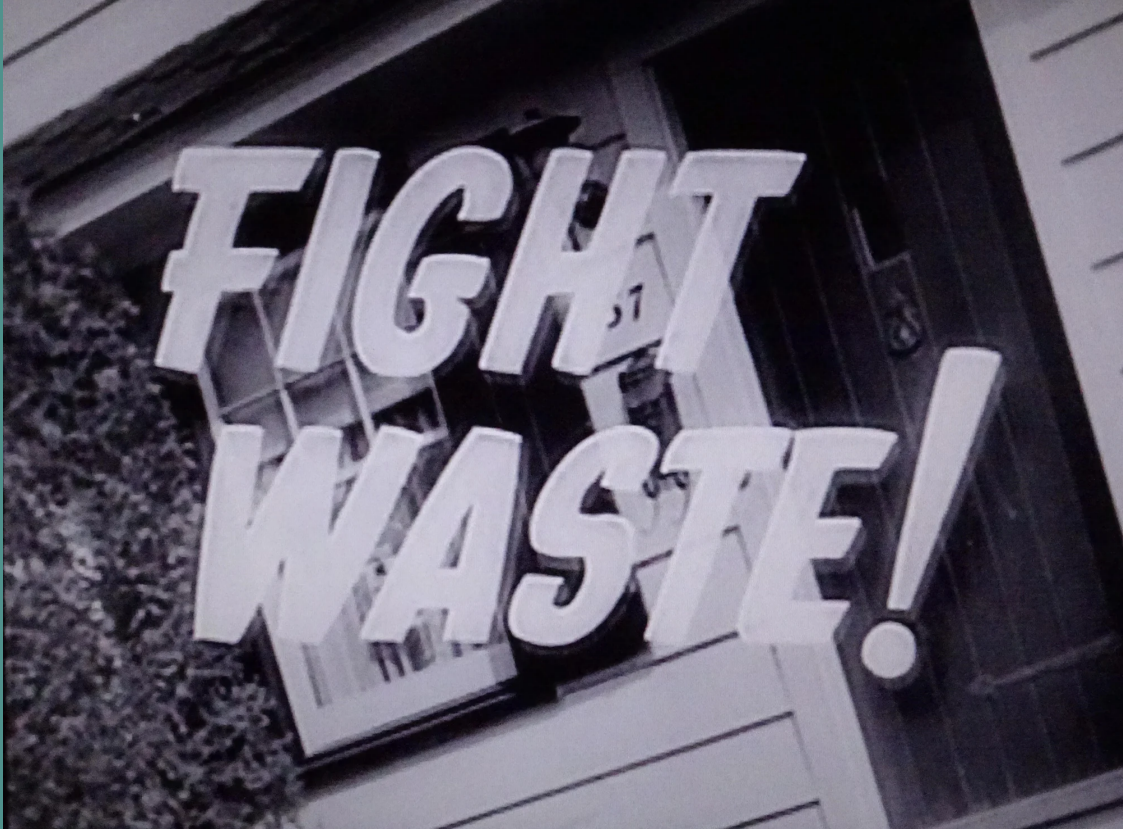
In WWII, everyone was affected

(Photo: Yevgeny Khaldei/MAMM/MDF)

Speaking very generally, the human-caused destruction afflicting our planet is a function of the growing overall numbers of humans, multiplied by each person's individual consumption of resources. It's not evenly distributed. In some human communities, per-capita consumption is lower but populations are expanding rapidly; while amongst the Global Consumer Class (which includes most of us reading this), population growth is slower but each person's consumption of resources is dramatically greater. When you add it all together, *both* the total number of people (c. 2.3 billion in 1945 to c. 7.8 billion today), *and* those people's per-capita rate of consumption of resources have increased since 1945, with the result that, depending on which index of human impact you're looking at—energy use, water



use, terrestrial biosphere degradation, marine fish capture, etc.—our overall human footprint on our planet has increased many-fold since WWII, and, notwithstanding technological advances, continues to do so (source: International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme). This pattern of increased human impact on our planet has been so marked since WWII, in fact, that the years since 1950 have been termed "The Great Acceleration." Since WWII, we humans have become voracious, and the entire circle of life on earth is paying the price.



1940s movie shorts helped spread the message.

(source: Ken Burns, *The War*)

What is to be done? We've all heard a thousand ways that we can make the planet better by changing the way we live. But first, remember this: it hasn't always been this way. And it doesn't have to be this way. Lots of folks are still alive today who lived very differently, with very different daily values and habits, and who—despite the horrors of war—will tell you that life was good. As a U.S. friend, Yvonne, remembers, "They were the worst of times, but they were also the best of times." In many parts of the world, food and other items were formally rationed. And even when that wasn't the case, "Use it Up, Make Do, Do Without," were the watchwords of the day.

Shoes, for instance, were scarce everywhere. In the U.S., even kids—whose sizes change constantly—got, at most, one pair of new shoes per year. Says Yvonne, "When you outgrew your shoes, you found someone to fit them." According to a German friend, Michael, many civilians went barefoot; there, too, consumer items of all kinds were



scarce. Yet, as Michael reports, folks "never missed items of consumption, except food. Even shoes. There was a huge shortage of shoes, because the leather was being used at the front. But that was okay."

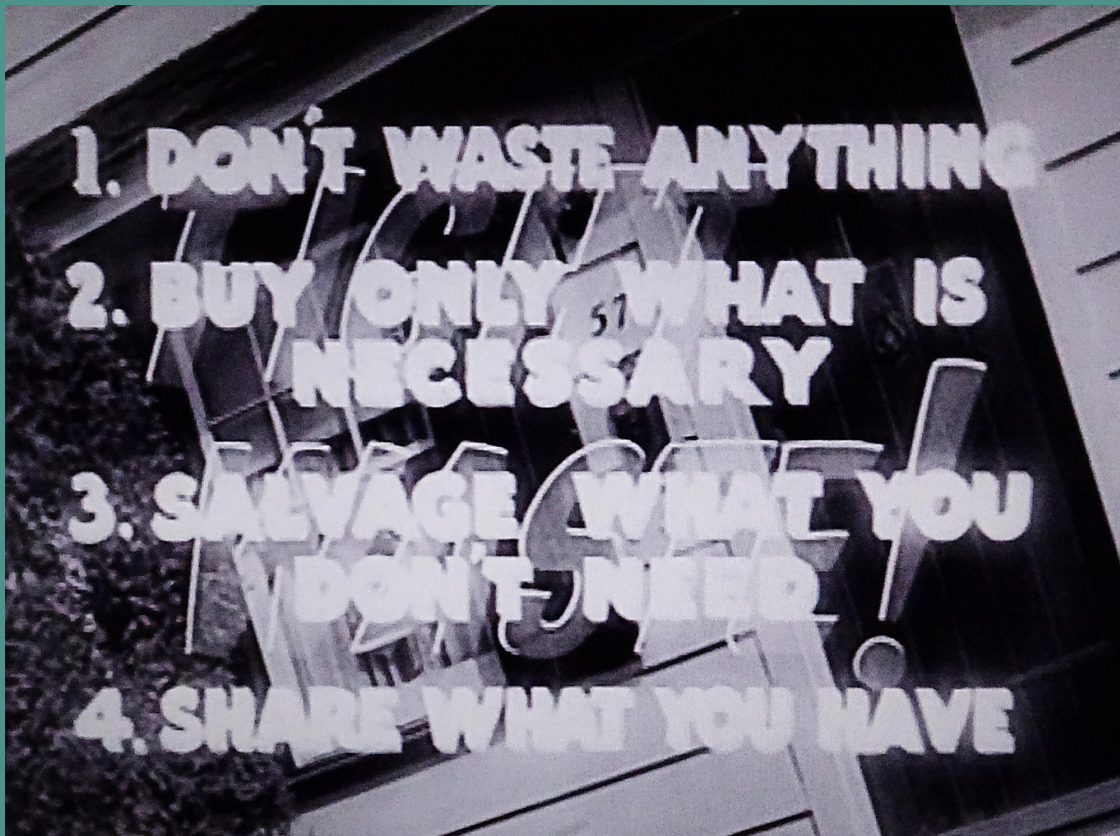


Austria, WWII: a boy gets a new pair of shoes

In those days, Yvonne remembers, even though compared with today people had vastly less stuff to begin with, everybody conserved resources because "we were all trying to do what we could. We were all in it together." In part out of respect for their soldiers, who on all sides were enduring tremendous hardship, suffering, and death, people cultivated personal qualities of toughness, discipline, self-sacrifice, and a healthy disregard for creature comforts. When folks at home could



reduce their consumption, according to Michael, there was a sense of "pride that you could do it. Do your part. And it was for the family as a whole, not just yourself."



Fight Waste for the war effort – four pillars

(source: Ken Burns, *The War*)

In the 1940s, public service movie shorts helped instruct and inspire the U.S. populace to "Fight Waste!" Looking back on one such announcement, it would be hard to come up with better guidance for members of the Global Consumer Class in the 21st century. Taken truly to heart, it is a radical but salvific message for our times:

- 1) **Don't waste anything.**
- 2) **Buy only what is necessary.**
- 3) **Salvage [recycle] what you don't need.**
- 4) **Share what you have.**

During WWII, people pulled together and did exactly that. They saved today's leftover oatmeal for tomorrow's breakfast. They wore hand-me-downs, such that one new shirt could send a person over the moon with delight. No one bought new cars, period. Housewives recycled bacon grease and kids collected scrap metal in their red wagons. Teenagers proudly brought handfuls of potatoes back to their families and neighbors, gleaned from the leavings on farm-fields after the harvest was finished.

In WWII, people did it for love of "the boys," knowing that buying less themselves meant there would be more available for the troops. They did it for their nations, for a sense of the common good, and they did it with pride and enthusiasm, each knowing that they were part of something bigger than all of us.

When the nightmare of WWII finally ended, reconciliation between warring nations was, blessedly and miraculously, both rapid and strong, and a "World Without War" was declared for all. But along with the much-needed end of humanity's worldwide war with one another, so also ended human consumers' willing self-restraint, and a new, unwitting war was ushered in—this time, humanity's war on the rest of nature. The end of WWII and the start of The Great Acceleration has proven deadly for non-human nature and now, increasingly, for humanity as well. And yet, the seeds of what pulled people together and the values that gave their lives meaning and purpose during WWII are still with us.



Cheerful collective action – salvaging tires

(source: Ken Burns, *The War*)

Don't waste anything. Buy only what you truly need. Recycle. Share what you have. Collectively, we have done this before. Could we not do it again, especially when the baseline of material riches we're starting with is already so incomparably much higher than our forbearers' greatest luxuries during WWII? This time, rather than for the war effort, could we not do it for love of our home, for love of each other—for *all life*—for our very selves? Could human self-restraint not become a cheerful collective action again? And could we not look to our elders, the Greatest Generation, who have trodden this path before, who have lived its gifts, to inspire us with their spirits of endurance and



energize us with their stories? Is there not a new form of Greatness lying before us now, inviting us to rise to it?

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