

Want to change environmental behaviour? Make nature personal

A new study argues that bringing nature into cities and enabling personal connections is necessary to prompt action on environmental issues, writes Tim Wallace.



A deer in Paris.
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The key to preserving our natural environment may lie in the design of our built environment, according to **new research published in [1]Science[2]** by a team of psychologists studying the failure of environmental education and awareness campaigns over the past half century to translate into significant changes in personal or social behaviour.

Noting the complex psychological and sociological reasons individuals fail to change their own behaviour even while expressing concern about the state of the environment, the psychologists argue that nature-friendly urban design is more likely to lead to environmentally sustainable behaviour than attempting to change attitudes through campaigns appealing to guilt or fear.

Urban landscapes that echo natural forms and patterns, with walking and biking paths and green spaces such as community gardens, can help heal the rift between humans and nature in a highly industrialised and urbanised society, the psychologists argue. It is the modern personal experience of “self as separate from nature” that underlies our “damaged relationship to planetary resources”.

“Simply put, humans don’t protect what they don’t know and value,” write the authors, led by Elise Amel of the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minnesota. “Indeed, numerous studies have found a significant positive correlation between feeling connected to nature and ecologically responsible behavior, and between ‘significant life experiences’ in nature during childhood and later environmental advocacy.”

The disconnect between modern industrialised society and the world in which humans evolved explains many of the reasons we seem incapable, both personally and collectively, to deviate from a lifestyle trajectory that is environmentally unsustainable.

To begin with, our emotions and senses have been conditioned over many thousands of years to respond to sudden and obvious dangers. Problems that are hard to see and get worse gradually, such as extinctions or climate change, feel “psychologically distant” and “do little to move us to action”.

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Moreover, individuals discount long-term and abstract consequences in preference to the here and now. Personal and immediate benefits or costs are much more compelling than far-off and hard-to-detect ecological costs or benefits. Which is why many individuals don’t want to give up their personal car or spend money on energy efficiency, even though they will save money in the long run and help to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Similarly, the authors note the nature of the environment as a “common-pool resource” tends to promote self-interested behaviour over what is ultimately best for the larger group in the absence of factors that would normally curtail selfishness and encourage co-operation, such as enforceable limits on who can use the resource, and strong social connections between users.

Even when individuals are willing to forgo immediate personal benefits in favor of the long-term greater good, efforts to change are stymied if a new behaviour threatens psychological needs.

Individual behaviour, moreover, is significantly shaped by external factors – “a powerful context comprising cultural worldviews, social networks, status inequalities, policies, scripts, roles, and rules”. Thus behavior-change campaigns focused on appeals to values, emotions or knowledge only stand a chance of working if the change is supported by an individual’s social surroundings as well as infrastructure.

While the constraints of social norms – paradoxically, most people express approval of sustainable behaviors but still behave in unsustainable ways – still require better understanding, the authors conclude that strategies enabling people to experience and better understand their profound interdependence with nature are the best basis to change the way they think and live.

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1. <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/356/6335/275>
2. <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/356/6335/275>

