

Thinking beyond environmentalism

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The scale of environmental problems that we currently confront defies a piecemeal response, says Dr Tom Crompton, a change strategist at WWF-UK

At the heart of the compound problems of climate change, depletion of natural resources and biodiversity loss lies a crisis about what we collectively value as a society.

There are profound limitations to the contribution that mainstream environmental organisations can make in addressing these problems – given their tendency to compartmentalise them, and to offer technically sophisticated but piecemeal solutions. In fact, if these problems are to be adequately addressed, it will be because we re-examine both what we collectively value and how our cultural values are themselves shaped by the ways in which we organise society. It is here that the role of public servants is of crucial importance – especially, perhaps, those who work on issues that are not readily identifiable as environmental.



Mainstream environmentalism is still saddled with the perception that if only people knew the facts of environmental problems, they would be galvanised into making urgent demands of decision-makers in government and business to roll out a panoply of technical solutions. Environmentalists' own experience of the counterproductive effects of bombarding people with visions of imminent environmental apocalypse has done little to shake this belief in the persuasive power of scientific fact. Nor is it a belief that has been especially troubled by decades of social science research focused on exploring the limitations of factual appeals.

Our values are of far greater relevance in determining whether we are moved to express concern about environmental problems than the facts that we grasp.

In particular, social psychologists have identified a set of "intrinsic" values that are consistently found to underpin both concern about environmental problems, and action in line with this concern, from personal lifestyle choices to political activism. These values include broadmindedness, social justice, creativity, and unity with nature.

They stand in opposition to "extrinsic" values – concern about wealth, social status or image – which are associated with lower levels of concern about environmental problems, and lower motivation to help tackle them.

It seems that almost all of us hold intrinsic values to be important. Indeed the great majority of us hold them to be more important than competing extrinsic values. Simply engaging these intrinsic values – any of them, it seems – leads to increased concern about environmental problems. So, in one typical experiment, social psychologist Tim Kasser and colleagues asked American participants in a study to think about aspects of their national identity. They asked some to think about national identity in the context of the US being a country that prioritises wealth, financial success and material gain. They asked another group to think about their national identity in the context of the US being a country with a long tradition of generosity, ideals of self-expression, and strong family values. They asked a control group to think about their identity as humans. The researchers then asked the participants what policy interventions they would advocate in support of tackling a range of environmental problems.

The results reveal some important principles, all of which have been corroborated by many other studies.

First, relative to a control group, the researchers found that those asked to reflect on more intrinsic aspects of American identity were significantly more likely to support a range of environmental policy interventions. It seems that values can be "engaged". That is, once brought to the forefront of people's minds (even unconsciously) particular values exert influence on people's attitudes and behaviour.

Secondly, "engaging" intrinsic values increases the adoption of a wide range of behaviour consistent with

deeper social or environmental concern, even where no explicit mention is made of this concern. In the experiment discussed above, no mention was made of the environment. And yet, having reflected on other intrinsic values, people's concern about environmental problems deepened.

Thirdly, engaging people's extrinsic values has the opposite effect to engaging people's intrinsic values. People who were asked to think about the US as a country that prioritises financial success attached lower importance to environmental policy than the control group.

Research such as this situates the necessary response to environmental challenges on a far broader canvas than the typically piecemeal solutions offered by mainstream environmental organisations. The scale of environmental problems that we currently confront – and the manifold interconnections between these and other social and economic challenges – defies a piecemeal response.

Social norms, business practice and public policy all serve, inescapably, to strengthen particular values. Recognising this, we must begin to ask in a concerted way, how these influences can come to engage and strengthen intrinsic values.

As citizens, we each share an obligation to examine the contribution we make to determining what we collectively value as a society. But this is a responsibility that public servants bear particularly heavily, because of the role that they play in shaping social institutions.

To take a few examples, intrinsic values are likely to be strengthened by educational institutions that nurture creativity and empathy (rather than prioritising education's contribution to a competitive economy); by healthcare workers who resist pressures to bend their strategies to narrow cost-benefit analyses; and by public sector managers who work towards narrower pay differentials, who find alternatives to assessing staff performance through economic indices, or who eschew financial incentive schemes.

The intrinsic values upon which any adequate response to today's environmental challenges must be built can be championed as effectively – perhaps more effectively – by public servants working in sectors far removed from the environment, as it can by self-proclaimed environmental organisations.

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