

The Planet Needs Our Help

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When it comes to big planet-scale environmental issues like climate change, some people [dismiss](#) individual actions like driving less or eating less [meat](#). They say that our actions aren't important, and instead we need large-scale policies that will influence everyone's actions. While policy can help, it's wrong to dismiss individual action.

First, to be clear: on their own, our individual actions will not stop climate change, biodiversity loss, agricultural runoff, or any other global environmental issue. But this is no reason to reject such actions. The fact that we can't make an entire issue go away is not a good reason to refuse to help. Should we stop teaching our kids to read just because there will still be illiteracy in the world? Should we stop donating to charity just because there will still be poverty? Of course not. The same goes for pro-environmental actions.

We shouldn't expect climate change to go away just because we turn off our lights at night. But we should expect climate change to be a little bit less severe. Here helping the environment is different from helping with issues like illiteracy or poverty: we'll never be able to see the specific effects of our actions. We simply can't trace a specific carbon dioxide molecule through the atmosphere to the people and ecosystems that are harmed by the climate change that it causes. Ditto for other environmental issues. But we still understand these issues well enough to know that the actions do help.

It is also true that collective action via public policy can be particularly effective. But again, this does not negate the importance of individual action. To the contrary, individual action is needed for public policy, especially in democracies. Without citizens applying pressure on elected officials, even the best of them are liable to produce bad policies. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said to his supporters after his 1932 election, when they asked him to enact new policies: "I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it." Likewise, as I cite in a previous article, ['activist fatigue'](#) (among other things) as a key reason why Obama's election hasn't lead to more policy advances. Acting to affect political change is one of the most important things we can do as individuals.

Here some might complain that our politicians are too corrupted by moneyed interests. There is some truth to this. In climate change, for example, the fossil fuel industry has spent large sums to avoid policies that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But where does the fossil fuel industry get its money from other than individual action? Every time we fill up our gas tanks or use electricity at home, we are giving the fossil fuel our money to spend as it pleases (that is, unless our energy comes from non-fossil fuels). We can as individuals decide to spend less money on such things by conserving energy and purchasing environmentally friendly products. As our purchases shift towards more globally responsible businesses, these businesses gain more political clout at the expense of the less responsible.

In summary, we as individuals have important roles to play in helping society rise up to global environmental challenges. To acknowledge this is not to deny the importance of big social forces like governments and economies. To the contrary – it is to acknowledge that our actions affect the environment both directly and through these big forces. Understanding this can only make our actions more effective.