

Climate change and other environmental problems

The state of the world's natural environment is one of unprecedented fragility, escalating threats and human impacts, and massive and in many cases irreversible natural environment degradation and habitat and species loss.

Australian psychologists, along with other members of the scientific and professional community, are gravely concerned about:

- the current state of the natural environment in Australia, and globally;
- continuing and escalating environmental threats and impacts;
- the overall adequacy and effectiveness of current initiatives to address environmental problems at regional, national, and international levels.

Threats to the environment include unsustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns in 'developed' nations, exponentially increasing and profligate non-renewable energy use, industrial pollution, human population pressures, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, decreasing agricultural productivity, overharvesting in natural environments, and conflict and war. The impacts and long term consequences of these threats are far reaching, ultimately catastrophic, and wholly unsustainable.

It is equally clear that the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on human health and well-being are profound, alarming, and dramatic in rate and extent. There is broad consensus among psychologists that human beings, their motivations and their behaviours are important causes of environmental problems (e.g., Oskamp & Schultz, 2006). Profound changes in human behaviour are therefore required to bring about improvements in every area of concern where the national and global environment is threatened. 'Human behaviour' includes the collective behaviours of governments and corporations, locally and globally.

Psychologists have been substantially involved in collaborative, multi-disciplinary work on environmental issues internationally and nationally for decades. Psychology as a discipline is ideally positioned to provide expert advice on fostering more ecologically sensitive and sustainable behaviours and lifestyles. Psychologists have an integral and indispensable role to play in analysing and addressing linkages between people and environmental problems and finding achievable and effective solutions (e.g., Oskamp, 2000a,b; Stern, 2000a,b; Winter, 2000).

A priority for psychologists is to communicate evidence-based psychological research findings and models that are the most effective in fostering behaviour change to reduce adverse environmental impacts. Areas to focus on include: major consumer purchases, residential location, house purchase or renovation, travel mode and patterns, or influencing more sustainable corporate and institutional decision making and policies.

Psychology can also offer also particular insight and expertise with respect to many other aspects of environmental problems, including:

- Better understanding of how individuals, communities and organisations perceive the natural environment, what motivates them to protect the environment, and how they make decisions and change their behaviour in order to protect and conserve the natural environment;
- Effectively changing awareness, perceptions, attitudes, understandings [beliefs, values] and behaviours relating to the environment
- Helping to analyse the nature and role of media coverage and representations of environmental issues and problems, and then contribute to the design and implementation of effective, persuasive communications, media coverage, and educational materials concerning the nature, magnitude and causes of particular risks and threats, [local and global] and what can be done, individually and collectively, to address such threats;
- Better understanding, identifying, and utilising the psychological and health benefits of natural environments and natural ecosystems.

It is imperative that the Australian Government and national funding bodies appreciate:

- the urgency of these multiple environmental threats,
- the need for immediate and effective actions,
- the central importance of human behaviour to understanding the nature and cause of the problems and potential solutions,
- the importance and role of psychologists on multidisciplinary research and policy teams addressing specific challenges, and
- the critical need for more adequate funding and support for psychological and social science involvement in multidisciplinary research initiatives relating to sustainable natural environments and ecosystems.

Notwithstanding the seriousness and urgency of current environmental problems, it is very important that risk communications, media coverage, and scientific statements be carefully framed and worded with respect to what can be done. In these statements it is very important to recognise the substantial achievements thus far in fostering more sustainable behaviours and practices.

It is equally important that such communications and coverage are validating and empowering, showing how local individual and community initiatives and efforts can contribute in a major and achievable way to addressing national and global problems and threats. And this needs to be done in ways that do not absolve world leaders, national governments and global corporations from their obligations in moving from being part of this large-scale problem to part of multiple solutions.

References

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