

Denial and Despair?

Engaging effectively with environmental challenges requires us to resolve a number of paradoxes. The first is that news of environmental problems comes in the first place from scientists – people who ideally are trained to weigh evidence, eliminate bias, calculate probabilities and present balanced conclusions. The findings often provide an uncomfortable yet urgent read and message, such as *The State of the World* published by the Worldwatch Institute or any national ‘state of the environment’ publication. However, adequately addressing the problems is a matter of human motivation, which works in an entirely different way. We are moved partly by evidence, but more by habit, social expectations, religion, the opinions of friends and which side of the bed we got out of in the morning. Motivation is largely a matter of emotion.

The mismatch between the two modes can produce contradictory results. A person who takes the time to understand and explain a complex issue in enormous detail and do justice to all the possibilities comes across as less convincing than a zealot who sifts the evidence purely for what will support their preconceived ideas. We are notoriously bad at thinking about probabilities: researchers have shown that one strong piece of evidence is taken as more convincing than the exact same fact accompanied by a number of additional, but less strong, supporting observations. The biggest paradox is that, when positions start to polarise, stronger evidence for an opposing view actually drives stronger resistance to it. Environmental groups have only recently begun to appreciate that piling on ever stronger warnings about the threats we face can be counter-productive, driving denialism rather than action.

Amongst those committed to action, there is a similar paradox. This group has been convinced by the evidence, but the same evidence can also drive our emotional responses to despair and avoidance. People find keeping the dangers enough in mind that they provide the motivation to act a severe challenge and tend to distance themselves in order to prevent depression and psychological burnout. In Ben Elton’s end-of-the-world comedy *This Other Eden*, there is a scene in which a group of environmental activists identify an FBI infiltrator in their midst. The giveaway? He has been talking constantly about the environment. By contrast the activists have an unwritten agreement never to mention the subject in order to avoid depression.

Another paradox has been expressed as ‘If you love nature, stay away from it’. In *This Other Eden*, nature is eventually saved only because humanity is tricked into retreating into hermetically sealed life support systems, cut off completely from any interaction with the outside world. Humans are strongly motivated by threats to things they love, but love is nurtured by contact, and there is a strong argument that the most sustainable way of living in the modern world is not to be found in some rural eco-idyll but in a compact, walkable city with good public transport connections. So, ‘if you love nature, live in

the city'. Yet the need for nature contact then means bringing nature into such cities, and being concerned that humans remain mindful and attentive to the nature that exists in the cracks. This is also necessary in order for humanity to maintain a connection to the natural world without driving out every day to observe it as a distant object from which humans are divorced.

The articles in this issue look at how such emotional factors affect our decisions as individuals, citizens and consumers. More importantly, they suggest ways in which we can navigate the paradoxes, finding the middle path between denial and despair; they point us towards emotionally viable pathways to a sustainable future.

Whittle (2015) considers the role of emotions in workplaces, focusing on daily practices and interactions with technologies and different levels of environmental awareness and responsibilities. She highlights the 'creation of emotional norms for the workplace' and employees presenting 'the appropriate emotion at the appropriate time' (p. 587). The results of her empirical study on energy use in large office environments (using Lancaster University for her sample) found that 'environmental self governance was distinctly emotional and moral in tone' (p. 589).

Engaging with the ordinary daily practices and nearby environment is also the context for the paper by Richardson et al. (2015) who focus on 'mundane nature' in urban landscapes, a topic that was also discussed by Newman and Dale (2013). Richardson et al. probe into how people feel and connect with nature, drawing in their analysis on values of 'biophilia'. Staying connected with nature becomes increasingly important as more and more people live in compact urban areas. Green and blue infrastructure is now recognised as an essential building block to benefit human health and help mitigate and adapt to climate change. Such infrastructure may include green walls, green roofs, balcony or roof gardens, disused train lines turned into green walkways, urban wildlife gardens (see Shaw et al., 2013) and other mini-biotopes, amongst other old and new land/patchwork uses that make nature part of our daily experience and enjoyment. In peri-urban areas, domestic gardens are another opportunity to connect with nature and practice environmental stewardship rather than feeling overburdened and hopeless in the face of climate change and other environmental challenges (Di Paola, 2013).

Büchs et al. (2015), like Whittle, focus on the role and importance of emotions; in this case on a third sector initiative called 'Carbon Conversations' which explicitly focuses on difficult emotions and emotional conflict. Emotional engagement is seen as a necessity to strengthen motivations for change, a relationship that has also been noted as highly relevant for addressing climate change (see Plumecocq, 2014). Büchs et al. offer some interesting, if not totally surprising, observations of our reluctance to tackle uncomfortable emotions or dilemmas, and of the importance of groups as a source of support and empowerment.

However, there may be the danger that environmental groups and initiatives only draw in the already ‘converted’, usually highly educated and quite well-off. This is not just an issue for initiatives such as Carbon Conversations but also in green consumerism, as Yildirim and Candan (2015) find in their sample of a Turkish environmental foundation (TEMA). Despite some similarities in terms of background and values in their studied sample of TEMA members, the authors found some distinct differences between groups, of green consumers, partly relating to age and, by implication, generational influences and different shades of green. Rather than fuelling free-market consumption choices, however, responsible production and consumption needs to be tempered by some regulation as, for example, discussed by Menzel and Green (2013). In light of the global impact of recent consumption patterns, some of course would argue that the focus has to move away from the growth of market economies, green or otherwise, and embrace degrowth to enable ecological sustainability and greater social equity (see e.g. Whitehead, 2013; Boonstra and Joosse, 2013). However, at present, the idea of slowing down the pace of modern life and production and then shrinking economies is embraced by few citizens (Alexander, 2013), and remains an uncomfortable discourse for most politicians who are still in denial of the need to recalibrate economies and political communities (see e.g. Muraca, 2013; Dobson, 2013).

In terms of providing a conceptual framework to facilitate effective behavioural change, Honig et al. (2015) offer a clearly argued and tested new model, taking a multi-disciplinary approach and, importantly, avoiding psychological (or any other disciplinary) jargon. Their Awareness–Motivation–Pathway (AMP) framework highlights how just focusing on consumer education, or just providing some kind of environmental new technology or provisioning mechanism, can fail to have the desired outcomes. Previously in *Environmental Values*, Egqvist Jonsson and Nilsson (2014) identified the loci of control as an important element whereas Honig et al. draw attention to the wider set of factors that need to come together to stimulate integrated ecological ‘innovations’ and other environmentally sound practices that help pave the path to sustainability. As we remind ourselves of the connectedness and dependencies within social ecological systems, we may become more sensitive and motivated to see possibilities and use opportunities for a more pro-environmental society.

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