Motivating Society-wide Pro-environmental Change

Bouman, Thijs; Steg, Linda

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We are facing environmental crises, but pro-environmental action is seriously lagging behind. Contrary to popular beliefs, we argue that this is not caused by people undervaluing the environment but rather by people structurally underestimating how much others care. Only through showing that many do value the environment will we inspire society-wide pro-environmental action.

Introduction

Human activity overshoots planetary boundaries and causes global climate change, which has severe and negative impacts on society and the environment. Yet, despite the many ways in which we can change our behaviors to mitigate and adapt to these crises, such actions have not seen widespread adoption. For instance, fossil fuels are still the dominant sources of energy in most countries even though sustainable alternatives, such as solar, wind, or thermal power, are widely available. Similarly, the production, consumption, and disposal of products are often far less sustainable than current technologies and services would allow them to be.1

Popular explanations for this lack of consistent pro-environmental action focus on people undervaluing the environment and prioritizing options that are financially profitable and convenient. Indeed, the media and political discourse frequently stress that people prioritize self-interest over collective environmental interest and regard people as unwilling to change their behaviors for the sake of the environment.2,3 Fortunately, recent evidence and events suggest that the picture is not as bleak as this popular discourse would lead us to believe. Most individuals do value the environment, providing a solid foundation for pro-environmental actions and policies.4,5 Moreover, increasing numbers of people appear supportive of pro-environmental measures and movements, exemplified by the School Strikes for Climate, Fridays for Future, Sunrise Movement, and Extinction Rebellion. Why then is there a lack of society-wide pro-environmental action?

We argue that the lack of consistent society-wide pro-environmental action is not primarily caused by people undervaluing the environment, as popular explanations suggest, but rather by these popular explanations themselves. Specifically, the apparent widespread underestimation of the extent to which pro-environmental values are endorsed within society could strongly demotivate people from taking pro-environmental action. When individuals recognize their own values reflected in others, pro-environmental action could quickly spread.

People Care

Studies on basic human values provide rich insights into what people care about. Basic human values represent universal, general, and desirable goals that guide our preferences and actions. All individuals endorse all values to some extent but differ in which values they prioritize over others. The more important a value is to an individual, the more likely this person will act in accordance with this value.6,7

Four types of values appear particularly relevant to understanding individuals’ engagement in pro-environmental actions: biospheric, altruistic, egoistic, and hedonic values (see Figure 1).8,9 Biospheric and altruistic values relate to goals that enhance the circumstances of things larger than the self, specifically nature and the environment (biospheric values) and others and society in general (altruistic values). Both generally encourage pro-environmental actions because such actions are inherently beneficial for nature and the environment, and they mostly benefit others and society too. Egoistic and hedonic values relate to goals that enhance one’s own circumstances, specifically one’s possessions, power, and status (egoistic values) and pleasure and comfort (hedonic values). Egoistic and hedonic values often demotivate pro-environmental actions because such actions are mostly associated with personal costs. For instance, egoistic and hedonic values can explain why an individual chooses to fly to a destination rather than travel by train, given that flying is often considered cheaper, faster, and more convenient.

As mentioned above, it is generally assumed that the lack of consistent and widespread pro-environmental action is due to society’s prioritization of egoistic and hedonic values and weak endorsement of biospheric and altruistic values. However, this popular assumption is not supported by empirical evidence. In fact, many studies have shown that biospheric and altruistic values are generally prioritized over egoistic and hedonic values, as can also be observed in recent data from the European Social Survey10 (see Figure 2). Studies testing the effects of different appeals further support this observation.2,11 For example, advertising biospheric benefits appeared more effective in promoting participation in energy-saving programs than did advertising financial benefits, and financial appeals could even backfire.11 Moreover, for many pro-environmental actions, such as switching off lights, eco-driving, or die- tary changes, individuals find the biospheric benefits more rewarding than any associated financial benefit.12

The Collective

If people care about the environment and feel motivated to act, why does this not translate into consistent pro-environmental actions? We argue that one explanation for this gap between the apparent society-wide endorsement of biospheric values and the lack of pro-environmental actions can be found in people’s perceptions of the values of others. Notably,
individuals seem to structurally underesti-
mate the endorsement of biospheric
values by relevant others, including
groups and society.1

The underestimation of biospheric
values in others could strongly demoti-
vate individual pro-environmental ac-
tion—such as installing solar panels,
adopting a plant-based diet, or cycling
to work—because individuals could see
others as unsupportive of, or disapprov-
ing of, such actions. Moreover, individuals
who do carry out such actions can feel un-
supported, disliked, or even marginalized,
leaving many feeling as though they need
to justify their choices, for instance, by
saying that they mainly installed solar
panels to save money, eat vegetarian
because of culinary preference, or
cycle to work to keep fit. This suggests
that environmental motives could be per-
cieved as deviant and insufficient rea-
tions to engage in these actions.

This underestimation of others’ bio-
spheric values can thus impede or slow
individual pro-environmental action, but the
consequences it can have for collective
action could be even more detrimental.
Collective actions depend on the support of
others, and underestimating others’
biospheric values can therefore strongly
inhibit an individual to initiate or take part
in collective action (e.g., join community
environmental initiatives or start pro-envi-
ronmental petitions). This could seriously
hamper bottom-up environmental initia-
tives, which appear to be effective ways
of promoting pro-environmental actions.13

Underestimating others’ biospheric
values can similarly impede top-down ac-
tion by governments, which are urgently
needed to realize the required systemic
changes that make pro-environmental ac-
tions more feasible.1 Because decision
makers (e.g., political leaders and man-
gagers) often have to represent their group,
their decisions and actions are likely to be
guided by the values they perceive to be
prioritized within their group, particularly
when their evaluation or re-election de-
pends on it.14 Underestimations of group
members’ biospheric values could there-
fore explain why political leaders often
appear hesitant to take pro-environ-
mental actions, unless such actions are
explicitly demanded by the public, as
was the case for the plastic-reduction pol-
icy in the UK, for example.

Hence, systematic underestimations of
the biospheric values of others could
explain the lack of pro-environmental ac-
tions at all societal levels. Critically, this
lack of pro-environmental action again
confirms and strengthens the mispercep-
tion that people generally do not care
about the environment, which could turn
these underestimations into a self-fulfill-
ing prophecy. Only through making the
biospheric values and actions of individ-
uals and groups more visible will the ur-
gently needed widespread pro-environ-
mental change be achieved.

**Making Values Visible**

Recent events might have enhanced
this visibility, resulting in more realistic
and optimistic perceptions of others’
biospheric values. For example, global
climate marches that were attended by
hundreds of thousands and supported
by far more conveyed the message that
many individuals do care about the envi-
ronment. Similarly, more and more orga-
nizations (e.g., the World Business Coun-
cil for Sustainable Development) and
governments (e.g., C40 cities and Cove-
nant of Majors) advocate their pro-envi-
ronmental vision and emphasize the pro-
environmental motivations behind their
policies, strategies, and actions, signi-
fying they care about the environment.
These positive messages, particularly
when accentuated through mainstream
communication channels and the media,
have the potential to correct the structural
underestimation of others’ biospheric
values and increase the likelihood that
individuals and groups will undertake
pro-environmental action, even those
with relatively weak personal biospheric
values.15

Unfortunately, propagation and dis-
semination of this positive pro-environ-
mental messaging via the mainstream
media remain limited and often have to
compete with conflicting messages. For
instance, around the time of the climate
marches, elected governments (e.g., the
US and Brazil) and protests (e.g., the
yellow-vest movement) opposed pro-
environmental measures, which was
largely publicized. Although these events
were mostly inspired by discontent with
current political systems and the specific
measures proposed (e.g., disproportionately
burdening the working and middle
classes), they were often presented and
interpreted as originating from anti-
environmental sentiments, feeding and

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**Figure 1. How Individuals’ Personal Biospheric, Altruistic, Hedonic, and Egoistic Values, as well as Their Perceptions of Others’ Values, Affect Pro-environmental Actions**

Green arrows represent positive relationships, and red arrows represent negative relationships.
confirming the already present underestimation of others’ biospheric values.

It therefore appears critical to identify how the widespread endorsement of biospheric values could be communicated more powerfully and effectively, for which we propose three strategies. First, pro-environmental motives behind actions could be accentuated and communicated more clearly, ensuring that people see that actions are taken out of environmental considerations. For instance, many employees and customers seem unaware of organizations’ pro-environmental ambitions and actions, and many citizens appear unaware of their city’s commitments to pro-environmental goals, rendering it unlikely that they would perceive these groups as strongly endorsing biospheric values. Second, it is critical to demonstrate that individuals’ and groups’ pro-environmental claims are accompanied by consistent and concrete pro-environmental actions. In fact, organizations and movements that claim to be pro-environmental are easily portrayed as “greenwashing” or “hypocrites” when some of their actions do not appear to be in line with these statements, suggesting that these statements are primarily made out of self-interest rather than environmental interest, thereby potentially harming a pro-environmental identity. Third, strategies communicating biospheric values could be more impactful and have a larger reach when initiated by individuals or groups with whom many people can identify. For example, protests by the general public (e.g., climate marches) might have a stronger and more widespread impact than protests by specific activist groups because the general public might not identify with the latter group. Similarly, organizational and political leaders can explicitly advocate their pro-environmental vision and policy, which would particularly motivate pro-environmental actions among their members and followers.

Showing Care for the Environment
Research consistently shows that—contrary to popular belief—individuals, groups, and society rather strongly endorse biospheric values, which has great potential in motivating and accelerating pro-environmental change across all societal levels. Yet, individuals structurally underestimate the biospheric values of others, which could hold them back from taking action. To unlock the full potential of people’s biospheric values, people need to recognize that biospheric values are widely endorsed within the groups and society they belong to. Although recent events might have enhanced this recognition, negative messaging remains prominent, and public and political consensus still appears to be that individuals and society prioritize profit and convenience over environmental benefits. Political and organizational leaders, as well as the media, seem particularly powerful in shaping perceptions about others’ biospheric values and could strongly enhance these perceptions by clearly communicating that many people do care. Moreover, leaders could show their groups’ true biospheric values through initiating top-down pro-environmental actions and policies, underlining the biospheric motives for these actions, and emphasizing biospheric values in their vision. Thereby,
they could create a social context that is open and supportive to bottom-up pro-environmental actions and initiatives, motivating and empowering individuals to act upon their personal and their groups’ biospheric values, which in turn will inspire others.

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