

# Want to save the planet? Stop trying to be its friend

March 4 2019

---



A composite image of the Western hemisphere of the Earth. Credit: NASA

A new theory suggests that we think of our relationship with the environment like a social exchange, leading to the belief that 'environmentally friendly' behavior can compensate for 'harmful' behavior.

But unlike a social misstep, our [environmental footprint](#) cannot be smoothed over.

Published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, the research reveals how advertisers, politicians and [economic systems](#) play on the psychology of 'climate compensation' - and encourages a more responsible, rational approach.

## **"You can't kiss and make up with the environment"**

Swedish psychologists have come up with a theory to explain why we harm the environment, even when we try to treat it well.

According to the researchers, it is virtually impossible to keep track of the environmental impact of every one of our actions, so we resort instead to mental 'rules of thumb' to assess our green footprint. The problem, they say, is that these innate, intuitive judgements evolved to deal with [social interaction](#), where morally righteous and unrighteous decisions can cancel each other out.

"Reciprocity and balance in social relations have been fundamental to social cooperation, and thus to survival, so the [human brain](#) has become specialized through [natural selection](#) to compute and seek this balance," says lead author Patrik Sörqvist, Professor of Environmental Psychology at the University of Gävle, Sweden. "But when applied to [climate change](#), this social give-and-take thinking leads to the misconception that 'green' choices can compensate for unsustainable ones."

In reality, all consumption causes permanent environmental harm, and green options are at best less harmful rather than restorative.

"You can't kiss and make up with the environment. Jetting to the Caribbean will make you a huge environmental burden, no matter how many meat free Mondays you have," Sörqvist quips.

## **Even eco-friendly behavior can be harmful**

The belief in 'climate compensation' is nevertheless pervasive. Studies show that when so-called 'eco-friendly' items are added to a set of 'conventional' items, people believe the environmental impact of the whole set is unchanged, or even reduced.

"For instance, some groups have found that people intuitively think the environmental burden of a hamburger and an organic apple in combination is lower than the environmental burden of the hamburger alone—or that the total emissions of a car pool remain the same when hybrid cars are added to the pool," highlights Sörqvist.

This leads us to pursue all sorts of misguided quick fixes to assuage our eco-guilt.

"People might purchase some extra groceries because they are 'eco-labeled'; think that they can justify jetting abroad for vacation because they have been cycling to work; or take longer showers because they've reduced the [water temperature](#).

"And companies—nations, even—claim to balance greenhouse gas emissions by planting trees or by paying for carbon offsets through the European Union Emission Trading Scheme.

"Meanwhile, the best thing for the environment would of course be for

us to consume less overall," stresses Sörqvist.

## Meaner is greener

According to the researchers, stricter legislation of marketing devices and an obligatory carbon footprint estimate of products could be a way to better guide people's behavior, companies and nations away from environmentally harmful actions taken in name of climate compensation.

"Terms like 'eco-friendly' or 'green' encourage the view that objects, behaviors and decisions with these labels are 'good' rather than 'less bad' for the environment," says co-author Dr. Linda Langeborg, also of the University of Gävle.

"Calling a hamburger restaurant '100 % climate compensated', for example, may deceive people into believing that eating dinner at that restaurant has no environmental burden.

"Instead, we should give consumers immediate feedback on how much 'eco-labeled' and other products add to the environmental impact of what they are buying. For example, self-scanning systems in supermarkets could provide customers with an accumulated carbon footprint estimate of their shopping basket," suggests Langeborg.

**More information:** *Frontiers in Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00348](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00348) , [www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00348/full](http://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00348/full)

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: Want to save the planet? Stop trying to be its friend (2019, March 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-planet-friend.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.