



## Do climate change threats de-motivate us to protect the environment?

**The threat of possible death** from climate change may paradoxically reduce our motivation to protect the environment, according to a new psychology study conducted in Germany. However, this negative impact on the environment could be reduced if people's environmental motivations stemmed from a desire to benefit humans rather than a desire to protect nature itself.

**Climate change and its impacts on the environment** have the potential to threaten our livelihood and even our lives through events such as species extinction, sea level rises, global warming and increasing frequencies of natural disasters. In order to protect the environment, policies need support from the wider public, which requires effective communication strategies and an understanding of people's motivations.

Previous research indicates that, under so-called "existential threat" potentially caused by climate change, people tend to distance themselves from nature and are therefore less motivated to protect the environment. The study investigated this possibility in more detail, taking into account the different goals of pro-environmental action in terms of whether they are biocentric (i.e. the aim is to protect nature for its intrinsic value) or anthropocentric (i.e. the aim is to protect humans by targeting aspects of the environment that are most important to human survival).

The researchers questioned 230 German participants on their environmental attitudes in relation to morality. The research indicated that the perception of an "existential threat" reduced participants' motivations to protect the natural environment for its intrinsic value. However, there was no effect on their motivations to protect the environment for its value to humans.

The research also examined the influence of the roots of these different motivations, that is whether they stem from concern for one's self (egoistic), for others (altruistic) or for non-human species (biospheric). Results indicated that existential threat decreased biospheric concerns, suggesting that people are less worried about the impacts of environmental crises on non-human species. Further analysis also indicated that those with biospheric concerns tended to have a biocentric motivation. Altruistic concern was also related to biocentric motivation, possibly because they are closely linked concepts.

Lastly, the research investigated the role of 'environmental identity' (defined as 'a sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environment'). If the participant included nature as part of the definition of themselves, they were more likely to want to protect nature, as nature protection would be beneficial for the self.

The study suggests that pro-environmental behaviour may be reduced under conditions of threat if it stems from the motivation to protect nature, but not if it is about saving humans or the self. This has implications for encouraging pro-environmental action and support for protective policies. However, the researchers point out that there may be other important impacts on motivation, such as reducing uncertainty and restoring a sense of control over nature which should be investigated in the future. It is expected that motivation would be greater if the benefits of pro-environmental behaviour affect one's immediate social group, such as community or family. Further research in other countries may confirm whether these results also apply to other nationalities.

**Source:** Fritsche, I. & Häfner, K. (2011) The Malicious Effects of Existential Threat on Motivation to Protect the Natural Environment and the Role of Environmental Identity as a Moderator. *Environment and Behaviour*. Doi: 10.1177/0013916510397759

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