



What influences our commitment to the environment?

Researchers have used the psychological concept of 'commitment', normally used to understand relationships between people, to investigate our relationship with the environment. The results indicate that an individual's commitment to the environment is important in their ecological behaviour, for example, their willingness to use public transport and make sacrifices for the environment.

Human behaviour is central to the exacerbation, mitigation and adaptation of various environmental issues, particularly climate change. As such, many policymakers are seeking insight into the psychological processes that influence pro-environmental behaviour, in order to inform policies that address detrimental behaviours and promote positive behaviours.

The concept of 'commitment' is rooted in the theory of relationships with people. It essentially describes feelings of attachment and a long term orientation in thinking about the relationship. The theory proposes that an individual's commitment to their partner is predicted by their satisfaction with the relationship, their investment in the relationship and the other alternatives that exist to this relationship.

This study took this concept of commitment to try to understand human relationships with the environment. It developed environment-specific measures of commitment and its three predictors: satisfaction, investment and alternatives. The *satisfaction* measure focussed on an individual's reward from spending time in the natural environment and *investment* looked at the involvement and effort people put into the environment. The measure of *alternatives* investigated the presence of other ways in which people could enjoy themselves and spend time, other than in the natural environment.

The study examined the relationships between these concepts by analysing the scores of 248 university students in the USA on these measures. It also included several other relevant measures, such as environmental identity, which assesses the degree to which individuals associate themselves with the environment, general environmentally friendly behaviour, such as public transport use and buying ecological products, and willingness to sacrifice for the environment, which assessed an individual's willingness to sacrifice their own needs in order to improve the environment.

The analysis revealed that both the participants' who had satisfaction with the environment and invested in the environment were more likely to be committed to the environment.

However, their perception of alternatives was not related to commitment. Commitment to the environment does not mean that an individual is not attached to other activities and places, in the same way that romantic attachment excludes relationships with other people. Therefore the predictor of 'alternatives' may not be so relevant in the environmental context.

Further analysis indicated that individuals with commitment to the environment said that their behaviour was pro-environmental and that they make sacrifices for the environment.

The research identified some interesting relationships between humans and the environment, although none of them were proven to be causal, i.e. it is not certain that commitment leads to pro-environmental behaviour or willingness to sacrifice. However, a greater understanding of these concepts could eventually provide insight into what influences an individual to develop long-term commitment to the environment, rather than making short-term decisions based on one's own needs. This could potentially inform policy that seeks to encourage long-term and committed relationships to the environment.

Source: Davis, J.L., Le, B. & Coy, A.E. (2011) Building a model of commitment to the natural environment to predict ecological behaviour and willingness to sacrifice. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. 31(3): 257-265.

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