



## Environmental awareness does not lead to smaller carbon footprints

**Environmentally responsible attitudes** and behaviour do not necessarily translate into real benefits for the environment, according to the results of a new study. The study shows that people who think they are environmentally aware – and even those who, in some respects, seem to behave in an environmentally friendly way – actually have just as large an impact on the environment as other consumers.

**Does changing people's attitude** towards the environment translate into the desired environmental impacts? There are two main considerations when trying to answer this question. First, a change in attitude does not always lead to a change in behaviour. The way people behave is affected by many external factors, for example, social norms and infrastructure – such as recycling facilities – may mean that people find it too difficult to change, even if they want to do so. Secondly, even when people report having changed their behaviour, the expected environmental benefits are often not as large as expected. This second problem is referred to as the Behaviour-Impact Gap (BIG) problem.

There are lots of reasons why environmental behaviour may not match expected benefits. People may overstate how often they recycle. They may switch to products that they genuinely believe to be 'greener' because they display eco-labels – when in reality, alternative products may be just as 'green'. Transporting renewable resources or waste for recycling over long distances may result in emissions that cancel out the intended environmental benefits. The result is that the consumer's carbon or ecological footprint may not change much, even when they believe they are acting responsibly towards the environment.

Research conducted in Hungary analysed the link between environmental attitudes and behaviour, and environmental impact, by comparing the ecological and carbon footprints of 'green' (committed to pro-environmental behaviour) and 'brown' (not committed) consumers. Ecological footprints were calculated using a survey of 1,012 Hungarians, which provided detailed data about consumers and their behaviour, including their income, diets, energy use and travel habits. Each person was assigned to a 'green', 'brown' or 'average' category based on their answer to the question, "Have you done any of the following during the past month for environmental reasons?" – eight options were given, including separating their waste for recycling and using their car less. Around a quarter were 'green', a quarter 'brown' and just over half 'average'.

There was no difference between the carbon or ecological footprints of 'green', 'brown' and 'average' consumers. This is a clear example of a big problem – a gap between environmental awareness and behaviour, and actual impact on the environment. Worryingly, the results suggest that no matter how environmentally aware a consumer claims to be, he or she will have just as large an impact on the environment.

Income is a major factor influencing consumers' ecological footprints. In the study, ecological footprint increased along with income – even though there were very few 'brown' consumers in the higher income brackets. While low income families were more likely to be 'brown' consumers, they still had smaller ecological footprints than high income families. The behaviour-impact gap problem was, however, persistent even when the impact of higher income was controlled for in the study. Thus the ecological footprint of 'green' consumers in a certain income bracket was not significantly different from the footprint of 'brown' consumers in the same income bracket. Although no statistical relationship between pro-environmental behaviour and ecological footprint was found at the macro level, there is still a place for individual action. The results of the study indicate that some individuals are successful at reducing their ecological impacts while acting 'green'. Hence, pro-environmental behaviour should not be rejected as superfluous or irrelevant.

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