

Is ‘doing your bit’ enough?

2,137 words

Introduction

This document is not so much an article, but more a ‘think piece’ to raise a question for discussion. The question is this – given that some of the goals of the environmental movement are clear¹, finite and urgent (for example, it is often argued that we have 10 years to prevent the average global temperature from increasing by more than 2 degrees and bringing catastrophe to large numbers of people²), should organisations seeking behaviour change from people on this topic be asking them to make the level of lifestyle changes that will enable them to reach this goal - and nothing less? In other words, is it enough just to ask people to ‘do their bit’ on these issues?

In the environmental movement, it is common to see websites, campaigns and brochures encouraging people to ‘do their bit’ – to undertake a few simple steps to make their lives more environmentally friendly, such as recycling and turning off appliances when not using them. Advocates of this ‘small steps’ approach would argue that it is the most effective way of getting people started on the road to ethical living and perhaps to greater behaviour changes in the future. They would also argue that getting people to do something is much better than getting them to do nothing at all.

Whilst I accept that the above approach does have some benefits, I suggest that there might be a number of important weaknesses within it:

1. **It is not directed at meeting specific goals** – and might therefore be setting us up to fail before we’ve even started. If we only have a short period of time in which to achieve a reasonably specific goal (or goals) and there are dreadful consequences of not meeting this goal, should our aim not be to achieve this goal, and to accept nothing less than this? Should we therefore not be asking the public to set themselves on a course to make this full range of changes rather than asking them to take small steps, as much of the environment movement is currently doing?

It could be argued that the ‘small steps’ approach is simply not sufficiently ambitious in its aims – it seems to say ‘well, we’ll just do what we can’, rather than ‘here are the goals, and here is what we need to do to achieve them’. It almost seems to be an approach that is resigned to its own failure before it even begins.

2. **Its goals are unclear** – perhaps the assertion in point 1 is a little harsh. Perhaps many members of the environment movement do have a very clear idea of the lifestyles we will each need to adopt to reach our climate change goals (and the equally urgent and more

¹ It may be difficult to reach agreement on precise goals on the environment in broader society, but it should be possible for sections of the environment movement itself to agree in principle a general goal and deadline for issues such as climate change and one planet living, adopting the precautionary principle.

² For example, see ‘Only A Decade Left to Avoid Climate Change, Say Think Tank’ at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1942773,00.html

complex goal of living within the parameters of one planet), as well as the series of changes they will be asking members of the public to make over the coming years to achieve these goals. Perhaps the current 'simple steps' approach is the first in a carefully-planned series that will continually ratchet up the level of change in the public over the next 10 years in order that we meet our goals.

I am not seeking simply to criticise the environmental movement here in what is an immensely complicated and challenging problem, but I'm highly doubtful that many environmental organisations have such a plan or vision in place. At the time of writing I am aware that one of the UK's (indeed one of the world's) leading conservation charities is currently just at the stage of putting together a team that will begin to formulate a vision for a 'one planet' future and the details of how we might get there. This will take some time, and sadly this team does not examine individuals' lives. From the evidence of their materials seeking change from the public, it seems that many other organisations are even further behind than this in developing their vision and strategy of how to meet our environmental goals.

This process of 'visioning' for a sustainable future is being undertaken by a few more radical thinkers and organisations but is not yet part of the 'green mainstream'. It needs to be, as the process of understanding our environmental goals, the detailed vision of the future they entail and developing detailed strategies in every area of society to achieve them is critical to our ability to meet our urgent environmental challenges. I suggest this process is also critical to our ability to gain meaningful change from the general public on these issues – how can we lead others to achieve a goal when we don't have know what steps they will need to take to achieve it?

Let us therefore give some time as a movement to developing this vision and the steps required to meet it (including those within individuals' day-to-day lives), as it will be our roadmap to a sustainable future and to achieving our goals. Without it, we will simply be taking (and encouraging others to take) a series of well-meaning but ultimately inadequate actions.

- 3. There is no prioritisation of actions** – a very simple improvement that many environment groups could make to the 'small steps' approach that they are advocating to the public is to prioritise the steps they are asking members of the public to take to make their behaviour more sustainable.³ Currently, very few materials seeking behaviour change from the public are effective at communicating the relative impact that different lifestyle changes will have. This means that people are unable to prioritise their actions or select the changes that will have most impact. Regardless of whether someone is deeply committed to the environmental cause or is only prepared to make a few changes to their life, being able to understand the relative impact of different actions (and thus prioritising them) is a vital ingredient in an effective response to the problems. After some time, people could gain a similar appreciation of the environmental impact of a particular type of activity as they have with the calorific content of particular types of food (e.g. 'chocolate = high calories', 'flying = high impact').
- 4. Asking for 'small steps' without context might not be the most effective method of seeking behaviour change from individuals** - it is commonly assumed (within the environment movement and beyond) that the most effective way to gain behaviour change from large numbers of people is to ask them to take small steps. On the issue of the environment however, massive numbers of people do not seem to be taking even these small steps, and therefore the 'small steps' approach is perhaps not proving effective on its own as a method of engaging the necessary critical mass of people in behaviour change.

³ This improvement does not require the research and planning outlined in point 2 above.

There may be a number of reasons for this that are directly related to the 'small steps' approach itself, rather than the more general and complex reasons why the green movement has failed to engage sufficient numbers of people in its cause. The latter reasons will not be discussed in this paper but the former are considered below.

In this section it is important to separate out the weaknesses of the 'small steps' approach that have already been covered – namely the lack of a long-term vision or detailed strategy of how to get people from where we are now to the way of life we need to achieve in order to reach our goals. There may be some members of the environmental movement who believe that the current format of the 'small steps' approach (i.e. just focus on small steps and provide no long term vision alongside these) should continue even if these things were to become available, as they believe that providing the public with any longer term (or realistic) vision of the future and the steps needed to reach our goals would fail to engage them, as it might be too depressing or complicated to engage them. I wish to offer a counter-argument to this.

I will not dwell for long on the arguments for providing a longer-term vision to people as I have already briefly covered these. It should be noted however that the argument that such a vision would be 'too depressing' and 'too complicated' is highly questionable – skilled communicators should be able to ensure that the latter problem does not occur, and the former problem can be overcome by challenging people's views as to what a 'good life' consists of, away from the consumerist philosophy that evidence suggests is failing to make people any happier and towards a world in which people pursue and enjoy true quality of life.

One possible weakness of the 'small steps and no long-term vision' approach in eliciting change is that it risks misleading people about the level of change required from them and therefore has the potential to alienate them. Substantial, transformative changes to modern individual lifestyles (such as considerably lower consumption, less air travel and many other things) will be needed if we are to achieve any significant environmental goals. Organisations are however currently telling people that 'making a few changes to your life will mean you are really making a difference'. The changes people are being asked to make at the moment are nowhere near enough to achieve our climate change or 'one planet living' goals, so how will people feel when the organisations go back to them in a few months' time (and then at regular intervals after that) with increasing numbers of actions, each mounting in its effect on their lives?

I fear that people may feel that they have been duped, having been told that they were 'making a difference' but in fact these initial actions were nowhere near enough to bring about the necessary change. This might demotivate them and cause them to lose trust with the environmental movement.

In addition, failing to provide people with a clear long term vision or a detailed 'road map' to show the full range of changes that will be needed to achieve our environmental goals may make people further demotivated, feeling that they are now engaged in a Sisyphean task that is simply not worth the energy or stress.

I therefore suggest we need to test a new approach to seeking behaviour change on environmental matters which builds on the 'small steps' approach rather than replaces it. This new approach would initially recommend a series of prioritised 'small steps' and at the same time provide a clear picture of the long-term goals they are seeking to achieve, the long-term vision for the lifestyle we are leading people towards and the detailed series of steps (or choice of steps) they will ultimately need to take in order to meet these goals. People would then become engaged in a longer term programme of change that has been developed to reach a particular goal, rather than simply being asked to take a few steps in order to 'do their bit'.

Conclusions

In this paper I have simply aimed to question one of the most common approaches to seeking initial behavioural changes from the general public on environmental matters. Different approaches will of course be appropriate for different target audiences, and the question of how to gain behaviour change on such a massive scale is a complex topic, and is beyond the scope of this brief document.

As a tentative summary to the topic of this particular paper however I suggest that the environmental cause should focus its programmes of public behaviour change specifically on meeting its urgent goals within the necessary timeframes.

Secondly, it should invest more time in setting out the strategy required to meet these goals and the vision of the future it entails. This should include sub-strategies for key areas of society – from business to transport to individual lifestyles.

Finally, I suggest the environmental cause should review its strategy of seeking small changes in behaviour from the general public without providing any context to these changes. This approach could perhaps be strengthened considerably by accompanying any suggestions for small steps with an indication of the relative impact each of them will have and by making the steps part of a coherent and comprehensive long-term strategy aimed at achieving specific environmental goals within a specific period of time. This strategy will include detailed steps that individuals will need to take in all areas of their lives in order to meet this goal and will provide a clearer long-term vision of what a typical life will look like if the goals are to be met.

As noted at the start, I have not intended to reach any firm conclusions in this document as I have merely aimed to pose a question. Any responses or thoughts on this question would be welcomed – contact us at info@changestar.co.uk.

**© Richard Docwra
20th September 2007**

Further Reading

- On the topic of meeting the goals of the environmental movement, see the ChangeStar paper 'Self Regulation'.
- On the topic of behaviour change, see the ChangeStar report 'Why Is It So Hard To Change People's Behaviour?'