

Environmental collapse or sustainable future?

April 26 2017, by Elin Bäckström

Young people have a bleak view of the future. They believe we are more likely heading towards environmental collapse than towards a sustainable world. A new dissertation from Uppsala University shows that although young people in upper secondary school are aware of current environmental issues, they think it is difficult, or impossible, to do anything to avoid environmental collapse.

"With regard to the environment, the picture of the [future](#) they express is gloomy. What makes it even gloomier is that this is the picture of the future held by [young people](#) in society today and they don't believe they are capable of changing this outlook," says Kajsa Kramming, doctoral student at the Department of Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University.

In her dissertation *Environmental collapse or sustainable future?* The language young people in upper secondary school use to talk about [environmental issues](#), she has studied the views of the future expressed by 343 young people.

Expecting climate chaos

In their quest to be environmentally friendly, climate-smart citizens, the young people look for the 'right' things to do. Not finding what they're looking for in the world around them, they express negative feelings such as powerlessness and hopelessness instead of hope that might lead

to an ability to act on environmental issues. As the young people see it, there is a way to achieve a sustainable future, and that is by immediately tackling environmental issues in a positive way and reversing current negative trends.

"One has to bear in mind that it was specifically environmental issues that provoked this negative language and that young people were more positive when they talked about other things, like gender equality," says Kramming. "The important lesson to learn from this study is that there are young people aged 17–18 walking around with a very real expectation that their future, and the future of their children and grandchildren, is a world that may be characterised by environmental collapse and climate chaos."

The young people in the study also have difficulty seeing how adult society, the education system, politicians and the business sector can help them create a [sustainable future](#).

Collective denial

The dissertation is a contribution to the field of social and economic geography, with a focus on environmental geography, which is interdisciplinary by nature and deals with people's perceptions of the environment. The young people in the study took part in workshop exercises on consumption and the citizens of the future in 2050. An analysis then revealed the language that they use to talk about environmental issues. The language the young people use is in line with what they register in the general media noise and environmental discourses that appear in these media, social media and contacts with others. The negative way in which young people talk about environmental issues and the feelings they inspire can therefore be regarded as reflecting a broad collective denial of environmental and climate issues in society, and the phenomenon of living in a dual reality

in which the consumer society and risks of environmental collapse exist side by side.

More information: Kramming K (2017) Environmental collapse or sustainable future? The language young people in upper secondary school use to talk about environmental issues

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