

Sustainability in populist times

May 28 2018



Credit: Leiden University

Flying is cheaper than driving a car, but a disaster for the environment. Yet few politicians dare to levy excise duty on kerosene. This is only one example from a world where emotions and yelling are burying facts, and in which scientists lose connection with society.

On the occasion of its 40th anniversary, the Institute of Environmental Sciences (CML) will elaborate on this theme with a symposium. Organiser René Kleijn asks himself how scientists can convince people to make sustainable decisions. Because why is that healthy and nice living environment still so far away, while everyone seems to want it?

"Policymakers choose not to excise levy duty on kerosine, but on fuel

for cars. That seems like a financially positive decision for [society](#), but on the long term, the associated [environmental problems](#) will result in much higher costs," industrial ecologist Kleijn explains. Because [sustainable solutions](#) sometimes directly cost money, they are not always popular. That's why some politicians oppose to them, to attract voters. "Although populists seem to want the best for the people, sustainability is not or barely on their politic agenda," Kleijn states. "While their voters also want the best for themselves and their children. How can we convince them that it would do them well to make other decisions?"

Mug or plastic cup?

"We do research on environmental problems and propose solutions. We know sustainable solutions sometimes cost money. For example, the energy transition from fossil energy to sun and wind energy. But at the same time the fossil industry receives a lot of subsidy ", Kleijn continues. That's why it is so important that scientists and politicians consider all aspects and options when they want to tackle environmental problems, he argues.

Environmental researchers at the CML and other institutions develop methods to assess the environmental impact of products, like the life cycle analysis. "But these analyses never result in simple answers," Kleijn explains. "All too often the answer is: it depends." For example, when you want to know whether using a porcelain mug or a plastic cup is more sustainable. When you use your plastic cup very carefully and hardly ever wash it with warm water, this is a better option than a mug. Because a plastic cup costs relatively little material and energy to produce or to keep clean. In many cases, your behaviour determines the best option."

Scientists as partyoopers

Companies often make unjustified claims of sustainability, also known as greenwashing or window dressing. But, Kleijn says: 'with everything that you claim to be sustainable, an independent control should be done to check if your claim is based on facts and thus science. During the control the whole system is studied, like with the plastic cup, and we do not only look at the front end of the problem as is often the case with plastic waste. Because of this we sometimes must disappoint people who want to do good for the world. In these cases, the scientists are the party-poopers.'

Kleijn notes that people are now being influenced in different ways than before. He speaks of a post-truth society in which facts are becoming less important. "My own father is not highly educated and always watches the evening news on television. That is where he gets his information from. This presents facts from science in a relatively objective way. But nowadays most people get their information from social media, where the truth is a lot less important, to put it mildly. Sometimes scientists are depicted as the elite, who defend their own interests. This leads to distrust of science. While scientists just want to discover the truth. To convince people, we have to show them what science can do for them."

Researchers should not have a political agenda. Yet, environmental [scientists](#) often study questions from society, among which from politicians. "The CML was born from a group of activists. In the meantime, it has grown into a solid scientific institute. But still the motivation of students at the CML is to make the world in better place." Scientists should be aware of their contribution to society, Kleijn thinks. "As a scientist, you should be open to questions from society and strive to improve society. Also when you are doing fundamental research."

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Sustainability in populist times (2018, May 28) retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-05-sustainability-populist.html>

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