

# Most people consider themselves more environmentally friendly than others

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Magnus Bergquist. Credit: Johan Wingborg

Research from the University of Gothenburg shows that we tend to overestimate our personal environmental engagement. In a study with participants from Sweden, the United States, England, and India, most

participants were convinced that they acted more environmentally friendly than the average person.

In the study, over 4,000 people responded to how much and how often they perform environmentally friendly activities compared to others. For example, buying eco-labelled products, saving household energy, and reducing purchases of plastic bags.

It turned out that the majority of the participants rated themselves as more environmentally friendly than others. Both in comparison to unknown people, and to their friends.

"The results point out our tendency to overestimate our own abilities, which is in line with previous studies where most people consider themselves to be more honest, more creative, and better drivers than others. This study shows that over-optimism, or the "better-than-average" effect, also applies to environmentally friendly behaviours," says environmental psychology researcher Magnus Bergquist.

After analyzing data from different types of environmentally friendly activities, results revealed that the participants were more likely to overestimate their engagement in activities they perform often. Many seemed to draw the faulty conclusion that the activities they perform often, they also perform more often than others.

A consequence of thinking that you are more environmentally friendly than others, is that it can reduce the motivation to act environmentally friendly in the future. The study also showed that when we think we are more environmentally friendly than others, we actually tend to become somewhat less environmentally friendly.

According to Magnus Bergquist, one way of reducing the risk of over-optimism standing in our way for a real environmental commitment,

may be trying to have a more realistic view of our own environmental efforts.

"If you think about it logically, the majority cannot be more environmentally friendly than others. One way to change this faulty opinion, is to inform people that others actually behave environmentally friendly, and thereby creating an environmentally friendly norm. Social norms affect us also in this area, we know this from previous studies," says Magnus Bergquist.

**More information:** Magnus Bergquist. Most People Think They Are More Pro-Environmental than Others: A Demonstration of the Better-than-Average Effect in Perceived Pro-Environmental Behavioral Engagement, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/01973533.2019.1689364](https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2019.1689364)

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