

'Everyone else does it, so I can too': How the false consensus effect drives environmental damage

February 15 2021, by Brock Bergseth



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There's a useful concept from psychology that helps explain why good people do things that harm the environment: [the false consensus effect](#). That's where we overestimate how acceptable and prevalent our own behavior is in society.

Put simply, if you're doing something (even if you secretly know you probably shouldn't), you're more likely to think plenty of other people do it too. What's more, you likely overestimate how much other people think that behavior is broadly OK.

This bias allows people to justify socially unacceptable or illegal behaviors.

Researchers have observed the false consensus effect in [drug use](#), how well nurses follow certain procedures [at work](#), and [illegal hunting in Africa](#).

More recently, conservationists and environmental researchers are beginning to reveal how the false consensus effect contributes to environmental damage.

From illegal fishing to climate change

In previous research, my colleagues and I showed how [the false consensus effect supports](#) ongoing poaching (meaning fishing in no-take zones) by [recreational fishers on the Great Barrier Reef](#).

In particular, we found people who admitted to poaching thought it was much more prevalent in society than it really was, and had higher estimates than fishers who complied with the law.

The poachers also believed others viewed poaching as socially acceptable; however, in reality, [more than 90% of fishers viewed poaching as both socially and personally unacceptable](#).

Beyond poaching, the false consensus effect can help explain other behaviors.

One [study](#) examined students living on campus who were told not to shower while an emergency water ban was in place. It found those who showered in breach of the rules vastly [overestimated](#) how many other students were doing the same thing.

In a [different study](#), researchers surveyed Australians about climate change and asked them what opinions they thought most other people held about the topic. The researchers found "...opinions about climate change are subject to strong false consensus effects, that people grossly overestimate the numbers of people who reject the existence of [climate change](#) in the broader community."

The false [consensus](#) effect has also shown up in studies examining support for [nuclear energy](#) and [offshore wind farms](#).

Using psychology to understand and address environmental damage

As a growing body of research has shown, humans are shockingly bad at [making accurate social judgements](#) about [the actual attitudes of others](#).

This gets even more problematic when we unwittingly [project our own internal attitudes and beliefs onto others](#) in an attempt to seek confirmation and reassurance.

Just as concepts from psychology can help explain some forms of environmental damage, so too can psychological concepts help address it. For example, research shows people are [more likely](#) to litter in areas where there's already a lot of trash strewn around; so [making sure the ground around a bin is not covered in rubbish](#) may help.

But [interventions](#) that work in one culture to [encourage environmentally](#)

[friendly behavior](#) may not work in a [different culture](#).

In Germany, for example, a campaign aimed at increasing consumption of sustainable seafood actually [led to a decline in sustainable choices compared to baseline levels](#), likely because the messages were seen as manipulative and ended up driving shoppers away from choosing sustainable options.

Campaigns to reduce consumption of [shark fin soup](#), [buying pangolin meat or scales](#), and [single-use plastic water bottles](#) aim to counter the idea that these environmentally damaging behaviors are widespread and socially acceptable.

Factual information on how other people think and behave can be very powerful. Energy companies have substantially reduced [energy consumption](#) simply by [showing people how their electricity use compares to their neighbors and conscientious consumers](#).

Encouragingly, activating people's inherent desire for status has also been successful in getting people to "[go green to be seen](#)", or to publicly buy eco-friendly products.

As the research evidence shows, social norms can be a powerful force in encouraging and popularizing environmentally friendly behaviors. Perhaps you can do your bit by sharing this article!

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