

Climate Questions: Does what I do matter?

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Can people's individual actions make a difference in how much carbon dioxide is emitted on an international scale? International organizations like the United Nations have called on individuals to limit their carbon footprint and live more sustainably, along with governments and corporations.

Some argue it would be more effective to focus on changing government and corporate policy to limit emissions from the energy and agriculture sectors than asking individuals to limit their carbon footprint, but experts say that while that's true, every bit of emissions reduction helps.

"We should all be the most responsible citizens we can be in every sense of the word and contribute to a sustainable existence on this planet," said University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann. He said that means, in part, minimizing our carbon footprints as individuals.

And that can take a lot of different forms.

The [United Nations Act Now](#) campaign for individual climate action suggests people can minimize their personal carbon footprint directly by changing their energy and transportation use and food consumption. Other, less direct methods for reducing [carbon emissions](#) include divesting from fossil fuel companies in [retirement plans](#), protesting to support [climate action](#) and lobbying government officials to pass environmentally sustainable policies.

Kim Cobb, a Brown University climate scientist, said there are consequences to individuals having "outsized" carbon footprints. And still there are people who engage in the environmental movement who don't consider their personal carbon footprint.

"I think we're living in an anti-gravity moment where people are able to say, 'I'm not concerned about my first, personal [carbon footprint](#). Collective action matters the most,'" she said. In the future, though, "there will be a moral and [social cost](#) to bear by those individuals."

Still, there are some climate impacts that people aren't individually responsible for and can't change on their own. Over 70% of all [greenhouse gas emissions](#) produced between 1988 and 2015 came from 100 [fossil fuel companies](#), according [a 2017 report by CDP](#), formerly known as the Carbon Disclosure Project.

And despite the United Nations' warnings to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions, countries are planning on extracting double the amount of fossil fuels than what would be consistent with keeping the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit), even as they pledge to make ambitious cuts.

So, although there are things individuals can do to minimize their personal carbon footprints, Mann said, "we must not allow ... polluters to reframe the discussion so that it falls entirely upon individuals, which takes the pressure off of them."

"We can't pass legislation ourselves that incentivizes renewable energy or that blocks new fossil fuel infrastructure. We can't impose regulations on industry. We can't negotiate directly with international partners. We need our policymakers to do that," Mann said. "Those things can only be enacted at the systematic level, and that's why we have to keep the pressure on policymakers and on corporations and those who are in a position to make the changes that we can't make ourselves."

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