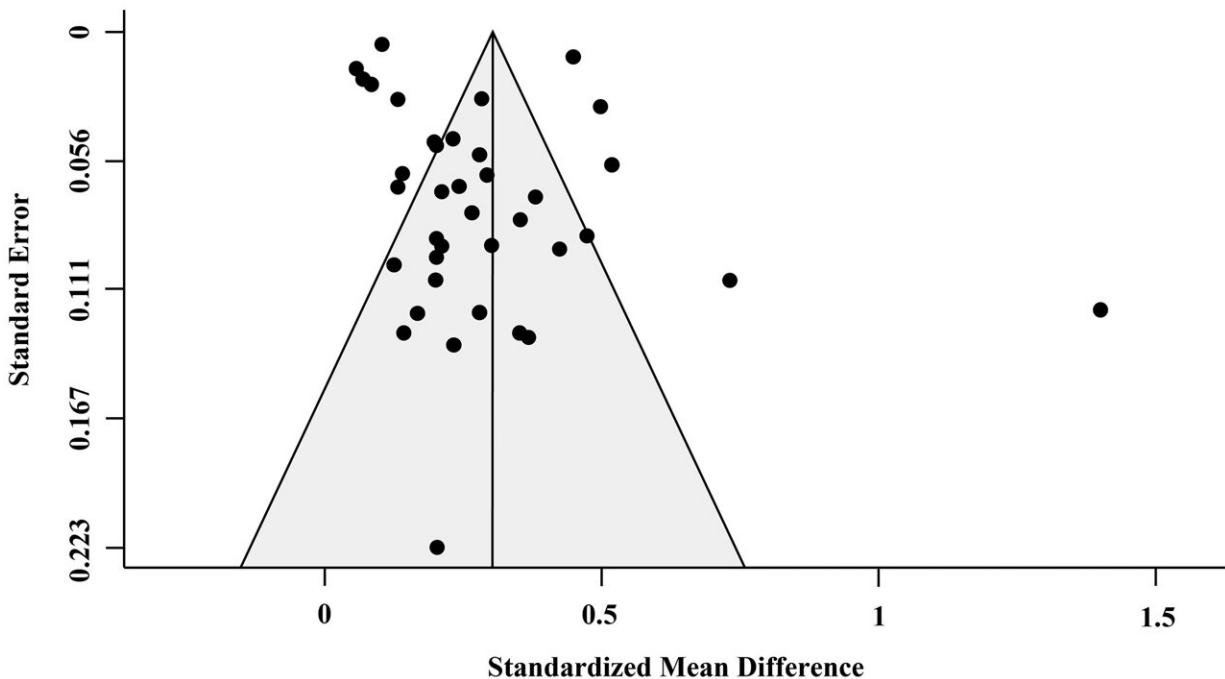


# Study shows that people are more likely to be eco-friendly if others around them are

March 28 2023, by Bob Yirka



Funnel plot of subgroup effects. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2214851120

A quartet of climate scientists, two from the University of Gothenburg, and one each from Yale University and the University of Cambridge, has found that educating people about the benefits of being Earth-friendly may not be the best approach to improving Earth-friendly behaviors. Instead, as Magnus Bergquista, Maximilian Thiel, Matthew Goldberg

and Sander van der Linden explain in their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the best approach may be exposing them to other people behaving better.

Over the past several decades, local and national officials have been listening to scientists regarding the benefits of being Earth-friendly. Polluting less, recycling and using resources such as water more wisely benefit everyone. Still, despite much effort, less than Earth-friendly [behavior](#) is still rampant. People waste water, toss trash onto the ground and refuse to separate their trash for recycling. In this new effort, the researchers suggest a different approach—[peer pressure](#).

To learn more about the impact of nagging people with Earth-friendly messaging, the researchers gathered and analyzed insights from 430 studies done on the subject. They found that such messaging is ineffective—prior research efforts, taken together, showed that such messaging changed behavior on average by just 3%. For example, exposure to messages that a product is more environmentally friendly results in only a 3% difference in sales.

The researchers also found that [financial incentives](#) were not much better—they saw differences of just 12%. What did motivate people to change, the researchers found, was the behavior of other people around them. If there was trash on a hiking trail, people felt free to add more. If a light was on when they entered a public restroom, they left it on when they left. But if a hiking trail was clean, people were less likely to litter. And if a light switch was turned off when entering a public bathroom, people were more likely to turn it off when they left.

The research team concludes that the way to get people to change their environmental behavior is by making them think that other people around them are behaving responsibly, making them look bad if they do not behave better themselves.

**More information:** Magnus Bergquist et al, Field interventions for climate change mitigation behaviors: A second-order meta-analysis, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2214851120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2214851120)

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