

Instant gratification poses barrier to addressing climate change

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Researchers have detected a huge impediment when it comes to working together to halt the effects of climate change: instant gratification.

A study conducted by Jennifer Jacquet, a clinical assistant professor in the Environmental Studies Program, and her colleagues finds that groups cooperate less for [climate change](#) mitigation when the rewards of cooperation lie in the future, especially if they stretch into future generations. The work was published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*.

"People are often self-interested, so when it comes to investing in a cooperative dilemma like climate change, rewards that benefit our offspring—or even our future self—may not motivate us to act," says Jacquet. "Since no one person can affect climate change alone, we designed the first experiment to gauge whether group dynamics would encourage people to cooperate towards a better future."

Jacquet worked with colleagues from two Max Planck institutes in Germany and from the University of British Columbia, where the research started during her time there as a postdoctoral fellow. The team of six scientists gave study participants 40 euros each to invest, as a group of six, towards climate change actions. If participants cooperated to pool together 120 euros for climate change, returns on their investment, in the form of 45 additional euros each, were promised one day later, seven weeks later, or were invested in planting oak trees, and thus would lead to climate benefits several decades down the road—but not personally to the participants.

Although many individuals invested initially in the long-term investment designed to simulate benefits to future generations, none of the groups achieved the target. In fact, they found, even groups gravitate toward [instant gratification](#).

The work builds on a recent shift to better

understanding not just the natural science behind climate change, but also the social science. The authors see the results as instructive in shaping global environmental policies. Specifically, international negotiations to mitigate climate change are unlikely to succeed if individual countries' short-term gains are not taken into consideration.

Provided by New York University

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