

Conservationists' eco-footprints suggest education alone won't change behaviour

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Conservationists work to save the planet, and few are as knowledgeable when it comes to the environmental pressures of the Anthropocene.

However, the first wide-ranging study to compare the environmental footprint of conservationists to those of other groupings – medics and economists, in this case – has found that, while conservationists behave in a marginally 'greener' manner, the differences are surprisingly modest.

Researchers say their findings add to increasing evidence that education and knowledge has little impact on individual behavior when it comes to major issues such as the environment and personal health.

Conservation scientists from the universities of Cambridge, UK, and Vermont, US, gathered data on a range of lifestyle choices – from bottled water use to air travel, [meat consumption](#) and family size – for 734 participants across the three groupings.

They found that fellow conservationists recycled more and ate less meat than either economists or medics, were similar to the other groups in how they travelled to work, but owned more cats and dogs.

The combined footprint score of the conservationists was roughly 16% less than that of economists, and 7% lower than the medics.

Nevertheless the average [conservationist](#) in the study's sample took nine flights a year (half for work; half personal), ate meat or fish five times a week, and purchased very few offsets to their personal carbon emissions.

In fact, researchers found little correlation between the extent of environmental knowledge and environmentally-friendly behavior.

Moreover, greener action in one aspect of a

person's life did not predict it in any others – regardless of occupation. So a positive and relatively simple habit such as recycling did not appear to act as a "gateway" to more committed behaviour change.

The team suggest that overall improvements might be most effectively achieved through tailored interventions: targeting higher-impact behaviors such as meat consumption and flying through government regulation and by incentivising alternatives.

"While it may be hard to accept, we have to start acknowledging that increased education alone is perhaps not the panacea we would hope," said lead author Andrew Balmford, Professor of Conservation Science at the University of Cambridge.

"Structural changes are key. For example, providing more affordable public transport, or removing subsidies for beef and lamb production. Just look at the effect of improved collection schemes on the uptake of recycling.

"The idea of 'nudging' – encouraging particular choices through changes in how cafes are laid out or travel tickets are sold, for instance – might have untapped potential to help us lower our footprint," Balmford said.

"As conservationists we must do a great deal more to lead by example. Obvious starting points include changing the ways we interact, so that attending frequent international meetings is no longer regarded as essential to making scientific progress. For many of us flying is probably the largest contributor to our personal emissions."

The study's four authors offer their own mea culpa: pointing out that, between them, they have seven children, took 31 flights in 2016, and ate an average of two meat meals in the week before submitting their study – now published – to the

journal Biological Conservation.

"I don't think conservationists are hypocrites, I think that we are human – meaning that some decisions are rational, and others, we rationalise," said study co-author Brendan Fisher from the University of Vermont's Gund Institute for Environment and Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources.

"Our results show that conservationists pick and choose from a buffet of pro-environmental behaviours the same as everyone else. We might eat less meat and compost more, but we fly more – and many of us still commute significant distances in gas cars."

For the study, researchers distributed surveys on environmental behavior through conservation, economics and biomedical organisations to targeted newsletters, mailing lists and social media groups.

Of the self-selecting respondents, there were 300 conservationists, 207 economists and 227 medics from across the UK and US.

The participants were also asked a series of factual questions on environmental issues – from atmospheric change to species extinction – and ways to most effectively lower carbon footprints.

"Interestingly, conservationists scored no better than economists on environmental knowledge and awareness of pro-environmental actions," said Balmford.

Overall footprint scores were higher for males, US nationals, economists, and people with higher degrees and larger incomes, but were unrelated to environmental knowledge.

Fisher says the study supports the idea that 'values' are a key driver of behaviour. Across the professions, attaching a high value to the environment was consistently associated with a lower footprint: fewer personal flights and less food waste, for example.

"It doesn't matter if you are a medic, [economist](#), or

conservationist, our study shows that one of the most significant drivers of your behaviour is how much you value the environment," Fisher said.

"Economists who care about the environment behave as well as conservationists."

More information: Andrew Balmford et al. The environmental footprints of conservationists, economists and medics compared, *Biological Conservation* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2017.07.035](#)

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