

## Can “Living Green” Save the Planet?

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It’s another hottest year on record. Fresh water aquifers run dry while fisheries flirt with collapse. Miles-long cracks snake across the Antarctica ice sheet while the pace of extinctions, ocean acidification, and soil erosion accelerates. As alarm grows about our expanding environmental footprint, we’re increasingly being asked to do our part to make a difference, to slow the damage, and perhaps even to reverse the tide. The good news, from public opinion polls and swelling support of environmental organizations, is that more of us than ever before are willing to roll up our sleeves and get to work. Who, after all, wakes up in the morning happy with being complicit, even in small ways, in global ecological ruin? When it comes to the planet’s health, we yearn to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

But what are these solutions, exactly? How, according to political elites, corporations, and even environmental groups, do we best act on our hunger to “help save the planet?” Despite the recent tilt toward mass demonstrations and twitter blasts, the overriding answer for the masses is unequivocal: we can, and should, save the planet one lifestyle change at a time – by recycling that plastic bottle, for example, or steering clear of meat, leaving the car in the garage, planting a garden, or buying “green” products. There is no shortage of books, websites, YouTube videos, and save-the-world lists to help. If we get enough people on board, this thinking goes, we’ll create a tsunami of lasting institutional change. Live your beliefs and walk your talk, no matter how difficult it may be. Others will be inspired to follow your lead, sparking an unstoppable shift in lifestyles and consumer demand that will make businesses and governments change their environmentally destructive ways.

This idea that we can save the planet one small act at a time is understandably attractive. It lets us act on our convictions and fears when we choose a salad instead of a burger for lunch, or pay more for the environmentally friendly version of a household product. It makes being a part of social change as accessible as the green-products shelf at the nearest supermarket or the container garden on our porch. Since the mid-1980s, marketers have relentlessly promoted this concept of conscientious consumption, and with considerable success. They have learned to exploit our desire to be powerful in our role as consumers where, we hope, our votes at the checkout counter will meaningfully influence politicians and CEOs.

Alas, as this book explains, buying green and living lightly are symbolically relevant and spiritually important, but as a prime engine of change these measures are materially and politically counterfeit. They are woefully incommensurate to the challenges before us. They spring from a naïve faith in the magical aggregation of good deeds, which spawns simplistic ideas about power while hiding more generous understandings of human nature and more joyful avenues for social change. This magical-aggregation thinking elevates blame and guilt as agents for change with devastating effect on the environmental movement. And, despite the hope of many environmental activists, living lightly and buying green seem to have little positive effect on political mobilization. The planet would undoubtedly be healthier if the eco-consumers of today transitioned easily or automatically into the eco-activists of tomorrow. But that’s not the

case. Persuading your neighbor to buy organic food doesn't, everything else being equal, up the odds that she'll become politically engaged around agricultural policy. Good evidence instead suggests that small acts of household environmental action draw people away from familiar forms of citizen mobilization.

This doesn't mean that lifestyle choice and consumer decisions don't have a place in the fight for the integrity of natural systems. They most certainly do, though in ways markedly different from today's trendy assumptions about the power of buying green and living simply. The problem, moreover, isn't with the good deeds themselves. Living lightly and doing our best to consume environmentally friendly products is a pillar of mindful living. These everyday acts keep us present to the urgency of problems like climate change or mass extinction and help us act with grace in the midst of the biological unravelling of the planet. As a colleague is fond of observing, it is important that you help your elderly neighbor across the street when you're both standing on the corner. Doing so cultivates inner decency and community connection. Just don't think that your good deed will solve the pension crisis.

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