

# The Key to Climate Change?

Green issues are seemingly taking over the world, yet most experts say we're still doing nowhere near enough to stem climate change. Recycling is an everyday household activity, sales of locally grown fruit and vegetables are replacing imports at a rapid rate, and the way we all think about transportation is now ruled by words like 'efficiency' and 'economical'. We seem to be hitting all the right spots, yet the problem is not going away – and we desperately need to know why?

We can identify two grounds in which we need to expand and begin to develop. Firstly, we need to identify why exactly people aren't taking the current campaigns seriously – and as a result why they aren't as successful as they could be. Secondly, we need to begin identifying the other changes that are necessary to stem climate change. **Wars against waste, food imports, transportation and energy consumption are already being waged, but are not enough on their own.** A wholesale change of perception is needed, and it seems the answer may be in linking the two areas identified above.

## Why aren't the current campaigns successful?

Well, it isn't a problem with the campaign topics themselves. Eliminating food miles, waste, reducing energy consumption etc – these are all things that affect climate change, and so it makes sense to campaign on them. The problem seems to be that the public on the whole aren't acting enough. But why? When we look back at the other major behavioural changes in our history (the abolition of slavery, women gaining the vote, equality for blacks...), people became aware of what was happening and as soon as campaigning was sped up, things rapidly changed for the better. So what's different? Again there are two areas in which there is a marked difference:

a) The previous issues had the voices of those who were affected (the slaves, or those that were being oppressed) confronting those whose behaviours were causing the problem. Humans react well to other human beings calling for respect, and as a result everyone's views began changing rather rapidly out of guilt and compassion. **With climate change, the real victims are faceless individuals from foreign lands or, moreover, those that haven't been born yet.**

b) Whereas imprisoning other humans, or treating them unequally is a 'moral baseline' (ie, it is basically always wrong to do so), climate change is a 'moral balance'. We all need to use resources to live, it is a case of balancing it right. Psychologically people react very well to 'moral baselines' as they are direct guides to behaviour, but not well to 'balances' (as the cost-benefit analysis a person makes on each behavioural decision generally labels a behaviour as good if it is causing them greater pleasure – it is difficult to break that without the 'baseline' being included at some point). People, in face to face situations, react badly to being told something is 'just wrong'; but encouraging them to make this decision on their own is perhaps the best way of constructing a 'baseline' in thought.



## Focusing on 'moral baselines' in our campaigning – what new areas help with this?

There is one area of cultural behaviour that is rarely touched upon (until recent UN reports)<sup>1</sup> which has a huge effect on climate change. **A switch away from animal products, and to a vegan lifestyle, is said to be over 8 times more effective at reducing carbon foot print than buying all locally sourced food.**<sup>2</sup> It is bizarre that this isn't campaigned on, and that we don't attempt to normalise the vegan lifestyle given this fact – and that animal food is nutritionally redundant in modern human society. At one point in our evolution we probably had narrow diets, and needed to eat anything we could get our hands on – similarly, there were probably times when we needed to often indulge in violence and murder to protect ourselves. Neither of these is the case now. A vegan diet is able to provide every nutrient an individual needs, at a fraction of the environmental cost. What's more, the other animals we eat (though not as 'intelligent' as humans) are conscious, experiencing individuals - PTO

to whom we do a great injustice by killing them for food when nutritionally, optimum health can be obtained from eating vegetables.

The facts about veganism also make it a 'moral baseline'. **Both on grounds of moral obligation, as well as environmental need, veganism is a 'baseline' that we need to begin adhering to.** A vegan chooses not to buy any animal products, and that is a set moral belief, not a balance. Moreover, by promoting the ideas behind animal rights/the environmental wastage of animal products, we do what's right. Every year the number of vegans in the UK rise – the longer we ignore these facts on the grounds that 'people like eating animals' the longer it will take for the big environmental changes to occur. As the stats earlier showed, 1 person choosing an average vegan diet is the equivalent to 8 choosing every product they buy locally – and how many can say they even do that? And more to the point, why not go above the '800% more effective' mark and buy a largely locally sourced vegan diet?

## Advancing

One final fact to consider is as follows: the 'moral baseline' issue may not be the only reason why current campaigns are failing. Campaigns such as climate change (as well as those based on reducing humans starvation/poverty) are 'indirect' ethical causes. No one directly chooses to destroy the environment or force other people to starve, these things happen indirectly as a result of our actions. Whereas a campaign of anti-violence can be waged well by appealing to the fact that such action is punishable by law, and is frowned upon by other members of society, only a fraction of this psychological opposition can be in place for indirect harm due to it's very nature.



What, traditionally, should inhibit indirect harm, is a sense of moral responsibility for our actions, which is formed by the call of sentience on our moral capabilities. We have evolved the ability to act morally, and however we did it, that capability is dissolved in instances where sentience is devalued during socialisation (in the same way one might be able to desensitise a youth to direct violence over time by showing them it's 'cool', one can also dissolve the sense of moral responsibility by devaluing the moral claim of sentience - by demonstrating that pain, death or suffering isn't the important thing in morality). We do this, rather unintentionally, with our use of animals.

We teach our children, and we believe ourselves that it is okay to use animals and ignore their sentience, but not to do so to other humans. We essentially teach that it isn't sentience that matters, it is the label of human, and labels do not provide the pull on our consciences that sentience does. It doesn't even come close. **One could argue that the world will never act responsibly toward other individuals while their natural moral capabilities are being neutralised** in this way – if this is the case, how can a campaign against climate change be successful? After all it requires people to act, indirectly in the interests of others. Without sentience, there is no far reaching moral responsibility.

Going vegan, and campaigning on grounds of veganism seems to be the solution to all these issues with the effectiveness of climate change campaigning. The only negative factor is that it seems hard to get people to go vegan, as animal use is so far integrated into society. But 200 years ago, so was something else:

“Thinkers and statesman and leaders and realistic politicians of all stripes believed that slavery could not be ended-not by deliberate human action. Those who supported slavery belligerently asserted that it could not be done; those who deplored slavery sorrowfully granted that it could not be done; those who had unsorted mixtures of opinions – the great majority, let us guess – felt that it could not be done, and did not want to hear about it”<sup>3</sup>

**Past achievements yielded some huge victories from majority moral indifference, the same will happen again. Let's make sure before it's too late.**

<sup>1</sup>“Assessing the Environmental Impacts of Consumption and Production”, UNEP, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>“Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States,” Christopher L. Weber and H. Scott Matthews, Environmental Science and Technology, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>“Arguing about Slavery: The Great Battle in the US Congress”, William Miller, 1996.