

The Joy of Saving the World

Research suggests a surprising motive for environmentalism: feeling good.



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[Liza Featherstone](#)/June 28, 2022

“That Tomato on Your Burger is Warming the Planet,” my morning paper warns. The environmental movement is full of admonitions against many other things that bring us pleasure: big cars, [global travel](#), [babies](#), shopping, [steak](#). Now [even tomatoes](#)—come on! Then there are the appeals to fear and anticipatory grief, meant to provoke panic: So many animals are going to go extinct if I don’t donate today! Bombarded as we are by doomsaying and scolding, it’s easy to think of saving the planet as a grim duty, powered primarily by guilt and fear. But what if it turns out that, in fact, the world’s best hopes lie in an

entirely different emotional register, that of joy and delight?

For people closely attuned to politics, these feelings may seem elusive. But in a not-yet-published study, economist Trisha Shrum found that helping the environment gives many of us a “warm glow”—an amusingly awkward economics term for the feeling of happiness we obtain by helping others.

“Warm glow” scholarship like Shrum’s has, over the last few decades, been helping to complicate the economics profession’s view of human nature as purely self-interested. This line of inquiry began in 1990 with a [study](#) that found that donating to charity gave people a warm glow.

This scholarship suggests that the boundaries between self-interest and altruism aren't tidy: Doing good for others makes us feel good, and we engage in all kinds of pro-social behaviors to get that warm glow, a kind of morally informed dopamine hit.

This might be why environmentalists, despite the dour messaging, “are [actually really happy](#),” says Shrum, who in addition to her academic career is the founder of an environmental nonprofit. “They have a higher level of life satisfaction, counter to the stereotype of the angry environmentalist.” More recently, she says, “we’re starting to see that not only do people feel good about themselves when they do something good for the environment, but this anticipation of that warm glow, the anticipation of feeling good about being green is one of the strongest drivers of pro-environmental behavior.” Those who experience warm glow after a small beneficial act—in her experiment, performing a task that raised money for an environmental organization—want to do more. In other words, says Shrum, the warm glow from environmental action leads people into a “virtuous cycle.” Shrum’s research also suggests that the warm glow can be strengthened and reinforced (by praising and thanking people, making them feel appreciated).

As Shrum notes, the research has “major implications for how we talk about ‘going green.’” Always harping on harm and guilt is, “to use the technical term, a ‘buzzkill,’” says Shrum. It can discourage environmental behavior by making people feel that they shouldn’t feel good about environmental action until their behavior is perfect. Shrum points out that this research—her study and [others like it](#)—complicates the idea that environmentalism is a sacrifice. “Is it really a sacrifice if you get more out of being green than you put into it?”

Shrum’s study hasn’t been peer-reviewed yet, but it’s consistent with [other research](#) in this tiny but intriguing corner of behavioral science. And it certainly resonates with my own experiences.

Like most people, I don’t do enough to help the environment. But I feel good when I compost my cucumber peels and coffee grounds, hassle my city government to expand its composting program, plant pollinators, knock on doors for environmental candidates, attend a protest demanding publicly funded renewables, or write postcards to environmental voters in swing states. When I think about doing these things, I think about how good I’m going to feel, and that helps me overcome feeling lazy, too busy, too discouraged, or too overwhelmed to help. And when other people thank me and tell me how great it was that I did that, I’m more likely to do it again (and it’s true I tend to avoid organizations that use guilt as a prod to action).

As Shrum points out, what amplifies or nourishes your warm glow is probably somewhat individual. I feel more warm glow when I understand how exactly my action is going to help, or when it supports my political analysis of what’s effective. I experience a warmer glow engaging in political actions with friends, as we enjoy each other’s company and reinforce each other’s positive feelings. But others—introverts, or more inner-directed people—might not experience those things the same way.

It seems likely that if people in Shrum’s experiment got a warm glow from such a small action, they might reap even more benefits from greater or deeper involvement. They didn’t experience the social pleasures of activism and may have been too isolated to experience the solidarity of working with others for a common cause. Nor did they reap the enormous rush of being part of a victory. In other words, although it’s somewhat novel to posit environmentalism as a source of joy, there’s even more joy in this movement that hasn’t yet been captured by this research.

Shrum, I should mention, based on my recent Zoom call with her, exudes warm glow. She smiles easily and genuinely and sits close to her camera for a pleasantly casual and intimate

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effect. “How cool would it be,” she asks, “if we figure out the best way to save the planet is to have more joy and have more fun? That’s the best

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ending. Like if I could write the book of *How I Saved the Planet: We Had a Big Party, It Was So Fun.*”