

Is the carbon tax a habit-breaking moment?

Nicola Markus

Everyday lifestyle choices involving energy consumption are driven by habit, says psychology professor, Bas Verplanken. Nicola Markus asks if there are times when breaking old habits and making new ones is easier, and wonders if the introduction of Australia's carbon tax is such a moment.



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People are creatures of habit. In most aspects of life, we develop ways of doing things that we stick to, giving them very little further thought. What we buy, how we travel, how we use energy and how we dispose of waste are a few of the many behavioural routines we follow almost automatically.

But rapid environmental degradation and climate change are prompting a review of our behaviour across the board. Many of the routines and habits that seemed acceptable not long ago are now known to harm the environment. What we do as individuals is amplified by the many millions of people doing the same thing. Unarguably, there is room for improvement.

‘While I do acknowledge that the issue of climate change is probably the most important problem humanity has faced, I surprise myself in my own ability to ignore this.’

Social psychologist Professor Bas Verplanken, head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath in the UK, relayed this telling quote from one of his students to open a recent lecture on behalf of BehaviourWorks at Monash University.

The student’s honest admission demonstrated that merely understanding the problem of climate change does not prompt appropriate responses.

Much current policy designed to encourage pro-environmental behaviour works with the idea of ‘positive spillover’.

This long-held, optimistic theory holds that motivating people to make small changes initially will act as catalyst to larger-scale sustainability over time.

However, problems with this theory arise when people feel that taking pro-environmental steps in some areas warrants cutting themselves some slack in other areas; or when people fail to grasp the true scale of changes necessary to effectively combat the problem. These points were made by another visiting professor – Denmark’s John Thøgersen – [to Australian audiences earlier this year](#).

Prof. Verplanken is less concerned with the up-scaling of behaviour from the individual to the population level than with how behaviour is formed and changed in the first place.

One of the main challenges faced by those promoting care for the environment is that engaging in pro-environmental behaviour competes with the many other priorities jostling for our attention. These include priorities as diverse as social recognition, power, freedom, respect for tradition, social justice and national security.

According to a recent British survey cited by Prof. Verplanken¹, the environment currently limps in at 21st place out of 24 important issues nominated to be of public concern. A similar Australian survey published earlier this year showed that food, crime, health, safety and basic public services rate higher than the environment, and that the last five years have seen it drop in rank.²

Then there are the gaps between our attitudes and intentions, and what we actually do. Although many people feel strongly about the environment and would like to do the right thing by it, life gets in the way. Distractions come up, the best course of action is not always clear, and good intentions are derailed and eventually forgotten.

According to Prof. Verplanken, our environmental behaviour is largely influenced by our habits. A remarkable one-third to one-half of all of our behaviours are habitual: defined by the fact that we perform these behaviours regularly and give them little thought. They are triggered by contextual cues, such as time of day or current location; specific situations; and even by our mood.

As a result, our habitual behaviours are intimately linked to our current circumstances, rather than being the result of careful thought. A parent used to driving the kids to school does so as part of a daily routine, without conscious decision: with lunches made, kids dressed and breakfast over, herding the juniors into the backseat en route to school is simply the next step in a routine. Stopping to consider alternative options, such as car-pooling or public transport, are not often a part of this sequence.

People who were asked to define their habits as part of Prof. Verplanken’s research described them as behaviours that occurred ‘without thinking’ or conscious intent, belonged to their routine, and would take effort *not* to do. And, these characteristics are what make habits hard to change.

So, can unthinking routines be broken? Are there such things as ‘teachable moments’ – windows of opportunity where positive change has a better chance?

Given that most habits are closely linked to context, the best chance of promoting new behaviours seems to be when that context changes. Prof. Verplanken calls these moments of ‘habit discontinuity’: they occur when routines are temporarily broken and have to be renegotiated.

Such moments of habit discontinuity – all of which involve a rethink of the usual ways of doing things – include moving to a new neighbourhood, changing jobs, having children or retiring; changes to infrastructure and legislation; and economic downfall. In each instance, new information has to be taken in and decisions consciously made.

It is not a stretch to see significant increases in the costs of utilities or other essential services as prompts for re-evaluating related habits.

The recent introduction of the carbon tax may provide people with incentives to review energy-expensive habits and consider more efficient alternatives. Just as the onus on large polluters is to reduce emissions to lessen their tax burden, reducing energy consumption around the house and business could lower costs *and* benefit the environment – a win-win situation.

Paying for heating, cooling, lighting, clothes dryers, flat screen TVs, computers and other gadgets may require sacrifices elsewhere: particularly to those with limited means. For many, notifications of increasing electricity rates were accompanied by offers of home energy audits to identify how residents could save energy, and therefore money.

How broadly this opportunity was embraced – and to what extent emissions are being reduced through the carbon tax – remains to be seen.

Events that lead to new routines don't necessarily prompt more sustainable behaviour; in fact, the opposite may be the case. Prof. Verplanken and his colleagues studied the consequences of moving house on the commuting habits of two groups of people: one group was highly concerned for the environment, while the other was much less so.

Following the move, the commuting habits of the group with high environmental concern improved, prompting the question as to whether better public transport was a deliberate consideration in their choice of location. Members of the second, less-interested group made even less of an effort to commute responsibly following their move, entirely missing the potential of this 'teachable moment'.

Prof. Verplanken talks about segmenting people into groups according to their willingness and ability to act.

At the extreme lower end are those that are neither willing nor able to make changes, and who are least likely to be converted to better habits. At the other end are people who are willing and able to act positively, but require varying degrees of reinforcement to convert their intention into greater action.

Other points along the spectrum include groups who recognise the problem, but need help and advice to progress, and those whose behaviour leaves a lot of room for improvement (i.e. people with high-consumption lifestyles), but who have no interest in the environment and need to be given incentives to act.

Prof. Verplanken is not optimistic about our capacity to turn bad environmental habits into better ones. Unlike Prof. Thøgersen, who still advocates the power of the people as the best path to change, Prof. Verplanken points to our lack of progress on this front over the past thirty years. In his view, the rapid change needed to avert disaster must now be driven from the top.

Pointing to the success of the seatbelt and anti-smoking campaigns in the past, Prof. Verplanken emphasises the importance of the 'stick' of legislation and the 'carrots' of technical solutions and infrastructure.

Without these, he warns, the era of humans will come to an end and we will follow the same inevitable path as other complex life-forms before us. RIP, dinosaurs.

Nicola Markus is author of On Our Watch: The Race to save Australia's Environment, Melbourne University Publishing, 2009.

¹ Ipsos/MORI polls, 2011, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive.aspx

² Deviney, T, Auger, P and de Saligny, R. 2012. *What matters to Australians: our social, political and economic values*. A report from the Anatomy of Civil Societies Research Project.

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