

Sustainability (31/05/17)

Web Article

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Sustainability for humanity: It's time to preach beyond the converted

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The mismatch between public opinion and sustainability science is the subject of a new paper from UTS School of Life Sciences, Professor Graham Pyke.

[SCI-News-Ecology-Thinkstock.jpg](#)



Prof. Pyke's research aims to understand ecological, behavioural and evolutionary processes. Image credit: Thinkstock.

A highly cited ecologist, Professor Pyke believes that environmental stewardship is everyone's responsibility, but that, clearly, the message is not getting to the right people.

"You would think that humankind would be actively pursuing a sustainable future, such that we and subsequent generations will be able to continue doing the things we do today at least as well, if not better," Prof Pyke said. "This applies not just to the environment in which we live, but also to our economic system, our society, and human health. These are the four pillars of sustainability."

“Yet before our eyes we are witnessing an ever-expanding human population size, growing per capita resource consumption and increasing impact per unit consumption, all of which combine to determine our overall footprint, with adverse consequences for our planet, our only home.

“Loss of biodiversity, increases in pollution, and global climate disruption are plain to see, along with their negative impacts across all aspects of sustainability,” Prof Pyke said.

It is clear humanity is not heading towards a sustainable future and recent research suggests we are taking an entirely wrong approach in combating this problem. Professor Pyke said researchers seeking to increase awareness and action around sustainability have been overly preaching to congregations of the already converted.

Instead of delivering messages more broadly to the wider population, Professor Pyke believes the current approach contributes to a mismatch between public opinion and sustainability science.

“Paradoxically, as illustrated by climate change – community and political support for action to increase sustainability have been stagnating, despite steeply increasing sustainability research,” he said.

“The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has expressed increasing confidence that climate change is occurring, is largely human-induced, and will have devastating impacts unless we curtail emissions of greenhouse gases.

“Yet, concern or worry in the general worldwide community about climate change has fluctuated markedly, and declined overall,” Prof Pyke said.

Professor Pyke explained this variation in public opinion is affected by several factors, but it has defied explanation. A major reason for this mismatch, he believes, is that scientists and other researchers seeking to increase awareness and action regarding sustainability issues continually target a pro-sustainability audience.

“We need new ways to preach beyond the converted, reaching widest possible audiences with pro-sustainability messages,” said Professor Pyke.

“A reasonable goal would be to provide information promoting sustainability to those who are mis- or under-informed, as well as to those interested in becoming better informed.”

Harnessing new and emerging technologies is key to spreading the sustainability message and Professor Pyke believes social media has an enormous role to play.

“Social media in particular, undoubtedly holds the key to preaching beyond the converted and reaching large audiences,” Prof Pyke said.

“A large and rapidly growing number of people use email and social media platforms, communicating vast amounts of information. Sustainability surely warrants an increasing share of the action.

“We must craft our messages for particular audiences, especially including those not already-converted,” he said.

Professor Pyke maintains we all have a responsibility to move towards a sustainable future. Most importantly, we can vote for and elect representatives who will take pro-sustainability actions and can promote sustainability through how we invest our time and money. Even the smallest of such actions can add up and make the world we live in a better place.

“You, I and others surely have a responsibility, not only to our own wellbeing, but also to promoting sustainability for humanity,” Prof Pyke said.

Prof Pyke also says that he would like to find a way to get pro-sustainability messages to every senior high school student in the world and seeks assistance to achieve this vision.

Sustainability for Humanity: It's Time to Preach beyond the Converted is published in ‘Trends in Ecology and Evolution’ [here](#).

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