The Environmental Crisis and Psychology: Is it time we rolled our sleeves up and got involved?

In the current economic climate you would be forgiven for thinking that the economy is the most pressing issue facing UK and global governance. Yet despite the current overwhelming focus on our banks and the eurozone, the environment is also a pressing issue in contemporary society. For example, there is a general consensus within the scientific community that human actions are contributing to global climate change, ecosystem degradation and natural resource depletion. Yet despite being an issue of unprecedented importance, politicians, and more importantly for us, psychologists, have yet to adequately deal with it.

Yes, ‘ecopsychology’ is making steady progress in theoretically and empirically understanding human–environment relationships, but its focus is not on understanding and engaging with pro-environmental and conservational behaviours. Pockets of research in marketing/consumer psychology have attempted to profile the pro-environmental individual in terms of demographics such as gender, age, ethnicity, occupation and income (see Dolnicar et al., 2008 for a review), and by measuring attitudes to identify the pro-environmental individual (e.g. Singh et al., 2007). Both perspectives offer much to market research, but little is said about those who don’t fit the profile or possess the correct ‘attitudes’. This issue has been addressed to some extent through the emergence of ‘conservation psychology’ (for example see www.conservationpsychology.org), focusing on understanding how people behave toward and value nature. However, much of the research in this field is located in the USA.
In the UK there are a handful of academics attempting to address these issues, such as Chris Spencer, Mark van Vugt, David Uzzell, and Birgitta Gatersleben. I too have recently conducted research for a doctoral thesis looking into the emotional, reflexive and reciprocal experiences of engaging with pro-environmental behaviours. Understanding this allows for a greater appreciation of the reciprocal and experiential elements of engaging with such practices and the positive impact this can have on well-being. This alternative focus appears crucial in facilitating greater levels of engagement for everyone, something fundamental in the context of the current crisis.

However, this type of research is scarce, and often does not filter through to the budding undergraduate or postgraduate student – the majority of institutions place more importance on traditional topics. So whilst psychology is constantly advancing knowledge in areas that are extremely relevant and important to contemporary societies (e.g. prejudice, development, health), what we have here is another contemporary issue of undeniable importance, yet one that remains largely unexplored by psychologists. Surely it is time for psychologists to ‘come out of the woods’, roll up our sleeves and fully engage with the environmental crisis facing all of humankind?

Dr Paul Hanna
University of Brighton

References
