‘You Broke It, You Fix It’ – The Pro-Environmental Behaviours of Individuals and Households.

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In his seminal book on practical ethics, the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, says “One historical principle, often applied in the case of pollution, is ‘You broke it, you fix it’ – also known as ‘The polluter pays’ principle. If a chemical factory pollutes a river, then the owner of the factory is responsible for cleaning up the river.” Holding countries and organisations accountable for their pollution seems logical. However, imagine if the above rule applied to all polluters, including individuals and households. Is it possible to make individuals and families accountable for their environmental pollution?

It is self-evident that individuals and households contribute to the carbon footprint. “A carbon footprint is the total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused directly and indirectly by an individual, organization, event or product.” To understand the extent of a family’s carbon footprint, let us evaluate a hypothetical example of Daisy Brown ‘s family. Daisy is 35 years old, Australian and working as a middle-level executive in a multinational corporation. She lives with her husband and their two school-going children in their family home, a four-bedroom house, in an upmarket suburb twenty kilometres away from a metropolitan city centre in Australia. She drives a mid-sized Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) to work five days a week. Her husband has a large-sized diesel SUV; he drives to work in the city after dropping their kids to school, which is 30 kilometres away from their home.

According to the nature.org calculations, the carbon footprint of Daisy’s family would range from 60 to 100 tons of CO2 a year. To put things into perspective, if total CO2 emissions in Australia were 414,988,700 tons in 2016, and households contribute 12 per cent of the emissions in Australia (4, 979, 864 tons of CO2), it is evident from the above data that Individuals and families contribute a sizeable portion of the per capita carbon emission of a country. Therefore, we are all polluters contributing significantly to global warming.

Going by the maxim, 'You broke it, you fix it', there are diverse ways to reduce one's personal carbon footprint, ranging from carpooling to a vegan diet. While these are relevant and useful measures, a more sustained and transformative change in behaviour is warranted to address the full extent of the problem.

According to Ken Peattie, pro-environmental behaviours consist of "purchase choice, product use and post-use, household management, collective, and consumer activism behaviours, reflecting some degree of environmental-related motivation." In other words, pro-environmental and green consumption behaviour encompasses careful oversight of all consumption-related and other routine activities with some motivation to protect the natural environment. At a fundamental level, as Anja Kollmuss & Julian Agyeman argue "...'pro-environmental behaviour'... simply means behaviour that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one's actions on the natural and built world."

Of course, for individuals and families, it is impossible not to pollute, but we definitely can minimise its extent. There are pro-environmental choices available in every decision that we make in our lives. Going back to the example of Daisy's family, they could opt for a smaller house that uses less energy to heat and cool (high electricity usage is one of the primary cause of household carbon footprint). They could drive a small electric car and carpool to work. ("The average passenger car emits 0.79 pounds of CO2 per mile driven"). They could also try to reduce the family's meat consumption and encourage the kids to eat healthier plant-based food ("Food accounts for 10 – 30% of a household's carbon footprint"). In other words, Daisy's family has choices.

A recent survey found that out of 65 % of the respondents who supported green consumption, only 26 % ended becoming green consumers. Specifically, there is a possible attitude behaviour gap in a green consumption context. In this gap, policymakers and organisations can play a critical role in encouraging pro-environmental practices like green consumption in communities. Katherine White, David Hardisty and Rishad Habib in their Harvard Business Review (HBR) article suggested the following three strategies to overcome this apparent gap in green consumption.

1. **Use Social Influence**

Social influences impact green consumption habits. Informing consumers that some people in the neighbourhood have embraced green behaviour, for example, recycling electronics waste would encourage others to emulate this behaviour. Social marketing campaigns with similar messages would be useful tools to promote green consumption practices in communities. Maria Ferreira Sequeda and Roos van den Wijngaard have observed that social factors such as peers' behaviour strongly encourage pro-environmental behaviour. They argue that observing others caring about the environment makes individuals feel socially responsible and more likely to imitate such behaviour.

2. **Shape Good Habits**

Encouraging pro-environmental habits in the market place is a critical initiative. David Hardisty and Rishad Habib suggest three techniques, "using prompts, providing feedback, and offering incentives", to encourage green habits. For example, energy providers could send text messages to their customers on the importance and methods of energy saving in their homes. Energy providers could also provide feedback on energy used and saved in each billing cycle compared to previous cycles and also the energy savings of neighbours during the same period (a widely accepted practice in Australia). Energy providers also could offer incentives such as reduced rates for increased energy savings.

3. **Leverage the Domino Effect**

Encouraging a customer to initiate pro-environmental behaviour could trigger a spill-over and snowballing effect. For example, energy-saving actions such as buying LED light bulbs could lead to purchasing other similar energy-saving devices at home, such as energy-efficient refrigerators, washing machines, and the like.

In conclusion, individuals and households are as responsible as their corporate counterparts for their carbon footprint. However, while individuals and households cannot usually fix the damage done in the past, they have plenty to offer in containing the current and future carbon footprints by embracing pro-environmental behaviours, such as green consumer behaviour.

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