

A photograph of a penguin standing on a large, sculpted ice formation in a blue ocean. The ice is a deep blue color, and the penguin is small in comparison to the massive scale of the ice. The text "Psychology and the environment" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Psychology  
and the  
environment

Psychology is the key to solving our global environmental problems. We have a beautiful planet, with an amazing diversity of species, and many incredible wild places. These are under increasing threat, despite sixty years of modern conservation effort and the raising of environmental awareness. Billions of human beings are the cause of these problems, so it follows that we must look to ourselves for a solution. Addressing the symptoms has its place, but a deeper approach is required to get to the root cause of what has gone wrong. Significant behavioural changes must happen, prompted by a new mindset. We need to unlock our human potential. Until we do this, any progress will be minimal at best - and, at worst, the situation will decline further.

Technological fixes will be required as well. For example, fusion generators could create massive amounts of clean energy - but this is likely to be another few decades away from becoming a commercial reality. Even if such an application of science provides a solution to climate change, the natural world will still remain under immense pressure. A new source of abundant clean energy won't influence the sheer number of people that results in overpopulation. Nor will it curb the greed of excessive consumption. The plague of billions of human beings is akin to a mass locust infestation; desires and other forms of self-interest are out of control. Whereas many of us might have joked about the use of something stronger than insecticide to reduce our impact, the idea is a non-starter simply because it's inhumane. We must turn to psychology for a solution.

The ubiquitous strategy of psychological avoidance has free rein. It's almost always unacknowledged and unchecked - the biggest elephant in the room, together with hypocrisy. It's a deceptively simple strategy: you avoid what you want to avoid. There are various ways you can shut off or ignore. You can make excuses, deflect blame onto a scapegoat, minimise the importance of something, trivialise it by employing misplaced humour, intellectualise a topic but distance yourself from practical involvement, conveniently develop forgetfulness, or just deny whatever you don't want to face. Distractions help you avoid; they divert attention onto something less emotionally challenging.

One basic consequence of avoidance is the distortion of reality. Your avoidance twists or limits how much of reality you admit, recognise, and take into consideration when thinking. You see only what you want to see, hear only what you choose to hear. It's like being partially blind or deaf, intentionally - yet you claim "It wasn't me!" You refuse to take responsibility for this infantile inadequacy, learning to become "clever" in case you find yourself on the proverbial hook. This all means that your processing of information will be unreliable. You'll overlook some aspect or degree of reality, leading to a miscalculation. And the biggest consequence of all is that you'll block a fullness of relationship with reality.

If you want to solve any problem, environmental or otherwise, a good starting point is to face up to the existence of the problem. Then you need to assess the severity of the situation. If you're a doctor or nurse, for example, does the patient need a sticky plaster or major surgery? If you get either of these two basics wrong, you're in trouble. Anything less than facing reality is unprofessional and irresponsible - although your friend, avoidance, is always at hand to help you deny that this is the case, deflecting the fact that you're to blame.

Another major consequence of avoidance is that poor thinking skills are accepted. This isn't rocket science: dumbing down leads to dumbness. When rational thinking is compromised or limited, emotional eruptions become admissible ammunition in a debate. Why bother to diligently work something out using precise logic, when you can just throw in an emotional "Whatever!?!!" at any point when your opinion is being shown to be inadequate or failing. When you really start to struggle, you can always turn up the heat even more, tossing additional hand grenades of greater emotional disruptive power. Hell, it's easy.

There are various dubious tactics when you're prepared to play dirty, ignoring the integrity of understanding. You can move the goalposts, again and again if necessary, or run the clock down. Your opponent will sooner or later give up if you keep on hammering away. It's easier to wear someone down than to attempt real education. Don't concede that you might be partially wrong, even when you've been blatantly caught out as ignorant.

Before long, you work out that others are more or less as insecure as you, so why not exploit their vulnerabilities too? Even the fool can be equal in such an idiocracy. And, if you learn to be a "cool fool", you might even become popular. Start a protest. Give people false hope to compensate for their frustration and sense of powerlessness. But keep it easy and superficial, whilst pretending to care. Most can't be bothered to find out what's really the case, so you can be liberal with those "facts".

When almost everyone's using a mixture of thinking and emotion, the mess is normalised. Some groups might have limits to what is tolerable, but avoidance has nevertheless already become rooted as the nettle in the garden. It quickly spreads through laziness, and can dominate. You then justify the neglect, claiming it's a "wild garden".

You can lead the proverbial horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Or think. Or link. You can make an attempt to educate, saying "You're seeing double." But someone in avoidance will always respond with "That's impossible! If I was seeing double, there'd be four suns in the sky instead of two!" Emotion allows a never-ending circle, with no rational outcome. Delusion is "easier" than facing reality, and it quickly becomes a habit. Anything can be justified, then normalised, when rigorous enquiry and logical understanding are compromised.

With the above in mind, it's not difficult to unravel and see what's gone wrong in the environmental movement. Go back to the Earth Summit of 1992 and you'll find that the aim of "environmental sustainability" was sabotaged, dumbed down into "sustainable development". Rather than being laughed out of the room, this dodgy compromise became the new mantra. But how can there be "sustainable development" whilst humans are fixated on "I want more"? It's unrealistic, an intellectually-clever fudge, that merely kicks the proverbial can further down the road.

Why did most people fail to see the problem? Avoidance and normalisation. The self-orientated psychology is accepted as the norm. This learned selfishness is only conditioned behaviour - which can be questioned and changed, but isn't. Instead, there's just the blind compliance of joining the global club. Talk about "missing the point"; this is the Mother of All Conspiracies (knowingly or unknowingly). The vested interest of "me, first" - whether it is on a governmental, organisational, or individual level - can always be "trusted" to steer anything towards a biased, less-than-best outcome. If you look beyond the pretence, the world is a group of Disunited Nations. And with global selfishness, shouldn't this be expected? Anyone who decides to open up their eyes, removing the conditioned blinkers, will realise this for what it is. It's become convoluted through the smokescreen of "sophistication", but the self-orientated psychology and accompanying avoidance isn't rocket science. Anyone can work it out, freeing themselves from the restrictive ball and chain.

Tokenism is usually the approach of both governments and non-government organisations (NGOs). It's easy to focus campaigning attention for a while on one small problem, offering a quick-fix "solution". But the approach is usually fallible, with questionable "benefits", and little more than a fashionable distraction. It's a bit like offering a sticky plaster when major surgery is required.

Rubbish embarrassingly gets shipped across the world in the name of “recycling”, instead of being burnt in modern energy-from-waste incinerators to produce electricity and hot water. The concept of “green taxes” means that we’re just taxed more; they don’t really work. NGOs struggle to justify their ineffective and inefficient existence (which is the subject of another essay). Governments are content to go along with funding a few environmental tweaks here and there, whilst the bulk of their spending goes on major development projects. Consumers keep on consuming, because distractions are needed to stop the mental health crisis becoming a complete breakdown. It’s a superficial and sick society.

Conveniently, NGOs focus a lot of effort on raising public awareness. It’s an “easy” option. But how much more “aware” do people need to become? Whereas awareness is necessary, of course, it should not be confused with achievement. Translating awareness into practical action takes a lot of hard work and capability, so you can see why most are shy and fall short of doing what’s necessary.

It all continues to get more and more congested as the human population keeps going up and up. I’m aged 63 and, shortly after I was born, the world was already getting seriously overcrowded with a staggering 3 billion people. This became 4 billion by 1975 as the Vietnam war ended, then 5 billion in 1987 when the song *With Or Without You* by U2 was released. I wrote *What Will It Take? A Deeper Approach To Nature Conservation* in late 1998, published in 1999 as the overpopulation crisis escalated further to 6 billion. The disturbing figure of 7 billion was reached in 2011 as the TV series *Game of Thrones* was premiered. Now, as I’m writing this essay in November 2020, we’ve gone beyond 7.8 billion. I wrote a whole chapter on “Too many people” in *What Will It Take? A Deeper Approach To Nature Conservation*, so I’m not going to repeat myself here. But it’s crucial to appreciate that the environmental problem is a mathematical one. We could be very, very wasteful and greedy if there were only a few of us. However, the accumulative effect of billions of people is massive. And it’s psychology, again, which stops this problem from being addressed. NGOs are worried about bringing up the subject in case it causes “offence”, which might result in their funding going down.

Meanwhile, as I and others predicted, huge numbers of animal and plant species are still being hammered. More are joining the obscene listings of rare, vulnerable, threatened, critically endangered, and extinct. Their natural environments are being damaged, degraded, and destroyed at an alarming rate. Whilst humans exploit and have access to the whole world, many wild species are restricted to nature reserves or national parks. It’s tokenism again - albeit better than nothing. Decades ago, I suggested a total re-think: that it should be us who, willingly, must limit ourselves within “human parks” or designated areas. This would leave the bulk of planet Earth to be wild, with our fellow species free and able to continue their struggle for future evolution. We’d also benefit, in terms of improved psychological health, by visiting these gigantic wild zones - much as we currently make trips to national parks and other reserves, leaving nothing more than footprints and taking only photographs. But it would happen without the large and noisy tourist crowds, including those overland trucks and air-conditioned coaches, that nowadays spoil an authentic safari experience. It would take place with considerable taste and greater respectfulness, no longer catering for the masses as part of a package holiday.

Climate change means more volatile extremes of weather, and perhaps holidaying in Costa del Blackpool rather than more traditional destinations further south in Spain, Greece, France, Italy, Portugal, etc. We expected more periods of drought at our own 30,700-acre Komsberg Wilderness Nature Reserve in South Africa when we established it in 2002. We made the short YouTube film *Drought* in 2018, followed by *Fifth Year of Drought* and *Rain Dance* in early 2019. When we’ve dared to think a few times that it might finally be over, we’ve been proved wrong. The long, severe drought has shockingly continued, almost two more years as of now; our reserve is still suffering extreme hardship, together with the surrounding

region. As I wrote earlier in this essay, I suspect that new technology will eventually fix the particular problem of climate change - but how many species will meanwhile be lost, their habitats ravaged? Yes, nature will one day bounce back when the human pressures lessen, just as it has after previous mass extinction periods, but that's not the point. We have to face up to how we are, taking the consequences seriously. Selfishness is a lousy survival strategy - just think of the wars and armed conflicts for a start. The dysfunctional psychology and resulting behaviour causes untold suffering for us, as well as being problematic for the environment. The stakes are high. We must rise to the challenge.

Henry David Thoreau, the early American conservationist, commented "For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root." He was, of course, correct. A deeper approach is needed. We need a paradigm shift in thinking, feeling, behaving. The self-orientated mindset must be challenged - seen for what it is: dysfunctional, problematic, limited, and outdated. Educationally, we have to change and move on. There is the far better alternative of a non-selfish psychology. It's a pragmatic and evidence-based approach, with no belief required. This more mature way of being offers huge improvements for all, including clearer thinking, greater caring, and capability. It's a win-win situation for both humans and the natural world. It's time for the human species to make a conscious step forward in our own evolution. The current *Homo sapiens* level is intelligent but nevertheless semi-primitive. We have to overcome - and thereby end - our destructive behaviour.

Until the current "me, me, me" psychology loses its self-obsessed appeal, very little will change. Being blunt, people will care far more for their brand new kitchen, perhaps focused on dealing with their state of poor mental health, or hoping that their football club will do better this season than last, or be consumed with finding someone to love, etc etc. Any concern for the tigers, giant pandas, mountain gorillas, rhinos, elephants, whales, and so on will come a distant second as an after-thought. There might be some spare time for going on a protest march or to occasionally volunteer (especially when single and lonely), but real dedication to making a significant difference is seen as "beyond" what is "reasonable" for the vast majority.

My fellow conservationists were full of hope for "the next generation" twenty to thirty years ago. The youngsters were more aware than we had been at an early age. Once young adults, they were "going to make a difference". I was pretty much a lone voice at the time, challenging the popular assumption. A crucial factor was being overlooked: the same youngsters were becoming increasingly spoilt. They were getting the "wrong" make of bicycle from their parents for Christmas, and demanding that "cool" £100+ pair of trainers. Most of them ended up by adulthood as snowflakes, hiding behind mental health labels when it was merely the overdiagnosis of poor behavioural choices. They can barely help themselves and simply do not have what it takes to tackle the difficult problems of nature conservation and the environment. If you put them on Komsberg's perimeter fence line with our colleague Victoria (aka the Goddess of Precipitation of *Rain Dance*), most university graduates wouldn't last the week; our nature reserve is too real and the hard work is demanding. Despite their "higher education", they're actually full of bullshit - which makes them metaphorically deaf, as in "Those who danced were thought to be quite insane by those who couldn't hear the music."

A few, however, thankfully see through the bullshit and are wary of the pointless rat race. But who and where do they turn to for joining a better way? A small handful look for and find our two organisations - Wildlife For All and The Human Potential Trust - perhaps applying for interview. It's then a question of can they be sufficiently honest about their psychological baggage, willing to learn how to overcome it on a step-by-step basis, and become capable?

Clench your fist, as hard as possible, now. This is representative of normal psychology: tight, grabbing, limited. Now relax your clenched fist. This is how you can loosen the grip of selfishness. Of course, how to actually do it is a bit more involved, but you hopefully get the idea. As someone shifts from the self-orientated psychology towards non-selfishness, a number of benefits start to happen. Rational thinking improves. You begin to get off yourself, thereby more able to genuinely care for others and the wider world. And, as you increasingly face reality, plus employ our other key factors for being the best you can be, you become an all-round capable individual. The word “capability” is usually overlooked by conservationists and environmentalists, yet this practical quality is essential if you want to help nurture change.

Human behaviour, underpinned and prompted by the current psychology, is what causes the world’s environmental problems. If you don’t face this fact, acknowledging that you are a part of the problem, then progress is a non-starter. Any real solution involves you first recognising that you need to change, to become a part of the solution, followed by actually doing so. Glibly believing the Mahatma Gandhi quote “You must be the change you wish to see in the world” isn’t enough. As they say: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Rather, it takes our no-nonsense, “nuts and bolts” approach. Plus developing a clear understanding that psychological avoidance will frustrate any attempt to change. And by “change”, I’m talking about a significant amount or degree. “Doing a little bit” is just tokenism - and it won’t even begin to budge the ingrained stubbornness of selfishness.

Iain Scott, December 2020

<https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org>

<https://www.wildlifeforall.org>

Essays in this second short series:

*Mental health: What’s gone wrong?*

*A deeper approach to self-image*

*Love matters: How to build a better relationship*

*Psychology and the environment*

*Food for thought: a no-nonsense guide to being a vegetarian*

*Why do we work non-paid? The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of charities*

*Formal education: a re-think*