

## Moving from Individual Change to Societal Change

*Annie Leonard*

In one of the most iconic ads of the twentieth century, a Native American (actually, it was an Italian dressed up as a Native American) canoes through a river strewn with trash. He disembarks and walks along the shore as the passenger in a car driving past throws a bag of litter out the window. As the camera zooms in to a single tear rolling down his cheek, the narrator announces, “People start pollution. People can stop it.”<sup>1</sup>

This 1971 ad, just a year after the first national Earth Day celebration, had a huge impact on a generation awakening to environmental concerns. Children and young adults watched it over and over, shared the faux-Indian’s grief, and vowed to make changes in their individual lives to stop pollution. That response was exactly what the ad’s creators hoped for: individual action. For the ad was produced not by a campaign to protect the environment but by a campaign to protect the garbage-makers themselves.

In 1953, a number of companies involved in making and selling disposable beverage containers created a front group that they maintain to this day, called Keep America Beautiful (KAB). Since the beginning, KAB has worked diligently to ensure that waste was seen as a problem solved by improved individual responsibility, not stricter regulations or bottle bills. It even coined the term “litterbug” to identify the culprit—individuals. By spreading slogans like “people start pollution, people can stop it,” KAB effectively shifted attention away from those who design, produce, market, and profit from all those single-use disposable bottles and cans that were ending up in rivers and on roadsides. As part of this effort, KAB created the infamous “crying Indian” ad against litter.<sup>2</sup>

It worked. Over the last few decades, the theme of the individual’s role in wrecking the environment, and the individual’s responsibility in fixing it, has only grown stronger—driven not just by KAB but by hundreds of businesses, by the government, even by well-meaning individuals and organizations. Today, lists of “10 simple things you can do to save the envi-

Annie Leonard is the host and author of the Internet film and book, *The Story of Stuff*, and codirector of The Story of Stuff Project.

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ronment” abound. The *Lazy Environmentalist* website will send you regular emails with tips on greening your shopping and household maintenance, implying that we really can save the environment without even breaking a sweat. Recyclebank, which is sponsored by Coca-Cola, rewards individuals for increasing their use and recycling of single-use beverage containers and other packaging. Participants who throw more single-use containers into the recycling bin are rewarded with more points—points that can be used to go shopping.<sup>3</sup>

Picking up litter, carrying reusable bags to the store, biking instead of driving—all these are good things to do and there are many reasons to do them. They demonstrate our concern to those around us, hopefully providing inspiration and social proof for friends and neighbors to follow our lead. Greening our small daily acts brings into alignment our values and our actions, which feels good. As political science professor Michael Maniates says, “Small, everyday acts of green consumption are important moments of ‘mindful living’: they serve as daily reminders of our values, and of the larger struggles before us. But these individual actions are puny when compared to the challenges before us, and can’t achieve the kind of change we desperately need today.” As explained in *The Story of Change*, the latest Internet film by The Story of Stuff Project, these small actions are a fine place to start. But they are a terrible place to stop.<sup>4</sup>

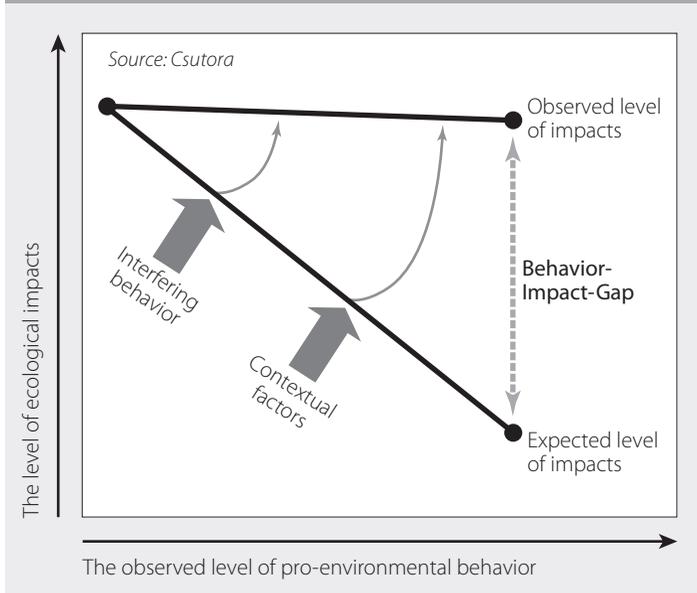
## The Behavior-Impact Gap

Even if we could convince everyone to make all the adjustments advocated by the *Lazy Environmentalist* or the “10 simple things” lists, it simply would not significantly change our environmental trajectory—which is headed toward an ecological cliff. Maria Csutora of Corvins University in Budapest has studied the gap between pro-environment attitudes and behaviors and actual environmental impacts, a problem she calls the Behavior-Impact Gap, or BIG, problem. (See Figure 23–1.) The BIG problem occurs when green-oriented behavior change is adopted with the expectation of making change, but little or no positive environmental impact follows.<sup>5</sup>

Csutora explains that the “BIG problem means that even when consumers act in an environmentally aware manner, their carbon footprint or ecological footprint may improve only slightly, if at all. Wishful thinking about prospective gains from pro-environmental behavior is common, which is actually more a policy-making problem than a consumer behavior problem.” The result, in Csutora’s words, is that “environmental actions may serve as green means for relieving our guilty ecological consciences without actually or genuinely reducing impacts.”<sup>6</sup>

There are many theories as to why the BIG problem exists. Some scientists attribute the lack of meaningful impact of all these green activities to

Figure 23–1. The Behavior-Impact Gap (BIG) Problem



the rebound effect: our tendency to increase our use of more-efficient appliances. The most common example of this is the driver who gets a new hybrid car, doubling his gas mileage, but then ends up doubling the miles driven in part because driving is relatively cheaper, cancelling out the benefit. Or the urban dweller who, able to live a car-free lifestyle, uses the thousands of dollars she saves each year from not owning a car to take an exotic far-off vacation, burning more carbon in one week than she would have in an entire year of driving.

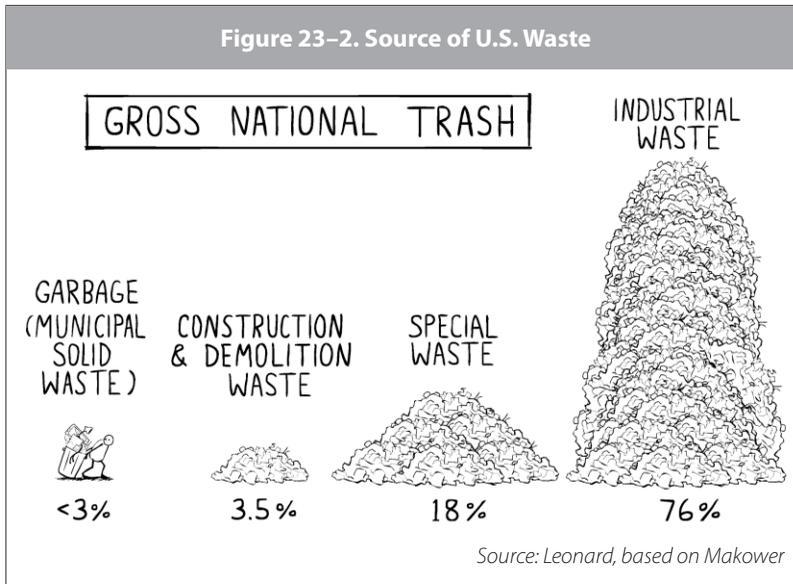
Others point out that individuals may think they are engaging in pro-environment behavior, such as buying shampoo with the terms

“natural” or “organic” on the label, when in reality the products they buy do not differ in environmental impacts from conventional products. Or people may decrease one environmentally destructive behavior with good intentions, only to offset the gains by increasing a different and more destructive activity. An example of this is the individual who decreases meat consumption out of environmental concern, only to then increase consumption of imported nuts that may have a greater carbon footprint than local meat.

Unfortunately, even if we overcome the rebound effect, if we really do decrease our driving, stop littering, and refuse plastic carry bags—which are all good things to do—the broader impacts are still negligible, since day-to-day individual actions do not contribute the bulk of today’s environmental harm.

Take garbage. Many conscientious householders are going to extremes to reduce their household garbage generation. A number of “Zero Waste” families have been profiled in the popular press after reducing their annual household garbage production to a single bag.<sup>7</sup>

Reducing waste in our daily lives is surely a good thing to do. Recycling reduces household waste sent to landfills and incinerators and creates jobs. The catch is that the garbage coming out of U.S. households accounts for less than 3 percent of the country’s total waste. (See Figure 23–2.) If we focus the bulk of our attention on reducing waste in our kitchens, we miss the much larger potential to promote reducing waste in our industries and



businesses—where it is truly needed. And if someone really wants to work on reducing household waste, civic organizing to get a mandatory curbside recycling and composting program is a far more effective way to increase recycling and reduce waste than trying to maintain an eco-perfect household. But this focus on individual behavior is exactly where the companies behind Keep America Beautiful hoped to channel public concern about waste.<sup>8</sup>

Framing environmental deterioration as the result of poor individual choices—littering, leaving the lights on when we leave a room, failing to car-pool—not only distracts us from identifying and demanding change from the real drivers of environmental decline. It also removes these issues from the political realm to the personal, implying that the solution is in our personal choices rather than in better policies, business practices, and structural context. Environmental decline is framed as the result of an epidemic of bad individual choices rather than of an economic, regulatory, and physical infrastructure that facilitates environmentally destructive activities over environmentally restorative ones. And the solution, then, is to perfect our own day-to-day choices rather than build political power to change the context, making environmentally beneficial actions the new default.

Describing today's environmental problems and solutions as individual issues also has a disempowering effect, leaving people to feel that their greatest power lies in perfecting their daily choices. Traditionally, the main strategies used to influence individual choice on environmental issues have focused on providing information and persuasion rather than working together to change the context in which the choices are made. As University of Califor-

nia at Santa Cruz sociology professor Andrew Szasz explains, this focus on changing individual behavior in response to environmental concerns is a strange, new, mutant form of environmentalism. There is awareness of hazard, a feeling of vulnerability, of being at risk. That feeling, however, does not lead to political action aimed at reducing the amounts or the variety of toxics present in the environment. It leads, instead to individualized acts of self-protection, to just trying to keep those contaminants out of one's body. And that is not irrational if one feels that there is nothing to be done, that conditions will not change, cannot be changed. I think, therefore, that we can describe this as a resigned or fatalistic expression of environmental consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

### Making Change—Past, Present, and Future

If perfecting our everyday individual choices is not the answer to creating a sustainable society, what is? Clearly, much needs to change beyond the level of our individual actions. Society-wide, we need to implement new technologies, cultural norms, infrastructure, policies, and laws. Many of these already exist, so the problem is less about inventing new ways to do things than about building the political power to demand them.

Consider some previous movements for major social change: in the United States, the civil rights and United Farm Workers of America movements, as well as national-level environmental victories of the 1970s, and internationally the South African anti-apartheid movement and the Indian Independence Movement. In each case organizers did appeal to the public to change their daily actions. Throughout the civil rights movement, supporters were asked to patronize black-owned businesses and avoid shopping at segregated ones. Millions heeded Cesar Chavez's call to boycott California grapes in protest of farmworker conditions. During the 1970s, in the wake of *Silent Spring* and the first Earth Day, people were asked to choose pesticide-free produce and to save newspapers for recycling. Around the world, opponents of South Africa's apartheid system boycotted companies invested in that racist regime. And most people have heard of Mahatma Gandhi's famous pleas to buy Indian-made *swadeshi* goods rather than imported British ones.

But the organizers in each of these movements did not stop with pleas for individuals to make different shopping choices. They did not argue that individual people cause segregation or British colonialism and that different individual behaviors can stop these wrongs. They shared a compelling vision of how things could be better, they worked together as engaged citizens, and they changed the rules of the game. The calls for changes in individual behavior were tactical elements within broader political campaigns—campaigns that engaged people as citizens working together, using the range

of tools available to them, including protesting, lobbying, legal action, economic sanctions, creating alternatives, and civil disobedience.

Integrated into broader political campaigns, calls to alter a person's individual choices can be used to educate and recruit supporters and to demonstrate commitment—all good tactical steps toward real victories. But too many of today's "green living" advocates are missing the broader political strategies that would enable the small acts to be more than just symbolic, feel-good activities.

A vigorous debate is currently under way about whether greening our daily individual acts leads people to the kind of deeper civic engagement that makes meaningful change or instead lulls them into a false sense of security and accomplishment. In other words, are these individual acts "on-ramps" to greater engagement, or are they "dead ends"?<sup>10</sup>

This debate has existed as long as campaigners have been extolling individuals to get involved in working for change. In the early nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, for example, "Free Produce" activists called on people to go out of their way to avoid purchasing goods made with slave labor. While the Free Produce approach was initially welcome in the broader campaign to end slavery, a growing number of abolitionists began questioning it as ineffective and distracting from the political work, which promised greater results. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison argued that Free Produce advocates were "so occupied by abstinence as to neglect THE GREAT MEANS of abolishing slavery."<sup>11</sup>

In his history of consumer activism in America, *Buying Power*, Lawrence Glickman explains that Garrison felt the Free Produce movement was a dead end because shoppers had "'a pretext to do nothing more for the slave because they do so much' in the exhausting efforts to find non-slave-made goods and the uncomfortable job of wearing and eating them. In other words, even if it were possible to divest oneself of all slave-made goods, the quest for what one free produce advocate called 'clean hands' diverted energy from the antislavery struggle by shifting the focus to what amounted to a selfish obsession with personal morality."<sup>12</sup>

Academics and activists on both sides of this debate have amassed studies documenting that small acts hasten or distract from greater engagement. It seems that the most honest answer is that it depends. Some people start with separating waste for recycling and move on to campaign for their local government to implement curbside recycling programs and to pressure companies to make products more recyclable. Others start recycling, and then stop worrying about waste—even increase the waste they produce—comforted by the fact that they can now put more in the recycling bin and are even rewarded for doing so if they live in a community partnering with Recyclebank. Rather than get stuck in this on-ramp versus dead-end debate,

people concerned about transitioning to a sustainable society need to clearly and consistently link calls for individual action to bigger visions and bolder campaigns to ensure the individual first steps become on-ramps to making meaningful change.<sup>13</sup>

## Making Broader Change

While making change in our kitchens may be easy, figuring out how to make change in larger communities and in broader societies is less so. The question ultimately revolves around what it takes to bring about change. Looking back over case studies where change has happened, it seems that change almost always involves at least three things.

First, there is a big idea of how things could be better. To move people beyond the easy green actions, we need to put forward an inspiring, morally compelling, powerful, and inviting vision comparable to that in transformative social movements of the past—compelling enough that people are eager to work long and hard to achieve it, because that is what it is going to take. Fortunately, we have that: Let's build a new economy that puts people and the planet first. Let's aim for nothing less than healthy, happy communities and a clean and thriving environment. Let's ensure that economic activity serves the goals of public health and well-being, environmental sustainability, and social justice rather than undermining them in the name of growth and profit.

Second, there needs to be a commitment to move beyond individual actions. Once we have a compelling vision, we need to join with others to build the power necessary to make it real. Building a mass movement strong enough to achieve the level of change needed is an inherently collective endeavor. To do this, we've got to reach beyond the traditional environmental community to create what Vermont Law School professor Gus Speth calls a "Progressive Fusion":

Coming together is imperative because all progressive causes face the same reality. We live and work in a system of political economy that cares profoundly about profit and growth and about international power and prestige. It cares about society and the natural world in which it operates primarily to the extent the law requires. So the progressive mandate is to inject values of justice, democracy, sustainability, and peace into this system. And our best hope for doing this is a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, true democracy, and peace into one powerful progressive force. We have to recognize that we are all communities of a shared fate. We will rise or fall together, so we'd better get together.<sup>14</sup>

Good old-fashioned organizing basics, combined with new social media and networking tools, make it easier than ever to connect with others in

our own neighborhoods or around the world to build that powerful unified force for change.

And third, action must follow. Right now, high percentages of people—in most cases a significant majority—support a cleaner environment, safer products, and a better functioning democracy, but these people are not yet actively working for change. The missing ingredient is not more information or more individual eco-perfectionists, it is collective engagement for political and structural change. Once we have a vision and a commitment to work together, there are an almost infinite number of ways to take action beyond the individual level: join or form an organization, draft legislation, gather signatures, litigate to stop a problem and advance a solution, launch campaigns to get companies to change their practices, run for office, write articles and educational material, invite others to join, organize protests and parades to make your opinion visible, engage in nonviolent civil disobedience, and much, much more.

There are already stellar examples of coalitions of groups doing just this—tackling a variety of environmental and social issues, from chemical pollution to climate change. The Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families Coalition in the United States, for example, includes 440 organizations representing more than 11 million individuals concerned about toxic chemicals in their homes, workplaces, and products. Members include parents, health professionals, advocates for people with learning and developmental disabilities, reproductive health advocates, environmentalists, community-based organizations, and businesses from across the nation. Yes, they offer advice on identifying and avoiding toxin-containing products, but their work focuses on advocacy campaigns for stronger policies and laws, along with market campaigns to affect broader shifts in the industry. Campaign director Andy Igrejas explains: “You can’t shop your way around the problem and you shouldn’t have to. There is no app for the kind of change we need. The problem is large and pervasive enough that we need broad changes in policy and by companies themselves. Consumer action can be a tool in that process—to send a message to a particular company for example—but it is not a substitute.”<sup>15</sup>



Gigie Cruz/GAIA

GAIA members and allies conduct a waste audit at Manila Bay to support their campaign for better enforcement of Philippine waste policies.

Another example, the international climate change campaign 350.org, was founded around the idea that individual action is not going to be enough to solve the climate crisis. It is going to take a movement. The group's first day of action in 2009 brought together over 5,200 events in 181 countries, what CNN called "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history." Instead of changing lightbulbs, people dove underwater with banners carrying climate change messages, hung signs off mountains, biked by the hundreds through their capitols, and found other creative ways to take action together and make their voices heard. Since then, 350.org has continued to push the boundaries of traditional environmentalists, from organizing the world's largest climate art exhibit to getting more than 1,200 people arrested in front of the White House over several weeks to protest the Keystone XL pipeline—a 4,300 kilometer (1,700-mile) fuse to the largest carbon bomb on the planet, the Canadian tar sands. As 350.org founder Bill McKibben says, "First change your politicians, then worry about your lightbulbs."<sup>16</sup>

The Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) is a leading catalyst for change in an area where historically most effort has been directed toward changing individual actions: waste. This global network promotes Zero Waste by providing its members with advice on setting up composting and local recycling programs while it simultaneously lobbies governments around the world to end subsidies for polluting waste incineration and to adopt ambitious policies to reduce all kinds of waste. According to GAIA U.S. coordinator Monica Wilson, "Providing tips for reducing waste at the individual level is important since many of our members come to us eager to get started right away in their own lives, but we know that real solutions to waste can't be achieved at the individual level alone. Ultimately we need stronger standards and laws, as well as shifts in societal and cultural norms, to achieve the solutions we know are possible."<sup>17</sup>

The good news is that we have everything we need to make big change in the years ahead. We have model policies and laws. We have innovative green technologies to help with the transition. We have an informed and concerned public; millions and millions of people know there is a problem and want a better future. The only thing we are missing is widespread citizen action on the issues we already care about. As American author and activist Alice Walker says, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." Our real power lies not in perfecting our ability to choose from items on a limited menu but in deciding what gets on that menu. Let's ensure that all the options offered move us closer to sustainability and justice. That is the kind of change we need. And we can only get it by working together.<sup>18</sup>