

The Relationship Between Humans and the Environment From The Latvian Perspective

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Environmental science and the issues that it seeks to resolve have become a focal point of interest not only for scientists, but also for an increasingly wider public. This public interest has grown due the growing conviction (based on people's accrued knowledge and experience) that the effect of human activities on the environment and its processes is no less significant than the effect of the environment on people and their activities.

Nowadays, increasing importance is being accorded to the so-called concept of ecological or environmental citizenship,ⁱ which is designed to promote environmental and social sustainability. In other words, people are being urged to act for the good of the public in the field of the environment. This entails the concept of social responsibility towards both the living and non-living environment, along with the implementation of a sensible consumer philosophy.

The concept of a consumer society is usually applied to Western societies. Generally, Western societies – along with the daily activities, choices and attitudes of their individual members – are being increasingly influenced and even driven by consumption, rather than by the production of goods and services.ⁱⁱ Consumption, for its part, depending on its orientation, is one of the most significant instruments of society for increasing or lessening the effects of climate change.

In Latvia – a small country in Northern Europe located relatively close to the Arctic Circle – the issue of climate change has also become increasingly pertinent. Several research studies have been conducted in Latvia, which lead one to draw significant conclusions about the relationship between humans and the environment, and about the principal features of this relationship.

Personal experience *versus* public pronouncements

While a close and unbreakable relationship does indeed exist between people and their surrounding environment, research studies must take note of the varying levels and intensity of this relationship. Regarding the individual's attitude toward climate

change, it is important to distinguish between his or her direct, or personal experience from an indirect, and therefore impersonal experience regarding the manifestations of global warming.

“Global warming, as I understand it, is actually two different things: one is that, which I hear about and what people tell me. The other is that, which I sense and experience on my own. That, which I hear about really is global and doesn’t seem to apply to me. [...] But there is something else that I also see and experience on my own: the fact that we no longer have a winter! Then I begin to think that this is perhaps the consequence of global warming.” (Elīna, 29 years old)ⁱⁱⁱ

“I feel the same as well, not only from what I have seen on TV and read in the papers. Last December, I drove up north all the way to the Arctic Circle. There was no snow on the ground. Swans were still flying about and the bodies of water had not yet frozen over. Everything had a summery feel to it.” (Pauls, 56 years old)^{iv}

Research studies indicate that to a large extent, it is through a direct perception of environmental problems, along with their causes and effects, that the individual’s awareness of wider environmental processes, including the worldwide effect of global warming, will be enhanced. In addition, the wide-ranging, but simultaneously impersonal array of accessible information that is highly generalized may often seem to be insufficient, for it does not appear to be directly connected with the personal life of the individual.

Interestingly, people’s perception of climate change has a significant effect not only upon their physical well-being, but also upon their national, cultural traditions and on the transmission of these traditions to future generations, for certain, established conceptions are simultaneously experiencing a transformation, to a larger or smaller degree.

“Sometimes, when I have to teach children songs about snow, I can’t, because it is not cold and there is no snow on the ground. For example, at Christmas time, how can I tell the children about Santa

Claus riding across the snow on a sleigh, if there is no snow on the ground and if the grass is still green? How can you explain this to small children? The magic is gone.” (Elīna, 29 years old)

“Like many other people who live in the countries [of our latitude], I prefer a cooler, rather than a warmer climate. [...] Nevertheless, as the biologists say, it is written even into our genes that we need all four seasons. We need them for our health, for our perception and our emotions. Now something has become lost.” (Jurģis, 63 years old)

The transformations brought on by climate change therefore effect not only the individual’s direct, physical, environment, but also the surrounding social and cultural environment, and to an equal degree. From the individual’s point of view, climate change is associated not only with the environment itself, but also with various cultural phenomena. Through this prism, the seasons are perceived as integral elements in the daily events of society. They are connected with both work and leisure. Lately, however, the seasons have also been associated with a general change in the perception of nature from a resource that supports the existence of humanity to a source of threat. Changes in the environment are transforming the experiences of both present and future generations, which are, in turn, changing the way in which people perceive nature and the cultural significance that they accord to it.

The link between the conservation of resources and knowledge about the environment

The struggle against global warming will depend not only upon the implementation of worldwide international agreements and national government policies, but also upon the motivation and activities of individual people all across the globe. In the context of averting further climate change, a certain proportion of Latvia’s inhabitants have already undertaken to conserve resources on a daily basis. For example, 54.2% of the country’s inhabitants try to conserve electricity on a daily basis, while 41.0% do the same with water and 34.7% with gas.^v Between 11.4% and 20.4% of respondents sort their household waste for recycling and attempt to use environmentally friendly

transport, goods and services, while 25.9% do not conduct any of the above activities.^{vi}

One could view the conservation of resources as a purely economic activity that is not always connected with concerns about reducing the negative effects of human-induced environmental changes. Nevertheless, in examining those groups of people who view themselves as being either well or poorly informed about issues of global warming and environmental change, one can see a correlation between their degree of knowledge about these issues and their implementation of environmentally friendly activities. Those, who view themselves as well informed are more likely (17%-61%) to conduct environmentally friendly activities on a daily basis than those who view themselves as poorly informed (7%-51%).^{vii}

In this case, knowledge and information are a precondition for acquiring a consciousness of the fact that environmental problems exist and need to be addressed, while a lack of knowledge about these issues appears to make them seem non-existent or irrelevant. In other words, the popular adage that *ignorance is bliss* can be aptly applied here. Erstwhile habits and lifestyles are maintained with little or no concern for the future.

“I believe that I already know enough and that I don’t need to know much more. Otherwise, I might become alarmed and feel even worse about the way things are.” (Lauris, 19 years old)

“I already have a great deal of information, more than enough. For example, I know that dogs carry fleas and that fleas carry diseases. If I began to delve into the issue of global warming [...] and constantly harp about it, then it would be the same as talking about those fleas all of the time.” (Kristaps, 31 years old)

One can thus conclude that the conservation of resources and other environmentally friendly daily activities can be further promoted if people are better informed about issues that concern global warming and if they are led to believe that their economic activity is not independent and is not to be viewed separately from their daily practices, but is a form of social activity^{viii} that is closely connected with the social practices of other individuals.

In the promotion of environmentally friendly practices, it is important to stress that a sustainable way of life from the environmental point of view is not attainable only through the solitary activities of individuals. It also requires concerted action by a wide array of institutions. In order to preserve the environment, reduce the greenhouse effect and resolve other ecological issues, a wide array of institutions will have to cooperate closely. These include municipal and national governments, various sectors of the economy, individual enterprises, regulatory institutions, as well as international organizations and scientific institutions. Although individual people are gradually implementing more environmentally friendly and sustainable activities, the involvement and initiative of national governments is required to ensure that this occurs consistently and on a wide scale.

Resignation or active participation?

Does each one of us share in the responsibility for state of the world and is the individual contribution of each person really of any significance? There are two types of solutions for reducing global warming: one involves the passive delegation of such solutions entirely to “others,” while the other involves the active contribution of each individual.^{ix}

The issue of climate change may indeed seem subjective if one looks at the different types of discourse concerning people’s perceptions about their ability to change things for the better. One type of discourse is characterized by a sense of resignation, in which the individual questions the significance of his or her potential contribution.

“Everybody is being urged to conserve electricity and to do all sorts of other things. But what can I, as an average citizen, really do to make things better? Not much would change if I turned down the heating in my home or did similar things.”(Lauris, 19 years old)

This discourse of individual resignation is also extended to the national level, for example, with regards to Latvia’s position concerning global climate change, in which one can detect a peculiar strategy of self-justification. While in accordance with this position, the existence of the problem of climate change is duly recognized, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the insignificant role of small countries and on

their inability to exert any meaningful influence. Through such discourse, responsibility and influence are therefore forsaken and delegated to the world's larger countries.

“Regarding global warming, we can't change anything here in Latvia, for we don't have anything of that kind, we don't have any atomic power plants. The greenhouse gases that we generate here are like a small drop in the ocean compared to what other countries produce.” (Kristaps, 31 years old)

In contrast, there is also another type of discourse that stresses the potential benefit arising from active participation, along with the significance of each individual's and country's contribution, including the need for initiatives that come “from the bottom up.”

“But we can also act on our own, each with our small drop. These drops will all add up to something in the end.” (Nelda, 59 years old)

“Something does indeed need to be done. Maybe we will be the wise ones who will act.” (Pēteris, 33 years old)

In accordance with this position, individual activity is important, regardless of the passivity of other individuals, countries and institutions. The question of who bears the most responsibility for inducing climate change is a secondary one, for the principal emphasis is placed on the cumulative and expansive nature of global warming and on those factors that are contributing to the geographical expansion of climate change, regardless of the degree of responsibility of each individual person or country in exacerbating this problem.

At the same time, one must take into account that the social responsibility proclaimed in people's words may be merely formal and declarative, and may not always be followed by tangible, concrete action.

Motivating factors for implementing sustainable practices

In the case that a concrete individual has gathered information about climate change and wishes to assume an active position, a further question must be asked by the scientist in analyzing the relationship between humans and the environment – namely, *why* has the individual chosen to act? The change from a passive to an active position regarding the implementation of sustainable practices in one's daily life is determined not only by one's personal conviction, but also by such external factors as the availability of constructive information that motivates one to act, and that offers ideas that can be implemented in practice.

“I remember that Māris Olte^x once had a TV show, in which he explained how paper is manufactured. It was presented in a straightforward and interesting manner and made me want to do something, rather than simply throw out my paper and ignore what happens afterward. In this way, his message reached a wider audience, but if one simply shows that glaciers are melting somewhere in the Arctic, then that doesn't really effect you. [...] I need the type of information that tells me what I can do on my own and also what I should not do, as an average citizen.” (Elīna, 29 years old)

Along with a constructive base of information, there is another motivational factor for implementing environmentally sustainable practices: financial gain. This can occur either through the obtaining of financial means, through their recuperation, through saving or through conservation. In such cases, the reduction of the individual's expenditures serves as a motivational factor for concrete action, such as reducing the consumption of resources, using recyclable consumer products and other potentially sustainable practices.

“I am conserving at home to lessen my electricity, gas and water bills.” (Pauls, 56 years old)

“I am conserving water and electricity, mainly due to the fact that I have to pay for these utilities.” (Irina, 27 years old)

“It’s a good thing that they now are making people pay 2 santims per plastic bag in the stores. If everything becomes three times more expensive, then people will also begin to save. I think that people can be educated through higher prices.” (Kristaps, 31 years old)

There may also be other, unconscious or unarticulated reasons for implementing environmentally sustainable practices. For example, people who conserve may wish to simultaneously save money and reduce global warming, while those who use natural, cloth baby diapers in the place of synthetic, disposable ones may not only be thinking about the reduction of harmful waste in landfills, but also about the health of their children.

“I like to drive around in my car, but I have stopped driving to Riga due to the heavy traffic, and I am less likely to be delayed if I take the train.” (Jurģis, 63 years old)

“I no longer drive to Riga on my own and have started to take the train, due to the shortsighted policies of Riga’s municipal Department of Transport. There are all kinds of illogical interdictions and forbidden turns, which force you to wait for hours on end at intersections and needlessly waste gasoline.” (Pauls, 56 years old)

Conclusions

Anthony Giddens, one of the most prominent, current-day scientists and opinion-makers in the social sciences, stresses that the environment needs to be closely linked with a wider consciousness of one’s rights and responsibilities in promoting the welfare of society.^{xi} Therefore, in debates about global warming and in the search for solutions, one needs to take not only physical factors and threats into account, but also the cultural and social environmental transformations that are accompanying climate change, and which are no less important and relevant in society. One must also take into account the fundamental distinction between the information that people receive through public channels and the knowledge that they acquire through their own,

personal experience. This has an important effect on the way that people view the environmental problems that are connected with climate change.

Society is not a homogenous mass, and the various individuals who compose it can develop comprehensive strategies in defining their attitudes and actions to deal with the changes caused by global warming. They may choose to distance themselves from the problem in a spirit of resignation, or they may choose to actively articulate and realize their capacity to act.

The involvement of the public in decision-making regarding environmental issues in general, and regarding climate change and sustainable environmental practices in particular, is an important area that needs to be promoted. This is connected in a wider context with the strengthening and development of civil society as a whole, for individual initiatives in their various forms – not only from large and established environmental organizations, but also the initiatives of small, social networks – have a vital role to play in arriving at long-term solutions at both the local, community and national levels. The empowerment of the general public is important, and should be achieved not only through formal, legitimate opportunities for people to become involved, but also by instituting real and practical forms of cooperation between decision-makers and representatives of civil society, thus permitting the realization of sustainable, inclusive, responsible and people-friendly policies.

ⁱ Andrew Dobson and Derek Bell, *Environmental Citizenship* (MIT Press, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Gordon Marshall, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 196-197.

ⁱⁱⁱ The text excerpts in italics that appear in this article are from the focus group discussions that took place on 29 February 2008 at the Riga Castle and that were moderated by researchers Aija Lulle and Anda Ādamsons-Fiskoviča of Latvia's Strategic Analysis Commission. The names of the discussion participants have been changed in this article.

^{iv} A participant of the focus group regarding sources of information about the environment.

^v Public opinion poll of Latvia's inhabitants conducted by the Latvian Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS on global warming in January of 2008. Some 1003 respondents aged 18-74 were polled in accordance with the stratified random sample method, with personal interviews conducted at the homes of the respondents. The statistical margin of error is +/- 2.9%

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, eds., *The Sociology of Economic Life* (Westview Press, Inc., 1992), 6.

^{ix} See Anda Ādamsons-Fiskoviča, "Science- and Technology-Related Risk Treatment in the Laymen's Discourse." In: *Latvijas Universitātes raksti*, vol. 701, 2006, 134-137.

^x The host of a popular Latvian TV show on the environment.

^{xi} Anthony Giddens, "Europe In the Global Age," *Polity*, 2007, 153-163.