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The problem with modern environmentalism (and how to fix it) by John Sheppard

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How many people find at least some aspects of environmentalism annoying? Be honest â€“ thereâ€™s no shame in it. Iâ€™m not talking about everybody who cares about the environment (for the record, I care about the environment), Iâ€™m talking about the overzealous, preachy ones. You know the type of person Iâ€™m talking about: the hemp-wearing, self-righteous eco warrior who incessantly sermonises the virtues of their morally superior green lifestyle from their lofty, holier-than-thou pedestal. Iâ€™m sure we all know at least one person like this. Together, these placard-waving activists seem to have created this de facto idea of environmentalism in their own image.

As far as I can tell, these dissidents do more harm than good. People donâ€™t like being told what to do, or that their lifestyle is wrong. By playing the â€˜angry environmentalistâ€™ card and attacking anyone who doesnâ€™t conform to their ideals â€“ be it by driving a gas-guzzler, leaving your TV on standby, or taking a long time in the shower each morning â€“ they are only going to make people more defensive. This has created a perception, particularly in the USA but also increasingly in the UK, that environmentalism equates to an assault on freedom. It leads to resentment â€“ those â€•save the whales, hug a treeâ€• people are only trying to force their lifestyle on you; you donâ€™t have to take it. The environmental fringe pushes against mainstream society, and mainstream society pushes back.

The two sides form a classic â€˜irresistible force, immovable objectâ€™ scenario. The environmentalists want to take the world forward into a carbon-neutral future, but their methods serve only to strengthen and reinforce the â€˜backlash cultureâ€™ of resistance that they are trying to break through. Their struggle is akin to banging your head against a brick wall in the hopes of breaking through â€“ not a technique widely used in the construction industry, as it is more likely to result in a concussion than any actual progress.

So how do you get through the wall? Well, given the strength and influence of those opposed to the environmental movement, breaking it down is simply not an option any more. This wall has deep and sturdy foundations in long-established living habits, consists of a rock-solid composite of pseudo-science and rhetoric, and is held together by a mixture of apathy and denial. But hereâ€™s the thing: we donâ€™t actually need to get through the wall. We just have to get to the other side of the wall, to that elusive carbon-neutral future. Thereâ€™s more than one way to do that, without resorting to laborious Shawshank-style tunnelling.

Iâ€™d like to talk about the ways we can get ourselves over that wall using technology and innovation. The principle is very straightforward: resistance to environmentalism is not based on any actual desire to damage the earth, but on the realistic viability of changing our own lifestyles, of making sacrifices that compromise our own personal comfort. If we can find and implement carbon cutting solutions that donâ€™t require people to go out of their way, then everybody wins.

This new breed of hi-tech environmentalism represents a more head-on attempt at tackling the vast, global issues of climate change and over-consumption than the â€˜grassrootsâ€™ approach favoured by many environmental activists, which focuses more on the day-to-day habits of the individual. By staying out of peopleâ€™s daily lives, and concentrating instead on utilising (rather than fighting) our free-market economic system to promote more efficient and alternative energy use, we can build a cleaner, more sustainable world to fit the lifestyles that we have already grown accustomed to.

Consider, for example, the humble energyEGG. The brainchild of Glasgow-based entrepreneur Brian Oâ€™Reilly, the energyEGG takes an innovative, modern approach to the problem of domestic electrical waste â€“ a problem that is usually tackled by nagging â€˜switch off, save energyâ€™ campaigns

Rather than trying to badger the public into using energy responsibly, Brian devised a system that would detect when a room is empty and turn off the power automatically. This is a perfect example of the modern approach â€“ it takes the hassle of remembering to switch off away from consumers, allowing them to be as lazy as they like whilst saving energy. Reduced carbon footprint, no lifestyle change.

The energyEGG is a good example of this philosophy in action at the ground level, but it is by no means the only working example of technological innovation outperforming traditional environmentalism. On the large scale, green tech is being deployed in a variety of interesting and inspired ways. In the US, air filtration technology from NASA has been adapted to extract carbon from gases that are pumped into the atmosphere, using enzymes that are found inside the human body. Silicon Valley car maker tesla caught everybody by surprise a few years ago by creating the worldâ€™s first line of electric sports cars â€“ high performance, zero emissions. Tearing up the open road in a carbon-free sports car, to my mind, embodies the spirit of modern environmentalism perfectly.

It is on the shoulders of entrepreneurs like these that our environmental future rests. These are the people who realise that â€˜the systemâ€™ cannot be fought or beaten, but that there are other options. These people dare to suggest that, when it comes to the environment, it might just be possible to have our cake and eat it too. Saving the planet need not come at the cost of our own personal comfort or quality of life. But come it must â€“ the problem of climate change has got to the point now where it is simply too late to ignore, or even to tackle the old-fashioned way. Itâ€™s time to embrace the future, not fear it.

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