It’s not easy being green: an investigation into the effectiveness of ecological citizenship as an explanation for pro-environmental behaviour

Jackie Wright (Environmental Management)

Introduction
The idea for this research grew from the author’s observation that while many people believe humans are causing irreversible environmental damage, few seem willing to change their lifestyles to mitigate this. In a survey tracking environmental attitude and behaviour, The Energy Saving Trust found that 80% of respondents believe climate change is connected to human activity and will affect them, yet most take few measures to reduce energy use and 40% do nothing at all (Energy Saving Trust 2007).

In the 2008 Climate Change Act, the UK government ambitiously committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 34% of 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% by 2050 (DECC, undated). As individual people’s activities currently account for over 40% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK (Energy Saving Trust, undated), this sector will play a major part in meeting these targets.

In the author’s experience a minority of people are willing to alter their lifestyles for seemingly altruistic reasons. What motivates these particular people? Why do they alter their lifestyles, sometimes quite dramatically, out of concern for the environment?

Ecological citizenship
Dobson (2003; 2007) states that while policies such as fiscal incentives and disincentives can change behaviour towards the environment in the short term, the change is easily reversed if the ‘carrot’ or ‘stick’ is removed. He believes that to attain long-term behavioural change there must first be a change in people’s attitudes, and that promotion of ecological citizenship is the way to achieve this. This theory could, perhaps, explain why some people are already living sustainable lifestyles.

Aims and objectives
The aim of this research, then, is to determine whether the theory of ecological citizenship is a useful tool in explaining the motivations for pro-environmental behaviour.

To fulfil this aim, the specific objectives are to examine:
• motivations of people who act in environmentally responsible ways
• whether people displaying strong pro-environmental behaviours also have strong pro-environmental attitudes
• whether strong pro-environmental attitudes can be explained by the principles of ecological citizenship
• whether ecological citizenship can be seen as a driver of pro-environmental behaviour

Literature Review

The UK Government has put faith in economic incentives and disincentives, coupled with information provision, to encourage people to change their behaviour (Dobson 2003, 2007; Jackson 2005). However, Dobson (2007) argues fiscal measures alone should not be relied upon to promote pro-environmental behaviour. Whilst financial incentives and penalties are sometimes effective, such as the road-pricing scheme introduced in Durham, he argues this only produces the required behaviour as long as the fiscal measure is in place. Dobson believes a deep shift in attitude is required, resulting in pro-environmental behaviour that will stand the test of time, and one way to achieve this is through the promotion of ecological citizenship. Ideas of rights and responsibilities from the field of citizenship can be developed to promote change in people’s attitudes, in recognition that ‘self-interested behaviour will not always protect or sustain public goods such as the environment’ (ibid., 280). Using the concept of the ecological footprint an environmental citizen will recognise that the way they live impacts upon others who live elsewhere in space and/or time (Dobson 2007; Seyfang 2006).

Dobson (2003) argues citizenship should not be confined to the public sphere, in recognition that actions we take in private affect others. Implicit is the importance of individual responsibility, and it is this characteristic that illustrates the need to extend citizenship into the private realm. Wolf (2007) likens Dobson’s interpretation of this to the Brundtland definition of sustainable development (WCED 1987).

The key obligation of the ecological citizen is to ensure that the impact of an individual fulfilling his or her needs does not foreclose the ability of others, alive now and in the future, to pursue their needs (Wolf 2007, 5).

Citizenship classes are compulsory in British education, and Dobson (2003, 2007) considers this to be the opportunity to develop ecological citizenship. Winter (2008) states environmental citizenship is now an integral aspect of the active citizenship taught at Key Stages 3 and 4. However, her research
with teenagers indicated that environmental issues should not be confined to the citizenship curriculum. Rather, these issues need to be infused as part of a whole school’s ethos and for other social contexts, particularly families, to be recognised more fully as influences on teenagers' environmental development (ibid., iii).

MacGregor (2006) offers a feminist critique of ecological citizenship, arguing green lifestyles require more effort and time, and that the burden of this is usually borne by women, especially in developing nations. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the division of labour between the genders, in the pursuit of more sustainable lifestyles, if the full potential of ecological citizenship is to be realised.

**Empirical evidence**

There is a small but growing body of empirical research on ecological citizenship. Horton (2006) conducted ethnographic research on the lives of environmental activists in Lancaster and concluded they do demonstrate environmental citizenship. He argued that the existence of information and reaffirming networks in the ‘green scene’ encourages pro-environmental behaviour, such as buying organic produce, not using cars and recycling. The existence of places for meetings, such as a vegetarian café, is important to allow space for members of the green community to meet and share information, reaffirming their beliefs. The message from Horton’s research is that people learn from each other in groups and by joining in, rather than passively accepting information.

However, further research carried out in the North West of England by Szerszynski (2006) and Wong et al. (2007) suggests that the application of ecological citizenship may be limited in some groups. Szerszynski (2006) argues that citizenship and the welfare of society require abstract consideration. His research showed that certain groups (e.g. low income mothers in a small West Cumbrian town) considered their environment as something close at hand, experienced from within, rather than viewed from afar. Additionally, many indigenous peoples around the world practice environmentalism by ‘focusing on present needs and situations rather than abstract ideas of nature and human duty’ (Szerszynski 2006, 93).

Wong et al. (2007) studied the installation of a grey-water and rain-water system in social housing for the elderly. One conclusion was that ‘it is neither environmentally moral nor desirable to ask
poor people to promote citizenship while they face tremendous constraints on their livelihoods’ (Wong et al. 2007, 342).

There is, however, further evidence of the relevance of ecological citizenship. Wolf (2006, 2007) examined whether this strand of citizenship could explain attitudes and behaviour towards the environment in two coastal Canadian communities. Participants were found to be taking action to mitigate and adapt to climate change out of a sense of civic responsibility.

The most dominant and uniform outcome of the case studies conducted for this research is participants’ sense of individual responsibility for both causing and ameliorating climate change (Wolf 2007, 10).

Many key elements of citizenship were evident in these communities. For example, activities in the private sphere were recognised by the participants to be relevant, and they felt that they had a duty to others who lived elsewhere and in the future.

Research on sustainable consumption and ethical investment has also tested the relevance of this theory. Seyfang’s (2006) research has shown Dobson’s model of ecological citizenship to be useful for analysing consumers’ behaviour in a local organic food network. Seyfang concluded that sustainable consumption, such as that shown by the customers and staff at Eostre Organics, was motivated by ecological citizenship principles. Both consumers and the organisation sought to express preferences which were at odds with market price signals, they demonstrated a clear commitment to justice and fairness in trading relationships, to reducing ecological footprints through localising food systems and reducing packaging waste, and sought to make links of solidarity between producer and consumer, regardless of geographical distance. Furthermore, many participants saw their everyday consumption decisions as being deeply political … (Seyfang 2006, 393).

Seyfang concluded, in this case, ethical consumption is a form of ecological citizenship. Similar to Horton’s (2006) findings, it was noted that the alternative organic food network itself had some effect in nurturing and promoting ecological citizenship as it allowed a space for individuals to meet and share information.
Finally, Carter and Huby’s (2004) research on ethical investment concluded that principles of ecological citizenship were evident. Many respondents were willing to make a perceived financial sacrifice, thus showing characteristics such as a desire to reduce their ecological footprint and a sense of non-reciprocal responsibility to others.

Their ethical investment … reflects their commitment to those people and places harmed by their lifestyles and behaviour, now and in the future. And, in making investments according to ethical principles, the investors display virtues of ecological citizenship – the care and compassion implicit in their quest for social and environmental justice (Carter and Huby 2004, 17).

Seyfang (2006) and Wolf (2007) both state that ecological citizenship is currently an under-researched field, thereby identifying a knowledge gap which this investigation hopes to address.

**Methodology**
The aim of this research is to ascertain the motives of people exhibiting pro-environmental behaviour and analyse whether these motives can be explained by the principles of ecological citizenship. Firstly, drawing from the research of Seyfang (2006), a self-administered questionnaire was distributed, involving fixed-response and open-ended questions. This was complimented by an online discussion, in an attempt to replicate qualitative information gathering techniques such as Horton (2006) and Wolf’s (2006) use of focus groups. The use of triangulation allows different aspects of the research to be addressed (Clifford and Valentine 2003, 7-8).

**Identification of participants**
McLafferty states that ‘[t]ypically the sample is selected to represent some larger population of interest’ (2003, 95). As the primary research question revolves around studying people who are already living sustainable lifestyles, it was important to identify groups of people displaying this type of behaviour, and draw a sample population from them.

Therefore, the groups identified were members of:

- an environmental online discussion forum (Green Living Forum)
- a peak oil online discussion forum (Powerswitch Forum)
- a Transition Initiative (South Ribble Transition Towns)
The two online discussion forums typically attract people aware of environmental issues and who place importance on them. The Transition Initiative is a localised grass-roots movement, involving people who want to address the issues of climate change and ‘peak oil’ (see transitiontow.org).

Since the researcher had existing links with these groups, questionnaires could be easily distributed, discussion would be with people already known to her, and it was hoped the response rate may be higher than with a cold approach. However, consideration has to be given to what Longhurst (2003) terms the researcher’s own ‘positionality’ (ibid., 123). The fact that the researcher was known to many of the participants may affect their responses, as she could be seen to be an ‘insider’ (Mohammad 2001). Indeed, the researcher’s motive for addressing this topic was her own interest in these issues (see Aitken 2001) and this would be likely to affect design of the project and interpretation of results (Limb and Dwyer 2001).

Through a process of ‘snowballing’ (Longhurst 2003) some respondents recruited other participants by distributing the questionnaire email to other environmentally-minded people. Thus two further groups were included in the questionnaire stage of the research:

- employees of Lancashire Wildlife Trust
- members of Central Lancashire Friends of the Earth

Questionnaire
The distribution of a questionnaire electronically allowed the collection of data from a reasonably large number of people from the target population. The questionnaire was produced using an online survey website (www.surveymokey.com) allowing a professional, user-friendly survey to be distributed easily via a link on an email or web page. The link was posted on both internet discussion forums and emailed to members of the Transition group. An incentive of a prize draw was offered to increase the response rate (see Oppenheim 1992, 104).

The questionnaire comprised of fixed-response and open-ended questions drawn from Seyfang’s (2006) methods. The collection of quantitative data from the fixed-response questions would allow comparison and statistical analysis. The inclusion of open-ended questions was felt to be the more important aspect, as the researcher was primarily interested in evidence of people’s beliefs and
values and the responses may go some way to determining whether respondents were acting in line with the principles of ecological citizenship. According to Oppenheim

[op]once [respondents] have understood the intent of the question, they can let their thoughts roam freely, unencumbered by a prepared set of replies. We can obtain their ideas in their own language, expressed spontaneously, and this spontaneity is often extremely worthwhile as a basis for new hypotheses (1992, 112-113).

A pilot survey was carried out, as suggested by Oppenheim (1992), allowing ambiguous questions to be reworded and glitches in the online survey corrected.

One section consisted of a series of attitude statements measured by a five-point Likert scale (McLafferty 2003, 91-92) rating from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. This method of measuring underlying attitudes of a sub population towards the environment has been successfully employed by Dunlap et al. (2005).

Online discussion
Initially it was hoped that the second part of the research would be a focus group as used by Horton (2006) and Wolf (2006). According to Anderson and Kanuka focus groups ‘are particularly effective for collecting data about attitudes, perceptions and opinions’ (2003, 102). However, there were only a limited number of potential participants known to the researcher in the North West area, so the decision to hold an asynchronous online discussion was made. This had the advantage of including people from a wide geographic area and was not limited to a particular time and date.

Overall, net-based focus groups can be an effective data-gathering technique that has most of the strengths of face-to-face interviews with fewer costs and greater accessibility (Anderson and Kanuka 2003, 104).

The discussion was held on the Green Living Forum, where people interested in green lifestyles were already active members, and ran for one week so participants were free to dip in and out as they were able.

A further benefit is that participants can remain anonymous, allowing quieter members of the group to have their say (Anderson and Kanuka 2003; Joinson 2005). Additionally, participants have time to
give more considered responses than either face-to-face focus groups or real time online synchronous discussions (Anderson and Kanuka 2003).

However, it was recognised that this method also posed some disadvantages. Citing Van Nuys (1999), Anderson and Kanuka (2003) list these as a loss of subjectivity in typed answers, lack of body language, a simpler discussion with less opportunity to ask in depth questions and the likelihood of a high attrition rate.

Results

Questionnaire

88 responses were gathered from the questionnaire. Of these 76.1% stated environmental issues are ‘very important’ to them and 21.6% ‘quite important’, indicating respondents were from the desired sample population.

Fixed-response questions

There was an equal split between female and male respondents, indicating little or no gender bias among people practicing green lifestyles. The majority were educated to at least graduate level (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Highest Qualification
Similarities can be drawn with the research of Wall et al. (2007) who proposed higher level of education may account for pro-environmental behaviour.

When asked who should take the main responsibility for tackling environmental issues (Figure 2) 25 respondents (28.4%) answered ‘national governments’ closely followed by 24 (27.3%) answering ‘individual people’.

Figure 2 Main Responsibility for Tackling Environmental Issues

10 statements, measured by a five-point Linkert scale, were used to gauge attitude, with 1 indicating strong pro-environmental attitude and 5 indicating weak. For the group a combined result of 1.43 was reached, suggesting this sub population have strong pro-environmental attitudes (Oppenheim 1992; Dunlap et al. 2005).

Several statements measured by the Linkert scale were used to indicate attitudes to various aspects of ecological citizenship. For example:

- 63.6% replied ‘strongly agree’ and 27.3% ‘agree’ to the statement ‘I feel a moral duty to do something about environmental problems’.
66.7% strongly agreed and 25.8% agreed with the statement ‘We each have a responsibility to people who live elsewhere in the world not to affect the environment detrimentally’.

83.3% replied ‘strongly agree’ and 10.6% ‘agree’ with the statement ‘We each have a responsibility to people who live in the future not to cause irreversible environmental problems’.

65.2% strongly agreed and 21.2% agreed with the statement ‘Other species have as much right to exist as humans do’.

Respondents were asked to indicate which of a list of 14 pro-environmental activities they often do, and to state, from a list of choices, their 3 main reasons for doing so. ‘Protect environment’ was the main reason for 9 of the activities, with ‘Health’ the main reason for 4 activities (Figure 3). For example:

- The most common reason for using public transport was ‘protect environment’, with ‘convenience/necessity’ second most popular.
- Combining activities concerned with home energy use, the most commonly cited reason was ‘protect environment’, followed by ‘save money’ and ‘moral obligation’.
- Combining the activities relating to reducing consumption and buying second hand, the main reason cited was ‘protect environment’, followed by ‘save money’ and ‘moral obligation’.

![Main Reason for Pro-Environmental Activities](image)

**Figure 3 Main Reason for Pro-Environmental Activities**
Open-ended questions
There was a very positive response to the open-ended questions, with many respondents making the effort to elaborate and express their thoughts. The following are some of the themes that emerged.
Concern for the non-human world was a strong topic when asked about why they are concerned about environmental issues; 29 people raised this as an issue.

*Why should we be so arrogant as to destroy other species, as well as ourselves?*

Concern for other humans (both now and in the future) was evident with 19 respondents highlighted this.

*We have a moral obligation to the poor and future generations.*

Overuse of resources was another common theme, with 18 respondents mentioned this.

*The earth has finite resources, materials, food & water and humankind are using and abusing them at an alarming rate.*

Overpopulation was an overarching issue. 24 people discussed this as a major environmental concern.

*Whatever problem you look at it always comes back to population.*

Responsibility for tackling environmental issues was discussed at length, the strongest theme being responsibility rests with governments, suggesting even this sub population believe incentives and disincentives are important in encouraging pro-environmental behaviour.

*I think laws should be passed and strictly enforced to ensure people begin to realise just how important environmental issues are.*

The importance of individual’s actions and personal responsibility was quite prevalent, being included in 15 responses.
I feel everyone needs to care and act upon issues everyday, make it a part of their lives and think about consequences to their actions.

Education and information provision were cited as solutions to environmental issues by 18 respondents.

... education is the key – it’s no use telling people what to do if they don’t understand why.

Upbringing was cited by 4 respondents as reason for their actions.

I was brought up on a smallholding with goats and pigs and their welfare while they were alive was very important.

Financial incentives reasons were given by 5 respondents for their pro-environmental behaviour.

For me it is mostly for financial reasons and I believe most people are motivated by money.

Online discussion

15 people took part in the online discussion over the course of one week. Several themes emerged from the discussion.

Responsibility to the non-human world was a recurring issue, with 6 respondents citing this as a motivation for their environmentally-responsible actions.

... and I don’t think we have more right than any other nature on the planet to be destructive of it.

Responsibility to other people also figured highly in the results, with 5 participants mentioning this.

[I] feel it is morally wrong both for future generations and present ones to suffer through our excesses.

Responsibility to family and their own upbringing were cited by 5 participants.

I think that [it] stems from the way my parents acted and me seeing that.
Recognition that personal actions in the private sphere affect others was mentioned by 2 participants.

_because in the past I have probably contributed to the chaos and would like to help rectify the damage we have done._

Financial motivation for pro-environmental actions was given by 1 participant.

_{It reduces my bills ... I spend less so I save more._}

**Interpretation**

Responsibility

Personal responsibility for environmental problems is considered to be an indicator of ecological citizenship. A relatively high number of respondents believe individuals are responsible for tackling environmental problems, suggesting they have beliefs in line with this principle of ecological citizenship.

... _everyone of us, be it in organisations, government or in our own home, ownership of this problem cannot be punted off to some faceless organisation._

The results also support Dobson’s (2003) assertion that responsibilities are more important that rights in this strand of citizenship as respondents referred to responsibilities more frequently than rights.

_In order to make the changes we really need to make several of the things we believe are ‘rights’ will have to go._

A strong theme was an emphasis on government responsibility and the power of legislation.

_Stick rather than carrot._

_**Financial incentives work best for me.**_

This is in conflict with Dobson’s (2003) beliefs that incentives and disincentives are not the best way to change behaviour.
Justice and asymmetry of responsibility

This principle of ecological citizenship was demonstrated often. By acknowledging a responsibility to others who live far away or in the future, respondents were also indicating that they understand their obligations are owed un-reciprocally, and not confined by national borders. This is in line with the findings of Wolf’s (2006, 2007) research on mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

... populations which have done least to damage the planet will suffer most (i.e. due to increased flooding, natural disasters, famine, disease etc. will hit the equator and the tropics hardest).

... and it's affecting the poor and biodiversity the most.

Private and public life

There was much evidence that respondents believe private actions impact on the environment and affect others, suggesting people leading green lifestyles embrace the notion of citizenship in their private as well as public lives. Again, this supports Wolf’s (2006, 2007) findings.

I understand that the way I live my life has a negative impact on the environment (electricity, car etc) so I like to think I'm doing my bit to try and put back what I have helped to destroy.

There was also strong evidence that respondents understand the importance of action in the public sphere. Activities such as writing to local MPs, campaigning and volunteering were mentioned often. This has some similarities with notions of information sharing and reaffirming ideas evident in Horton’s (2006) research on green networks.

We have campaigned on a number of Environmental, Ethical, Food, Fair Trade, Human Justice and other Sustainability issues for MANY years.

This extended to membership of community and environmental groups, which Hoskins (2006) listed as an indicator of ‘active’ citizenship.
I am now part of a local group setting up a Green Cooperative shop and drop in centre locally.

However, as the questionnaire was distributed to members of a Friends of the Earth group and a Transition group, this indicator of citizenship was likely to be evident.

**Ethical consumption and investment**

There was much evidence for the characteristics identified by Seyfang (2006) of ethical consumption and Carter and Huby (2004) of ethical investment. Many respondents expressed a wish to reduce consumption and their ecological footprint.

*I use a local farm shop where fruit and veg is cheaper than supermarkets, some of it comes directly from the fields behind the shop. It is also a great social activity as I meet up with regular shoppers for a chat. Never get that in Tesco.*

Many participants practice ethical investment and banking; the most common reason being ‘moral’, which could be considered a strong indicator of ecological citizenship.

*I only bank (including mortgage etc) with the Co-op, because I trust and can vote on their ethical policies.*

However, there were references to the argument discussed by Carter and Huby (2004) about whether investment can ever be ethical.

*Ethical banking still fills me with doubt as does recycling I feel these areas are money making areas that use the environmental message for marketing purposes.*

**Factors not associated with citizenship**

There was also evidence of factors other than citizenship motivating pro-environmental behaviour. Health, money and upbringing were cited and often respondents indicated it was a combination of reasons.

*There is often more than one reason to act in an environmentally friendly way and helping the environment is not often the sole motivator i.e. I do it because it also saves money or I enjoy the activity anyway. The environmental element is often a 'by-product'.*
Finally, one prevalent theme, sometimes expressed in a rather un-citizenly fashion, was concern about overpopulation. Some respondents seemed resigned to a catastrophic population crash, regardless of the impacts this will have on people living then.

_Only a global pandemic (or similar human culling event) is likely to stop us causing the demise of the very environment that supports us._

Limitations
Several limitations to this research have been identified. Firstly, had such a large response to the questionnaire been anticipated a statistics package could have been used to analyse the results. Additionally, the large volume of data gathered from the open-ended questions could have been analysed using a coding package. For the online discussion individuals could have been invited to a closed group discussion and given more guidance, as while 3 people did return to post further replies, the majority posted their views once so did not engage fully in discussing issues raised. However, the researcher feels this was a worthwhile exercise producing some good results, and is a medium with much potential for future data collection. Distribution of the questionnaire to a ‘peak oil’ forum may have slanted the results toward concern for overuse of resources and distribution to Wildlife Trust employees may have skewed results to concern for the non-human world.

Further research
In addition to developing online discussion techniques, future research could benefit from use of focus groups as the resulting information may add other dimensions to that gathered here. Similar research could be carried out with a group from the general population, offering comparison with the values and motivations of people not pursuing sustainable lifestyles. Perhaps the most pressing research, however, would be to investigate how ecological citizenship might be encouraged and developed further within society.

Conclusion
This research has shown that the concept of ecological citizenship does appear to be a useful tool to explain the motivations for pro-environmental behaviour. Therefore, it is this author’s belief that its promotion could encourage people to live more sustainably.
Participants in the research gave many reasons for their pro-environmental behaviour. The most prevalent motivation was to protect the environment, with health, saving money and moral obligation also figuring highly. Lack of infrastructure was cited as a barrier to environmentally-responsible behaviour. It is evident that people have many motives, and these are complex and interact with other aspects of their lives.

This sub population expressed strong pro-environmental attitudes, and these were aligned to those of an ecological citizen. Evidence of Dobson’s (2003) civic responsibilities was common. Non-reciprocal responsibility to others was clearly evident, as was a desire for justice, even for others spatially and temporally distant.

These results suggest that ecological citizenship is one of the drivers of pro-environmental behaviour. It is recognised that there are other motivations such as financial or upbringing; however, acknowledgement that private actions have environmental effects was borne out in this research, and participants regularly take action to mitigate this. Additionally, people acting in line with ecological citizenship principles are accepting responsibility for the collective actions of society, often acting to mitigate this themselves rather than waiting for the state to do so.

Promotion of ecological citizenship would appear to be an effective strategy to help achieve UK sustainability targets. Furthermore, growth in citizenship could engage more people in political life and result in pressure on government to provide appropriate infrastructure and regulation of business and industry. The utility of citizenship may be limited in some groups in society and further development on its practical application is required. However, it certainly appears to be a concept that could be employed to good effect.

I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world

(Socrates from Plutarch, Of Banishment 469-399 BC)

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