

Environmental Activism: Pro-Environmental Behavior, Consumerism, and Environmental Justice

Kaden Uribe¹, April Chapman-Ludwig²

¹Student Contributor, University of Denver

²Advisor, Department of Writing, University of Denver

Abstract

This literature review examines established research on the concept of pro-environmental behaviors (PEB) and its subjects: activism and consumerism. There are competing opinions regarding the salience of pro-environmental activist behavior. This dichotomy is characterized by the role of social media, which can be simultaneously used for performative identity signaling and as a platform to facilitate global collective activism. The research shows a stark contrast between pro-environmental activism and pro-environmental consumerism, with the former acknowledging historical injustices and addressing the social, economic, and environmental disparities created by neo-liberal policies designed with the purpose of profit extraction at the expense of marginalized communities. This review concludes with a question not addressed in current research: does pro-environmental consumerist behavior create a sense of complacency that hinders the necessary actions for systemic change? This is important to consider going forward as corporations continue to lead consumers to believe their products and practices are sustainable, perpetuating the neoliberal conservation narrative that fundamentally prioritizes capitalism over systemic environmental change.

Keywords: pro-environmental behavior, conservation, activism, consumerism, identity-signaling, social media, environmental justice

1 INTRODUCTION

The Western concept of environmental conservation stems from a late 19th-century ideology known as *environmentalism*. Settler colonialism heavily influenced the environmentalism movement within the United States. National Parks were initially created by seizing wilderness areas to preserve for the sake of colonizers' enjoyment, rationalizing the displacement of Native Americans up to the present day^{1;2}. Many pioneers of environmentalism were proponents of eugenics, associating white supremacy as a goal of environmental conservation. John Muir, the supposed father of environmentalism, is still highly regarded by many scholars as a "wilderness prophet" despite the wealth of evidence of racist and colonial narratives in his writings^{3;2}. Environmental activism, or the environmental justice movement, can be interpreted as distinctly separate from traditional environmentalism, as it focuses on fighting against the systemic environmental injustices that predominantly affect Black and Native populations and promoting the decolonization of the basis of conservation ideology^{4;2}. Pro-environmental behaviors can

predict the extent of one's active participation in the environmental justice movement; however, examining the difference between activist and consumer behavior is imperative to understand the true impacts of both fully. Within the scope of this literature, one could argue that pro-environmental consumerist behavior and the status symbol that purportedly sustainable brands provide create a sense of complacency that does not align with the inherent values of environmental justice nor the collective action that is needed for systemic change.

2 PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR (PEB)

Pro-environmental behavior is understood as conscious behavior that reduces the negative environmental impacts of one's actions⁵. Multiple types of pro-environmental behavior have been identified and thoroughly researched at both the individual and collective identity levels. A person's *nature connectedness* can be a predictor of individual PEB^{6;7}. Nature connectedness is a personal identification with nature or perception of the self as one with nature⁸. The level of nature connectedness can be quantified by the Nature Connectedness

Scale and similar surveys that assess one's emotional bonds with and relatedness to nature. Personal bonds with nature can inform one's propensity to engage in PEB, but this is limited by access to natural spaces, cultural integrity, and conservation education. It is important to note that for generations, systemic environmental injustice has fortified barriers for oppressed communities¹. Exclusivity and colonialism have denied these communities the ability to connect and exist in nature, a reality that must be acknowledged when considering the nature connectedness model's legitimacy^{7,2}. Further research on the drivers of PEB and environmental activism has found that collective political and social identity with the environment is a stronger predictor of PEB, specifically pro-environmental activist behavior (PEAB), rather than an individual connectedness to nature^{5,8}. Pro-environmental consumer behavior (PECB) differs in that it is inherently capitalist, where economic growth will ultimately take precedence over sustainability⁴.

3 PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR (PECB)

Pro-environmental consumer behavior is characterized by people participating in presumably sustainable consumer trends⁸. Individual consumer trends can include anything from using reusable bags, purchasing energy offsets, buying from "eco-friendly" fashion brands, or participating in eco-tourism. While these small-scale individualistic behaviors have some merit for furthering sustainability, PECB is still promoted by neoliberal conservation ideology. Profitability is often prioritized over environmental impact, with many people unaware of the actual unsustainable sources of their consumer lifestyles^{4,2}.

Social identity is one of the main catalysts for eco-consumerism through *identity signaling*⁹. This is known as the *green-to-be-seen* concept, in which people participate in eco-friendly consumer trends specifically to boost social standing and signal their alignment with environmental friendliness¹⁰. Analysis of PECB indicates that people are more likely to choose eco-friendly products over luxury brands when it is clearly displayed on the label to flaunt their pro-environmental stance. For example, consumers will spend a premium price on recognizable car models like Prius or Tesla, despite more affordable hybrid and electric vehicle options on the market¹⁰. The rapid increase in PEB identity signaling can be largely attributed to the ever-growing presence of social media influencers and celebrity performative activism⁹.

Neoliberal conservation ideology proclaims that capitalism's inherent innovation is the primary vector to achieving the traditional environmentalist goals of conservation. However, unregulated corporations exploit

consumers through performative advertising and mis-marketed "eco-friendly" clothing, products, and experiences⁴. Ecotourism and commercial wildlife experiences like safaris operate under the guise of conservation while disrupting and commodifying native communities and ecosystems due to a lack of governmental regulation on what defines "eco." Historical trends in research have shown that systemic change toward sustainability and environmental justice requires people to expand beyond their individual consumer behaviors^{2,11,4}. Collective action toward social justice needs to occur hand-in-hand with collective environmental activism, as both systemic issues are inextricably linked⁸.

4 THE NEED FOR PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST BEHAVIOR (PEAB)

Before looking at PEB activist behavior, it is important to address the systemic injustices that cause the need for such activism. Colonial ideology has led to government-sanctioned theft and privatization of land since the beginning of European colonization around the 15th century, or the Age of Discovery². White colonizers have invaded Native populations globally, committing heinous injustices to minority populations even in the present day^{1,2}. In doing so, they destroyed native ecosystems in the name of expansion, mirroring the neoliberalist rationalization for the continued destruction of wildlife⁴.

There is no denying that structural racism and classism are direct factors in the systematic destruction of ecosystems. This is blindingly apparent in urban ecosystems that are being deemed as "ecological sacrifice zones"⁴. Sacrifice zones are communities within the immediate range of heavily industrialized areas or military installations that result in high exposure to toxic pollutants (Bullard, 2011). In urban areas throughout the United States, Black Americans were forced into segregated neighborhoods through *redlining* to suppress their economic growth¹. Redlining was an urban segregation policy where neighborhoods were graded from most desirable (greenlined) to most hazardous (redlined)¹. Black Americans were refused housing loans in greenlined neighborhoods and confined to the redlined neighborhoods. Although technically outlawed through the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the racist systems behind redlining still prevail and are seen in present-day urban segregation maps^{1,11}. The same neighborhoods created through redlining continue to be populated by impoverished and oppressed BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) communities and are often within sacrifice zones. Evidence on the ecological impacts of systemic racism shows that income inequality in the United States predicts biodiversity loss¹. There is statistically less green space, tree cover, and ecosystem diversity in Black neighborhoods. The gov-

ernment and fossil fuel industry continue to seize Native land and further climate destruction through oil pipeline construction, fracking, mining, and mass deforestation, among other resource exploitation methods^{1;2}. There has been a need for environmental justice reform since the beginning of colonization, and with the current neoliberal conservation ideologies in place, the need for collective action and resistance grows exponentially.

5 THE CHARACTERIZATION AND EXAMPLES OF PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST BEHAVIOR

Bamberg argues that while the social and environmental justice movements share commonalities, they possess different motivations. “Group-based anger” within environmental justice movements often centers around corporations, financial institutions, and government policies, just to name a few. This competitive and collective action, paired with group-based anger, aids in unifying their cause⁶. Conversely, he suggests that the environmental justice movement is a form of conversionary collective action, lacking that same anger and unified resistance against a single entity. Many directly oppose this critique, citing examples where grassroots environmental activists have exemplified group-based anger spurring immense resistance to fossil fuel and mining industries^{4;2;11}. They argue that the convergence of both conversionary and competitive methods of collective action is a necessary catalyst for change.

Just as social media can be a stage for performative activism and commodification of the climate crisis, it also brought around a new wave of global collective activism that was impossible before the age of the internet⁹. Platforms such as Twitter and TikTok have enabled the awareness of localized grassroots activism and amplified the voices of those most affected by environmental injustice. So-called “ordinary people,” like Greta Thunberg, have arisen in the wake of social media, becoming internationally recognized symbols of environmental activism⁹. The Blockadia Map, an online atlas created by multiple international research universities, documents grassroots environmental activism worldwide. This online resource was created to allow activists to unite and create stronger collective resistance and showcases several circumstances where such resistance has spurred environmental policy changes¹².

Under the umbrella of environmental activism, collective creation and regeneration are vital components in order to create substantial change. Society must increase its adaptive capacity and collective environmental and social resilience to combat the climate emergency and the persistence of neoliberalist conservation ideology². Bamberg highlighted the Transition Towns movement, a successful example of collective creation.

This community-led movement strives to establish localized energy autonomy, a localized food economy, and restore green spaces, with groups active in several countries worldwide⁶. The establishment of community gardens and rooftop green spaces are common forms of collective creation and regeneration in urban environments. There has also been an uptick in natural regeneration efforts like converting privatized nature spaces to protected areas. Privately owned nature areas such as beaches, lakes, parks, golf courses, and resorts are often implicated in the overexploitation of natural resources and the degradation of native species. Due to the increasing privatization of nature areas in Cancun, Mexico, local fishermen collectively protested the environmental injustices of increased pollution and ecosystem destruction caused by the tourist industry, garnering global attention. This activism then spurred the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to establish the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, an internationally recognized protected ecological marine area off the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula (Grady-Lovelace, 2017). It is clear that the pathway to environmental justice must be forged through not only PEB and activism but through collective creation and regeneration.

6 A GAP IN RESEARCH: DOES COMPLACENCY CREATED BY PECB LEAD TO LESS COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Substantial research has been done on what PEB is and what factors influence it. The characteristics of pro-environmental activist behavior and consumer behavior are clearly defined. However, the possible adverse effects of increasing pro-environmental consumer behavior on the overall environmental activist movement are underexplored. The age of social media has brought a wave of performative activism and eco-consumerism⁹. It can be argued that consumerism as the dominant form of PEB results in a sense of complacency to neoliberal, capitalist conservation solutions.

Pro-environmental consumer behavior does nothing to address or rectify past environmental injustices, and participating industries often misinform consumers about their actual environmental impacts. This begs the question: does the increase in eco-consumerism discourage collective environmental action? If pro-environmental consumers are satiated by their contributions towards a sustainable society, could this result in the stagnation of the environmental justice movement? Exploring the damaging effects pro-environmental consumer behavior can have on the progression of systemic change would be conducive to further sustainable development and environmental justice strategies.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and express my sincere gratitude to Professor April Ludwig-Chapman for her guidance and academic support throughout writing this literature review.

8 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

REFERENCES

- [1] Schell, C. J. *et al.* The ecological and evolutionary consequences of systemic racism in urban environments. *Science* **369** (2020).
- [2] Whyte, K. Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice. *Environment and Society* **9**, 125–144 (2018).
- [3] Fox, A. Sierra club grapples with founder John Muir's racism. *Smithsonian Magazine* (2020).
- [4] Graddy-Lovelace, G. Beyond biodiversity conservation: Why policy needs social theory, social theory needs justice, and justice needs policy. *Global Environmental Politics* **17**, 144–151 (2017).
- [5] Dono, J., Webb, J. & Richardson, B. The relationship between environmental activism, pro-environmental behaviour and social identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **30**, 178–186 (2010).
- [6] Bamberg, S., Rees, J. & Seebauer, S. Collective climate action: Determinants of participation intention in community-based pro-environmental initiatives. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **43**, 155–165 (2015).
- [7] Bratman, G. N. *et al.* Nature and mental health: An ecosystem service perspective. *Science Advances* **5** (2019).
- [8] Schmitt, M. T., Mackay, C. M., Droogendyk, L. M. & Payne, D. What predicts environmental activism? the roles of identification with nature and politicized environmental identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **61**, 20–29 (2019).
- [9] Abidin, C., Brockington, D., Goodman, M. K., Mostafanezhad, M. & Richey, L. A. The tropes of celebrity environmentalism. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* **45**, 387–410 (2020).
- [10] Brick, C., Sherman, D. K. & Kim, H. S. "green to be seen" and "brown to keep down": Visibility moderates the effect of identity on pro-environmental behavior. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **51**, 226–238 (2017).
- [11] Reese, G. & Jacob, L. Principles of environmental justice and pro-environmental action: A two-step process model of moral anger and responsibility to act. *Environmental Science & Policy* **51**, 88–94 (2015).
- [12] EJAAtlas. Blockadia: Keep fossil fuels in the ground!

| ejatlas (2022). URL <https://ejatlas.org/featured/blockadia>.