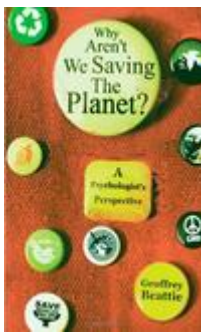


## The Imelda Marcos of Green Consumerism

A review of



### **Why Aren't We Saving the Planet? A Psychologist's Perspective**

by Geoffrey Beattie

Hove, England: Routledge, 2010. 269 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-56197-6. \$19.95, paperback

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Reviewed by

[Ad Bergsma](#)

The new book by Geoffrey Beattie is easy to summarize. The title is *Why Aren't We Saving the Planet? A Psychologist's Perspective*, and his answer is, "I haven't got a clue." But oddly enough, the writer spends more than 250 pages arguing otherwise. Marcel Danesi of the University of Toronto and editor of *Semiotica* totally disagrees with me, lending his name to the book cover with the following text, "This brilliant book has opened up a veritable practical path to solving the crises facing the planet."

Beattie is a respected scholar. He has published in *Nature*, and he is the head of the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Manchester. He was awarded the Spearman Medal by the British Psychological Society for "published psychological research of outstanding merit"; according to the Wikipedia entry on him, he has published 16 books, "many of which have either won or been short-listed for major national or international

prizes.” (Geoffrey Beattie, n.d., para 1, 2). He was also the resident psychologist on all 10 of the UK *Big Brother* reality television series.

So the problem cannot be that Beattie doesn't know his psychology. In the book he shows a skilled hand in placing his own ideas in the perspective of the history of psychology. He is well informed and picks interesting anecdotes to get his points across. But you can call it a little shortsighted if Beattie tries to answer his leading question with just four chapters, all his own.

It is not that these chapters aren't interesting. His most important chapter addresses whether people have the same explicit and implicit attitude about lowering their carbon footprint. This is an intriguing question because most people claim that they like to go green, but the actual choices they make tell a different story. Beattie therefore puts the people who say they care for climate change to the test. He uses an implicit association test that uses the speed in which people are able to associate *low carbon footprint* with the categories *good* or *bad*. The quicker people were able to combine categories, the higher the association between the two. It turns out that the implicit attitudes toward low carbon emissions were even more favorable than the explicit attitudes were.

So people do not forget to save the planet simply because they don't care. Time for another hypothesis to answer the leading question of his book, but Beattie still sticks with his initial line of thought, exploring the association between implicit and explicit attitudes. Statistically they are totally uncorrelated, but he tries to identify the “green fakers” who say they like to treat the environment with respect but who unconsciously have negative associations with a low carbon footprint. This is about 13 percent of the public.

Beattie clearly demonstrates that observation of nonverbal signs enables one to recognize the green fakers. He claims that this is very important, but I have at least two problems with this position. The first is practical. If you can identify green fakers with an implicit association test, why would you bother to do the same with an elaborate video analysis of nonverbal behavior? This is scientifically interesting but totally impractical for answering the question at hand.

The other problems with his approach are even more serious. The first is that the implicit and explicit attitudes are statistically unrelated; thus, it is more or less an accident if implicit and explicit attitudes align with each other. I therefore doubt if there is a principle difference between the so-called fakers and the honest people. What can we gain by calling some people “fakers,” especially if it is unknown how being a green faker is related to the actual behavior of people?

Beattie hints that green fakers might have a higher carbon footprint than others do, but he ignores that climate change is the result of the collective actions of all humans. Beattie's focus on finding the bad guys makes him forget the system characteristics of the climate problem. He should at least have mentioned the rebound effects, which can make individual action less effective.

Van Praag, Van Soest, and McAllister (2008) have given an illuminating example of this effect. You are a green warrior, and you decide to cut energy consumption. You switch off most electrical appliances, and you put on a thick sweater. The central heating system is used only in case you start shivering. But the story doesn't necessarily have a happy ending. Sadly, you save money this way, and if you want to use that for a flight to Barcelona, all the good you've done will be undone. So you decide to go to a restaurant instead and to enjoy an expensive meal. As a consequence, the waiter makes more money, which he eventually spends on a trip to Barcelona. Van Praag, Van Soest, and McAllister spoke of a waterbed economy: If you succeed in putting one part down, another will rise.

Beattie, however, ignores these complexities, thus making it impossible to put his own contribution into perspective. He documents that Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* had a huge emotional impact on viewers and raised the willingness to tackle climate change, but, again, this doesn't help him to explain why we aren't saving the planet. Beattie ignores the questions of why Gore's Nobel Prize-winning message did not result in lower carbon emissions and why corrupt bankers causing the credit crunch were much more successful in this respect.

Three of Beattie's chapters make it harder to understand why green behavior is put on a hold by the masses, but there is one more. Beattie shows with eye-tracking devices that consumers in the supermarket do not pay attention to information about the carbon footprint of individual products. He uses thorough observation to come to this point, but I think that one needs five minutes of superficial observation in the supermarket to come to the same conclusion. Any information about the carbon footprint is out of sight of the consumers on the back of the products, and consumers spend about five seconds when choosing a product. Beattie uses a cannon to kill a mosquito in this chapter, while still offering valuable suggestions to make the carbon information more useful.

All in all, Beattie adds a little bit to the big picture. How does he manage to fill a complete book? First of all, he devotes numerous pages to the technical details of his research. He could have saved the carbon footprint of a whole lot of paper by skipping these parts. I think the book would have benefited, for the details are so thoroughly described that I had a hard time figuring out exactly what he meant, even though I recently earned my PhD and have the statistical expertise that comes with it. The technical details make the book inaccessible for nonpsychologists.

A second important feature of the book is the life story of Beattie himself. He confesses to be addicted to consumerism. For example, he owns 60 pairs of running shoes. This autobiographical information is nice if you want to know Beattie better, but I wondered what it was doing in the book.

First, I thought that I should understand it as an old-fashioned conversion story. If you find God, it is better for the drama if you start out as a heavy-drinking, aggressive prostitute. Being full of remorse about past mistakes adds glory to being reborn. But Beattie just explains that he buys clothes he doesn't wear and that he should know better, but he never

changes his behavior. He is no green faker but rather a green dilettante who remains inert until the last pages.

On page 188 Beattie writes, “When you communicate you need a clear model of the audience, their mental state, their needs and aspirations.” However, I believe Beattie didn’t give the audience of his book much thought. The parts about his personal life are probably meant to reach a wide audience, but the technical parts are only for nerds. Beattie adds little to all earlier efforts that have been done to understand the psychology of climate change, and I cannot think of a single audience I could recommend the book for.

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## References

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Van Praag, E., Van Soest, J. P., & McAllister, J. (2008). *De Aarde heeft Koorts: Bewust leven met klimaatverandering* [The earth has a fever: Conscious living with climate change]. Kampen, the Netherlands: Ten Have.