

World view



By Emma Marris

To mark the 50th Earth Day, take collective action

Reducing your own carbon footprint is not as powerful as calling governments and companies to account.

Everybody can and should do something to protect our shared home, Earth. But it pays to be strategic when deciding what action to take. In recent years, I have joined the board of a local climate non-profit group, marched, written local and national editorials, and even been hauled to jail for occupying the Oregon state capitol to protest against a pipeline project. And I've never felt more sure of myself.

For at least the past decade, environmental groups have been suggesting we reduce individual emissions by altering our behaviour: choosing public transport, eating less meat, buying more efficient light bulbs. In fact, it was the oil giant BP that popularized the 'personal carbon footprint' in 2005. This focus has kept individuals working on their own impact while letting governments, and corporations that profit from climate change, off the hook.

This year, 22 April marked the 50th annual Earth Day, a day of protest in favour of environmental protection. It is past time to shift our focus to policies that can get at the root cause of the problem: the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. The transition to zero-emissions energy needs to happen quickly – but also equitably, without making energy unobtainable for poor and marginalized people. By acting together to demand this, we can all have an impact much larger than whatever reductions we can make as individuals.

The average person in an industrialized country is responsible for around 10 tonnes of carbon emissions per year, so that's a rough limit to what anyone can accomplish by addressing only their own footprint. If someone were to join a campaign to close down a coal-powered plant, and it prevailed, that could help to eliminate 10 million tonnes of carbon a year – much more than any individual could prevent over a whole lifetime. And helping to pass laws that shut down all coal plants in a single country could multiply that impact.

Scientists are well positioned to contribute to such campaigns. They have skills that can be valuable in this fight, even if their area of expertise has nothing to do with atmospheric chemistry, soil science, electrical engineering, conservation planning or any of the hundreds of other specialisms that directly intersect with the problem.

Scientific habits of mind can help anyone to identify where they have the most leverage. Do you join 10,000 people to push for a national policy change, 1,000 people to demand your employer divest from fossil fuels, or 10 people to push for a new bike lane by your house? Any choice will be good, and success at any level will do much

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more to stop climate change than a lifetime of green living.

Everyone who works for an employer, is part of a community, or is a member of a field has several possible spheres of influence. They can push their employer to divest from fossil fuels; support students who are demanding changes across a university system; lobby a government agency to include climate impacts in decision-making; or even go on strike if their employer continues to pursue profits that are tangled up with torching the climate. They can go to council meetings and recommend that their community sets emissions targets or invests in community-run renewable energy or public transport. They can push for their professional organizations to make commitments and public statements. They can take to the streets and protest; they can run for office; they can volunteer to take the muffins to the next meeting of the local climate-activism group.

Climate change is not the only environmental problem facing Earth – there are other major threats to the diversity of life. Working to institute policies that protect complex ecosystems from clearance and development can also have high rewards. There might be species on the edge of extinction in your area that you can help by attending community meetings, writing comments during government planning processes or lobbying your local representatives.

Equally, fighting for the rights of people of colour, Indigenous people, people from sexual and gender minorities, poor people and members of other marginalized groups is a powerful way of engaging in the fight for climate justice. When everyone really has equal power, policies that allow historically favoured groups to profit from the ongoing and deepening misery of others will be changed.

There are as many ways to engage with collective action as there are people. But the key word is collective. By all means, green up your personal life. It can help, and often comes with other benefits, as well. But we should prioritize changing the systems we all live in that make it difficult and expensive to make green choices.

You might worry that advocating on behalf of the climate puts your reputation as a dispassionate, rational scientist at risk. I sympathize. As a freelance writer, I worried that getting involved in climate activism would mean I could no longer claim to be an unbiased journalist. In the end, I decided that sharing my fears about the future, my love for Earth and its life, and my opinions about the changes we need to make to protect our home did not conflict with my core commitment to seek out and report the truth.

Going public with your opinions need not conflict with the scientific search for truth. Nor do you have to dedicate your life to collective action for the environment. Even a couple of hours every other week can achieve great things. Individually, we are puny; together, we can change the world.