

Could football and flash mobs save the planet?

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People's dedication to bizarre rituals is a rich yet relatively untapped source of wealth that could be devoted to environmentally friendly activities. Twenty million people in the UK (more than a third of the country's population) are estimated to have watched Euro 2004. That's millions of hours watching overpaid young men kicking around a ball according to arbitrary rules. Followed by weeks of detailed analyses of critical seconds during the match.

Then, we have flash mobs. A crowd suddenly collects at a predetermined time and location to commit a completely pointless and generally harmless act. Examples are applauding for fifteen minutes in the lobby of a prestigious hotel or jumping up and down with an open umbrella. The joy of flash mobbing is the pointlessness: nothing political, no hidden agenda, just pure fun.

Yet doing something practical and useful for the environment can also be non-political and fun. A Birmingham flash mob in August 2003 sang in front of an Oxfam shop and then donated clothing to them. Flash mobs could be used to clean up litter or for other environmental community work.

Why has this concept not evolved in such a fashion? And why are we unlikely to see football fanatics transfer their World Cup 2006 television hours into developing a sustainable transport strategy for their home community? Many attempts have been made to explain what moves people and how society's priorities are set (for example, watching football rather than reducing private vehicle use). A base reference in the enmeshed psychology of crowds and power is the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. After only a few days of role-playing as guards or prisoners, the former became sadistic while the latter became severely depressed.

Would it work to give people a badge, baton, and instructions to be Environmental Police or Environmental Guardians? What would we discover from a psychological experiment where people were asked to be as environmentally friendly as possible for a week while another group was delineated as Environmental Enforcers? How could we create environmentally friendly social epidemics rather than being subservient to the random trends thrust upon us?

A £100 departure tax per passenger on any commercial flight originating in the UK might come close to representing the true environmental and social cost of the aircraft taking off. Any attempt to implement this suggestion would be politically courageous (i.e. political suicide) even if special provisions were made for isolated locations such as the Outer Hebrides. Cheap flights have become part of the British culture and are viewed more as a right than a privilege, even though they are actually a luxury that the environment cannot afford.

Similarly, Westminster has been cornered into declaring that it is not anti-car, as if any attempt to discourage private vehicle use were a felony. Apparently, we have a right to own whichever vehicle we want and to drive it whenever we wish, irrespective of the true costs (which individual vehicle owners do not pay). Higher oil prices are lamented rather than accepted as being fair - but only when the price at the pump increases or when we see the ballooning fuel tax on our plane ticket.

Through all the hypocrisies of wanting an environmentally friendly society that does not impact our individual choices, obvious observations emerge about individuals' actions. Three examples:

-Individuals will go to great lengths and cost to do something that they want to do.

-Immediate, day-to-day decisions are not necessarily consistent with one's overall values or longterm desires and expectations for society.

-Acts done since childhood, such as watching football, are more popular than new suggestions, often seen as impositions, such as driving less.

The challenge is how to use these observations to the advantage of the environment rather than to its detriment.

How can we define and apply the usual words of "education" and "awareness", plus the less usual words of "brainwashing", "bribing", "convincing", "goading", and "cajoling", in order to produce more environmentally-friendly results? How do we tackle the fundamental values, ethics, and cultures that promote two-dimensional Hollywood actors and sports superstars without giving similar attention (and salaries) to key sustainability actors and environmental superstars?

I believe that we can and should do better for ourselves. How to make environmental friendliness part of the unquestioned, normal, traditional, and accepted patterns in our day-to-day lives is the question that I wish I could fully answer.

Recommended reading:

Gladwell : The Tipping Point www.gladwell.com/books.html

Surowiecki: The Wisdom of Crowds www.randomhouse.com/features/wisdomofcrowds

MacKay: Extraordinary Popular Delusions And The Madness Of Crowds
www.litrix.com/madraven/madne001.htm

Stanford Prison Experiment: www.prisonexp.org/index.html