

All That Performative Environmentalism Adds Up

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My newly adopted home state is on fire again: Scorching heat and lightning strikes have sparked dozens of fires across California, burning an area the size of Rhode Island. Iowa is reeling from a deadly derecho. The Mountain West is suffering through a severe [drought](#). Towns and cities all over are experiencing one of the hottest summers on record, if not the [hottest](#). And a hurricane just tore through the Gulf Coast.

With climate change making extreme weather events more intense and more common, and Congress continuing to ignore this existential threat, I have tried to do my part. After moving to California, I went on a no-buy streak. I began refusing short plane trips, using public transit or walking whenever possible, and turning the air-conditioning down. I even started carrying around a water bottle or a mason jar.

Could it be that my decision to go green is pointless, or even harmful? “Performative environmentalism” is more about personal virtue than saving the planet, says the writer s.e. smith in a [searing essay](#), and puts the focus on the micro and futile rather than the macro and important. Polluters have convinced us that it is consumers’ fault, [argues](#) the activist George Monbiot, who also argues that we cannot [buy our way](#) out of a crisis caused by untrammelled consumption. [Neoliberalism](#) has wrested the responsibility for environmental action from the C-suite and the statehouse to the individual home, says the journalist Martin Lukacs. No less an authority than Michael Mann, the renowned climatologist, has made a version of this [same argument](#), as have [many, many other thinkers](#).

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Social scientists do not just think that the same is true when it comes to helping the environment and stemming climate change. They know that it is true. Take the example of the sport utility vehicle. Annual sales of these boxy gas guzzlers have soared in [recent decades](#); just 8 percent of American consumers chose SUVs as of 1992, and more than 40 percent choose them today. As the Cornell University economist Robert H. Frank notes in his book [Under the Influence](#), that shift was not due to some intrinsic need on the part of American consumers. The population [grew in dense](#) urban areas and shrank in sparse rural ones over that time, and labor growth happened in the white-collar and service sectors. Families got smaller at the same time too.

SUVs got popular because they were perceived as cool and rich people started buying them, and nobody cared a whit about the carbon impact. Frank traces the trend to the 1992 Tim Robbins film *The Player*, of all things: “Seeing a wealthy studio executive behind the wheel of a Range Rover instantly certified it as a player’s vehicle of choice. As more and more high-income buyers purchased them, their allure grew,” he writes. “When other automakers began offering similar vehicles at lower prices, SUV sales took off. And with each driver who bought an SUV instead of a car, gasoline consumption and greenhouse-gas emissions increased further.”

If viral buying can hurt the environment, it can help it, too. Putting solar panels on your house [is infectious](#): A study from California showed that a [single house](#) installing rooftop solar panels increased the probability of another house in the same zip code doing so by .78 percentage points. The propensity to [conserve water](#) and recycle is [social](#) too. “People see that their neighbors are putting their [recycling bins] out, and they become more likely to do that,” Robert Gifford, a psychologist who studies environmental behaviors at the University of Victoria, told me. “Seeing what your friends and neighbors are doing can make a big difference in people’s behavior.”

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