

Want to fight climate change? Have fewer children

Damian Carrington Environment editor – Wednesday 12 July 2017 05.45 BST

The greatest impact individuals can have in fighting climate change is to have one fewer child, according to a new study that identifies the most effective ways people can cut their carbon emissions.

The next best actions are selling your car, avoiding long flights, and eating a vegetarian diet. These reduce emissions many times more than common green activities, such as recycling, using low energy light bulbs or drying washing on a line. However, the high impact actions are rarely mentioned in government advice and school textbooks, researchers found.

Carbon emissions must fall to two tonnes of CO₂ per person by 2050 to avoid severe global warming, but in the US and Australia emissions are currently 16 tonnes per person and in the UK seven tonnes. "That's obviously a really big change and we wanted to show that individuals have an opportunity to be a part of that," said Kimberly Nicholas, at Lund University in Sweden and one of the research team.

The new study, published in *Environmental Research Letters*, sets out the impact of different actions on a comparable basis. By far the biggest ultimate impact is having one fewer child, which the researchers calculated equated to a reduction of 58 tonnes of CO₂ for each year of a parent's life.[...]

"We recognise these are deeply personal choices. But we can't ignore the climate effect our lifestyle actually has," said Nicholas. "It is our job as scientists to honestly report the data. Like a doctor who sees the patient is in poor health and might not like the message 'smoking is bad for you', we are forced to confront the fact that current emission levels are really bad for the planet and human society." [...]

Overpopulation has been a controversial factor in the climate change debate, with some pointing out that an American is responsible for 40 times the emissions produced by a Bangladeshi and that overconsumption is the crucial issue. The new research comes a day after researchers blamed overpopulation and overconsumption on the "biological annihilation" of wildlife which has started a mass extinction of species on the planet. [...]

The researchers analysed dozens of sources from Europe, North America and Japan to calculate the carbon savings individuals in richer nations can make. They found getting rid of a car saved 2.4 tonnes a year, avoiding a return transatlantic flight saved 1.6 tonnes and becoming vegetarian saved 0.8 tonnes a year.

These actions saved the same carbon whichever country an individual lived in, but others varied. The savings from switching to an electric car depend on how green electricity generation is, meaning big savings can be made in Australia but the savings in Belgium are six times lower. Switching your home energy supplier to a green energy company also varied, depending on whether the green energy displaces fossil fuel energy or not. [...]

Chris Goodall, an author on low carbon living and energy, said: "The paper usefully reminds us what matters in the fight against global warming. But in some ways it will just reinforce the suspicion of the political right that the threat of climate change is simply a cover for reducing people's freedom to live as they want.

"Population reduction would probably reduce carbon emissions but we have many other tools for getting global warming under control," he said. "Perhaps more importantly, cutting the number of people on the planet will take hundreds of years. Emissions reduction needs to start now."

Adapted from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/12/want-to-fight-climate-change-have-fewer-children>