

Slay those dragons

We all have psychological dragons that test our resolve to adopt greener lifestyles



ARNOLD LIM PHOTOGRAPHY

Gifford

By Peigi McGillivray

How many times have you made a resolution to be a cleaner and greener you, only to fall back on old wasteful and energy-consuming habits?

You're not alone, says University of Victoria professor Dr. Robert Gifford. As an environmental and social psychologist, he studies the mental obstacles we all have to adopting more environmentally friendly lifestyles.

"At least 13 psychological barriers hinder our willingness to change," says Gifford, who is convinced that a heavy dose of positive thinking needs to be injected into public discourse about climate change and what we can do about it. "Constant gloom and doom just makes people give up," he says.

To get a comprehensive picture of environmental attitudes and behaviours around the world, Gifford and UVic graduate students Leila Scannell and Christine Kormos recently completed a sweeping survey of more than 3,100 people in 18 countries.

Questions covered such topics as the effects of greenhouse gases, the quality of air, the degree of biodiversity, the state of fisheries,

the impact of vehicle traffic, the state of forests and wilderness, and the effect of pesticides.

For each topic, respondents were asked to give an assessment for their own region, for their country and for the world—now and 25 years into the future.

"We found widespread pessimism about the state of the environment in general," says Gifford. "But we also found that people all over the world believe things are better in their own communities than elsewhere."

Being too optimistic about local conditions leads to inaction, says Gifford. "Finding the most effective public messages about climate change and its implications is a delicate task that must balance bad news against excessive optimism, while taking the attitudes and values of different groups of people into account."

Before real change can occur, he says, we each need to slay those 13 psychological "dragons."

"I believe everyone can help change the world for the better, and the New Year is a perfect time to start. So pick a dragon and start slaying."

Here are four of Gifford's "dragons":

Uncertainty: Is climate change really such a big deal? Uncertainty makes us much less likely to do anything about a problem. "Do your homework," says Gifford. "Read about global climate change issues, ask questions. The more you know, the more likely you are to turn your beliefs into action."

Helplessness: I'm just one person, what difference can I make? "Doing nothing is the ultimate lack of control," says Gifford, "Each small action you take puts you more in control of the problem, and every little bit helps the environment."

Tokenism: I recycle, what more do you want? Step outside your comfort zone and take on new challenges. "Find out what else you could do that would make a difference, whether it's energy-efficient bulbs or a transit ride to work once a week," says Gifford. "Do one more thing this year than you did last year."

Fairness: Others are far worse than me, why should I change? It's harder to change a habit if we think we're sacrificing when others aren't. "See yourself as a pioneer, a leader and an environmental hero," says Gifford. "You'll be doing your bit, as well as setting an example for others."

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Read all 13 of Gifford's "Dragons of Inaction" at web.uvic.ca/psyc/dragons.pdf

Gifford is founding director of a new interdisciplinary program at UVic that focuses on the human dimensions of climate change. The program, which begins in January, will give students an understanding of the multidisciplinary aspects of climate change.

Major funding for Gifford's work comes from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Canadian Space Agency and others.

The latest ranking by ReSearch Infosource places UVic in the elite "\$100-million club" of Canadian universities with research income of \$100 million or more. UVic's sponsored research income of just over \$112.4 million for fiscal 2008 is a 25.9 per cent increase over the previous year—the second highest growth rate among the nation's top 20 universities.



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