

# Is it up to individuals to save the planet? Science, ethics, politics, markets, environment

## Discussed by

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## Moderated by

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**WHEN:** Monday 19.3.2018, 14-16

**WHERE:** Metsätalo/Forestry House (Unioninkatu 40), room 6, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor (<http://www.helsinki.fi/teknos/opetustilat/keskusta/u40/ls6.htm>)

**WHAT:** AID ([www.helsinki.fi/tint/aid](http://www.helsinki.fi/tint/aid)) is the forum for interdisciplinary conversation coordinated by TINT ([www.helsinki.fi/tint](http://www.helsinki.fi/tint)). This session is organized jointly by TINT and LUKE (Natural Resources Institute, [www.luke.fi](http://www.luke.fi)).

## Topic:

It appears all pressure we impose on the environment can in principle be traced down to the actions of individuals. A logical consequence of this is to require that the environment be protected by reshaping individuals' choices. How should this be done? Government programs, educational campaigns, rules and regulations can be used to guide and constrain the choices made by firms and consumers. Market based regulations utilize the decision making mechanisms of firms and individuals but takes them as given. Finally, we can try to help make the autonomous decisions of individually ethically more noble.

By framing the choices in terms of right and wrong we may create impediments for effectiveness. First, we revise our moral codes sluggishly. Meanwhile, environmental science makes progress, revising old ideas and inventing new ones. Having taught a generation of farmers that conservation tillage is a good choice, how should we tell them that science now informs that it seems to be bad after all for phosphorus driven eutrophication? Are the other ethical statements any more robust? Second, as soon as we portray any particular choice as right or wrong, we risk inflating the ultimate ethical imperative: You must protect the environment. Third, researchers are rarely very brave human beings. How should we express doubts about our models if their results are being used for labeling other people's choices as right or wrong? Particularly in agriculture we should not stick to ethical arguments. We know too little.

If we consider markets as comprised of collectives of individuals, then relying on the capacity of markets in the self-correction of externalities boils down to relying on individuals altering their behavior. This is terribly optimistic. Lack of relevant information is only one of the sources of market failure. Regulation is needed to level the playing ground, to coordinate our common will to protect the environment.

## Questions:

- Are ethically noble individual choices sufficient for desired environmental outcomes?
- How important a role does environmental protection play in the ethical choices of the youngest generations? What will happen to their overall willingness to protect the environment if the currently promoted measures turn out to be ineffective or even wrong?
- Will fixing the "right thing to do" decrease our efforts to continuously and innovatively seek the most effective protection measures? Do we want to save the planet or do we want to witness destruction?
- What are the ethical standards of individuals and collective governance organizations in relationship to nature, and to fellow humans affected by our environment-affecting choices?
- How are these standards for individuals and collective governance organizations related? Are they well aligned, or they diverge, even conflict with one another?

- Is a market-based instrument more ethical than ethical individual choice if the instrument generates a better environmental impact?
- How likely is it that widely adopted environmental protection measures will be deemed harmful for the environment in the future? Has this happened in large scale protection efforts in the past?
- Should environmental researchers be prophets or priests?

**Readings:**

Ympäristöprofeetta: <https://www.luke.fi/blogi/ymparistoprofeetta/>

The Environmental Prophet: <https://www.luke.fi/en/blog/the-environmental-prophet/>

A Bad Food Bible – How and Why to Eat Sinfully: <http://theincidentaleconomist.com/wordpress/the-bad-food-bible-preorder-now/>

The Cookie Crumbles (New York Times): <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/upshot/the-cookie-crumbles-a-retracted-study-points-to-a-larger-truth.html>