



CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE OVER 50s

BACKGROUND

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General

It is now widely accepted that mankind's activities are contributing to, and accelerating, global climate change. The need for urgent action to ensure we do not get locked into irreversible damage, goes hand in hand with recognition that there is no one magic solution or course of action. We need a collective effort to address the problems on many fronts. As well as the international and national initiatives, the impact that individuals and groups can make is potentially immense. Since every individual can do something, whatever their personal, social or economic circumstances, there is no excuse for inaction.

Climate change, its causes and consequences, is a fast moving and complex area, which does make it difficult for individuals and groups to keep abreast of how they can help. RSVP has therefore produced a directory and factsheets targeted at the over 50s to assist navigation through the plethora of information and advice. Focusing on this age sector is important because recent academic studies (1, 2) suggest that they have the highest carbon footprint of any age group. These surveys and other work (3) have also shown that the over-50s are motivated to take action, prompted by a mixture of reasons including fears of consequences for their grandchildren and their own vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. The complexity and often contradictory nature of the advice and information available, adds to frustration and confusion about how best to help or avoid the negative consequences.

The emotive nature of some of the many issues surrounding climate change, demand that RSVP should only provide signposts to solutions, rather than preach. Similarly RSVP cannot attempt to address everything. Nevertheless the directory and factsheets do at least provide a starting point by illustrating what things can be done easily, and where to go to obtain further advice, guidance and information. Hopefully it will also provide the incentive for individuals and groups in the 50+ age group to explore possibilities for reducing their carbon footprint through individual or collective action.

What is Climate Change?

Climate is broadly defined as "average weather" over a long period. Weather is described as the fluctuating state of the atmosphere around us. Through our activities, the concentration of so called greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere is increasing year on year. These gases, primarily carbon dioxide (but also methane, nitrous oxide, CFCs, water vapour and others), can cause an increased warming effect on the earth surface that results in reductions in snow and ice cover and expansion of the oceans. So why is this a problem?

These direct effects themselves alter important interactions between the earth surface and the atmosphere which ultimately influence global weather and climate. Not surprisingly therefore attempts to combat climate change focus on directly or indirectly reducing, or stabilising, GHG emissions. There are various ways of doing this, ranging from not emitting them in the first place, capturing emissions at source, or utilising natural “sinks”, such as trees, to absorb GHGs from the atmosphere. The UK government has recently embarked on a nationwide campaign to highlight reducing GHG emissions (<http://actonco2.direct.gov.uk>)

Our understanding of climate change has improved immensely over the past 20 years and there is now universal agreement that it is being accelerated by the activities of humankind. However a recent nationwide survey has shown a small reduction, over a period of 5 years, in the number people who believe climate change is real and actually happening.(4) Some of this small reduction is attributed to recent attempts by sceptics to undermine the scientific justification for climate change. Such claims have been shown by independent review to be unfounded, Current scientific effort is now focusing on the uncertainties associated with how much change we can expect, over what timescales, what areas will experience the most change and how we can do something to neutralise or reverse current trends.

Why do we need to act now? Alongside acceptance that climate change is happening is recognition that we need to act quickly (within the next 20 years at most), if we are to avoid irreversible damage in the future (5). Indeed recent statements by politicians and their advisors have described the nature of the threats we now face from global climate change as being greater than the threats posed by international terrorism (6) Since there is no one simple thing we can do to reverse the causes or consequences, action needs to be taken urgently on many fronts by individuals, communities and governments.

Why can't the over-50s leave it to others to act? The age 50+ sector currently represents 33% of the UK population and this will rise to approximately 40% by 2030. Each person in this age sector is responsible for some 13.5 tonnes of CO₂ per year as opposed to around 12 tonnes for the average UK individual. This higher “carbon footprint” is attributed to 28% higher GHG (e.g. CO₂) emissions associated with lifestyles that include higher home energy consumption and more travel. The over-50s also possess 40% of the UK disposable income, 60% of savings and 80% of the UK's private wealth and thus have the potential to make a major contribution to the collective effort to address the challenges. A key message for the over 50's is that it would be immoral and unjust for them to abdicate responsibility and leave it to others to act. Drawing on recent project work carried out in Swindon and elsewhere, the case for better engagement of the older generation in discussion and debate on climate change, and related environmental issues, has been well made (7)

What is a carbon footprint and how do I calculate mine? A carbon footprint is the amount of carbon emitted by an individual or organisation in a given period of time. The amount is primarily a function of which greenhouse gas, and how much, is released into the atmosphere. Some emissions are worse than others but all of them stay in the atmosphere for a long time (residence times being in the order of up to 100 years or more for CO₂). There are now many “calculators” to work out how much carbon is generated by each aspect of your lifestyle. One example is the UK government website at <http://actonco2.direct.gov.uk/>

That's fine but what exactly can I do to help? The directory and factsheets document, available at <http://www.rsvp-west.org.uk/pdf/climatechange facts.pdf>, provides some ideas and pointers on how individuals and groups can take action. It does this by breaking down the issues surrounding climate change into a number of topic areas: **Energy, Ethical Investment, Food and Drink, Transport and travel, Waste, and Water resources.**

It will not be possible for everyone to do all the things suggested, but each personal contribution, however small, will help. One quick and easy way is for individuals to reduce their consumption of resources, whether this is food, water, energy etc. A simple reality check such as considering “before you buy do you really need it” might even work!

OK but my circumstances do not allow me to take direct action. Are there other ways I can help? One way could be to support a carbon offset scheme which aims to help neutralize your carbon footprint. Many of these schemes are in their early stages of development and some have been harshly criticized as simply transferring the problem elsewhere, rather than removing them. Whilst better than doing nothing, offsetting is not as good as not emitting in the first place. Many schemes appear sound but before signing up you need to reassure yourself that the offsets you pay for are actually happening! Generally each scheme will calculate your lifestyle carbon footprint for you and most will allow you to offset one activity, for example air travel. Your carbon footprint is then translated into a fee that a company will use to soak up an equivalent amount of GHG from the atmosphere. Some examples of schemes are:

For individuals: Carbon Neutral Company: <http://www.carbonneutral.com>

For Businesses: CO2balance.com: <http://www.co2balance.com>

OK but I am still confused! How can you help me? If the directory and factsheets do not provide what you are looking for, RSVP has a small group of individuals who are willing to give free advice and guidance and also talk to clubs, gatherings and community groups in the West region to engage them in discussion on options. Contact us [by e-mail](#). There are also a number of books and publications which give further background and may help. For example:

The Rough Guide to Ethical Living. Duncan Clark. ISBN 1-84353-792-3

The Rough Guide to Climate Change. Robert Henson. ISBN 1-85828-105-6

The Hot Topic. Gabrielle Walker and Sir David King ISBN 978-0-7475-9630-1

References

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3. *Greener and Wiser: An Older people's manifesto on the environment*. Green Alliance. May 2009. ISBN 978-1-905869-22-0
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