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Report: Knowledge Alone Won't Spur Environmental Action

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This undated handout photo provided by NASA shows the Thwaites Glacier in West Antarctic. Two new studies indicate that part of the huge West Antarctic ice sheet is starting a slow collapse in an unstoppable way. Alarmed scientists say that means even more sea level rise than they figured. (AP Photo/NASA)

When it comes to protecting the environment, talk is cheap. Redlands University Professor Monty Hempel says a sense of urgency is needed before people are willing to act to protect the health of the planet.

Hempel says ecological literacy – or ecoliteracy for short –addresses the knowledge deficit about environmental problems. But so, far, he says, it's not affected the behavior deficit.

"Ecoliteracy is a phrase invented to describe the kinds of knowledge that we need to operate sustainably in the society in which we live," he said. "And that means with the environmental life support systems that provide sustenance for everybody, not just humans, but other species."

Hempel has written a chapter in the Worldwatch Institute's State of the World 2014 report called ["Ecoliteracy: Knowledge is Not Enough."](#)

"Some people think that ecoliteracy is just a green form of science literacy," he said. "And what I have tried to ask is whether that's enough? In other words, what an ecologically literate person needs to know might include things like the cycles and the flows, the energy systems, all of those [kinds] of things that we would call the science of ecology."

It's been said that knowledge is power. But the environmental sciences professor says that's not always the case.

"That doesn't seem to lead to action to protect our environment – to protect our life support system – to the level that we need to," Hempel said. "Just because we know a lot about the environment doesn't mean that we actually act to save it."

He said people may not be very concerned about environmental problems if they occur far from their homes.

"Some people call it psychological distance. A lot of climate issues are worse in the Arctic and most of us don't spend time in the Arctic," Hempel said. "And so, there's a certain distance. But there's also a distance that's happening in the world as it urbanizes -- people spending more time in front of screens and less time out in nature. We become, if you will, disconnected from the natural systems that used to be the key to success for a human being."

In the past, he said, if a person could not read the surrounding environment, he or she would have difficulty finding food, water and shelter.

"We give it less thought and perhaps we give it less importance in our own lives," he said.

Hempel said getting back in touch with nature would help people re-balance their lives – and may even help reduce the U.S. obesity epidemic, which is now affecting the nation’s youth.

“To help children discover the wonders of nature. To help children discover what it is when they take a breath. They can probably thank the ocean for every other breath they take because of the oxygen that’s produced there,” he said.

Hempel said getting back in touch with nature should become part of the formal education system.

“One of the things that I think ecoliteracy would help us do is to bring back -- through experience -- those wonders of encounters with wildlife with other creatures than ourselves. And that that would actually contribute to our quality of life – that would contribute to our learning,” he said.

While the vast majority of scientists agree on climate change, Hempel said there is a great deal of polarization among the general public. He said too many decisions regarding climate may be swayed by money and politics and not science.

“How do we go back to a governance system that can actually use science to help us solve problems? That if we had a kind of system of governance that allowed us to incorporate what we know in science -- and to respond to it -- we would all be better off,” he said.

Hempel said the future can seem scary because there’s so much that’s not known about the effects of climate change. But he added that it’s time to put aside denial and fear when confronting major problems.