

3c- Americans Say They Want Eco-Friendly Vacations. But Few Make It a Priority

The start of summer travel season is underway, and Americans are crowding into airports, interstates, and cruise terminals, family **in tow**, to get away from it all for a week or two. A lot of them will be thinking about sustainability: the carbon emissions entailed by this yearly mass exodus, and the whether the ice in Glacier National Park is going to be around for much longer, or if there'll be any unbleached coral to see on snorkeling outings a few years down the line. It's just that not a lot of them are going to change their plans because of it. Those were some of the findings of a recent survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of TIME. Just over half (56%) of the more than 1,000 respondents said that their vacations' environmental impact was at least somewhat important to them. It wasn't exactly the biggest concern among vacationers—92% said that cost was “somewhat important” or “very important,” 85% placed importance on dining options, and 75% would prioritize prospects for socializing. Still, if most people are thinking about the environment when they plan their trips, it seems like that would make a difference in the carbon footprint of this summer's travel season.

The catch is that just because people thought the environment was important, doesn't mean they plan to do anything about it. Only 17% of respondents said they'd spend more money to make their trips more environmentally friendly, by switching to an airline with more investments in decarbonized aviation fuel, for instance, or by renting an EV instead of a gasoline car. Even fewer, 12%, have ever actually changed their plans for the sake of the planet, such as taking a train instead of flying, for instance, or visiting somewhere closer to home. In both cases, younger generations are much more likely to do so than people over the age of 55.

That's the reason why many environmentalists tend to focus on getting regulations on businesses passed in government, or pressuring them through shareholder activism, rather than simply trying to get companies to offer more sustainable options and hoping consumers will pick them out. Unless whatever new product they're selling is cheaper or better than what's already out there, very few people are going to buy it. Often, people don't even have a good idea of what products are actually sustainable, or what sustainability even means. From Arkalgud's past research, he estimates that only a tiny fraction of consumers, around 1%, actually share a common understanding of the term “sustainability.” “We haven't even checked if people understand what this thing is, yet we're trying to sell them something,” he says. “And we really blame the consumer?” That lines up with the results of TIME's **survey**. For example, taking a cruise to a destination releases far more greenhouse gas emissions per person than simply flying there and staying in a hotel. Yet, when asked about environmentally responsible modes of travel, respondents were actually more likely to rank cruising as being climate-friendly compared to flying.

Those numbers are **sobering** for anyone hoping that a wave of customer demand is going to force airlines and cruise companies to cut their emissions. Worse still, they're almost certainly an overestimate. Ujwal Arkalgud, who studies consumer decision-making at Lux Research, has done a lot of studies asking consumers if they'll pay more for more environmentally-friendly products, then following up on what they actually do in the real world. The results aren't pretty. “If 20% of a cohort says I'm willing to pay more, the reality is about half that [does it],” says Arkalgud. “We have an idealized self, but when the rubber hits the road and we actually have to make the purchasing decision, it's usually a very disappointing outcome.” The situation is a bit like the U.S. market for cigarettes, says Arkalgud. Doctors have known that cigarettes are bad for you for decades, but it took years for it to really **sink in** for the public. Only then, in the course of many decades, did people begin avoiding tobacco on their own. The same may happen one day for vacationers and other consumers, with people choosing to travel more sustainably even if there's an extra cost, or it means not visiting their ideal destination. It's just that we don't have decades to wait.

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