That's a claim!

Key Concepts for thinking critically about environmental claims

INTRODUCTION
What should you do to reduce your carbon footprint? You may hear or read many suggested actions but which will be effective? The suggestions will come from many sources such as friends and family, government, business or social media. But how can you tell which claims are trustworthy? There are lots of claims like this about what is good for our environment. A claim is something someone or some group says that can be right or wrong.

An intervention is something you do to address a problem or challenge and improve the environment - for example, tackling pollution, conserving habitats, or reducing your carbon emissions. An intervention effect is something that the intervention makes happen - like reducing pollution, increasing numbers of an endangered species or reducing your carbon footprint.

People make lots of claims about intervention effects. How can we tell which claims are right or wrong? To do this, you need to look at what supports their claim - its basis. For example, someone’s personal experience is not a good basis for a claim about what is good for the environment. This is because we don’t know what would have happened if that person had done something else.

To know if an intervention (like changing from driving to cycling to school or work) causes an effect (e.g. reducing carbon emissions) and by how much, the intervention has to be compared to something else (like continuing driving in a car). That way we can see whether it would happen if people did something else. Researchers compare an intervention in one target group with something else (or nothing) in another target group. Those comparisons provide evidence - facts to support a conclusion about whether a claim about intervention effects is right or wrong. For those comparisons to be fair, the only important difference between the groups should be the intervention.

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THINK ‘FAIR’ - and check the evidence from treatment comparisons
Evidence from comparisons of interventions can fool you. You should think carefully about the evidence that is used to support claims about the effects of interventions.

Look out for:
• Unfair comparisons of interventions
• Unreliable summaries of comparisons
• How treatment effects are described

TAKE CARE - and make good choices
Good choices depend on thinking carefully about what to do.
Think carefully about:
• What your problem is and what your options are
• Whether the evidence is relevant to your problem and options
• Whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages