

A while back I wrote about how the *New York Times*' [environmental coverage had been in decline](#). The public editor at the *Times* has a [new article stating that environmental coverage has recently increased substantially](#). I think that is a great thing. But I want to focus on another element of the public editor's article.

In her [article](#), the public editor notes that there is some controversy over the fact that, in general, the *Times*' environmental coverage is placed in its Science section and that the journalists covering the environment are primarily based out of the science desk. She quotes one reader's concerns:

"Keeping these stories primarily in the Science section sends a signal to your readers that the phenomenon of climate change is still something to be studied or examined by scientists—some sort of scientific or natural phenomenon—and not something that is human-caused and already affecting our daily lives. Leaving climate change out of relevant stories that appear outside of the Science section sends the same, outdated message."

The public editor's response was that there were some articles that were not in the science section, and that it would be good to have "more stories on how climate change is affecting our daily lives."

I too have long been skeptical about the placement of environmental issues in the *Times*' science section. (The *Times* is not alone on this: Much of the *Economist*'s environment coverage is in its [Science and Technology](#) section.) But I am skeptical for different reasons than those expressed by the *Times*' reader.

Placing environmental issues in the Science section implies that science is the primary, perhaps only, determinant of how environmental policy should be decided. It implies that if we just get the science right, all of our environmental problems will be solved.

But that is just plain wrong. Science can never answer all of our questions in setting environmental policy – there are ethical, practical, and inherent limits to our scientific understanding that ensure that science cannot answer all of our questions, even when they are framed as scientific or technical questions. And there will always be, at heart, ethical or values questions about what our goals are in environmental policy. These are questions that science cannot answer. (For some overview of the literature, see this [piece](#) I wrote a couple of years ago.)

Indeed, focusing too much on the science in environmental policy can lead to a lot of problems in environmental decisionmaking. As a number of legal scholars have noted, including our own [Holly Doremus](#), it encourages the use of science as a rhetoric to conceal underlying value choices – making legal and political debates less transparent and productive. It may be one of the reasons why climate change policy has had so little traction, as different sides [who feel their values threatened resort to attacking science](#).

So yes, more environmental coverage in the Science section, but even more in the Politics, Business, or Arts sections. Or even better, give the environment its own section. It's surely as important as the *Times*' [Automotive](#) section, no?