



Psychology Joins Fight Against Global Warming

Kristin Espeland October 12, 2009 | [Email this to a friend](#)

“Thank you for choosing Earth as your planetary vehicle. We hope you enjoy the many wonderful features of this planet as you hurdle through the cosmos. Please note however, that in the event of continued inaction in the face of global warming, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device.”

On stage, this bit got big laughs. But psychologists might classify this excerpt from a [Blue Man Group video](#) as a “fear appeal,” a message that speaks to your worst fears to move you to action. But Penn state psychology professor Janet Swim says it doesn’t always work.

“So when you address individuals with the fear of potential consequences, they potentially will react against it, if they’re so afraid they’ve got a motivation to not do anything and to deny the fear,” says Swim. It sounds clear cut. But Swim and colleagues at the American Psychological Association believe it’s more complicated. The APA recently formed a climate change task force and issued a report with some recommendations, which Swim co-authored.

“It seemed like it would be quite useful to understand the way people understand climate change, and understand the behaviors that they’re doing to contribute and then hopefully to help with responding to climate change,” Swim says.

Swim isn’t talking about millions of Americans lying on therapists’ couches, hoping for a global warming emotional breakthrough. She’s talking about applying psychologists’ methods to find the best ways to change individual behavior. The APA [report](#) examines, in part, researchers’ current understanding of how individuals perceive risks and threats, and how they cope and adapt. Swim says the key word is individuals.

“When you’re doing anything to try to change people’s opinions, you have to know what your audience is. It’s not likely to be a uniform solution across people.”

Researchers at the Center for Climate Change Communications at George Mason University have just analyzed that audience in a [study](#) called “Global Warming’s Six Americas.” They surveyed adults across the nation about their global warming beliefs. Center director Ed Maibach says they found a range of opinions, but they mostly fell into six categories.

“From one America, about 18%, we call them the ‘alarmed’ because they understand that global warming is a very real threat to human health and well-being. They’re engaged in a variety of ways to try to change their own personal behaviors. And they’re very, very supportive of a whole range of public policy responses to deal with the threat,” Maibach says.

Maibach says that on the other end of the continuum is a group he calls the “Dismissive,” about 7 percent of the population. They’re just as engaged as the “Alarmed,” but in the exact opposite way; they don’t believe climate change is real. Maibach says that when it comes to curbing the actions that contribute to global warming, understanding the characteristics of each group should help policymakers and others target their messages more effectively. Still other social scientists are going beyond opinion polls these days to investigate how people are beginning to adapt to climate change.

“Right now I work on looking at how communities or individuals react to climate change issues or what climate change effects are occurring on the ground, says Jessica Montag, a social scientist with the US Geological Survey. She’s interviewing ranchers in Wyoming to find out how they might be changing their operations in anticipation of climate change’s effects—grazing their animals in new ways, for example. And what she’s finding—even though the effects of climate change are already appearing all over the country—is that most of the people she interviews say it’s something to worry about in the future.

“Why is there such a big gap between people’s beliefs, in this case the belief that global warming is a really serious threat, and their subsequent actions,” asks Ed Maibach, of George Mason University.

“And the answer to that is because it isn’t actually very easy to change many of our behaviors until the qualities, until the attributes of the communities in which we live are changed as well.”

Attributes such as access to public transportation. But another answer might be hidden deeper in our brains. Psychologists say they’re wired to perceive immediate, human threats. And global warming doesn’t fit the bill.