



Daily Climate News and Analysis

Psychologists Delve Into the Paradox of U.S. Concern but Inaction on Climate Change

by Renee Cho - Aug 23rd, 2009



Ask Americans if something should be done to stop global warming and close to three-quarters will say yes. Getting them to act on that belief is something else.

Only 8 percent say they've taken the step to contact their political representatives, according to a [poll \(http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/Climate_Change_in_the_American_Mind.pdf\)](http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/Climate_Change_in_the_American_Mind.pdf) by Yale and George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication.

That paradoxical state of America's consciousness has drawn the interest of social scientists and psychologists who are captivated by the challenge of how to engage the public and policymakers on climate change.

Earlier this month, the American Psychological Association issued a [report \(http://www.apa.org/releases/climate-change.html\)](http://www.apa.org/releases/climate-change.html) based on an examination of decades of psychological research on climate, conservation and environmental beliefs and actions. Its conclusion: Psychologists should take a greater role in helping communicate and break down the psychological barriers that are keeping people from accepting the science behind climate change and taking action to stop it.

"What is unique about current global climate change is the role of human behavior," said task force chair Janet Swim of Pennsylvania State University. "We must look at the reasons people are not acting in order to understand how to get people to act."

The Challenge

Part of the difficulty in getting people to accept the reality of climate change has been the success of communications strategies employed by the opposition to sow confusion and doubt about the science. Naysayers have taken advantage of the media's ethic of balanced reporting and succeeded in inserting the skeptical opinions of a fringe into the mainstream.

Scientists, meanwhile, have proved no match for the denialist campaign generously funded by fossil fuel interest. Most have little skill as spokespeople, unable to effectively communicate and hobbled by their penchant for jargon and cautiousness as well as their training to emphasize the unknown over the known.

The facts about climate change are often scary and can induce [emotional responses](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Communicating_climate_change_motivating_citizen_action#Common_Obstacles_to_Civic_Engagement_on_Climate_Change) (http://www.eoearth.org/article/Communicating_climate_change_motivating_citizen_action#Common_Obstacles_to_Civic_Engagement_on_Climate_Change) such as denial, numbness and the feeling of being overwhelmed, says Dr. Susanne Moser of Santa Cruz, Calif., who studies adaptation to climate change and effective climate change communication to bring about social change. People often don't fully understand the information. And because individuals are entrenched in their social niches, if action on climate change represents a social norm that's not consistent with that niche, they will likely not take it.

Yale and GMU researchers found that the U.S. public tends to respond to climate change issues with one of six unique types of behavior, set out in the report [Global Warming's Six Americas 2009](http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/GlobalWarmingsSixAmericas2009c.pdf) (<http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/GlobalWarmingsSixAmericas2009c.pdf>).

The six are the Alarmed (18%), who are already active and changing their behavior; the Concerned (33%), who recognize global warming as a serious problem but are not as involved; the Cautious, (19%) who believe global warming is happening but do not feel a sense of urgency; the Disengaged (12%), who haven't given it much thought; the Doubtful (11%), who are not sure if global warming is happening; and the Dismissive (7%), who do not believe global warming is happening and are actively engaged in downplaying it.

It would appear that the Dismissive have had a far greater influence than their numbers would warrant.

What Works?

The APA task force found several ways that groups have been successful in getting people to act on climate change. For example, people are more likely to use energy-efficient appliances if they can see immediately—rather than waiting for a utility bill—how much energy they are saving. [Smart meters](http://blog/20090603/what-s-next-smart-grid-ibm-picks-5-companies-watch) ([/blog/20090603/what-s-next-smart-grid-ibm-picks-5-companies-watch](http://blog/20090603/what-s-next-smart-grid-ibm-picks-5-companies-watch)) and software currently being developed will give more people that instant feedback.

The researchers also looked into combinations of interventions to see which combinations were most successful. For example, strong financial incentives accompanied by attention to customer convenience and strong social marketing

worked well to encourage people to weatherize their homes, increasing participation by 20 percent or more compared to programs that just offered financial incentives.

"Many of the shortcomings of policies based on only a single intervention type, such as technology, economic incentives or regulation, may be overcome if policy implementers make better use of psychological knowledge," the task force wrote.

Psychologists note that it's also important to tailor the message to the audience. By positioning environmental stewardship as a moral duty, E.O. Wilson successfully engaged religious communities.

To reach the uninvolved, an influential messenger or opinion leader that matches the message can be very persuasive. To reach the "Doubtful" segment of the population that is concerned about national security, Edward Maibach, Director of the GMU Center for Climate Change Communication, suggested that an influential status opinion leader such as a top U.S. general could be persuasive since climate change could soon become a major factor in global instability. It's a strategy [already being deployed](/blog/20090821/retired-military-leaders-working-create-common-ground-energy) (</blog/20090821/retired-military-leaders-working-create-common-ground-energy>).

"While status opinion leaders can help change people's minds, popular [local] opinion leaders are much more effective at changing people's behavior because we care about what they think," Maibach said. "It's crucial to find these local opinion leaders and ask them to become part of the solution."

At the heart of the challenge is reframing the issue. Frames are "mental structures that shape the way we see the world," explains George Lakoff, a professor of cognitive linguistics at the University of California-Berkeley.

Reframing an issue doesn't just mean using a different set of terms, such as "deteriorating atmosphere" instead of "global warming" — it's a much more comprehensive shift in perspective. When targeting a specific audience, climate change needs to be reframed according to the values and concerns of that particular group.

To reach the broader public, Lakoff stresses eight concepts that need to be repeated over and over until they are part of the public's common understanding.

- We are all part of nature — it is not outside of us, and the destructive exploitation of nature is evil. "Nature has been seen as a resource for people's short term gain rather than as a nurturer for us and for future generations. But it is part of us ... it is inside of us as we breathe the air, drink the water and eat our food," Lakoff said.
- The economic and ecological meltdowns have the same root — the idea that unregulated greed is good.
- The ecological system is a global one that is affected by many different elements. Thus people need to realize that their actions might cause climate change effects in other parts of the world, and that what happens in other parts of the world can affect us as well.

- The right wing's argument that it will cost too much to save Earth is faulty; if Earth goes, business goes.
- It is not just the polar bears that are endangered – all of human existence is threatened
- We all own the air, and corporations are polluting our air; they need to be stopped.
- Even the most effective emissions cap will not be sufficient; large corporations need to join the effort.
- The cost-benefit analysis is the wrong paradigm for thinking about global warming because it is only accurate when calculating short-term gain for a given purpose. It cannot calculate the long-term value of sustainable measures.

The public also needs to be given immediate practical solutions people can implement to address the problem. As strategist Tom Bowman puts it,

“to the extent people can't solve a problem, they tend to ignore that problem.”

Polls indicate that people do not know what solutions are viable and effective or what role they can play in mitigating climate change. Most people who are concerned about climate change are already changing how they shop, and they are implementing energy saving measures at home. However, stopping climate change is going to take much larger global measures.

That's where experts says one of the most important actions individuals can take to deal with climate change comes in: Keep up the [pressure on politicians](http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/index.html) (<http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/index.html>) to do the right thing.

While it's often said that climate change impacts seem too far away to motivate people's behavior, Moser notes that we already have several models for acting in our long-term best interests, such as saving for retirement or our children's college education.

Appealing to people's desires for a better future, their social identities and aspirations, and cultural values that promote individual and collective action for the greater good can all help increase people's motivation to become engaged. Without misrepresenting the enormous challenges we face, communicators need to paint a hopeful vision of the future.

See also:

[12 Generals, Admirals Speak Truth to Congress on Climate](/blog/20090517/12-generals-admirals-speak-truth-congress-climate) (</blog/20090517/12-generals-admirals-speak-truth-congress-climate>)

[Taking the Climate Fight to the Streets](/blog/20090223/taking-climate-fight-streets) (</blog/20090223/taking-climate-fight-streets>)

[Poll: US Trails Just About Everyone In Prioritizing Climate Change](/blog/20090730/poll-us-trails-just-about-everyone-prioritizing-climate-change) (</blog/20090730/poll-us-trails-just-about-everyone-prioritizing-climate-change>)

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On August 24th, 2009 Irv Beiman, Ph.D. (not verified) said:

As the first foreign psychologist to live and work in CHINA, I have spent 16 years here applying management tools and frameworks to business, with a focus on STRATEGY EXECUTION. I have begun conceptually applying these tools to the critical challenge of how to balance economic development and sustainability. A two part article series was published in COST MANAGEMENT, titled: "Economic and Environmental Sustainability: A Modest Proposal". These articles give a brief summary of the leading indicators for what's coming [with business-as-usual] and propose a new framework at five levels for how to cope with the challenge: 1 global, 2 regional/national, 3 organizational, 4 cities/communities, 5 individuals/families. The two primary enabling objectives at the bottom of the STRATEGY MAP for global sustainability are FINANCIAL and POLICY. I am very interested in contributing to helping others understand how to use this methodology [briefly described in the articles], pro bono, or otherwise. Send an EMAIL REQUEST for the articles to bu3690@gmail.com (<mailto:bu3690@gmail.com>) with REQUEST ARTICLES in the subject heading. Feel free to direct questions, suggestions and comments to the same email address. Irv Beiman, Ph.D. Univ of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973.

[great analysis Ms. Cho. \(/blog/20090823/psychologists-delve-paradox-u-s-concern-inaction-climate-change#comment-3257\)](/blog/20090823/psychologists-delve-paradox-u-s-concern-inaction-climate-change#comment-3257)

On August 23rd, 2009 wade norris (not verified) said:

This article sums up the roadblocks to motivating people on an emotional level. may I quote you?

[Tap into the consciousness of their children! \(/blog/20090823/psychologists-delve-paradox-u-s-concern-inaction-climate-change#comment-3256\)](/blog/20090823/psychologists-delve-paradox-u-s-concern-inaction-climate-change#comment-3256)

On August 23rd, 2009 [Synonymous \(http://michaelwharton.co.uk\)](http://michaelwharton.co.uk) (not verified) said:

As with most products, directly advertising to the person you're selling it to can be difficult due to people's innate distaste for being sold to. Children are on the other hand, easy to sell ideas to, they are open to new ideas and can be easily influenced.

My parents would have never dreamed of recycling all of their household waste until I pressured them into it as a child.

They still do it religiously now, years after I have moved out. Why? Well as a child I was a big fan of Captain Planet, I even had the video game for the Amiga 500. The pro-environmental messages in this children's product made me put pressure on my parents to do their bit. This is called the nag factor in marketing, it is incredibly powerful when it's children doing the nagging. That is why before Christmas all of the toy makers advertise directly to children so that they, in turn, inform their parents of what they want in the manner befitting a child: incessant nagging!

In summary, it is the children of this generation that will inherit the problem so make them part of the solution. Bring back Captain Planet, or some other child friendly alternative to spread the message amongst kids. Alternatively make climate change part of children's education, and let kids know what their parents are doing to this planet!

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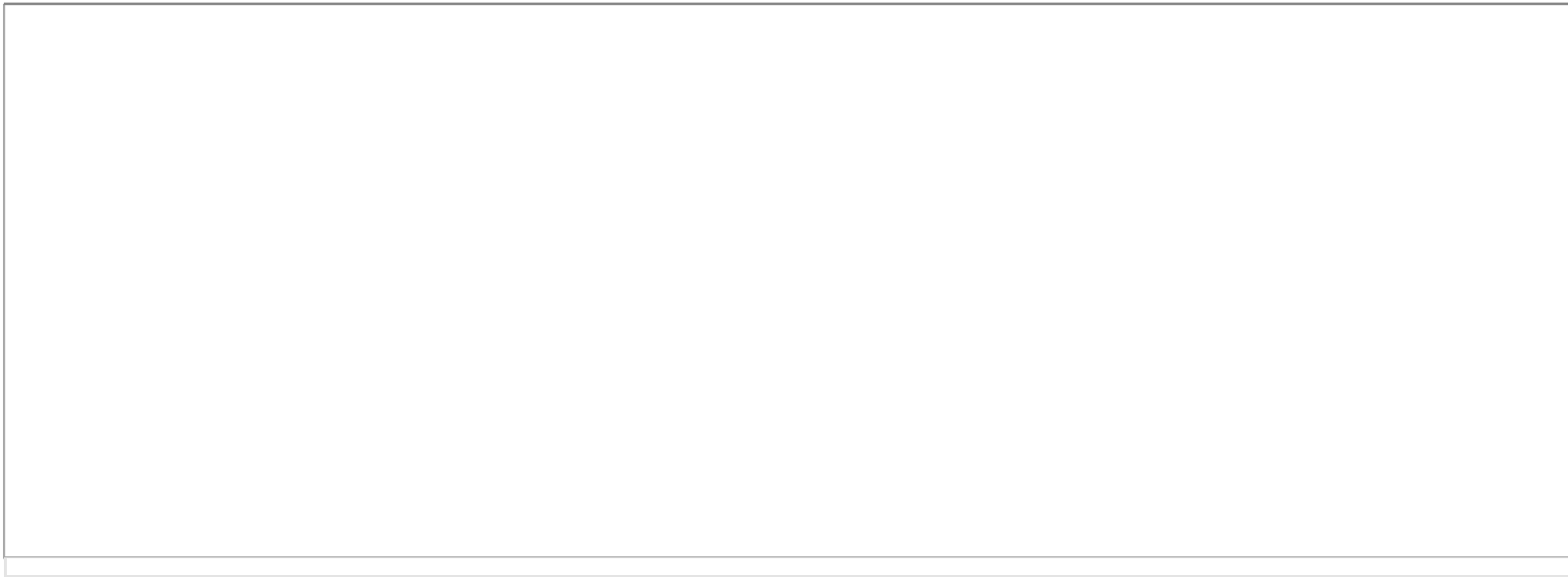
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