

Americans believe global warming is real, want action, but not as a priority

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To reach the public, communicators urged to focus locally, with targeted approaches

Americans believe global warming is real but a moderate and distant risk. While they strongly support policies like investing in renewable energy, higher fuel economy standards and international treaties, they strongly oppose carbon taxes on energy sources that put carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

These results were reported by Anthony Leiserowitz, a courtesy professor of environmental studies at the University of Oregon, in a talk during the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco. His conclusions, based on a national survey conducted in 2003 are detailed in a new book, "Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change - Facilitating Social Change," that he and other contributors discussed in an 8:30 a.m., PST, session devoted to communication strategies.

The study by Leiserowitz, also a scientist at Decision Research, a non-profit research institute in Eugene, Ore., looked at the risk perceptions, policy views and behavior of Americans in regards to global warming.

Although the data demonstrating climate change have grown stronger in recent years, Americans rank global warming as a low priority compared to other national issues such as the Iraq war, the economy, health care and education, and environmental issues such as air and water pollution, Leiserowitz said.

Using affective-image analysis, Leiserowitz also asked Americans what thoughts or images came to mind when thinking about global warming. Sixty-one percent of their associations fell into just four categories: melting ice in the Arctic; warmer temperatures; impacts on non-human nature; and polar ozone holes.

"These responses help us understand the connotative meaning of global warming - and why Americans react the way they do," Leiserowitz said. "These associations are to geographically or psychologically distant

impacts, generic warming trends, or a completely different environmental problem. Thus it's not too surprising that global warming remains a relatively low priority.

"One of the most important things that we found is what we didn't find," he added. "We found no references, no associations, of the impacts of climate change on either human health or extreme weather events. Yet these are, arguably, among the most important potential impacts, because, ultimately, the consequences are going hurt people."

The survey, detailed in Chapter 2 of the book, also identified two particular groups, or "interpretive communities," of Americans at the extremes of global warming beliefs:

* Alarmists, who have apocalyptic visions, envision "death of the planet" or post-nuclear-war-like scenarios. "These visions are well beyond the most extreme scientific scenarios," Leiserowitz said. Alarmists, he found, are slightly more likely to be liberal and to hold strong egalitarian values.

* Naysayers, who deny, discount or disbelieve the reality of climate change. "These people claim that there is no scientific evidence, blame global warming on media hype, or even hold dark conspiracy theories, such as scientists making up data to protect their job security," he said. "Naysayers are much more likely to be white, male, conservative, Republican, very religious, hold strongly individualistic or hierarchist values and to get their news and information from radio talk shows."

The majority of Americans are in between these two extremes, he added, but are more closely aligned with the alarmists than the naysayers.

In his talk, Leiserowitz also described several strategies for communicators as they tell the global warming story: Highlight local impacts; illustrate how climate change is impacting people and places already, such as in Alaska; describe the potential impacts on human health; talk honestly about remaining uncertainties; and tailor both the messages and the messengers so they resonate with the values held by particular audiences.

The book, he said, is the outgrowth of a conference held in 2004 by the National Center for Atmospheric Research, in which participants “ including cognitive psychologists, experts in risk perception, sociologists, anthropologists, climate scientists and historians “ discussed how scientists and others might communicate climate change more effectively.

Leiserowitz will become a research scientist and director of strategic initiatives in the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as of March 1.

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