

Climate change message needs to be closer to home to hit home, say researchers

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Effectively communicating climate change risks to the general public could all hinge on bringing the issue closer to home, research by a team from Nottingham and Cardiff Universities has found.

In a project that aimed to analyse [public perceptions](#) of [global warming](#), the researchers focused on ‘psychological distance’ in prompting people to go greener and the significance of uncertainty as justification for inaction.

The study, led by Dr Alexa Spence, found that in general the closer people felt to the problem, the more concerned about climate change they were. It also recommends that more needs to be done to communicate the global impacts of climate change and highlight the severity of the problem.

Dr Spence is a researcher in The University of Nottingham’s School of Psychology and a Horizon Transition Fellow at Horizon Digital Economy Research, a research hub and doctoral training centre based at The University of Nottingham Innovation Park (UNIP).

She said: “Climate change is abstract, and if we make it more real for people then they are more likely to act sustainably.”

Real and present threat

The research was carried out in collaboration with colleagues Dr Wouter Poortinga and Professor Nick Pidgeon of Cardiff University, and their paper *The Psychological Distance of Climate Change* appears in the June edition of the international journal *Risk Analysis*.

The research was conducted in conjunction with Ipsos MORI via face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,822 people in the UK between January and March 2010.

To understand the psychological dimensions of distance in relation to climate change, the researchers assessed the geographical, social and temporal (or time-related) distance, as well as uncertainty.

Overall, whilst many people perceive climate change as a real and present threat, significant psychological distance remains. They found:

- geographically, more than half (52.6%) of respondents agreed with the statement that climate change would affect their local areas, compared with 30% who disagreed;
- socially, 44.6% agreed that climate change would impact on people like themselves, compared with 32.3% who disagreed;
- temporally, 41% felt that Britain is already feeling the effects of climate change compared with less than 15% who believed it would never occur or would be felt beyond the next 100 years;
- regarding uncertainty, almost half (47%) believed that climate change is caused by a combination of human activity and natural processes – 31% said it is caused mostly or entirely by human activity, while 18% said it was mostly or entirely caused by natural causes.

Aspects of uncertainty

The authors note that it is important to distinguish between different aspects of uncertainty regarding climate change. Whilst a large proportion think that the effects of climate change are uncertain, only relatively small numbers think that [climate change](#) is not happening or not caused by human activities.

This paper is part of a special issue on climate risk perceptions and communication in the June edition of Risk Analysis, at a time of growing scientific concern and political conflict over the issue.

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ...
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Provided by University of Nottingham

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