

Polar bears aren't the only victims of climate change

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From heat waves to damaged crops to asthma in children, climate change is a major public health concern, argues a Michigan State University researcher in a new study.

Climate change is about more than melting [ice caps](#) and images of the Earth on fire, said Sean Valles, assistant professor in Lyman Briggs College and the Department of Philosophy, who believes [bioethicists](#) could help reframe current [climate change](#) discourse.

"When we talk about climate change, we can't just be talking about money and jobs and polar bears," he said. "Why do we focus on polar bears? Why not kids? Climate change isn't just people hurting [polar bears](#). It's people hurting people."

The public has become fairly apathetic to climate change, he said. But moving away from "save the environment" messaging could help people focus on the serious health risks of climate change, even if they're skeptical.

A prime example: antibiotic resistance.

People understand "superbugs" are dangerous, thanks in part to bioethicists' efforts, Valles said. Working in interdisciplinary teams and contributing to policy discussions, bioethicists have helped to successfully communicate the dangers of "superbugs," which have evolved to resist penicillin and other antibiotics.

The same thing could happen with climate change if bioethicists have a seat at the table. They could aid communication efforts by doing what bioethicists do best: public advocacy and interdisciplinary collaboration, he said. And they're experts in the analysis and communication of medical risk.

In addition, ethics will increasingly come into play as the [climate change debate](#) continues. Bioethicists could help mitigate tensions between skeptics and experts when dealing with complex socioeconomic issues, as they relate to climate change.

"It would be a major victory if slightly more often people would talk about the health effects, or at least try to imagine, the health-related risks involved with climate change," Valles said. "There are some important justice issues at stake because the most vulnerable populations will feel the effects of climate change first."

The study is published in the June edition of the journal *Bioethics*.

Provided by Michigan State University

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