Understanding alternative reasons for denying climate change could help bridge divide

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Mississippi River's Gulf Outlet. A University of Kansas researcher is conducting research in two Louisiana parishes adjacent to the mouth of the Mississippi River -- Plaquemines and St. Bernard to assess perceptions of environmental risk among a vulnerable population in the region and the links between attitudes about climate change and local discursive and political processes surrounding coastal restoration issues in the region. Credit: US Army Corps of Engineers

Mainstream criticism of people who deny climate change essentially portrays climate skeptics as being out of touch, ignorant or somehow incapable of understanding the facts about climate change.

However, an early look at ongoing work by a University of Kansas researcher examines alternative reasons for climate change denial, specifically economic, social or cultural influences on why individuals or entire communities remain skeptical of climate change.

"The most obvious example of this is the instance of an individual who works for an industry, such as in oil and gas production, that may be negatively impacted by regulatory policy," said Jacob Lipsman, a KU doctoral student in Sociology. "This also functions on the community level; for instance, in southeast Louisiana, oil and gas represents a disproportionate source of revenue for coastal parishes."

His project focuses on two Louisiana parishes adjacent to the mouth of the Mississippi River—Plaquemines and St. Bernard. Lipsman assessed perceptions of environmental risk among a vulnerable population in the region and the links between attitudes about climate change and local discursive and political processes surrounding coastal restoration issues in the region.

It is crucial to study these issues in Louisiana right now because the state has already lost over 1,800 square miles of land—an area the size of the state of Delaware— to coastal erosion.

"This land loss has major impacts on communities both directly in terms of increased flood vulnerability and indirectly through potentially decreased economic productivity," he said.

He will present findings of pilot research in the project on Tuesday, Aug. 15, at the American Sociological Association's 2017 annual meeting in Montreal. The project was funded on a grant from the National Science Foundation, and the KU Institute for Policy & Social Research provided assistance with the award submission and will help to manage the award.

So far in his research, Lipsman has found despite the higher than average rates of climate change denial in southeast Louisiana, parish residents have shown an environmental awareness that, on the surface, seems inconsistent with climate attitudes.

"Local residents are aware of coastal erosion and are focused on addressing this issue, whether or not they attribute this land loss to climate change," he said.

A major centerpiece of coastal policy is the Louisiana's Comprehensive Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast, a 50-year, $50 billion series of proposals designed to restore Louisiana's coast. The master plan includes a range of project types including sediment diversions, shoreline protection, hydrologic restoration, structural protection, non-structural protection, and others.

While residents may not be entirely focused climate change itself, the coastal master plan is a major focus in local politics, particularly since the legal settlement from the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill has made major funding avenues available for the execution of the master plan.

The region is a prime place to study alternative reasons for climate change denial because southeast Louisiana communities rely so heavily on oil and gas, commercial fishing and maritime industry—all of which would be affected by environmental regulations—for revenue.

"We investigate whether this rather than an inability to understand basic science, is a contributor to climate skepticism in the region," Lipsman said.

This work could help those who advocate for climate change policies in how they engage with those who deny climate change based on economic or cultural factors, he said.

"If an individual or a community is resistant to the idea of climate change for economic or social reasons, climate advocates will not be able to effectively communicate with these individuals about climate change simply by presenting more data," Lipsman said. "By better understanding the processes of climate change denial, climate advocates will be better equipped to have an effective dialogue with individuals and communities that are skeptical of these ideas."

Provided by University of Kansas

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