

So close, yet so far: Making climate impacts feel nearby may not inspire action

March 19 2018, by Susan Kelley

Although scientists warn that urgent action is needed to stop climate change, public engagement continues to lag. Many social scientists say people are hesitant to act on climate change because, especially in Western industrialized countries like the U.S., it feels like such a distant threat.

New research from a Cornell University communication professor upends that conventional thinking.

Jonathon Schuldt, assistant professor of communication, says it is possible to make faraway climate impacts feel closer. But that doesn't automatically inspire the American public to express greater support for policies that address it. The paper appeared in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

The research offers a more complex, alternative view of current assumptions in climate change communication. The conventional thinking is based on a theory in social psychology based on [psychological distance](#). It says we generally think about things that are physically close to us in much more concrete and vivid ways compared with things that are far away.

"Normally, reducing psychological distance is talked about like a panacea for climate change engagement. 'Just talk about local impacts; just make it feel closer and then people will do something,'" Schuldt said. "We're saying, well, maybe that's overly simplistic."

"Our findings suggest it's possible to make faraway climate impacts feel closer to people, but that it's wishful thinking to assume that's automatically going to translate into greater policy support."

The researchers had U.S.-based [participants](#) watch a video about climate change occurring in the Republic of the Maldives, a chain of 26 low-lying atolls in the Indian Ocean and one of the world's most vulnerable countries when it comes to climate change. "In fact, some models predict it is at significant risk of being completely submerged due to [sea level rise](#) within a century," Schuldt noted.

The participants then looked at an online map, similar to a Google Map, designed to make the distance separating their location in Ithaca, New York, and the Maldives seem relatively short (just a few scrolls of the mouse in one condition of the experiment) or relatively long (additional scrolls in the other condition).

Participants were then asked to judge the distance separating the U.S. and the Maldives. Participants who viewed the smaller map judged the two countries as closer compared to those who viewed the large map. "This suggests we were able to make the Maldives feel a little bit closer than it normally does," Schuldt said. "And that people's feelings of distance, to the same climate impacts, can be affected by something as simple as the size of the map they're using."

Then the participants described the video in their own words. Half of the participants in the small map condition described the video in concrete ways, compared with only 35 percent in the large map condition - suggesting that how people thought about the climate impacts matched their relative feelings of closeness to the Maldives.

Last, the participants took a standard measure of policy support for [climate](#) change, answering questions such as, "How much do you favor

reducing carbon dioxide as a pollutant?" In the end, the participants' support for [climate change](#) policies was the same, whether they were in the small or large map condition. "We found no difference - no difference at all," Schuldt said.

This is not the final word on this topic, he cautioned. The researchers used a common measure of policy support, but it's certainly not the only one. "Just because we didn't find an effect in our measure doesn't mean that we won't find an effect with another."

More information: Jonathon P. Schuldt et al, Does reduced psychological distance increase climate engagement? On the limits of localizing climate change, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.02.001)

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