

Why we should stop labelling people climate change deniers

December 4 2018, by Chui-Ling Tam



We are not doing a good job of communicating climate change. People have diverging interpretations of how climate change fits into their own stories.

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In the westernmost reaches of Nunavut, on the Northwest Passage, Inuit

hunters have told me some pithy things about climate change. "The land is changing. It isn't climate change. This is part of cycles. Our elders saw this coming."

Some of the most visible and profound effects of global warming are occurring in the Arctic. Some Inuit are worried [climate change](#) will permanently alter the world. Others say it will pass, as other times of want and plenty have passed through the Inuit's long cycles of life in the Arctic.

In [Inuit Nunangat](#), the Inuit homeland in Canada, perceptions about [climate](#) change cannot be divided into two camps of "believers" and "deniers." The situation is far more complex.

To understand [climate change communication](#) and adaptation in maritime communities, my [research team](#) has travelled to the Canadian Arctic, Indonesia and the Philippines to find out what [local communities](#) have to say about climate change.

The answer so far? It varies.

Some fear climate change, some deny it's real and some don't know what, or whom, to believe. Many don't want to talk about climate change at all. Others say we must talk. The diverse interpretations of how climate change fits into their own stories are beautifully captured in the documentary [Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change](#).

It's simplistic to divide people into only two opposing camps of climate change: believers or deniers. The way we have been communicating the science of climate change has not been persuasive.

Place matters

Scientists warn that human activity, industrialization and our dependence on fossil fuels have caused a warming of global temperatures that threatens life on Earth. By contrast, climate change deniers dismiss such dire premonitions as conspiracy. The weight of scientific facts is often presented to [better inform](#) or [inoculate](#) a misinformed public.

Yet between those two polarized positions are local populations living with the immediate effects of climate change on the environments they depend upon.

Few people can claim to share the Inuit's experience of climatic variation. Many process the concept of global warming with facts about climate change, but also by the geographies they occupy. As University of Cambridge geography professor [Mike Hulme](#) suggests, we should conceive of climate change as the cultural evolution of the idea of climate.

Local experience, [traditional knowledge](#) and [personal experience](#) may blend in a swirl of contradictory impressions about climate change. People are shaped in part by their place in the diverse physical and social spaces undergoing climate-related events, whether they are marine, mountain, urban or desert regions.

The history and experience of individuals and communities may influence how they interpret and prioritize climate change. This diversity of lived experience and worldviews contradicts the divisions between climate change belief and denial.

Facts aren't enough

Climate change science alone is not convincing. [Recent research](#) suggests the public is split into two conflicting groups: those whose views align with the scientific community (believers) and those who do not.

These opinion-based groups have distinct social identities, beliefs and emotional reactions to environmental change; they are set apart by cultural differences and political leanings.

[A recent study](#) found that social networks influence people's stance on climate change. So, how you talk about climate change matters. An [international survey of 24 countries found](#) that personal experiences, beliefs, knowledge, values and worldviews are important factors that shape climate change belief.

The viral response to last year's *National Geographic* video of a starving polar bear [shows how easily climate change narratives can be hijacked](#) by deniers.

The video was initially swiftly embraced by climate change champions. For instance, Canada's Environment Minister [Catherine McKenna tweeted](#): "THIS is what climate change looks like. Climate change is real. As are its impacts. Time to stand up for our polar bears and our planet." But the photographers were later criticized for assuming the polar bear was starving because of climate change, laying the "believe" camp open to ridicule.

The dominant climate change narrative is one of permanent, near-irreversible human-induced changes to the climate accompanied by a rise in global temperatures.

This is what I thought I heard as an Inuit hunter eloquently described how the land has stayed greener for longer during each of the last 40 seasons he has travelled since his honeymoon.

Then I pondered his words again, and I asked him, "Do you think climate change is permanent or cyclical?" He paused and replied, "It's cyclical."

Listen to local people

In its new report "[Global Warming of 1.5°C](#)," the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says the prognosis is dire if we do not contain a rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C.

The debate over "1.5 to stay alive" is not new. It was central to the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris in December 2015.

Will the IPCC's latest message finally convince the climate change confused or their leaders, who failed to make 1.5°C binding in the Paris text three years ago? The debate will rage on at the 24th COP in Katowice, Poland in December.

Meanwhile, far from the pomp and formality of COP meetings, do local populations feel engaged in climate change action? I doubt it.

Inuit hunters must increasingly navigate unpredictable sea ice. One explained their seeming indifference to climate change this way: "What are we going to do about it? We Inuit take care of the land."

Elsewhere, a community leader hinted at his weariness of a problem that has been known to Inuit but ignored by the world for too long: "What's there to say? We've said it all before."

Be better communicators

After attending three COP meetings since Paris, I question the reach of the existing narrative and governance of climate change. I suggest we move beyond a simplistic division between believers and deniers, and

talk to people in local communities to examine how climate change complexity and confusion are hindering effective action on climate change.

We need to communicate at the local scale where resource-dependent or climate-susceptible populations live with the actual or foreseen threats of climate change.

We should heed the words of Thai marine scientist [Suchana Chavanich](#), who told delegates at a workshop at COP 23, hosted by Fiji but held in Bonn, last year that to make a difference we need more than scientific knowledge; we need to connect with local people on the ground, in the places they live and work, to learn about the relevance of climate change in their lives.

That is more effective than theorizing about what might happen in a 1.5°C or 2°C world.

For many, climate facts are not convincing nor do they speak for themselves. And because people are not necessarily swayed by climate change facts but rather the communicator of facts, the nature of communication, their personal affiliations and networks, and their personal experience, labelling someone who is confused about climate change as a denier does not advance us to a world of collective effort to confront climate change.

We are not doing a good job of communicating climate change. Maybe we can do a better job if we recognize that people are not just passive receivers of climate change facts, but actors with their own history and knowledge in place and interpretations of how climate change fits into their own stories.

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