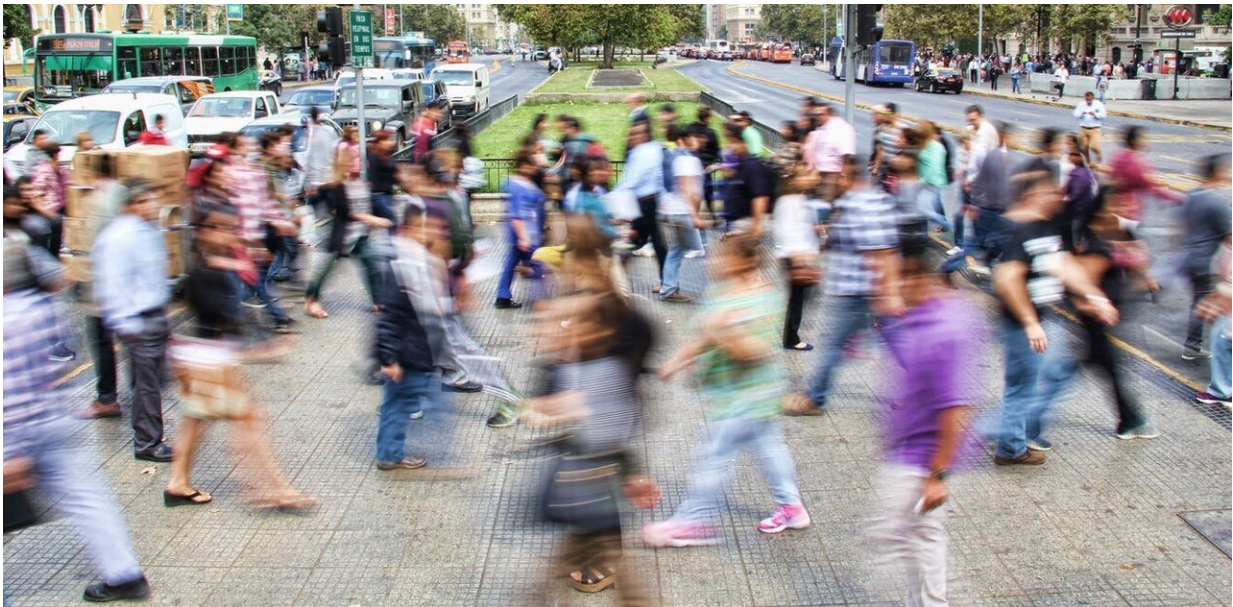


Climate change is really about prosperity, peace, public health and posterity

September 27 2019, by Ezra Markowitz and Adam Corner



What will it take to get people to connect to the climate change story? Credit: [mauro mora/Unsplash](#), [CC BY](#)

The story of climate change is one that people have struggled to tell convincingly for more than two decades. But it's not for lack of trying.

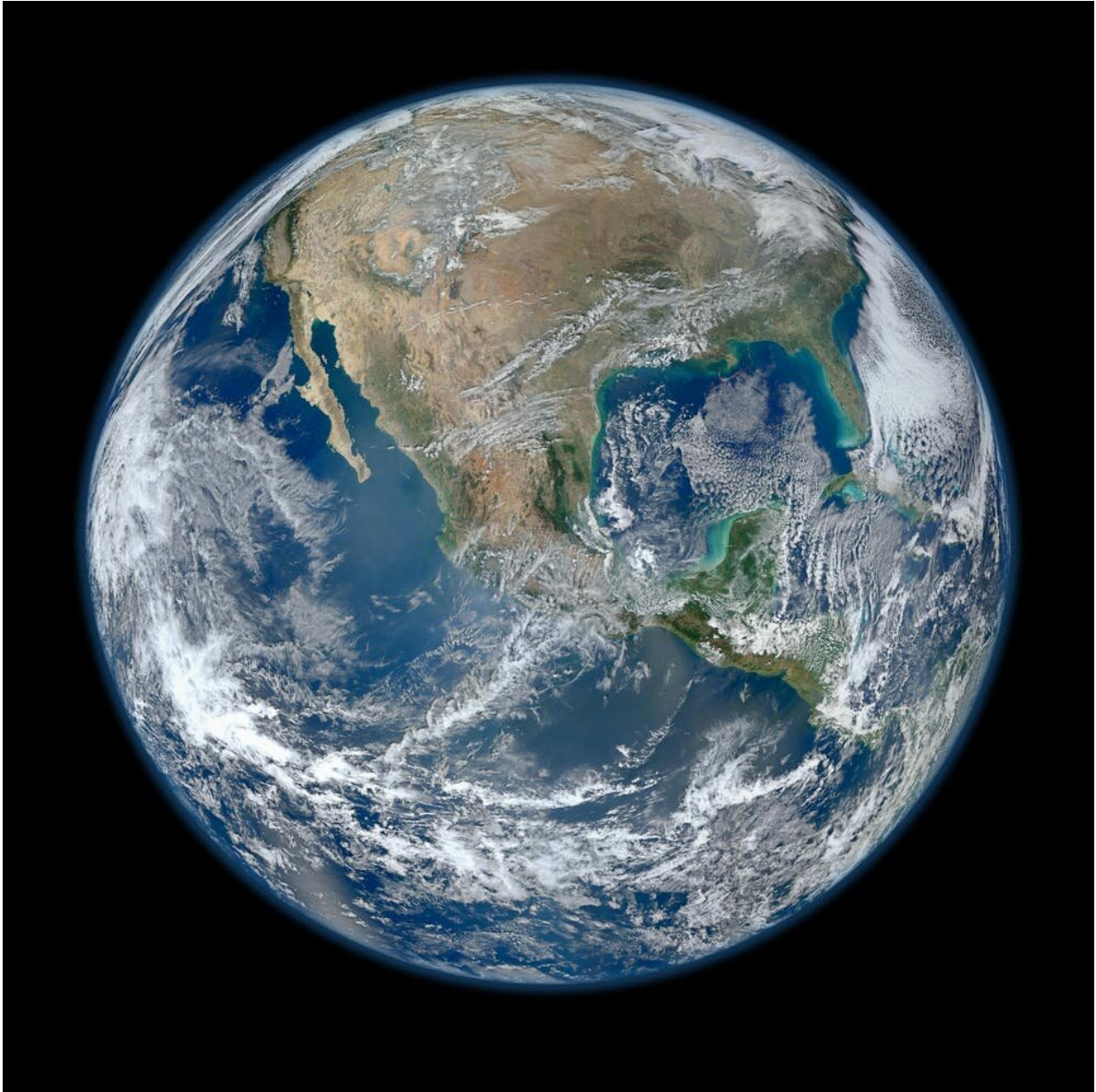
The problem is emphatically not a lack of facts and figures. The world's best scientific minds have produced [blockbuster report](#) after [blockbuster report](#), setting out in ever more terrifying detail just how much of an

impact we humans have had on the Earth since the dawn of the industrial revolution. Many people believe [anthropogenic climate change](#)—rapid and far-reaching shifts in the [climate](#) caused by human activity—is now the story that will define the 21st century, whether anyone's good at telling it or not.

Nor is it merely a problem of delivery. The past decade has witnessed an explosion of climate change communication efforts spanning nearly every conceivable medium, channel and messenger. [Documentaries](#), popular books and articles, interactive websites, [immersive virtual reality](#), community events—all are being used in increasingly creative ways to communicate the story of climate change. Many of these efforts are beautifully designed and executed, [visually](#) and narratively engaging and careful to avoid [common traps](#) and [shortcomings](#) that have tripped up previous efforts.

[As communications specialists who](#) have each spent more than a decade observing and studying how people, media and organizations talk and think about climate change, we've come to understand that the climate change communication problem runs much deeper: It's baked into the nature of the issue itself.

Climate change is abstract, uncertain, unfamiliar, impersonal, diffuse and seemingly distant, even as the [frequency of climate-related events](#) continues to increase in many parts of the world. This is not to say that the [well-documented and well-funded](#) efforts to sow misinformation, doubt and denial aren't also real challenges facing climate change communicators and advocates; of course they are.



It's hard for a single person to connect with a global-scale problem. Credit: [JPL/NASA, CC BY](#)

But even without explicit efforts to confuse and divide the public, climate change would still be a uniquely challenging issue to talk about in ways that motivate [public engagement](#) rather than inspire despair and

fatalism.

The sad irony, of course, is that the story of climate change is in fact a deeply human one—we caused it, we will suffer from it and we alone can take action to avoid its worst consequences and prepare for the rest.

But shifting climate change from a scientific reality to a social, economic and political reality has proven extremely difficult. This is still primarily an "[environmental](#)" issue in many people's minds, and that is a real problem for building a broad-based social movement around climate change.

Solve additional problems by tackling the first

Over the past few years, one suggested solution around this communications roadblock has been to tell the story of what are called climate change co-benefits.



It's hard for a single person to connect with a global-scale problem. Credit: [JPL/NASA](#), [CC BY](#)

The idea is simple and compelling: If the public won't or can't get behind climate action for climate's sake, maybe they will if all the many nonenvironmental benefits of reducing carbon emissions are brought to the foreground. Hence, climate change as a threat to [public health](#), to [national security](#), to [social mobility](#).

Traditional co-benefits framing tells the story like this: If humanity does something about climate change—if we reduce carbon emissions through massive investments in renewable energy and retrofitting of inefficient buildings, if we improve resilience through investing in green infrastructure, nature-based solutions and all the rest—we will not only solve the climate change problem, we'll also reduce economic inequality, improve [public health](#), reduce threats to national sovereignty and geopolitical stability, and generally make people's lives better.

These and many other co-benefits of aggressive and proactive action on climate change [are real](#), and they will very much improve the lives of billions of people living on this planet today and in the future. But is this the best way to talk about the issue in service of building a powerful social movement?

The problem with the standard co-benefits narrative isn't that it distracts too much from the core climate change challenge (it doesn't), nor that it is somehow manipulative (it's not) or simply [not necessary](#) (it is).

We suggest the problem is that it still leaves too much of the focus on

climate change as an environmental or scientific issue while relegating all the other things people often care more about—addressing rampant inequality, increasing access to [affordable health care](#), improving people's material and emotional lives—to the background.

Leading with "if you really cared about your pet issue, then climate change should be your priority" is neither welcoming and inclusive nor likely to succeed in building a broad base of support for aggressive action on climate. Condescension rarely wins converts.



A wind farm promotes human health – and just happens to benefit the climate?
Credit: [Brandon Hoogenboom/Unsplash](#), [CC BY](#)

Rethink which benefit drives the story

But that doesn't mean advocates should necessarily give up on co-benefits. Maybe they just need to flip the script on its head—to lead with and keep the focus on the nonclimate benefits of aggressive decarbonization and adaptation efforts. Maybe "addressing climate change" should be treated as the co-benefit rather than the leading motivation for action that could materially help billions of people, today and in the future.

Ultimately, the most effective long-term approach to getting diverse audiences to engage deeply with climate change may require that advocates stop treating it as a standalone problem that could benefit from being linked to other topics many people care more about. Instead, advocates may need to fundamentally rethink and alter the way they talk about and position climate change as an issue in the first place.

If climate change is now becoming a [meta-narrative](#) against which all other stories play out, perhaps no one needs to argue that decarbonization of the global economy will produce some health benefits or improve people's well-being. Perhaps the best strategy is to simply say that climate change is a health risk, a risk to peace and prosperity, a risk to humanity's survival—that the climate change story is our [story](#) as a species.

This is not about mobilizing the muscle of co-benefits to make the climate change narrative more robust or appealing. It's about merging the co-benefits and [climate change](#) itself so thoroughly that they become one and the same.

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