Waning attention to climate change amid pandemic could have lasting effects

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On Sept. 23, 2019, then-16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg stood before a sea of news cameras at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York City and told world leaders: "People are

suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing…How dare you continue to look away."

Within days, web searches for 'climate change' soared to levels not seen in years, and environmentalists cheered a new surge of activism. Fast forward to summer 2020: With a global pandemic monopolizing news coverage, searches around environmental issues have plummeted to new lows, according to Google analytics data.

This trend could mean serious trouble for the planet, suggests a new CU Boulder study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"We found that simply directing your attention to an environmental risk, even momentarily, can make it seem more frightening and worthy of mitigation," said senior author Leaf Van Boven, a professor of psychology and neuroscience. "On the flip side, if you are not actively paying attention, the risk seems less dangerous and less important to address."

Previous research has shown that humans have a finite capacity for attention to risk, inherently programmed to prioritize one threat at a time. Rather than thoughtfully calculating how risky something truly is, humans tend toward "intuitive risk perception," or how something feels in the moment, Van Boven said.

"If a threat seems physically distant, far in the future, too abstract or if we are just too distracted to notice it, our perception of risk declines. Climate change is the prototypical example."

When we look away, we stop caring

With that in mind, Van Boven and coauthors Jennifer Cole, a doctoral

student in the Department of Psychology, and Kellen Mrkva, now a postdoctoral researcher at the Columbia School of Business, set out to learn whether subtly directing someone's attention to environmental threats, even briefly and involuntarily, boosts their emotional response and willingness to take action.

They recruited two groups—100 college students and a diverse, national sample of 100 adult volunteers. In a series of experiments, images of 12 environmental hazards—a raging wildfire, a polluted river, an endangered polar bear, etc.—flashed on the screen in random order.

Meanwhile, the researchers subtly manipulated which image the subject paid attention to.

For instance, the subject might be asked to click the J key every time they see a wildfire. Or they might be asked to look for a certain letter on the screen, and then a polluted river might flash in the area where that letter appeared.

Later, the subjects were asked to rate the threats according to their severity and how frightened they were of them. In one experiment, they were asked to pick one they'd be willing to write a letter to their Congressional representative about.

Across experiments and groups, study participants prioritized subjects they had been subtly directed to pay attention to and were less interested in, or willing to take action on, issues their attention had been drawn away from.

"What was surprising was how little attention they had to direct toward something for it to begin to seem more severe to them," said Mrkva, who began the research while a doctoral student at CU. "Just a few times for a few seconds was enough to have a significant effect on how big of a

threat they perceived it to be."

'All COVID all the time'

In a recent analysis of Google search trends, Mrkva looked to see how often people searched for information about the same 12 issues. Not surprisingly, as media coverage of coronavirus has gone up, interest in those issues has plummeted." The consequences of this reduced attention could be severe," said Mrkva.

He points to a recent Gallup Poll showing that concern about climate change is already slipping, with only 2% of Americans identifying it as the most important problem facing the country today, versus 5% in December.

Those wanting to raise the profile of environmental hazards in the media face an uphill battle, notes Van Boven.

"It's all COVID all the time right now," he said.

The good news is this: Even the subtlest shift in attention—a single news story or reminder from a friend—may be enough to reorient people.

"You don't need to be loud or overwhelming, you just have to be persistent," Van Boven said.

He also advises people to be cognizant of how their own attention is shaped, deflected or even manipulated.

"Are we wrong to be worried about COVID? Absolutely not. But we should not forget about these other threats, and we should be careful not to let our environmental laws be jeopardized while we're not paying attention."

More information: Kellen Mrkva et al. Attention increases environmental risk perception., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2020). DOI: 10.1037/xge0000772

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