

Powerful, local stories can inspire us to take action on climate change

September 24 2021, by Kamyar Razavi



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The climate emergency has put the world in grave peril, but that is hard to tell when [watching the news](#) or looking at the overall global response to the climate crisis, which [continues to be lax](#).

Climate change is a [complex and difficult problem to communicate](#). It is

slow-moving, it does not always feel urgent and there is often very little gratification for acting to mitigate it.

For decades, the assumption has been that members of the public, politicians and policy makers would take the matter more seriously if only there was [more information about the impacts and consequences of a warming planet](#).

The [science, now, is unequivocal](#). Humans are responsible for [climate change and the extreme weather events it generates](#).

We need to rethink the way we communicate [climate](#) change. The best tool at our disposal is a simple one: storytelling. Stories have the power to transform complex subject matters into something that feels personal, local, relatable and solvable.

But stories about the [climate crisis](#)—for example, about how people are responding in real time and making a difference—are still few and far between.

That needs to change.

The role of emotions

Traditionally, emotions have been seen as separate from rational judgment. Sabine Roeser, an ethics researcher, investigates the role of emotions in communicating climate change: "[Emotions are generally considered to be irrational states and are hence excluded from communication and political decision making](#)."

Emotions, Roeser argues, play a very important role in how people engage with risk. As urgent as it is, the climate [crisis](#) does not always garner the same attention as other topics, such as COVID-19 or the

economy. Climate change can still feel abstract, personal and even distant.

But that is rapidly changing. Around the world, more people are starting to agree that the climate crisis is not just a distant threat, but one that will affect them personally and directly.

In Canada, concern about the personal impacts of climate change has risen [seven percentage points over the past six years](#). In 2015, 27 percent of Canadians felt "very concerned" that the climate crisis was going to affect them personally. This past spring, that had risen to 34 percent.

This growing concern over the personal impacts of climate change represents an excellent opportunity for journalists, policy makers and environmental advocates to localize and personalize climate communication to engage people more effectively through the power of storytelling.

As important as it is to communicate information about the impacts of [climate change](#), it is also important to include stories that people can relate to and draw inspiration from.

Improving science communication

Enric Sala spent years as a university professor, doing research on ocean life. He thought that his increasingly alarming reports on the state of the world's oceans would spur [policy makers](#) into action. But that did not happen so Sala left academia.

"When I was an academic, I thought that science was all we needed," [he said in an interview on the podcast *Outrage and Optimism*](#). "That if we continued providing the scientific papers, that for some miraculous reason, leaders would read the papers."

Sala finally realized what science communicators already know: that the relationship between how much people know about the climate crisis and how they act is not necessarily linear.

"I thought that having enough information, leaders would be able to make rational decisions," Sala said. But he quickly realized that "the world doesn't work like this and most decisions are made in an irrational way."

In their book [*Thinking Fast and Slow*](#), psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky famously describe the interplay between the "System One" brain—the intuitive, emotive, non-analytic response mechanism in our brains—and the "System Two" brain—the analytic mechanism.

As journalist Dan Gardner succinctly puts it, the challenge for science communicators is to "help System 1 feel what System 2 calculates"—[to make climate change feel personal, relatable and local](#).

Ecological crisis stories

Most communication about the climate crisis builds on communicating facts and figures at people on the consequences and impacts of a warming planet.

What is missing are stories about ordinary people who are grappling with the crisis in deeply personal ways and doing something about it.

Examples include stories of Indigenous communities [fighting to protect environments from irreparable harm](#) and [students rallying for climate action](#).

These can be very mobilizing narratives about solutions to the climate crisis. They do not gloss over the fact that the world is in grave peril, or focus on [technological quick fixes or hero worship](#). These stories both

communicate facts and underscore the crisis the world faces.

That facts-based approach is necessary. As journalist Chris Hatch observes: "[Most people still have a muddled understanding of climate breakdown—of its urgency, that it's caused overwhelmingly by fossil fuel burning, and that carbon pollution from oil, gas and coal needs to be phased out entirely.](#)"

Fear can also play a productive role, as there is still [far too much complacency](#). Fear can mobilize action.

But what is consistent is the power storytelling has to engage.

Effective communication

Climate scientists—passionate about the work they do—are reacting with [sadness and disbelief](#) to the speed with which glaciers are receding in the Canadian Rockies. Coral researchers are [emotionally worn out by witnessing drastic coral bleaching](#). And firefighters are [reaching breaking points](#).

Stories can connect us to ecological crisis on a deeply personal level. Luckily, those personal and emotional connections are being made with increasing frequency in the news media, in documentary films and even on social media.

"I am an Incident Commander with the #BCWildfire Service," Kyle Young of the B.C. Wildfire Service tweeted during this past wildfire season. "I am writing this post rather than sharing a video message because, frankly, it would be too emotional for me."

Kyle described the physical and emotional toll the ever-intensifying wildfires in British Columbia had taken on him and his colleagues.

These stories of sacrifice and courage are among the many relatable and personalized narratives that can connect us to the climate crisis. Climate scientist Michael Mann observes that [it took elementary and high school students protesting in the streets for the adults to finally take note of the urgency of the crisis.](#)

It is no longer an abstraction. It is affecting people directly, and stories are one of the best ways to capture and communicate that urgency.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Powerful, local stories can inspire us to take action on climate change (2021, September 24) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-powerful-local-stories-action-climate.html>

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