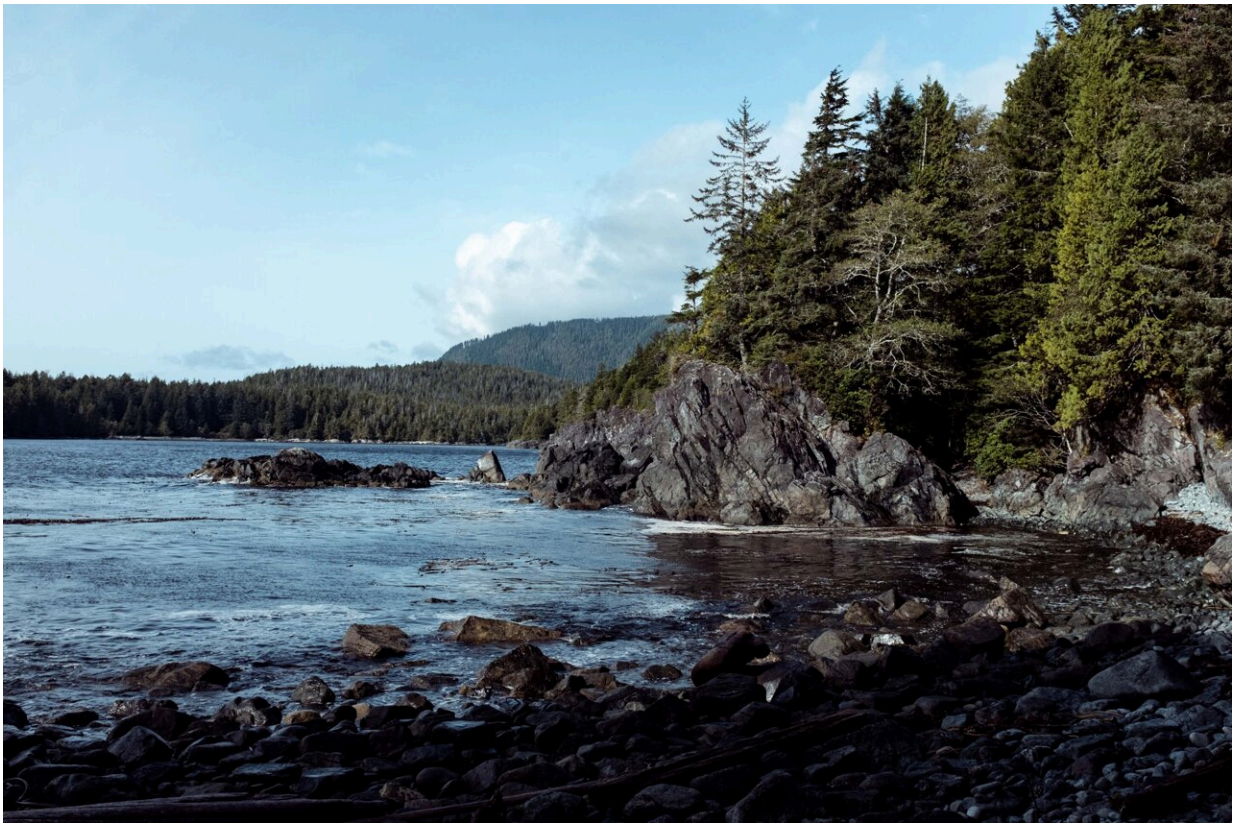


Collaboration at all levels of government key to climate action, say researchers

November 15 2022, by Donna McKinnon



Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

In Canada, as in most places around the world, climate change adaptation planning takes a top-down approach. But new findings by

University of Alberta researchers suggest an integrated approach that incorporates regional policy guidance is both critical and effective in building resilience to climate change.

Led by Ph.D. student Nicole Bonnett and Jeff Birchall, associate professor and associate director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning, the research shows that local governments, tasked with the implementation of policies that may not be tailored to a specific area, are less inclined to act on these policies that lack the granular, on-the-ground detail necessary to prompt meaningful action.

"You're getting knowledge and guidance from the top, but if it's not contextually specific, if it's not considering the surrounding environment and population, the plan might just end up sitting on the shelf," says Bonnett.

In their study, Bonnett and Birchall looked at coastal communities in British Columbia, specifically Vancouver Island—an area with thick forests, dynamic microclimates and other factors that make it uniquely susceptible to stressors related to [climate change](#)—to determine the extent and quality of climate adaptation integration within the strategic plans of the [local governments](#).

The urgency of action is unavoidable. While conducting field research on Vancouver Island, Bonnett was surrounded by wildfires and mass evacuations.

"The island sees a whole bunch of climate impacts from wildfire to drought to rising seas levels," explains Bonnett. "I thought it was important to go out there and look at some of these impacts first-hand at the regional scale."

Bonnett visited each of the seven regional districts on Vancouver Island,

gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between regional governments and their municipalities.

In B.C., municipalities operate under regional political and administrative structures that can guide municipal planning priorities. The bigger city is the core and is usually but not always the headquarters of the regional district, which might also include a number of other smaller municipalities and electoral areas. While similar to counties in the rest of Canada, regional districts differ in that they "borrow" powers from municipalities rather than having power over them, exerting a type of "gentle imposition" and facilitating co-operation and joint decision-making.

"Because of this unique, flexible relationship, municipalities are able to work with what they have, to tailor their policies to show alignment with the regional governments," says Bonnett. "That opportunity for co-ordination can result in more action, and also enhance the quality of climate adaptation planning."

Birchall agrees. "What our study demonstrates is the importance of having that push and guidance from other levels of [government](#)."

Mitigation and adaptation

Responding to climate change involves two distinct yet complementary approaches: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation efforts, like reducing [greenhouse gas emissions](#), aim to lessen the severity of climate stressors. Adaptation is an approach that attempts to get out in front of anticipated effects, such as limiting development in coastal areas where sea level is expected to rise.

"When it comes to climate change and any sort of plan to become more resilient, it needs to be both—mitigation and adaptation—you should

never be doing either of these in isolation," says Birchall. "It's about balancing the two, and unless all of us can mitigate and reduce the GHG emissions, we're always going to have to adapt, so what we need now is to sort out the best approach. That means collaboration between all levels of government, because all levels of government bring different strengths."

Community climate change planning typically favors mitigation because the return on investment is fast and clearly demonstrable. This is a trend that Bonnett and Birchall see not just on Vancouver Island, but across the country.

"We found that the use of region-specific climate data is lacking, which is the case for all of Canada," says Bonnett, who adds that we need to change the current mindset and allow communities to lead some of their own adaptation actions while also leveraging the guidance and direction coming from other levels of government.

Recommended interventions, says Bonnett, include detailing adaptation policies and weaving them throughout the entire planning framework, as well as incorporating them into granular regulations to make use of legislation to put climate adaptations into practice.

"These steps can assist decision-makers here and elsewhere with their efforts to enhance climate preparedness and resilience," she says. "It's important to have that bottom-up perspective because I think we would see adaptation being taken up a lot more, but also much more effective in practice."

The study, "The influence of regional strategic policy on municipal climate adaptation planning," is published in the journal *Regional Studies*.

More information: Nicole L. Bonnett et al, The influence of regional

strategic policy on municipal climate adaptation planning, *Regional Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2022.2049224](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2049224)

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Collaboration at all levels of government key to climate action, say researchers (2022, November 15) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-collaboration-key-climate-action.html>

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