

Extreme weather events are exactly the time to talk about climate change—here's why

July 30 2023, by Josh Ettinger



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

Record-breaking heatwaves are [sweeping across the northern hemisphere](#), affecting large parts of southern Europe, the US and China. On July 24, Sicily recorded blistering temperatures [of more than 47.5°C](#) and wildfires are currently [tearing through Greece](#). The heatwaves come as [record numbers of fires continue to burn](#) across Canada.

A [study by the World Weather Attribution group](#) found that these heatwaves would have been "virtually impossible" without [climate change](#). In fact, the heat wave that is affecting parts of China was made 50 times more likely by [global warming](#). This is exactly what [climate scientists](#) have been warning us about for decades—climate change makes many types of [extreme weather](#) event [more likely, more intense and longer lasting](#).

As a Ph.D. researcher examining [extreme weather events](#) and [climate change communication](#), I have spent the past four years exploring how extreme weather events may affect the way the public feels, thinks and acts on climate change.

One area of interest to researchers is how extreme weather events might reduce the ["psychological distance"](#) associated with climate change. While climate change can feel abstract and vague, extreme weather is something people can experience firsthand.

But [research offers contrasting results](#). Some studies have found that extreme weather events lead to an [increased belief](#) that human-driven climate change is occurring and [greater support for climate action](#). Others [find no effects](#) or suggest that these effects are [only temporary](#).

However, [we often underestimate](#) how much the public already cares about climate change. In Britain, [just 4% of the public](#) say they are not at all concerned about climate change, while only [11% of Americans](#) dismiss the issue.

Given that [most people](#) are already concerned about climate change, an important question now is how to shift these existing concerns into action.

Talking about climate change is a powerful way of mobilizing [climate](#)

[action](#), and extreme weather events provide helpful climate conversation starters. We can use these moments as opportunities to [engage our families, friends and communities](#) in discussions about how climate change may relate to these events and [what we can do about it](#).

So, if you decide to engage people you know in discussions about extreme weather and climate change, here are a few thoughts and guidelines to keep in mind.

1. Listen and share perspectives

[Extreme weather events can be traumatic](#) and climate change can evoke a wide range of emotional responses. If the person you are talking to is comfortable discussing the topic, ask them about their experiences and observations.

Encourage them to tell stories and affirm the validity of their emotional response—whether they are afraid, angry, hopeful or worried. There is no one right way to feel about climate change, so listen to what they have to say and then share your own perspective too.

2. Talk about planning and preparation

When discussing extreme weather events, some people may link their experiences to climate change, while others focus on various local factors that contribute to extreme weather risks.

The risks associated with extreme weather arise from a [combination](#) of factors. These include the weather itself, which can be influenced by climate change, the level of exposure of people and places to extreme weather and the vulnerability of those to harm.

Climate change, for instance, can affect the frequency, intensity and duration of wildfires. But [emergency responses](#), [evacuation procedures](#), firefighting and health care systems are crucially important to reduce risks. There are also significant equity and justice implications of extreme weather as different populations are [affected disproportionately](#).

It's also important to bear in mind that while climate change affects many extreme weather events, it [does not necessarily affect every instance](#). Weather systems are complex and there are meteorological processes that scientists are still trying to understand.

We also need to make sure the roles of local planning and preparation in minimizing the impact of these events are not overlooked.

3. Challenge arguments about politicizing the weather

In May 2023, Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, dismissed concerns about global warming by claiming that he rejects the ["politicization of the weather"](#). Ontario premier, Doug Ford, recently [made a similar argument](#) about Canada's wildfires.

In conversations, it's possible that someone might accuse you too of "politicizing" the weather. You can (respectfully) push back against this claim.

This argument is a [discourse of climate delay](#). Rather than denying the existence of human-driven climate change, climate delay discourses try to shut down climate discussions and cast doubt on the need to act very quickly. These arguments disingenuously assert that acting on climate is too expensive, too late or that someone else should take care of it—and they are becoming increasingly common.

If we shouldn't discuss climate change when extreme weather occurs,

then when is the right time? If we want to protect lives, we need to talk about—and act upon—the risks associated with extreme weather events and the disasters they can cause.

If talking about [climate change](#) politicizes the weather, so be it. The politics of climate denial and delay affected this summer's [weather](#), and our current decisions will shape our planet for thousands of years.

The science is clear. Act now or face increasingly dire consequences.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Extreme weather events are exactly the time to talk about climate change—here's why (2023, July 30) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-extreme-weather-events-climate-changehere.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--