

Concern for the Great Barrier Reef can inspire climate action, but the way we talk about it matters

November 20 2023, by Yolanda Lee Waters and Angela Dean



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There's no doubt you've heard the Great Barrier Reef is under pressure. The main culprit? Climate change. The main solution? An [urgent reduction](#) in greenhouse gas emissions and a shift away from fossil fuels.

Those who promote action to protect the [reef](#), therefore, have a difficult task. How do we encourage more people to take action on [climate change](#)? Whether it's reducing reliance on fossil fuels in our [personal lives](#) or asking our government to transition from fossil fuels to renewables, what do people need to know, and how do we say it in a way that makes a difference?

Researchers in [climate change communication](#) have been grappling with these questions for decades. But we have something other communicators don't—the reef itself.

In [our new research](#), we used experiments to show what many divers, tourism operators, and [local communities](#) have known for decades—the wonder of the Great Barrier Reef inspires [climate action](#). But it doesn't just magically happen. The way we talk about it matters.

What's happening on the Great Barrier Reef?

Earlier this year, the Bureau of Meteorology [officially announced](#) an El Niño weather event, which has already begun to bring hotter than average temperatures to much of Australia. But while Australia braces for a scorcher on land this summer, those working on the Great Barrier Reef are preparing for a marine heat wave.

The marine equivalent of bushfires, heat is set to [wreak havoc on marine ecosystems](#) all around Australia. For the Great Barrier Reef, this means an increased risk of mass coral bleaching.

These events have occurred [four times](#) in recent years (2016, 2017,

2020, and 2022). Scientists expect mass coral bleaching will happen every year if we do not urgently reduce [greenhouse gas emissions](#) and eliminate the use of fossil fuels.

But while the science around the Great Barrier Reef is clear, the way we talk about it isn't.

Different messages about the reef

We are constantly flooded with all kinds of information about the Great Barrier Reef. This can make it tricky for people to understand what is going on and what they can do to help.

Some communicators convey a sense of urgency by emphasizing the "[reef is dying](#)". Others warn against the use of apocalyptic-style messages, suggesting [fear is an ineffective tool](#) for motivating action. These commentators suggest [stories of resilience](#), restoration and recovery can strengthen motivation and [hope](#). But what really works? How do we talk about the reef in a way that motivates action?

Which messages work? An experiment

To find out how best to inspire action, we provided 1,452 Australians with one of eight different messages about climate change and/or the Great Barrier Reef. We then looked at which messages were most likely to increase engagement in a range of climate actions.

We found climate messages focusing on the reef were more effective than generic climate messages, compared to a control that included an unrelated message or no message at all.

This suggests the reef itself is a valuable tool for motivating climate

action. This was particularly true when we emphasized our collective potential to protect the reef, using language such as "together we can", and asked people to take action by using their voices. That is, letting their friends, families, and politicians know they support stronger action on climate change.

We also found sadness is a necessary ingredient, and there is no need to shy away from the reality of coral bleaching or fear-provoking negative emotions. When exploring why these messages focusing on the reef were more effective, we found the effect was largely due to feelings related to sadness, worry, and anxiety.

But here's the rub. For reef messages to work, we found they must include tangible, specific, and relevant calls to action. In other words, highlighting the reef is the hook, but we need to show people what they can do to help.

Less effective	More effective	Most effective
<p>Climate change is caused by rapid increases in greenhouse gas emissions stemming from increased fossil fuel use. This leads to increasing temperatures which has many impacts for Australia.</p> <p>These impacts include more frequent heatwaves and droughts, more frequent extreme weather events, and coastal erosion.</p> <p>Helping to reduce emissions and reduce impacts of climate change can help protect Australia into the future.</p> <p>There are several actions we can take to reduce our emissions. Here are some actions you can take:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Around the house Reduce energy use around the home and choose energy efficient appliances. With family and friends Have a conversation with those around you about climate change and possible solutions. As an active citizen Let your political representatives know that you support reducing emissions. 	<p>The Great Barrier Reef is a natural wonder. It is home to an amazing variety of marine life and provides a place for shared stories and experiences. As Australians, the Great Barrier Reef is a place that shapes who we are.</p> <p>However, the Reef is under threat. Rapid increases in greenhouse gas emissions stemming from fossil fuel use, are causing sea temperatures to rise. This can lead to coral bleaching, which can result in coral death.</p> <p>Helping to reduce emissions can help protect the Reef into the future.</p> <p>There are several actions we can take to reduce our emissions. Here are some actions you can take to help the Reef:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Around the house Reduce energy use around the home and choose energy efficient appliances. With family and friends Have a conversation with those around you about climate change and possible solutions. As an active citizen Let your political representatives know that you support reducing emissions. 	<p>We can all make a difference!</p> <p>Transitioning to renewable energy is the number one solution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but this transition requires strong public support. If we collectively show our support for renewable energies, we can significantly reduce our emissions and have a positive impact on the Great Barrier Reef.</p> <p>Research shows that many Australians support the transition to renewable energy and support those who are making this happen. If everyone does their bit, we can all protect the Reef.</p> <p>Here are some actions we can take to help the Reef:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As an active citizen Let your political representatives know that you support reducing emissions. With family and friends Have a conversation with those around you and encourage them to make their voice heard.

Reef messages were most effective when they focused on social and political actions. Credit: Yolanda Waters

Preparing for a hot reef summer

We can't control the heat waves or the headlines coming this summer, but we can do our best to leverage this opportunity to motivate widespread action for the reef.

Here's how you can talk about the reef this summer:

- highlight the iconic nature of the reef and how it is a part of who we are
- emphasize collective and motivational language (such as "together we can") instead of personal and restrictive language (such as "you can reduce")
- state the problem (including the cause—burning [fossil fuels](#)) but don't focus too much on explaining the threat. It's time to talk about action
- Avoid broad policy statements such as "to protect the reef, we need to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees" unless they are followed by more specific calls to action
- include very specific calls to action. People want to know exactly what you want them to do. Examples include encouraging people to commit to finding ways to reduce their [personal carbon footprint](#), joining a [climate action group](#), or [have a conversation](#) about [climate change](#) with at least one family member or friend
- be careful, [too many calls to action](#) can be overwhelming. Aim to give one to three options—a mix of easy and difficult actions tends to work best.

Of course, don't forget to remind people they don't need to live near the reef to make a difference—people can demand and support climate action from anywhere.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Concern for the Great Barrier Reef can inspire climate action, but the way we talk about it matters (2023, November 20) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-great-barrier-reef-climate-action.html>

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