

Communicating about climate change more effective when stories of displaced hit 'close to home'

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Concern for climate change grows—along with support for policies to

reduce emissions—when people read about Americans being forced to move within the U.S. because of it.

That's in sharp contrast to learning about climate-induced moves to the U.S. by non-Americans, which doesn't move the dial on [climate change](#) beliefs or [policy](#) support.

The findings from a new study conducted by researchers from the University of Michigan and other institutions offer a potentially productive way forward in changing attitudes and spurring action on climate change in a highly politicized and polarized era.

"The truth is that both in the U.S. and around the world, most climate-related migration is likely going to be domestic—people moving within their home countries," said Kaitlin Raimi, associate professor at U-M's Ford School of Public Policy and the study's lead author.

"Our work finds that this type of migration is less threatening to Americans and more likely to spur action to reduce emissions. So if climate communicators want to talk about climate migration as a way to invoke [climate action](#), they are best off talking about the Americans who may be forced to move."

Raimi's co-authors were Julia Lee Cunningham, associate professor at U-M's Ross School of Business; Nathaniel Geiger and Melanie Sarge of the Media School at Indiana University; and Ash Gillis of the Owen Graduate School of Management, Law School and Climate Change Research Network at Vanderbilt University.

The study, [published](#) in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, builds on the researchers' previous work in several ways, including the incorporation of a nationally representative sample to test how the U.S. public will react to climate migration.

The researchers also sought to explore whether different kinds of messaging about climate migration would make a difference. They compared a baseline where people didn't read about climate migration at all to four different stories that talked about climate migration in various ways (as well as comparing those ways of talking about climate migration to each other).

They found that talking about domestic climate migration was slightly less politicized than talking about international climate migration and evoked less concern about migration in general. They didn't find much evidence that including a personal story about one climate migrant significantly helps to elicit more empathy than merely talking about statistics.

Additionally, the study looked at support for different kinds of climate-migration policies: helping people move permanently or temporarily, or helping build infrastructures so that people could stay in their home communities. They found the pattern of support for these policies differed from each other—moving permanently was basically just driven by [political ideology](#), but people who read about international migration were more supportive of helping people adapt to be able to stay in their home communities.

In sum, the study found that where talking about climate migration does affect policy support, it was mostly in terms of heightening people's concern about migration and therefore wanting to devote more aid to policies that would reduce the need to migrate.

The research underscores challenges inherent in coverage of climate change and [migration](#) issues. Communicators, the authors say, need to be aware of the limitations, particularly those resulting in complacency on the issues and fear of those affected by it.

"Talking about vast numbers of foreigners having to migrate to the U.S. due to climate change just doesn't seem to be a great way to inspire action on climate change," Raimi said. "It makes people scared of migrants, but doesn't do anything to root out the causes of [climate change](#) by reducing greenhouse gas emissions."

More information: Kaitlin T. Raimi et al, Effects of communicating the rise of climate migration on public perceptions of climate change and migration, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102210](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102210)

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