

Climate scientists are more credible when they practice what they preach

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Americans are more likely to follow advice about personal energy use from climate scientists who minimize their own carbon footprint, according to Shahzeen Attari of Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs. She and her team used two large online surveys to determine that scientists should practice what they preach if they want their advice on reducing energy use to have greater credibility. Their findings are published in Springer's journal *Climatic Change*.

Personal attacks on [climate](#) experts and advocates are not uncommon when it comes to their own behavior. For example, environmentalist and former vice president Al Gore was criticized for home [energy](#) use that far exceeded the national average.

Attari and her team conducted the online surveys with about 3,000 Americans to see the impact of the researchers' credibility on their messages and advice. Participants were randomly presented with fictional vignettes about a climate expert presenting a talk on how an individual's actions can collectively have a large impact on the environment.

The surveys began with a baseline narrative: a leading climate researcher is giving a talk about the merits of reducing air travel and lowering the amount of energy used in the home. The researcher gives advice to the audience on how they can reduce their own energy use.

The survey participants were then asked to judge the impact of a range of actions by the researcher including this one: "During the question period a member of the audience asks the researcher whether he flew across the country to give this talk. He replies that he regularly flies to lectures and conferences all over the world. It is part of his job, though flying like this does lead to negative impacts on the climate."

The surveys showed that audiences are less concerned with transportation habits than home energy use. A scientist who buys carbon offsets is seen more positively but it doesn't wipe the slate clean.

"Credibility may require [climate researchers](#) to decrease their [carbon footprint](#)," Attari said. "Effective communicators about climate change do sometimes discuss their own behavior and our research indicates that this can be a good way to enhance their credibility," Attari added. "Whether the climate scientists are male or female, what they do in private can have a pronounced effect on how their message is perceived by the public."

She continued, "To communicate effectively, advocates of energy conservation need to be the change they wish to see. Climate researchers, including the three authors of this study, need to make strong efforts to reduce their own carbon footprints."

Still to be determined is whether the effects on credibility and on intentions to conserve are temporary or enduring, the study reports. Another open question is whether the personal behavior of scientists is a factor when lawmakers consider changes in the nation's policies on [climate change](#).

More information: Shahzeen Z. Attari et al, Statements about climate researchers' carbon footprints affect their credibility and the impact of their advice, *Climatic Change* (2016). DOI: [10.1007/s10584-016-1713-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-016-1713-2)

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