

With climate change less obvious in Midwest, park visitors want to know how local resources are impacted

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Lisa Groshong interviewed members of a park advocacy group about their perceptions of local climate impacts. Credit: University of Missouri-Columbia

In image of a polar bear stranded on a sheet of ice makes for a dramatic impression of the impact of climate change, but for most Americans, it has little resemblance to the effects closer to their homes. In the Midwest, lacking obvious climate indicators like melting glaciers, it can be difficult to show local examples.

As a result, research on climate change perceptions of visitors to parks and other [natural areas](#) has largely ignored the Midwest. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that dedicated [park](#) visitors are not only aware of climate changes, but also want science-based information to help them understand its effects on local resources. Those visitors also have recommendations for how to educate the public about climate impacts.

"We felt it was important to capture the unique perspectives of people who have long, deep ties to the parks and the environment in a place where climate impacts are not always obvious," said Lisa Groshong, a doctoral candidate and research assistant at MU's School of Natural Resources. "What we found was that even though they understood the importance of addressing climate change, there was a need for specific, locally-relevant information about how to protect our land and rivers in the Midwest."

Groshong and her advisor, associate professor Sonja Wilhelm Stanis, interviewed members of a park advocacy group about their perceptions of local climate impacts. The group was chosen because its members consistently visit and engage with parks. Participants were asked to submit photos demonstrating tangible effects of climate change, and in follow-up interviews they discussed these photos and broader perceptions of climate change and [land management](#).

Researchers found that while the participants were aware of the various manifestations of climate change—including flooding and drought,

[extreme weather](#), changes in temperature and impacts on plants and wildlife—they were less certain about whether these effects were directly caused by climate change, and they often struggled to convey climate change in the form of a picture.

"Midwesterners have lifelong connections with our natural resources—especially rivers," Wilhelm Stanis said. "Our study shows that not only do they want scientific information about [climate](#) change, but they want education and land management about specific, resource-related impacts that affect the activities they care about."

Natural resource specialists can help educate the public by highlighting current management efforts and increasing ecological resilience to issues such as erosion and invasive species. In this way, educators and managers can work together to conserve park resources and increase awareness of the impacts of [climate change](#), Groshong said.

The study was published in the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*.

More information: Lisa Groshong et al. Climate change impacts in Missouri State Parks: Perceptions from engaged park users, *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.jort.2018.09.002

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