

Climate change conversations can be difficult for both skeptics, environmentalists

11 August 2019



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Having productive conversations about climate change isn't only challenging when dealing with skeptics, it can also be difficult for environmentalists, according to two studies presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

The first of the studies found that reinforcing belief and trust in science may be a strategy to help shift the views of [climate change](#) skeptics and make them more open to the facts being presented by the other side.

"Within the United States, bipartisan progress on [climate](#) change has essentially come to a standstill because many conservatives doubt the findings of climate science and many liberals cannot fathom that any rational human can doubt the scientific consensus on the issue," said Carly D. Robinson, MEd, of Harvard University, who presented the research. "These opposing perspectives do not create a starting point for productive conversations to help our country address climate change. Our goal was to find an intervention that might change the current situation."

Though previous research has shown that social pressure to disbelieve in climate change stems from the political right and that conservatives' trust in science has eroded, Robinson and her colleagues theorized that most people would find at least some branches of science credible. Leveraging those beliefs could lead climate skeptics to shift their views, they said.

"When people are faced with two or more opposing beliefs, ideas and values, it tends to create discomfort, which can lead people to becoming more open-minded about a particular issue," said Christine Vriesema, Ph.D., of the University of California, Santa Barbara and a co-author of the study.

The researchers surveyed nearly 700 participants from the U.S. Half were given surveys about their belief in science (e.g., "How credible is the medical data that germs are a primary cause of disease?" and "How certain are you that physicists' theory of gravity accurately explains why objects fall when dropped?") and their belief in climate science (e.g., "How credible is the climate science data that ocean temperatures are rising?" and "How certain are you that global warming explains many of the new weather patterns we are seeing today?"). The other half was only surveyed about their belief in climate science. All participants reported if they considered themselves politically liberal, moderate or conservative.

"As we predicted in our pre-registration, conservatives reported a greater belief in climate science if they were asked questions first about their belief in other areas of science," said Robinson. "For climate skeptics, it likely became awkward to report on our survey that they believed in science while at the same time, denying the findings of climate science. That dissonance led many to adjust their beliefs to show greater support for the existence of climate change."

The findings showed that beliefs in [climate science](#) are malleable and not fixed, said Robinson.

"We were pleasantly surprised that a brief, two-minute survey changed skeptics' views on climate change," said Robinson. "It is exciting to know that in real-world settings, we might be able to have more productive climate conversations by starting from a place of common belief."

The second study showed that igniting a sense of resilience and perseverance can increase action and engagement around climate change for people who work in aquariums, national parks and zoos.

"Many educators working at these institutions reported wanting to talk about climate change and visitors reported wanting to hear about it, yet many educators still felt uncomfortable bringing the topic into their conversations because they were worried about being able to communicate effectively," said Nathaniel Geiger, Ph.D., of Indiana University who presented the research.

The study included 203 science educators from zoos, aquariums and [national parks](#) who were part of a yearlong communication training program from the National Network of Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation designed to build participants' confidence in talking about climate change. The training consisted of study groups, group assignments, readings, discussions and weekend retreats. During the last six months of the program, participants worked to integrate what they had learned into their jobs.

Survey data were collected one month before and one month after the training program and again six to nine months later.

Geiger and his colleagues examined two components of hopeful thinking to see which one might lead to the success of the training program: agency (e.g., enthusiasm, a sense of determination) and pathways (e.g., resilience and perseverance strategies) and how those influenced participants' reports of engagement about climate change.

Participants rated their "agency thinking" (e.g., "I

energetically do all I can do to discuss climate change" and "I anticipate that efforts to discuss climate change will be pretty successful") and their "pathways thinking" (e.g., "I can think of many ways to discuss climate change") in each survey. The science educators also reported the frequency with which they discussed climate change with the general public and visitors to their institutions, ranging from never to daily.

Geiger and his team found that pathways thinking was more successful at inspiring conversations about climate change than agency.

"Our findings suggested that portions of the training that taught how to persevere and be resilient in the face of difficult climate change conversations may have been the most effective at promoting discussion," Geiger said.

The training program also increased the frequency with which the science educators spoke about climate change with visitors, from less than once per month prior to the training to more than two or three times per month afterward, he said.

"We found it uplifting that the training program showed such a robust effect at promoting these difficult discussions," said Geiger. "We believe that climate change advocates and educators will find this work helpful toward meeting their goal of crafting more effective training programs to boost climate change engagement."

More information:

apps.apa.org/convsearch/article/158171067.1564407200

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Provided by American Psychological Association

APA citation: Climate change conversations can be difficult for both skeptics, environmentalists (2019, August 11) retrieved 13 April 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-climate-conversations-difficult-skeptics-environmentalists.html>

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