

American Meteorological Society's Environmental Science Seminar Series

The Divide between Values and Behavior: Exploring American Perceptions of Global Warming and the Environment

Many in society still largely adhere to the notion that 'If we just tell people the facts, they'll reach the right conclusion.' Is this notion supported by research on risk perception, decision-making, and behavior? It is said that people think in terms of frames. How do frames differ from facts? What role do facts play in public perceptions and behavior regarding environmental risks such as global warming? What other factors influence perception and behavior? Is there a disconnect between environmental values and behavior? If so, why? Given the above, what are the most effective ways of communicating environmental risks?

Public Invited

Please provide us with a business card if you would like to be on our mailing list

Tuesday, November 28, 2006

12:00 noon - 2:00 pm

Location: Dirksen Senate Office Bldg., Room 106

Washington, DC

Buffet Reception Following

Moderator:

Dr. Anthony Socci, Senior Fellow, American Meteorological Society

Speakers:

Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, Research Scientist at Decision Research, and Principal Investigator at the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University, New York, NY

Dr. Matthew C. Nisbet, Assistant Professor, School of Communication, American University, Washington, DC

Program Summary

Climate Change in the American Mind

Large majorities of Americans believe that global warming is real and consider it a serious problem, yet global warming remains a low priority relative to other national and environmental issues and lacks a sense of urgency. To understand this lack of urgency, this presentation reports results from several recent national studies of American global warming risk perceptions and policy preferences. These studies demonstrate that Americans generally: 1) perceive global warming as a moderate risk that will predominantly impact geographically and temporally distant people and places; 2) support national and international policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and, 3) oppose carbon taxes. The public's knowledge about causes and solutions is limited and occasionally confused, thus many Americans rely predominantly on images, feelings, and values when thinking about global warming. There are, however, several distinct segments of the public that conceptualize and respond to the issue in very different ways. For example, alarmists often view global warming in apocalyptic terms, while naysayers claim the problem either doesn't exist or is unimportant for a variety of reasons. Different strategies are needed to communicate about global warming in ways that either resonate with the values and predispositions of particular audiences or that directly address fundamental misconceptions.

Framing as a Tool for Engaging the Public

Despite record amounts of media attention in 2006, surveys show that while Americans are generally concerned about global warming, they still rank the issue as a lower level priority than many other policy concerns. Part of the reason is that citizens rely heavily on cognitive short-cuts such as partisanship and ideology to cut down on their choices about which issues to pay attention to, and which arguments to accept as valid. Moreover, in a fragmented media system, audiences segment themselves based on their preference, or lack thereof, for public affairs content. As a result, science- and policy-focused media coverage only reaches a relatively small audience of already engaged citizens.

This presentation reviews research on "framing" as a valuable tool for redefining the issue of global warming in a manner that makes it personally relevant to key segments of the public, while remaining true to current scientific understanding of the issue. Previous research offers a generalizable set of frames that appear to span science-related issues, and that apply to global warming. Additional work is needed to identify the issue-specific phrases, images, and cultural references that trigger these underlying social meanings, and to better understand the

communication channels in a fragmented media system that engage specific audiences.

Biographies

Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz is a research scientist at Decision Research, and a Principal Investigator at the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University, NY. He received his B.A. in International Relations from Michigan State University and his Ph.D. in Environmental Science, Studies, and Policy from the University of Oregon.

Dr. Leiserowitz's research focuses on risk perception, decision-making and behavior and the human dimensions of global environmental change. He has conducted studies of public and stakeholder climate change risk perceptions, policy preferences and behavior at multiple scales including individual states (Alaska and Florida), the United States (five national surveys) and internationally (USA, UK, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina). His work also examines the role of underlying cultural values, attitudes, and worldviews in human decision-making and behavior. His research has demonstrated the importance of values, imagery, emotion, and experience in public risk perception, and has identified several distinct segments (audiences) within the American public who are predisposed to interpret risks in unique ways. He also recently conducted the first global assessment of public values, attitudes, and behaviors regarding sustainable development.

Since receiving his Ph.D. in 2003, Dr. Leiserowitz has authored over a dozen peer-reviewed scientific articles for journals and books, serves as a scientific advisor to the Global Roundtable on Climate Change at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and is a frequent invited speaker on the public's response to climate change and sustainable development.

Dr. Matthew C. Nisbet is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at American University, Washington, DC. He holds an M.S./Ph.D. in Communication from Cornell University and an A.B. in Government from Dartmouth College.

Dr. Nisbet's research tracks scientific and environmental controversies, examining the interactions between experts, journalists, and various publics. In this work, he focuses on several key questions: How does news coverage both reflect and shape policy? How do citizens make sense of controversies, and in what ways do strategists try to mold public opinion? What mobilizes citizens to get involved in a debate? Dr. Nisbet has studied a wide range of controversies including those over climate change, stem cell research, intelligent design, plant biotechnology, and hurricanes.

Dr. Nisbet is the author or co-author of twenty research articles and book chapters. His work appears across a number of leading peer-reviewed journals. A frequent

invited speaker at conferences and meetings across the U.S. and Canada, Dr. Nisbet tracks current trends related to science communication at his blog *Framing Science*, hosted by the Seed Media Group.

This seminar series is open to the public and does not require a reservation.

You are invited to forward this notice to friends and colleagues

The **Next Seminar** is tentatively scheduled for early December, 2006. **Tentative Topic: *The Scientific Case for Global Warming***

Please see our web site for seminar summaries, presentations and future events:
<http://www.ametsoc.org/seminar>.

For more information please contact:

Anthony D. Socci, Ph.D.
Tel. (202) 737-9006, ext. 412
E-mail: socci@ametsoc.org

Or

Jan Wilkerson
Tel. (202) 737-9006, ext. 436
E-mail: jwilkerson@ametsoc.org