

Cultural Daily

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Climate Change—Who Cares?

John Glynn · Wednesday, May 1st, 2019

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a rather unsettling report. 90 climate scientists from 40 countries published a comprehensive paper with a damning conclusion: If humans don't take immediate action to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2040, there is no going back. The consequences of our actions will effectively be rooted in the natural systems of the planet. There will be no turning back, the experts warned. Punishing droughts, widespread wildfires, devastating floods, lethal hurricanes, and deadly famines have become more common in recent years. If we do not act soon, they will become even more common.

The IPCC, established some three decades ago, has published hundreds of reports. However, this one felt different, more pressing, more urgent, more definitive. The reactions from the general public? Well, they were pretty predictable. Nonchalant shrugs, some tutting, vigorous head nodding and stern looks, even an odd 'oh, my word' here and there.

A rising number of Americans understand that climate change is happening and believe that it could harm their family and the country, according to a new poll from Yale and George Mason University. The data suggests that U.S. concern about climate change has risen by several points in just 12 months. According to the poll, more than seven out of 10 Americans now say that global warming is "personally important" to them, an increase of nine points since March 2018. More Americans than ever—around 30 percent—also say they are "very worried" about climate change, an eight-point increase. What we tell pollsters, however, is often very different from what we actually believe.

Over the last couple of decades, climate scientists, environmentalists, left-wing politicians and NGOs have fooled themselves into believing that people *really* care about climate change. They assume that constant footage of global carnage, flooded cities, the displacement of millions, and droughts and the famines will encourage the masses to come together and help save our dying planet. Wishful thinking. In the immortal words of Karen Marie Moning, when you assume, "you make an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me.'"

Although environmental activists have won the "battle" about the reality of climate change, they have yet to win the "war." Climate change never dominates elections. It makes an appearance here and there, but it never plays the leading role. It rarely dominates headlines in the way a Jussie Smollett story does. It's not sexy enough. It's important... just not that important.

Last year, speaking at UN summit in Katowice, Poland, UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres

called climate change the “single most important issue we face today.” You certainly wouldn’t think it; climate change doesn’t even come close to in top Google searches. What does? Well, in 2018, people Googled *What is DACA? What is a government shutdown? What is racketeering?* And Meghan Markle fever was sweeping the nation. Other frequently Googled things included *Fortnite*, *Black Panther*, and trying to figure out what the hell Bitcoin is. For any future historians out there, it should also be noted that every year for the past decade, “Kardashian” has been searched far more than any climate related term. Judge us harshly, citizens of the future.

Our nonchalance is worrying on so many levels. 2018 was a year of weather extremes. Europe experienced particularly abnormal weather patterns.

In Helsinki-Vantaa Finland, a place not exactly renowned for warm temperatures, there were 25 consecutive days of heat well above 25°C. Wildfires swept through Sweden—yes, Sweden—burning close to 25,000 hectares of land. Greece experienced its deadliest fire season in more than a decade, and in September of 2018, experienced an extremely rare ‘Medicane,’ a Mediterranean “Hurricane.”

Meanwhile, in Budapest, Hungary’s capital, the iconic Danube dried up. Portugal had its hottest day of the 21st century (44°C); Armenia had its warmest July in history, with temperatures in Yerevan, the capital, reaching 43.7°C. From July 23rd to August 9th, the German city of Frankfurt sweltered in 19 consecutive days of heat above 30°C.

In the United States, 2018 was the year of unprecedented natural disasters, from the deadliest wildfire in California’s history to the worst hurricane to hit the East Coast in half a century. The impact of the wildfires in California cannot be overstated. With a total of 8,527 fires burning an area of 1,893,913 acres, the largest amount of burned acreage recorded in a fire season, the fires caused more than \$3.5 billion in damages.

Even with all this devastation and heartbreak, Americans are not any more willing to pay money to fight climate change than they were three years ago, according to a recently conducted poll by the *Associated Press* and the University of Chicago. Almost 70 percent of Americans said they would simply “refuse” to pay \$10 a month to help cool the warming planet.

Why we don’t take climate change more seriously?

The simple answer is ignorance. We just don’t care. However, I find this assumption problematic. People do care, or at least they appear to. The problem isn’t ignorance. As discussed, most people get the basic idea; when yet another ominous report is issued, people appear to pay attention. Yes, but for how long?

From an evolutionary perspective, we are not “designed” to take future threats as seriously as immediate ones. Though the sea levels are rising and the world’s *honeybees* are quite literally dropping dead, for most of us, the worst is yet to come—in a few decades, maybe half a century. Most of us will be old by then. Some of us will be dead. Basically, we treat the world like a rented hotel room. The world is someone else’s mess to take care of. This is not just an anecdotal assumption.

More than half of Americans seem to think that climate change won’t affect them personally, according to a 2018 Gallup poll. Only 45 percent think that global warming will pose a serious

threat in their lifetime, and just 43 percent say they worry a great deal about climate change. As discussed above, however, climate change is already affecting us. Just ask the people in California. (OK, maybe ignorance does play a role after all).

The poll shows that many Americans perceive climate change as a distant problem. *Evolutionarily speaking*, humans are hardwired to discount the future. Our brains are hardwired to prefer immediate benefits and delayed costs over upfront costs and delayed gains.

This explains the amount of global credit card debt. It's why we eat so much chocolate.

It's why we drink copious amounts of alcohol. It's why I make so many bad decisions on a daily basis. Decades of work on temporal discounting highlight one simple fact: we overprize benefits in the short term relative to benefits in the long term. People fail to save enough money for retirement, preferring to spend money now rather than having a fund to dip into their old age. When the rainy day arrives, there is no umbrella to grab. We demand immediate gratification. To hell with the consequences.

Historically speaking, "looking ahead"—planning accordingly, if you will—is a relatively new concept. Up until recently, our ancestors, living a sort of hand to mouth existence, looked forward in hours and days, not years and decades, and certainly not centuries. *What will tomorrow bring? I don't know, but hopefully enough food to keep my family nourished.*

Ignoring climate change in the here and now has benefits both to individuals and to businesses. After all, if I simply choose to ignore the ominous warnings from scientists, I can continue driving my petrol guzzling motor.

Ignoring is not the same as ignorance. Ignorant means lacking knowledge or awareness in general; uneducated or unsophisticated, not a person that actually overlooks something. Companies aren't ignorant; many of them just choose to ignore the facts, as do many of us on an individual level. By ignoring the reality of the situation we now find ourselves in, companies can keep manufacturing cheaper products if they don't have to develop new processes to limit carbon emissions, hence the billions of dollars being poured into lobbying against laws designed to protect the *environment*..

In fact, according to a paper published last year, major polluters have had a massively disproportionate financial influence on US politics in recent years. Dr. Robert Brulle of Drexel University, who conducted the study, noted that, over the past two decades or so, lobby groups have spent more than \$2bn in attempts to "guide" climate change legislation in the US. Unsurprisingly, a large chunk of this money has come from groups that stand to financially suffer if limits on carbon emissions are implemented. For decades now, the spending of fossil fuel and transportation sectors has totally eclipsed the spending of environmental groups and the renewable energy sector.

Awful, I know. But, honestly, what are we to do? This is just the way the world works.

Should we care more? Yes, of course. The question we need to ask is this — how can governments and politicians promote 'pro-environmental behavior' that actually works? Appealing to hearts won't work. Appealing to wallets might.

In psychology, the incentive theory suggests that behavior is motivated by a desire for

reinforcement or incentives. Similar to operant conditioning, where behaviors are performed in order to either gain reinforcement or avoid punishment, incentive theory states that an individual's actions are directed by the thought of being rewarded.

Think about what type of things might motivate you to be more environmentally aware. Tax breaks? Points that can be used at restaurants, resorts, or when booking flights? Maybe politicians and governments can incentivize greater environmental awareness. However, if the climate scientists are to be believed, they better act fast.

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