

Some Climate Scientists Make Overtures to Their Critics

<http://www.yaleclimatemediaforum.org/2012/04/some-climate-scientists-make-overtures-to-their-critics/>

April 5, 2012



Can climate 'skeptics' be won over with face-to-face engagement?

In 2010, a *Scientific American* article asked, "Why can't we have a civil conversation about climate?"

Commentary

A number of climate scientists seem to be wondering the same thing these days. Some have opened up channels of communication to the public, including the small but vocal minority that is most suspicious of climate science. Noting this trend, Leo Hickman in the *Guardian* recently wrote that "there now appears to be more of what I call 'Rapunzel' scientists; those that choose to (metaphorically, at least) let down their long hair and allow us to climb up into their ivory tower to converse with them and to see how they operate."

Hickman reports on the various outreach efforts:

A good example is Professor Richard Betts, a climate scientist who is head of the climate impacts research team at the Met Office Hadley Centre in Exeter and a lead author on both the 4th and 5th Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in Working Groups 1 and 2. By being positioned at the heart of both the Met Office and the IPCC, he is a scientist placed very much under the scrutiny of climate skeptics.

But rather than defensively pull up the drawbridge, he routinely posts explanatory comments on blogs that are hostile to climate science and engages in debates on Twitter with skeptics.

In fact, the Met Office has confirmed to me that it has now hosted a number of "conversations" with its critics over the past couple of years in an effort to both better explain how it works and to "hear other viewpoints."

In Hickman's article, Betts explained why he thought this was a good idea: "In the polarized debate on climate change, there seem to be two self-reinforcing groups which criticize each other but do not really understand each other," Betts said. "They each get their impression of the other group second-hand, which only leads to further misunderstandings and increased bitterness. Neither party comes out of this looking very good."

The mutual distrust and hostility between the two opposing camps is what prompted Scott Denning, a climate scientist at Colorado State University, to speak last year at an annual gathering of climate "skeptics" sponsored by the Heartland Institute. In an essay about his experience, Denning wrote that he "was treated with respect and even warmth despite my vehement disagreement with most of

the other presenters. Heartland gave me a very prominent platform: both an hour-long keynote debate over lunch with Prof. Roy Spencer and a 15-minute plenary presentation in the final panel of the meeting.” (See [Yale Forum](#) article.)

In that essay, Denning noted that some of his colleagues had tried to convince him to not attend the Heartland conference. They feared that climate skeptics would take his words out of context and/or use his appearance to lend legitimacy to the event. Denning countered:

Refusing to engage dismissive voices on climate change may feel like taking the high road, but I suspect it's the high road to ruin. Ignoring climate contrarians has not made them go away. In fact, their message has resonated with an increasing slice of public opinion for several years. Tony Leiserowitz (Yale University) and colleagues survey public opinion on climate change and find persistent and growing segments of the American public that are doubtful or dismissive about the human role in climate change. It seems to me that strong and persuasive engagement of that audience by more bona fide experts articulating the scientific consensus is essential.*

In a phone interview this week, Denning reiterated his belief that such outreach by climate scientists is necessary; but it's also not for everyone, he added. He suggests that there is nothing to be gained from the current standoff, with the two opposing sides acting “like armed camps. What the hell good does that do?”

Asked if he thought he had changed any minds, Denning said that had not been his intent (he has continued to engage with audiences that are suspicious of climate scientists). He said he just wants to foster a more respectful dialogue and perhaps pave the way for some common ground.

The reception he received after his Heartland talk confirms to him that he made the right decision to attend. “Dozens of people came up to me afterwards, thanking me for coming,” Denning recalled, adding that many told him, “We really needed to hear this other perspective.”

Reminded that much opposition to climate science (and dismissal of climate change) seems ideological in nature, perhaps limiting the amount of headway that can be made on the science if people are already predisposed against it, Denning agreed that the culture war dynamic presents a high hurdle to overcome.

“Almost everyone that dismisses climate change as a problem does it for ideological or political reasons, not for scientific reasons,” he said. “We scientists need to recognize that.”

This is a point stressed by one researcher in a [recent Guardian](#) column. He wrote:

In fact, the more we know, the less it seems that climate change skepticism has to do with climate science at all. Climate change provokes such visceral arguments because it allows ancient battles — about personal responsibility, state intervention, the regulation of industry, the distribution of resources and wealth, or the role of technologies in society — to be fought all over again.

It follows that the answer to overcoming climate change skepticism is to stop reiterating the science, and start engaging with what climate change skepticism is really about — competing visions of how people see the world, and what they want the future to be like.

Richard Betts, for his part, understands this challenge all too well. In an e-mail exchange with *The Yale Forum* explaining why he thinks direct engagement with climate skeptics is necessary, he said:

The “ideological prism” concept is actually one of the reasons why it is good to meet people face to face. When one is viewing an issue through such a prism, it is very easy for the prism to influence your views if the other people in the discussion are remote from you (eg: you only see their words written on a blog or through the TV or radio). However, if you actually meet people face to face, you get a much richer perspective of the other person, and the influence of the prism is reduced.

So to give a concrete example rather than an analogy — institutions like the Met Office and IPCC can easily come across as beurocratic monstrosities, and these organizations (and the people that work within them) are easily caricatured. However, if folks come and meet us in person, they can see that we (climate scientists) are real people with our own individual views, expertise, and motivations. Having a proper conversation also helps get to the bottom of why certain views are held.

So, my aim is not really to try to convince anybody that global warming is a problem — that is a personal judgment, and anyway there are plenty of other people trying to do that kind of thing! Rather, my aim is to let him/them see that the evidence informing that judgment comes from real people with credible expertise and whose motivations are merely to seek and communicate the scientific truth. That will hopefully then form the basis for a more useful discussion, in which the evidence can then be discussed in a more informed (and less suspicious) manner.

Whether climate change can be discussed in a more informed and less suspicious manner remains to be seen — especially since much of the dialogue currently takes place in depersonalized media forums. Nonetheless, any efforts that can add more light to an otherwise noisy, fractious debate should be applauded.

**Anthony Leiserowitz is Publisher of The Yale Forum.*