



Comment: Time to get sceptical about climate change message?

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Darren Hughes, head of communications and public affairs at the Rothamsted Research Institute explores how smarter communications could help prompt climate action from the public and policy makers alike.



Hughes believes communication on climate change should target those not yet convinced to act. (Source: Wikimedia/Malte)

We all understand the devastating impacts of climate change don't we? The [evidence](#) is clear and obvious isn't it? Everyone knows we have to act now to adapt and mitigate, right? I'm not so sure. Indeed, I am a sceptic. No, not one of those sceptics, but I am sceptical that, despite all our efforts, the message that climate change is real and urgent is not really getting through to people to convince them to change their behaviours with the speed and verve required.

Whilst we see a lot of rhetoric from Governments across the world, I think it's fair to say that this is not always backed up with concrete action and is often mixed in with a number of counterintuitive policies.

The recent Durban Climate Change Conference (COP17) provided us with renewed rhetoric and [Mark Lynas'](#) excellent blog eloquently summarises these. But the reality of converting this rhetoric into action, with the speed that is required, remains unclear.

As a science communicator, working at a research establishment focused on creating more sustainable agricultural practices ([Rothamsted Research](#)), my days are spent speaking with people who understand climate change and are developing the knowledge and technologies required to tackle the problem.

But my social surroundings are quite different, with quite an eclectic group of acquaintances. Speaking with these people, it is quite clear to me that the messages about our urgent need to mitigate and adapt to climate change are not getting through to everyone.

Perfect Storm



The UK Government's Chief Scientific Advisor Sir John Beddington has described an impending food crisis as the "Perfect Storm" (Source: Flickr/CGIAR)

So what's the problem? Why doesn't everyone get it? I believe one of the problems is in our ability to communicate the right messages to the right people.

In other words, we are preaching to the converted. By reserving our conversations to sections of the blogosphere and Twitter feeds where other like-minded individuals live out their virtual lives, we are failing to reach the people we need to reach.

If we are serious about tackling climate change everyone, and I mean everyone, needs to put it at the centre of his or her everyday lives.

What's the solution then? Clearly we need to be smarter about the way we communicate our messages to reach new and different audiences. We need to understand what 'floats their boats' in order to make this happen. An example of how this has been done is through the example of the Perfect Storm.

Just to remind you, the world's population of 7 billion is projected to reach 9.3 billion by 2050, an average increase of over 160,000 people every day.

Coupled with other factors, for example people moving from rural livelihoods to cities and changing dietary practices as people become more affluent (poverty must be alleviated), this will create an enormous stress on our natural resources, notably on food, energy and water security in the next 20-30 years.

Climate change is at the heart of the security of supply of these three resources. Collectively, the UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir John Beddington, referred to this as a *Perfect*

Storm of events.

By packaging the concept of climate change under a different banner, e.g. the Perfect Storm, or Food Security, it allowed us to overcome two problems, the danger of diluting the climate change message, i.e. sounding like a stuck record, or worse still appearing cultish or tribal; and secondly taking the message beyond the usual suspects to a wider audience.

Changing behaviour

The focus on the Perfect Storm and food security allowed us to take climate-related behaviour change deeper into the farming community, food manufacturers, suppliers, retailers and more importantly the less obvious UK Government Departments.

This is because the actions required to manage food, water and energy security are the same as those required to manage climate change.

Sir John Beddington has concluded: "The challenge for global agriculture is to grow more food on not much more land, using less water, fertiliser and pesticides than we have historically done". This is a climate smart message, without mentioning the term "climate change". In the future, messages about climate change could relate to other hot topics such as financial instability (relating climate change to how it will affect people's wallets), or political security (price volatility of energy and food leads to socio- economic impacts, such as civil unrest). You see where I am going with this? As they say in media circles, you need to find a hook to hang your story on.

If we are serious about protecting our environment, we need a concerted commitment from all 7 billion people on this planet, not just the sensible few.

To do this we need to use smarter communications to take the messages that will affect behaviour change beyond the usual suspects, to a wider audience.

To paraphrase Hess's fundamental [scientific principle](#), there are a number of different paths you can follow to achieve the same result.

Dr Darren Hughes is head of communications and public policy for [Rothamsted Research](#)

<http://www.rtcc.org/nature/comment-time-to-get-sceptical-about-climate-change-message/>