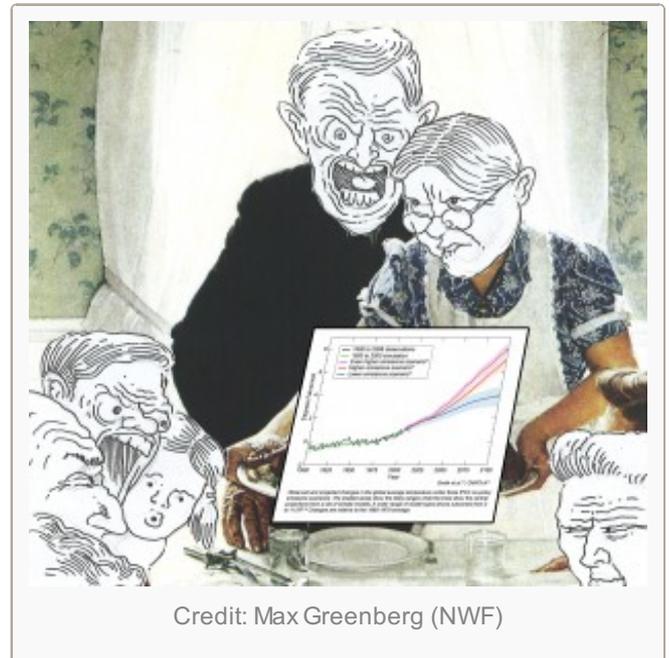


## Tips for Talking Climate Change at the Holiday Party : Wildlife Promise

Several years ago at the holiday party for my husband's company, one of his colleagues began spouting off about how climate change was not real. Those at the table who knew what I did for a living looked expectantly at me, gearing up for a juicy confrontation. I thought, okay, here we go again...

Yes, like others working on climate change, I'm used to the occasional family member, neighbor, friend, or other acquaintance questioning climate science. Wary of derailing an otherwise cheerful occasion, my initial inclination is to diffuse these exchanges and steer the conversation back to safer territory.

However, this year, I'm going to try to embrace these encounters as teachable moments. I'm inspired by Richard Somerville and Susan Joy Hassol's *Physics Today* article entitled "[Communicating the science of climate change](#)," in which they state:



***“It is urgent that climate scientists improve the ways they convey their findings to a poorly informed and often indifferent public.”***

and

***“We must find ways to help the public realize that not acting is also making a choice, one that commits future generations to serious impacts.”***

As someone who is all-too-aware of the urgency of the problem, it is no longer acceptable to smile benignly or change the subject as others spread misinformation. Avoiding these confrontations is akin to making a choice not to act.

### Tips for Talking Climate Science

How best to respond to patent misunderstandings in a way that won't disrupt the festive mood? Russell McLendon offers some [good advice](#) about how to keep your cool. Here are a few more pointers that I plan to keep in mind:

#### 1. Get local and connect the dots:

People love to talk about their own experiences with the natural world – from the latest extreme weather event to changes in their favorite outdoor activity to unusual happenings in their garden – and it usually is pretty straightforward to connect recent oddities to the changing climate. These sorts of connections help make climate change real, rather than some abstract problem affecting people far away and long into the future.

## 2. Make it clear what the scientists are and aren't debating now:

While it helps to be ready to quickly address some common arguments that climate deniers perpetuate (check out [NWF's global warming summaries](#) and [Skeptical Science's responses to typical denier claims](#)), try not to get stuck on these points. Scientists are no longer debating whether climate change is happening or whether humans are responsible. The questions now are: How bad will it be? and What can we do about it? And, it's not just scientists who have moved beyond the is-it-happening questions. Our [military](#), [medical](#), and [religious](#) leaders, along with [many others](#), are likewise grappling with how to respond to a problem they view as very real and serious.

## 3. Point people to solutions:

Talking about climate change can quickly turn you into a real [Debbie Downer](#), the last thing anyone needs at the family feast. The solution: talk about climate change solutions. I think that this part of the conversation should try to accomplish two things: (1) help people identify modest actions that they could take now to address the problem, thus avoiding the perception that climate change is an intractable problem; and (2) paint a positive vision of the future, in which we have proactively tackled climate change and are enjoying many of the co-benefits of transitioning to new, cleaner technologies. After all, who can really argue against an electric grid that's more reliable or never having to fill your car up with gas again?

## 4. Remind people about the good things they are already doing:

Appealing to people's better nature can be a powerful motivator. Solving climate change will require us to be frugal, resourceful, innovative, leaders, and on the cutting-edge. These traits are quintessentially American, crossing political and ideological lines. Helping people to recognize the good actions they are already doing – from recycling to carpooling to hand-me-downs – will help them identify themselves as good stewards of the Earth, and could lead them to make more climate-conscious choices in the future.

## Some Food for Thought...

So, as I head to holiday parties over the next couple weeks, I'll be ready for the inevitable encounter with someone who questions climate science. When these teachable moments arrive, I'll be realistic about what will result. Chances are slim that I'll be able to change anyone's mind in a short conversation. But, hopefully, I'll give them some good food for thought. And, even if I can't persuade the person who raised the issue, others might join the conversation and gain something from it.

As for my husband's colleague, I was gearing up to respond when the company's CEO grabbed the microphone to make some remarks. For better or for worse, the juicy confrontation was averted. By the time the next year's holiday party rolled around, he had left the company, and our paths haven't crossed since. Next time, I'll be sure not to miss such an opportunity.

### Related Links

- [What is Global Warming?](#)
- [How could global warming impact wildlife?](#)
- [How is Global Warming Related to Extreme Weather?](#)
- [7 Alarming Trends in the Arctic Ecosystem for 2011](#)