

Communicating about climate change: Moving beyond the myths toward more effective strategies for societal engagement

Lisa Dilling, Assistant Professor
Center for Science and Technology/CIRES
University of Colorado at Boulder

Climate change poses a frustrating challenge for communicators and advocates seeking to galvanize public action in response to the issue. To begin with, climate change is often communicated as a global scale issue, shrouded in the complexity and uncertainty inherent in modeling the future, and with impacts often perceived as geographically and temporally distant. Adding to the challenge, the distributed nature of the causes and potential options for responding to the problem, coupled with the lag times and inertia of the global system, mean that potential solutions are often perceived as ineffective or overwhelming to enact. And yet this very inertia, both in the earth system and social systems, suggests that effective responses are urgently needed in the near term. Communicators often therefore resort to tactics that inspire fear or guilt in order to increase the urgency of their messages on climate change.

Unfortunately, these tactics do not serve well to provoke effective societal responses, and in fact can often produce the opposite effect. Other strategies commonly invoked to promote action and spur public policy include filling in gaps in information on climate science for the public and reducing uncertainty as a prelude to decision making. This presentation will provide a new synthesis of insights from a broad range of disciplines applied to the issue of communicating about climate change, and suggest more effective strategies. The findings are highlights from Moser and Dilling's book "Creating a climate for change: Communicating climate change and facilitating social change," published in 2007 by Cambridge University Press.