

09 JUL 2015: **INTERVIEW**

How Can We Make People Care About Climate Change?

Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes has studied why so many people have remained unconcerned about climate change. In a Yale Environment 360 interview, he talks about the psychological barriers to public action on climate and how to overcome them.

BY RICHARD SCHIFFMAN

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Per Espen Stoknes, a Norwegian psychologist and economist, has been doing a lot of thinking about a question that has bedeviled climate scientists for years: Why have humans so far failed to deal with the looming threat posed by climate change?

That question is the focus of his recent book, *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming*, in which he analyzes what he calls the five psychological barriers that have made it difficult to deal realistically with the climate crisis. Those include: the distant nature of the problem (it's far off in time and often in other parts of the globe); the



Per Espen Stoknes

doom-and-gloom scenarios about the impacts of climate change, which make people feel powerless to do anything about it; and the psychological defenses that people have to avoid feeling guilty about their own contributions to fossil fuel emissions.

In an interview with *Yale Environment 360*, Stoknes — who co-founded three clean energy companies and helps lead the [BI Center for Climate Strategy at the Norwegian Business School](#) — talks about these barriers and about how the discussion of climate change needs to be reframed. “We need a new kind of stories,” he says, “stories that tell us that nature is resilient and can rebound and get back to a healthier state, if we give it a chance to do so.”

Yale Environment 360: Scientists and journalists have been warning us for years about climate change. But you say the message is not getting across. Why not?

Per Espen Stoknes: My work starts with what I call the psychological climate paradox. Long-term surveys show that people were more concerned with climate change in wealthy democracies 25 years ago than they are today. So the more science, the more Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessments we have, the more the evidence accumulates, the less concerned the public is. To the rational mind this is a complete mystery.

e360: You're suggesting that the initial impact of news about climate change actually moved the meter a bit, but after the initial alarm the meter went back to the default position, and people became unconcerned again?

Stoknes: Absolutely. In the late 1980s this was a novel scare, we hadn't heard much about it before. [Scientist] Jim Hansen really broke the story

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in the international news media in 1988. ... At that point there was a wave of environmental concern. The earth came to seem fragile in a new way. But as this news was out there for longer, we started habituating to it. And when it began to be clear that our own lifestyle was responsible for these new threats, then several psychological barriers started to introduce themselves and create a backlash of denial.

e360: Why did you write this book?

Stoknes: It gradually became clear that the time has come when we need to shift from talking about the climate system to talking about people's responses to climate science. How can it be that we are behaving in such a self-destructive way, that we are seemingly inevitably pushing the planet way beyond the 2-degree [Celsius] limit that scientists have proposed [for avoiding dangerous climate change]?

Climate scientists have been trying to educate us on this for so long that they are frustrated and exhausted and feeling exasperated. Some have become cynical saying that it seems as if humans are wired to self-destruct, maybe our genes aren't well equipped to deal with these long-term issues. It seems we prefer to eat all our cake today and not care about the coming decades.

e360: Is there any way around this inability to think in the long term?

Stoknes: The question that really drives me and that fuels my research is: Is humanity up to the task, or are we inevitably short-term thinkers? Or to put it a bit more constructively, what are the conditions under which humans will begin to think and act for the long term as far as the climate is concerned? Is it possible to pinpoint the mechanisms or functions in the human psyche that would enable us to act for the long term? And if so, what are they and how can they be strengthened?

e360: Is the rejection of climate science a global phenomenon?

Stoknes: We need to be clear that this is a cultural phenomenon. Because in countries like Thailand and the Philippines, or in Latin America and countries in Southern Europe, the concern about climate change is very high. So it is an issue that particularly pertains to people in wealthy democracies. It is much more difficult for somebody in Bangladesh who is acutely vulnerable, who lives on the coast, to say that sea level rise is not happening, because they are actually experiencing it. If a drought takes away a farmer's crops or a monsoon fails, it means destitution. But here [in the United States and Western Europe], we can always go to a store and buy stuff produced elsewhere, because we have the money to distance ourselves from the immediate impact of weather disruptions.

It is much more difficult to allow that cultural psychology to interfere when you are face-to-face with a failed monsoon or a drought, and your seeds are lost.

e360: Why is it so hard for people in the developed world to come to terms with climate change?

Stoknes: There are five main psychological barriers: distance, doom, dissonance, denial, and identity. This is what the book is about. And the

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reason climate science communication is so difficult is that it triggers these barriers one after the other.

The first barrier is distance. If you look at the IPCC report or other science, they are using graphs charting different variables which typically end with the year 2100. So you are positioning the facts in a way that creates a psychological distance — it is so far in the future that it feels less important, and the sense of urgency goes down. I mean, when is the last time you made a decision for the next century?

People think this is far off — it is not here and now, it's also up there in the Arctic or Antarctica, it affects other people, not me, I'll be old before this really happens, other people are responsible, not me. We distance ourselves from it in so many ways that the pure facts are not sufficient to generate a sustained sense of risk.

Another factor that discourages people from dealing with climate change is the fact that it is so often presented as a doom-and-gloom scenario. Studies show that more than 80 percent of news articles relating to the IPCC assessment reports primarily employed the catastrophe frame. Only 2 percent were using what I call the opportunity frame.

What we know from psychological studies is that if you overuse fear-inducing imagery, what you get is fear and guilt in people, and this makes people more passive, which counteracts engagement. This includes creativity as well. If you give people a guilt or fear-inducing message and then ask them to solve a problem that requires creative thought, there is a statistically significant reduction in the amount of creativity that people come up with to formulate solutions.

e360: Another of the barriers you cite is dissonance. What do you mean by that?

Stoknes: Dissonance is the inner discomfort when I feel like a hypocrite — when my knowledge of climate change is not matched by my actions to stop it. We know that our fossil energy use contributes to global warming, yet we continue to drive, fly, eat beef, or heat with fossil fuels, then dissonance sets in.

Psychologists have found that people are pretty creative in finding ways to defuse this tension between thoughts and deeds. One strategy to deal with this might be to say, “Well, I don't personally emit that much carbon, it's the Chinese, the corporations or somebody else who does that. It's my

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neighbor with the big SUV, or my friend who flies more than I do.” Another strategy is to doubt. So we say that it is really not certain that CO₂ causes global warming. Or some physicist said that it's the sun activity that is causing it.

We can understand why the fossil fuel industry might have an economic interest to spread such ideas, but why do people want to believe this misinformation? If I can believe the doubters, then my dissonance goes away. I don't need to feel bad about myself.

e360: That's where denial fits in?

Stoknes: Yes. The next level is the full out denial, where we negate, ignore, or otherwise avoid acknowledging the unsettling facts about climate change. The word denial has perhaps been overused as a pejorative against the other side who are [portrayed as] immoral, or ignorant, or the enemy. But psychological denial is a process that we all have and use. It is a way that we defend ourselves.

Those who reject climate change are getting back at those who criticize their lifestyles, and want to tell them how to live. So when Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio talk about climate change, they are not necessarily stupid or ignorant or immoral, but they are reinforcing a social contract that says this is an issue that we are not supposed to take seriously.

This ties into our sense of identity. Each of us has a sense of self that is based in certain values — a professional self, a political self, a national identity. We just naturally look for information that confirms our existing values and notions, and filter away whatever challenges them.

Psychologists know that if you criticize people to try to make them change, it may only reinforce their resistance. This has been empirically demonstrated by [Dan Kahan at Yale](#), who found that the more science conservative ideologues know, the more likely they were to get it wrong on

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To overcome polarization on the issue of climate change, Yale professor Dan Kahan says in an interview with e360, scientists and the media need to frame the science in ways that will resonate with the public. A message that makes people feel threatened, he says, simply will not be effective.

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climate change. They use all they know about science to criticize climate science and defend their values.

e360: So what are your recommendations in terms of how we need to reframe the discussion of climate change to be more effective in reaching people?

Stoknes: We need a new kind of stories, stories that tell us that nature is resilient and can rebound and get back to a healthier state, if we give it a chance to do so. We need stories that tell

us that we can collaborate with nature, that we can, as Pope Francis has urged, be stewards and partners of the natural world rather than dominators of it. We need stories about a new kind of happiness not based on material consumption.

Since we have a pretty good understanding of the barriers, that is a good place to start. We need to flip the barriers over so they become successful strategies. Rather than something distant, communicators need to make climate change feel like something that is near, personal, and urgent. Rather than doom, we need to emphasize the opportunities that the crisis affords us.

Climate change is an opportunity for economic development — an entire energy system has to be redesigned from the wastefulness of the previous century to a much smarter mode of doing things. It's a great opportunity to improve global collaboration and knowledge sharing and to create a more just society. So climate change is a fantastic opportunity to encourage our global humanity to emerge. We need to be talking about this.

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