

Public Attitudes to Environmental Change: a selective review of theory and practice

A Research Synthesis for the Living with Environmental Change Research Programme.

One page summary

September 2009

Paul Upham^{1,2}

Lorraine Whitmarsh^{2,3}

Wouter Poortinga⁴

Kingsley Purdam⁵

Andrew Darnton⁶

Carly McLachlan²

Patrick Devine-Wright⁷

¹ Manchester Business School, University of Manchester (paul.upham@manchester.ac.uk)

² Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research

³ School of Psychology, Cardiff University

⁴ Welsh School of Architecture and School of Psychology, Cardiff University

⁵ The Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research, University of Manchester

⁶ AD Research and Analysis

⁷ School of Geography, University of Exeter

For further information on the Living with Environmental Change programme, visit www.lwec.org.uk

A report by the Economic and Social Research Council for the cross council programme Living With Environmental Change reviews what is currently known about public attitudes to environmental change. The report also highlights any gaps in knowledge and points to future research priorities.

Key findings

- The literature on UK public attitudes to environmental change is highly variable in quantity. Notably, there is substantially more literature on UK attitudes to climate change and energy infrastructure than on UK attitudes to landscape and species change. The literature is not organised in terms of an environmental change or adaptation theme: it is scattered across disciplines, with a wide variety of theories or no explicit theory at all.
- Climate change is perceived as a remote issue, with (a) other issues more pressing, (b) impacts befalling future generations and other regions, (c) others' actions as primary causes, (d) responsibility for tackling it assigned principally to government.
- While most accept that climate change has human causes, a significant minority remain sceptical and detailed understanding of the process remains limited. There is also a tendency to conflate climate change with other environmental issues.
- There is no simple relationship between attitudes, engagement and behaviour change. If engagement is undertaken for the purpose of changing attitudes and/or encouraging behaviour change, a wider range of contextual factors will need to be addressed.
- While public support for mitigation action is high, willingness to change personal behaviour (particularly travel) is limited by various perceived individual, social and structural barriers.
- In respect of specific climate change impacts, most existing research relates to public perceptions of flooding. There is very little research on public attitudes to sea-level rise or abrupt climate change.
- The existing research literature suggests that place attachment, environmental values and ideas of what is 'right and normal' are closely involved in the formation of attitudes to ecosystem, landscape and species change.
- Well-known renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, are viewed positively by the general public. Although public attitudes to lesser-known renewables tend to be less favourable, they are still more positive than attitudes to fossil fuels and nuclear power.

Moving Forward

- There may be particular benefits from deliberative studies that investigate attitudes to inter-related types of environmental change simultaneously, in real policy settings.
- More consistent use of psychological and sociological theory would enable studies to build on existing understanding.
- There is a need for targeted communication about climate change, to dispel misperceptions and highlight the benefits of specific behavioural changes, mitigation and adaptation options, as well as to open up debate around change to infrastructures and societal arrangements.
- As a priority there should be focus on improving understanding amongst key groups and there is potential for addressing specific behaviours.
- There is a major gap in the understanding of attitudes to small-scale renewable energy and the decision-making processes involved in purchasing small scale renewable energy systems.
- Positive experiences of renewable energy projects and development processes should be investigated so that both support and opposition are more fully understood.