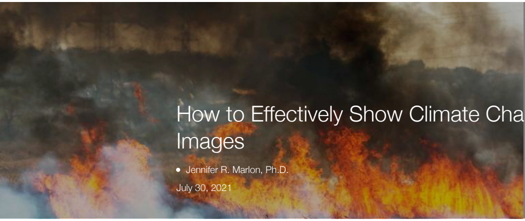

How to Effectively Show Climate Change in 25 Images

- Jennifer R. Marlon, Ph.D.

July 30, 2021

Design

As extreme weather continues to strike cities across the world, how can we effectively show the damage climate change is doing to our planet?

For decades, polar bears and melting ice were the face of climate change. Now, however, the heat-trapping blanket that we've wrapped around our planet by burning fossil fuels has begun to do much more harm than just melt ice and starve polar bears.

Wildfires are burning down entire towns in Canada. Deadly floods struck the subways of Zhengzhou and London. Climate change is wreaking havoc on millions of people around the world.

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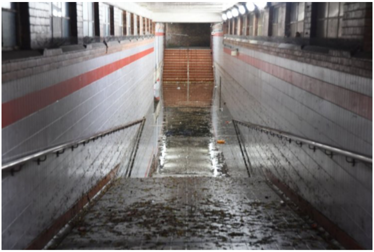
- 

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Images via Dino Adventure, Jack Dredd/Shutterstock, and A_Lesik.

However, many people are still confused about the root cause of these extreme weather events and how we can limit them by switching from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy.

In America, for instance, the majority of citizens accept that pollution from cars, trucks, and factories is warming the planet and causing drastic shifts in weather patterns—but there are still many people who believe that increasingly severe wildfires, drought, and flooding are merely evidence of land mismanagement, biblical prophecy, or natural cycles.

Image via CHINE NOUVELLE/SIPA/Shutterstock.

Visual images have a critically important role to play in engaging and informing the public about the problem and its solutions. That's, in part, because the human brain is incredibly fast and efficient at processing visual information, which aids learning.

But it's also because, for climate change in particular, visual imagery adds concrete detail and context to an issue that often feels distant in time and space.

Image via CHINE NOUVELLE/SIPA/Shutterstock.

Strong visuals of the causes, impacts, and solutions to climate change can give the issue meaning and help people understand how and why it's affecting our daily lives and what we can do about it.

But, how can you tell which images are most effective?

Know Your Audience

A project called Climate Visuals has identified seven principles for effective climate change images, and the first one is "understanding your audience." Engaging people on climate must begin with the recognition that every person has different psychological, cultural, and political reasons for acting—or not acting—to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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Images via Ringo H W Chiu/AP/Shutterstock and Isopix/Shutterstock.

Within the United States, for instance, social scientists have identified "Global Warming's Six Americas"—six unique audiences within the American public that each respond to the issue in their own distinct way.

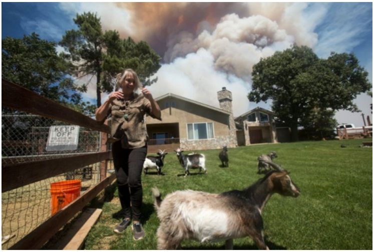
They are:

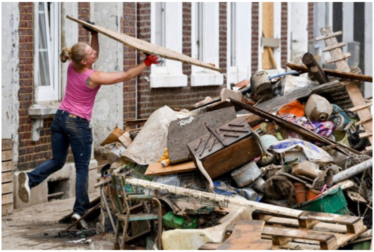
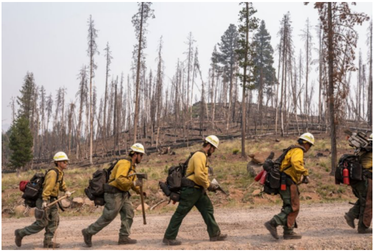
- **The Alarmed:** This group, which makes up 26% of the public, are convinced that global warming is happening, caused by humans, and an urgent threat, and they're strongly supportive of aggressive policies designed to reign in carbon pollution.
- **The Concerned:** This group, which makes up 29% of the public, also knows global warming is real and caused by human activities, but they tend to believe that severe impacts are not yet "here and now."
- **The Cautious:** This group, which makes up 19% of the population, are the fence-sitters. They're unsure whether the temperatures are rising or not, what's causing it if they are, or how serious global heating may be.
- **The Disengaged:** This group, which makes up 6% of the public, know little about the problem as they rarely or never hear or talk about it.
- **The Doubtful:** This group, which makes up 12% of the public, doesn't think the planet is warming or if it is, that the changes are natural and the risk is greatly exaggerated.
- **The Dismissive:** This group, which makes up 8% of the public, is convinced that the climate is *not* changing, and most endorse conspiracy theories. For example, they may believe that climate change is a hoax.

(See which group you fall into by taking a four-question quiz here.)

Researchers haven't yet tested which images resonate most within each group, but existing surveys and experiments provide insights into what sort of imagery might engage a diverse range of audiences.

Go Beyond Stock

- 

- 
- 

Images via Ringo H W Chiu/AP/Shutterstock, Isopix/Shutterstock, and Nathan Howard/AP/Shutterstock.

Climate Visuals recommends showing real people rather than staged photos. In discussion groups that explored the cognitive and emotional impacts of different photos, "authentic" images were preferred over those that were staged, which were deemed less credible and trustworthy.

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Images via Yorgos Karahalis/AP/Shutterstock, LNP/Shutterstock, and Shafkat Anowar/AP/Shutterstock.

Expand the Narrative

Climate Visuals also advises telling new stories. Researchers found that conventional images that identify the causes of climate change (think smokestacks and deforestation) or the impacts (the familiar polar bear or melting ice) were easily understood and positively rated.

But, some discussion group participants were more interested in less familiar images that helped tell new stories about climate change.

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Images via Muntaka Chasant/Shutterstock, Andre Penner/AP/Shutterstock, Nathan Howard/AP/Shutterstock, and DEAN LEWINS/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

Don’t Shame Individuals

Fighting climate change requires changing the behavior of hundreds of countries, millions of companies, and billions of people. The most effective solutions don’t require each of us to rethink every meal, trip, and purchase—they require collective actions by corporations, governments, and institutions.

With that in mind, you might represent positive change by choosing an image of, say, a clean and efficient public transportation system, or an urban area with pedestrian- and bike-friendly designs (as opposed to a single individual using a metal straw, for example).

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Images via Egor_Kulinich, Roberto Westbrook / Blend Images, and Rachid Jalayanadeja.

On the flip side, if you want to call out problematic behaviors—like our over-reliance on cars, for instance—you might show a congested highway rather than a single driver.

Image via bibiphoto.

Tap into Emotions (But Carefully)

Confronting the devastation wrought by floods and wildfires can move people to action, but it can also overwhelm them. To avoid creating feelings of hopelessness, Climate Visuals recommends coupling emotional or disturbing images with something positive, like a concrete behavioral action people can take or images of survivors.

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Images via Action Press/Shutterstock, Noah Berger/AP/Shutterstock, Noah Berger/AP/Shutterstock, and Mike Eliason/AP/Shutterstock.

A final principle suggests that public protest imagery should be used with caution, as people are drawn more to imagery that they identify with, and few people identify as environmental activists, although it's vital for more people to join the climate movement.

But, there are many other actions besides street protests that people can take, including having a conversation with a neighbor or sharing an article with a friend.

The more people understand the importance of working together to improve the health and beauty of our planet, the more likely it is to happen. Picture that.

Jennifer R. Marlon, Ph.D., is a research scientist at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

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