



**CHANGE
IS IN
THE AIR**



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CHANGING THE CLIMATE BY LEAVING “CLIMATE CHANGE” BEHIND

The best way to increase clean energy production and phase out fossil fuels may be to shift the narrative from climate change to messages that reflect people’s deeply held values, particularly those related to better health.

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Many movements struggle to let go of the revered stories they use time and again to win supporters, but change often requires a new narrative. In 2012, for example, the US marriage equality movement replaced its long-used “basic human rights” messaging with messaging focused on love¹ and family. Doing so allowed the movement to overcome setbacks and dramatically shift norms, behaviors, and expectations through savvy campaign strategies. Since then, public support for marriage equality has been climbing steadily,² from 37 percent in 2009 to 62 percent in 2017. And since the 2015 Supreme Court ruling in favor of marriage equality, it is now the law of the land.

Changing hearts and minds,³ building public will⁴ and thereby influencing political will and judicial engagement on any issue requires that advocates first connect with people through language and stories rooted in values we authentically share. Yet by and large, climate change advocacy has continued to focus on the imperative of a stable climate and trends in rising temperatures (often accompanied by ice cap and polar bear imagery). The movement typically relays that we are in crisis mode, and must act immediately to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. But while all these arguments are true, they have largely failed to inspire individual action or widespread change in the United States.

1 www.ssir.org/articles/entry/three_questions_that_transformed_a_movement

2 www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/?mod=article_inline

3 www.ssir.org/articles/entry/persuasion_in_a_post_truth_world

4 www.metgroup.com/assets/Public-Will.pdf

Some leaders and groups are beginning to evolve climate change’s traditional narratives to, for example, encompass health impacts⁵ (“climate change is impacting our health”), but new messaging still often hinges on changing people’s attitudes toward climate change itself. It still seeks to build public will in support of the issue as a precursor to driving policy and action to tackle it—and it isn’t working. Surveys show that even though more and more Americans

understand climate change is real, is human caused, and directly affects communities,⁶ the issue remains a low priority for taking actions.⁷ More than a decade of investment in advocacy and marketing to raise the alarm on climate change—during both progressive and

conservative ascendance—has not yet galvanized political or public will in the United States. In fact, the issue remains a political third rail even for people who believe we need to act now.

It’s worth asking then: Is there a fatal flaw in the discourse around climate change? Is it time to let go of the climate change “sacred cow” and create a narrative centered on common values? We believe the answer to both questions is yes, and a natural place to start is by focusing on the health benefits of clean air, water, and land.

5 www.bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-10-299

6 www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/16/most-americans-say-climate-change-affects-their-local-community-including-two-thirds-living-near-coast/

7 www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/23/most-americans-believe-in-climate-change-but-give-it-low-priority/

Is there a fatal flaw in the discourse around climate change?

Change Is in the Air

The health impacts of climate change are clear and evident; poor air and water quality, natural disasters, extreme heat, and wildfire make us more vulnerable to illness, disease, and death. In 2009, *The Lancet* medical journal declared climate change⁸ “the biggest global health threat of the 21st century,” and in November, it released a report⁹ on how climate change is “shaping the health of nations for centuries to come.” These findings are underscored in a domestic context¹⁰ by the 2018 US National Climate Assessment, which notes the interconnected impacts climate change presents for the US economy, natural resources, and our health. The American Public Health Association is meanwhile prioritizing the issue on behalf of the nation’s public health field, and recently announced the launch¹¹ of a new Center for Climate, Health and Equity.

Within the health field, the medical literature and galvanizing work of the World Health Organization and others are contributing to a particular emphasis on clean air. At last year’s Global Climate and Health Forum, for example, “air pollution” was the term on everybody’s lips, including Howard Frumkin’s of the the Wellcome Trust, who said:¹² “Five years ago at a meeting on climate and health, we would have heard much less talk about air pollution ... Air pollution has emerged as an incredibly powerful issue to advance our discussion of climate change.” He and others have noted that air pollution is salient for policymakers and people, because it is happening now, the pollution is tangible, and its impacts on human health are direct and recognizable.

Air pollution is also salient for health professionals. Independent medical literature underscores the urgency for action, which may be fueling the field’s newfound focus. A 2013 MIT study (using 2005 data) attributed 200,000 premature deaths¹³ in the United States per year to poor air quality. Studies are also uncovering other harmful impacts, such as chronic bronchitis and asthma,¹⁴ cardiovascular diseases,¹⁵ systemic inflammation,¹⁶



impaired cognitive development and memory function, and kidney damage, as well as gastrointestinal, liver, lung, and renal cancers.¹⁷ (See a World Health Organization compendium here.¹⁸) These conditions may also drive absenteeism¹⁹ in schools and workplaces, exacerbate health care needs and costs, and impinge on our well-being and resilience as individuals, communities, and nations. The impacts are far worse for those who live near sources of air pollution, which are disproportionately near communities already facing disparities. Consequently, the World Health Organization is unifying the field—and its policy and behavior change prowess globally and domestically—to tackle the health inequities air pollution poses.

This focus on air quality is one health-focused example that could serve as a compelling impetus for tackling climate change without necessarily referencing “climate” terms. An air quality narrative could, for example, entail calls to action that help end new fossil fuel projects and shift economies away from coal, oil, and natural gas. Domestically, strategies and messaging designed to prompt policies and action for cleaner air could help: safeguard comprehensive regulations in the Clean Air Act and standards for minimizing particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter; commit the nation to 100 percent clean and renewable energy for all; and create opportunity and political capital to advance a new clean power plan, restore emissions standards, and drive other high-impact policies that seem impossible today but could have public will behind them in two years.

8 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19447250

9 [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)32594-7/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)32594-7/fulltext)

10 nca2018.globalchange.gov/

11 www.publichealthnewswire.org/?p=21447

12 www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXonXia1zFE&feature=youtu.be&t=1

13 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1352231013004548

14 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140673600026532

15 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1240667/

16 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1513328/

17 citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.465.5144&rep=repr&type=pdf

18 www.who.int/airpollution/en/

19 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969713001320

Promising Early Evidence

This approach is already showing promise as a mechanism for motivating action in a clean energy context. While clean energy messaging has historically focused on climate change (“the Earth is warming, we need to do something about it, and clean energy can help”), Sierra Club’s US-based Ready for 100 Campaign instead focused on how air pollution from fossil fuels²⁰ is putting our health at risk, and how clean and renewable energy will improve our health, leave a better world for our children, and save lives.

The campaign drew on a proprietary national survey conducted in 2015, which indicated that Americans’ values for health and quality of life, particularly for future generations, motivate support for clean energy. Respondents generally ranked protecting air and water quality as higher priorities than fighting climate change, and health-based messages about reducing pollution tested best as reasons to support clean energy goals. The Sierra Club research illuminated an opportunity to engage new clean energy champions (beyond those activated in a “climate change” context) through messages linked directly to their values, particularly through values related to their health.

In just two years, the campaign has already inspired²¹ 100 cities, along with 10 counties and two states (Hawaii and California) to pledge to shift to 100 percent clean and renewable energy.

Opportunities to Pursue

Given this, is it time for climate change advocates to develop a shared narrative that better taps people’s values and elevates our health, and in a way that will work across fields? How can we more fully connect health to other values, like economic security, economic development, social justice, environment and sustainability, energy independence, jobs creation, and just transitions for those whose livelihoods rely on the fossil fuel industry?

As we work to answer these questions, let us look to how we can promote more-robust collaboration, reduce duplication of effort, and reinforce central concepts; share resources

²⁰ www.sierraclub.org/ready-for-100

²¹ www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/blog/1846%20RF100-CaseStudies2018_Report_o6_web.pdf

(through pooling funding, resources, and tools), and mobilize and coordinate across fields and movements; and reimagine community engagement by leading with curiosity, and inviting people to talk about these issues in the context of their experiences and those of their loved ones. Together, we can inspire the policies and actions we seek.

If those of us who work to mitigate climate change unite to make health a national priority—bypassing the climate change third rail—it will be an instructive model for broader shifts in narrative and action, and a potentially formidable force for positive change in our communities.

About the Authors



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Robert brings more than fifteen years of stakeholder engagement and communication, marketing, branding and organizational culture change experience. Rob is passionate about intersectional approaches to advance social, environmental and public health causes, and the cross-sector conversations that make them possible.



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Beth has more than 25 years of experience helping social change organizations tell their stories and build long-term relationships with their stakeholders. Her smart communication strategy has helped launch several public will building campaigns, including efforts to accelerate the transition to 100 percent clean energy in the U.S.



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