

Weathering The Storm Of Today's Climate

(NAPSA)—From glamorized weather programs to sitcoms and the Academy Awards, we are flooded daily with weather and climate-related messages. Throw in today's political climate regarding these concerns and there is one messy storm brewing. Have Americans' opinions become clouded by climate fatigue, and what impact can this have if we are facing a "point of no return" in the near future?

According to a recent Gallup annual Environment poll, attitudes about the perceived seriousness of global warming have been steady, but public opinion has changed notably since 1997. Fewer Americans say the seriousness of global warming is generally correct, but the percentage finding the threat generally exaggerated has consistently been at or above 40 percent since 2009.

Researchers believe these perspectives are connected to confusion between weather and climate. Weather is the condition of the atmosphere over a short period of time (hours or days), while climate is how the atmosphere "behaves" over longer periods of time (years or decades). Additionally, confusion regarding the different Earth spheres, such as the atmosphere and hydrosphere, can lead to misconceptions, since these cannot be treated in isolation from each other.

This is important, because public opinion regarding climate often changes in response to current weather events. Scientists with The Earth Institute, Columbia University found that people tend to latch onto the most available and recent information—temperature or otherwise. Their studies support that even when given scientific information on the difference between local temperature and global climate change, people were still likely to use the daily weather as a measure for their own feelings on longer-term change. For example, if a day's local temperature is colder than usual, it can lead to a decreased belief in and less concern about global warming.

This can be a dangerous way to drive perceptions regarding climate, according to Hesham El-Askary, Ph.D., professor of earth sciences and remote sensing, and director of graduate programs in computational and data sciences at Schmid College of Science and Technology, at Chapman University in Orange, Calif. "Sensationalized weather events, such as El Niño or heavy snowfalls, can cause



"The sooner we all get together to combat climate change, the more likely we'll be able to head off a catastrophe," says Professor Hesham El-Askary, Ph.D.

a narrow focus on weather instead of overall climate," said El-Askary. "This could have severe if unintentional consequences."

According to a 2015 Pew Research study, Americans are most likely to believe that the effects of climate change are years away. Twenty-nine percent still believe that it will not harm people for decades, or ever. "This is troublesome, as we are already seeing worldwide impacts due to climate change, such as drier and longer periods of drought, disease and unprecedented wildfires," added El-Askary.

The National Academy of Sciences, a leading scientific body in the U.S., determined that the Earth's surface temperature has risen by about one degree Fahrenheit in the past century, with accelerated warming during the past two decades alone. Forecasts show that without change, the Earth will reach a significant "threshold of danger," rising to four degrees Celsius by 2100, resulting in the catastrophic disappearance of 50 percent of all species, and natural disasters that will impact millions, according to El-Askary.

Fortunately, some of the most historic efforts are taking place on the global stage. At the 2016 Paris meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) 21, world leaders set the most aggressive goals to date toward stabilizing climate temperatures.

But experts contend they must work harder to impact public opinion in order to encourage change on both a local and global scale, especially as it relates to reducing carbon footprints, supporting vital legislation and involvement on a local level. Even so, researchers will never tire in their work for a more prosperous, sustainable future.