

Does experience make a difference? Alaskan risk perceptions of climate change



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We Americans generally perceive climate change as a geographically and temporally distant problem, with significant consequences for marginalized people and places (e.g., small island or poor tropical countries), but not for the United States (Leiserowitz 2005). Climate change, however, is already having severe impacts on the U.S. state of Alaska. Alaska's climate has warmed about 4°F (2°C) since the 1950's and 7°F (4°C) in the interior during winter. It has already experienced significant impacts including dramatic loss of sea ice, shifting ecosystems, permafrost melting, infrastructure damage, and forest fires. This presentation reports results from a representative statewide survey of the Alaskan public (n=1018) conducted in 2006 to investigate whether Alaskans have detected these changes, attribute them to anthropogenic climate change, perceive climate change as a significant threat, and what mitigation and adaptation measures they prefer. Alaskan results will also be compared against recent national survey data to examine the role of actual experience in climate change risk perception and behavior.

Anthony Leiserowitz is a research scientist at Decision Research, a principal investigator in the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University, and a courtesy professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon. His research examines the role of underlying psychological, socio-cultural, and geographic factors in risk perception, decision-making and behavior. Recent projects include a series of survey and experimental studies at the state, national, and global scales on public risk perceptions and responses to global climate change; an examination of global values, attitudes and behaviors regarding sustainable development; and the theoretical development and empirical demonstration of distinct "interpretive communities of risk" among the American public.

This lecture is presented by Arizona State University and the Decision Center for a Desert City.

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