

What Americans Think About Climate Change

Most scientists agree that climate change is real and that human activity has largely contributed to its effects. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that there is at least a 90% chance that most of the global warming experienced since 1950 is the result of increased greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels, cutting down trees, generating waste, and farming.

The past century has seen an increase in global temperature of 1.3°F and the rate of global warming in the past 30 years has been three times greater than that of the past 100 years. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) states that seven of the eight warmest years on record have occurred since 2001. If humans continue to emit greenhouse gases at the current level, the average global temperature may increase 3 to 7°F over the next 100 years. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency believes that such an increase in global temperature would affect the world's population in terms of health, agriculture, water resources, energy, wildlife, and recreational opportunities.



Southern tip of Greenland, March 1992
NASA-Johnson Space Center

While many governmental agencies and not-for-profit groups warn of the disastrous result of inaction, a few scientists and politicians disagree that human activity is to blame for the change in climate. What is the average American to make of all this?

In October 2008, a comprehensive study was undertaken by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. A nationally representative survey was conducted of 2,164 American adults who were asked a series of questions about how they prioritize issues related to the new administration and climate change. The study, entitled "Climate Change In the American Mind" found that global warming ranked 10th out of 11 national issues. Topping the priority list was the economy with 76% of Americans giving this issue very high priority. Other high priority issues for the American public were the federal deficit, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care, terrorism, and social security. Despite this low ranking, more than half of Americans (54%) gave global warming a high (33%) or very high (21%) national priority.

While Americans appear to have higher priorities than climate change when considering other issues being tackled by the current administration, when global warming was prioritized against several other environmental issues, only water pollution ranked higher. It was concluded that the majority of Americans (69%) are convinced that climate change is real and only 10% of Americans are unsure that it is happening. When questioned about the cause of global warming, 57% of respondents stated that global warming is caused mostly by human activities, 5% felt that it was caused by a combination of human activities and natural changes in the environment, and 32% of Americans believed that global warming is primarily a natural phenomenon.

One of the more publicized findings of this project concerns the extent to which climate change is expected to impact different groups. Sixty-two percent of Americans believe that global warming will harm plant and animal species, but only 32% felt that they would be personally impacted by it. More than half of Americans felt that future generations, people in developing countries, and people in other industrialized nations were at greater risk due to global warming than themselves and their families. What do you believe? Some observers speculate that the tendency of many Americans to distance themselves, in space and time, from the immediate threat of climate change will continue to delay the remedy.

TO FIND OUT MORE:

- For the entire report "Climate Change in the American Mind": www.climatechangecommunication.org/resources_reports.cfm
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: www.ipcc.ch/
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: www.noaa.gov/
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/climatechange/basicinfo.html
- For inspiring images of the Earth from Space: <http://earth.jsc.nasa.gov/sseop/efs/>