What's in a Name? Not Much if It's "Climate Change"

Our choice of words affects how the general public responds to issues—whether at local, national, or even global scales.

With public opinion polls routinely finding the issue of "climate change" toward the bottom of the priority list for most Americans, it may be time to begin paying attention to the words we use to engage the public. The latest assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change finds that the increase in global temperatures is *very likely* attributable to greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution from human activity. As the United States has yet to act on GHG emission regulations, it is very likely that US GHG emissions will continue to rise, along with their long-term impacts.

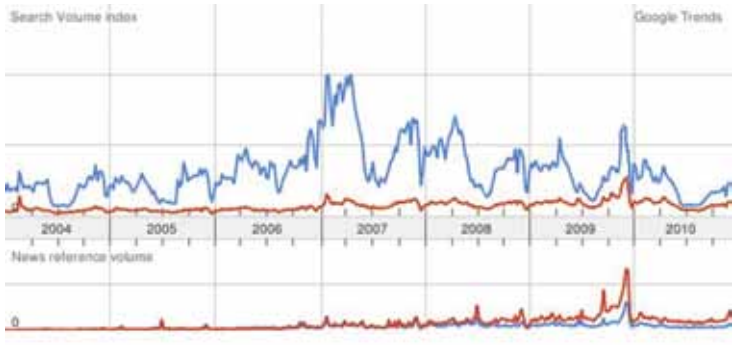

Figure 1. Google Trends (from December 18, 2010) in tracking website hits for the search terms "global warming" (top blue line) and "climate change" (top red line) by users in the United States from 2004 to 2010. The bottom graph indicates the use of the terms "global warming" (bottom blue line) and "climate change" (bottom red line) in online news articles.

For a while, it appeared as though the general public was interested in learning more about "global warming." After the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, Americans stampeded to Google to learn more about "global warming" (Figure 1). So what went wrong?

The language has changed since then, and their enthusiasm has waned. "Climate change" overtook "global warming" as the predominant term used in the news media. Google Trends data reveal the consequence: back when the press wrote about "global warming," the public conducted Google searches about "global warming." Now that the press writes about "climate change," the public doesn't seem to respond much at all.

A few years ago, Frank Luntz urged those opposed to GHG regulations to use the phrase "climate change" as his research had found that voters greeted this term with complacency but responded with alarm to "global warming." In 2010, he released the presentation "The Language of the Clean Energy Economy." This time, his purpose is to advance solutions to GHG pollution. His presentation is packed with useful advice to help regain some of the ground we have lost over the past few years.

Among his time-tested recommendations, Mr. Luntz suggests that if we want to build political support for GHG regulations, we must use the same words that the voters do, such as "clean," "healthy," and "safe." We must avoid jargon—especially the terms "carbon-neutral" or "anthropogenic." Even more importantly, Mr. Luntz urges us to define our purpose more broadly than "preventing global warming." In particular, we must stress the benefits of clean energy technologies in terms of gaining "energy independence" from the Middle East and the prospects of new jobs in industries that have a future.

Mr. Luntz's advice is useful for inside-the-beltway political players sparring over law, policy, and the public purse. But what about engineers, scientists, and public servants out on the front line? What about people like you—anticipating

harsher weather and rising waters, creek by creek, acre by acre, neighborhood by neighborhood? Allow me to channel Mr. Luntz and provide some practical advice: If you want to build public support for stream restoration, erosion prevention, or polluted runoff reduction, it is more important for you to stress the traditional benefits of this work—clean water, improved flood safety, and a home for wildlife—than the need to prepare for climate extremes or the historical rationale for your efforts, such as floodplain development and channelization.

List of Sources

Google. No date. Google trends. http://www.google.com/trends

For More Information

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This vignette was prepared by Eric Eckl, founder of Water Words That Work, LLC, a marketing agency that helps nature protection and pollution control organizations professionalize and modernize their communications.

Oyster River Culvert Analysis Informs Coastal Climate Change Adaptation

Many coastal communities in the eastern United States are experiencing an unusual and persistent increase in heavy and extreme storms that is generally consistent with climate change projections. Existing drainage systems were not designed to safely pass the volume of water resulting from these events, and new systems still are being designed using 50-year-old standards. As a result, there is an increased likelihood that drainage components will fail, damaging infrastructure and property, causing loss of life, and degrading both fluvial and estuarine aquatic ecosystems. However, published adaptation research and planning guides remain typically characterized by general resilience building or regional vulnerability studies.

On October 5th, 2010, the White House Council on Environmental Quality issued its *Progress Report of the Interagency Climate Change Adaptation Task Force*, one of the key findings of which is that the federal government must "…promote and implement best practices for adaptation…."[1] A recent study by a team in New Hampshire is helping to actualize these goals. The Oyster River Culvert Analysis Project assessed the capacity required for a coastal watershed's stormwater drainage system to accommodate mid-twenty-first century climate change and population growth. This study delivered results in a form understandable to, and usable by, planners, resource managers, and decision makers. The project was performed by Syntectic International, led by Latham Stack and Michael Simpson, under contract to the Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership. It was one of six pilot projects selected nationwide for funding under the US Environmental Protection Agency's Climate Ready Estuaries Program. The study estimated adaptation costs, developed methods for managing uncertainty, and examined the capacity of nonstructural methods such as low-impact development (LID) to mitigate climate change impacts. The project

[1] US Council on Environmental Quality, Progress Report of the Interagency Climate Change Adaptation Task Force: Recommended Action in Support of a National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (Washington, DC: Council on Environmental Quality, 2010), page 8.