

How to Talk to a "Climate Skeptic" Without Wasting Time and Energy on Non-science Nonsense

Those of us who spend time and energy on climate change communication, on any level from talking with friends to educating large groups of people, sometimes find ourselves confronted by someone posing what we know to be scientifically invalid arguments against our concerns and against our advocacy. Often, they mention an article they have read, cite a media misinterpretation of real science, or seem focused on the impressive credentials of one of those few global-warming-denialist scientists who actually have impressive credentials.

Sometimes it is hard to tell at first whether such a person is simply confused by propaganda or is ideologically devoted to it. If I am confident that it's the latter case, I won't waste my time or energy debating them. When I cannot be sure, I give them the benefit of the doubt for at least a few minutes — but there is no reason why it should be any more than a few minutes.

Here's the approach I have evolved over the four years that I have been intensely studying climate change. It works well for me. It offers a simple, honest, fair, and concise way to get right to the point in a way that will reveal an unreasonable person, and compel a reasonable person. I think it will work well for other people too.

Two caveats: I insist on speaking uninterrupted for two minutes, and I refuse to allow politics or religion to cloud the discussion. I won't talk about Al Gore or Jim Inhofe; I won't talk about fundamentalism or atheism. I am only willing to talk about science, and about solutions.

If this straightforward approach doesn't convince someone that they should take global warming seriously, I refuse to waste additional time trying to convince them — and you shouldn't either. Save your time and energy for someone who is reasonable.

It's this simple. If any scientist had a coherent and sensible scientific revelation that we needn't be worried about fossil-fuel greenhouse-gas emissions causing a dangerous global warming problem, that scientist would write what would very quickly become the most celebrated research paper ever published. The publication would be in one of the world's most prestigious science journals, and that journal would be proud to have the honor and privilege. Literally hundreds of other scientists would quickly validate the research, and the author of the paper would become the most famously celebrated scientist in history.

Every last one of us — scientist or layperson, conservative or liberal, religious or not — shares the same confirmation bias: we would strongly prefer that the problem of global warming were not real and not serious. Those of us who do understand the science would be the first in line to shake the hero's hand and thank them for delivering the best news civilization has ever gotten.

But that's not reality. We are experiencing, all at once, not just global warming but the entire suite of climate change phenomena that go along with it. Unprecedented droughts. Unprecedented heatwaves. Unprecedented storms. Unprecedented floods. Unprecedented precipitation events. Such a high ratio of new record high temperatures to new record low temperatures that it would be statistically impossible without a definite global warming trend (and that ratio is growing). Earth's perennial ice is melting — including the entire north polar ice cap.

Who predicted 25 years ago that these things were going to happen?

These phenomena were, in fact, predicted by the very same scientists who say that carbon emissions from burning enormous amounts of fossil fuels are building up in Earth's atmosphere and causing global warming — as originally predicted in 1896.