

Free towards the inevitable: a study on Australians attitude towards climate change...

[Environment](#), [Climate Change](#)



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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, there has been a global revolution in the environmental realm. In various countries, the green movement has manifested itself in a visibly increased awareness by the public, as well as in governmental policies that seek to lessen the environmental impact of both public and private institutions. United States citizens, for example, have begun choosing whether to make their homes and transportation more energy efficient. Humanitarian and environmental non-governmental organizations are deciding how to guide their members and respond to climate change (Board on Atmospheric Sciences and Climate, 2010). Closer to home, Australian governmental policies have also begun to take shape, with political and legal debate emanating from sceptics that suggest that there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that changes to the climate outside the scope of natural variability have taken place (Bulkeley, 2001). More recently, however, criticisms against the national government have surfaced in response to its questionable approach to the issue of climate

change. Current Prime Minister Tony Abbott has largely been criticized for being unresponsive to the problem, even moving to repeal an opposition party's move to tax carbon emissions and establishing a review aimed at scaling back renewable energy production. On February of 2014, it was announced that a businessman and avowed "sceptic" of climate change would handle the review (Pearlman, 2014). In the recently-published Global Green Economy Index 4th Edition, Australia has ranked last for its performance on political leadership in relation to climate change (GGEI 2014, p. 28).

One of the primary reasons that may have contributed to Australia's poor showing in indices like these may be seen as a lack of education and awareness among citizens with regards to climate change, its effects, and how it impacts not only the nation, but also the whole planet. Although most Australians acknowledge that climate change is occurring, it is not being accepted as a result of human activity and it is being undervalued as an issue worth dealing with. However, with the earth's growing population and its increasing demand on resources, and a reliance on traditional and environmentally taxing methods of creating usable energy, people may not be progressing at any significant rate toward reducing their impact on climate change, if at all. The problem may never be entirely solved, but education and attitudes toward mitigation of damage need improvement, and the preservation of the planet needs to be valued and actioned.

There is a view that there are still not enough people recognizing that climate change is occurring. However, in Australia the CSIRO believe that there is an over estimation by the general public of how many people do not

believe climate change is occurring. The CSIRO conducted a survey in 2013 and found that around 80% of Australians believe that climate change is occurring and that this is consistent with recent years. Their report also states that people wrongly assume the opinions of others, of the 8% of participants that did not believe climate change was occurring, these participants assumed that this view was held by 50% of the population (CSIRO 2011). It is not in the recognition of climate change that the CSIRO shows concern, but in how the public rank the importance of climate change, and the lack of familiarity of climate change related terms. In a similar study, the Climate Institute reported that only 32% of Australians think that humans are the main cause of climate change, while 58% think Australia should be a leader in finding solutions to climate change (The Climate Institute, 2013). Indeed, the knowledge on climate change has been recognized that as being there, but most Australians do not necessarily understand what it is. Although there is a general recognition of the occurrence of climate change, fewer people believe that it is caused by human activity. Surveys have shown that the views on this differ dramatically according to different nations, in South Korea 92% of participants blame a rise in global temperatures on human activity, whereas in Tajikistan that figure is only 15%, and in Australia 54% (Pelham 2009). The belief in a connection between human activity and climate change has in some cases declined. Between 1993 and 2011, the world's population increased approximately 27% (World Energy Council 2013). The increase in population has meant there has been an increased demand on resources and space. Also, the factory emissions are assuming one of the main causes of the

climate change. In the article ' The Pivotal Role of Perceived Scientific Consensus in Acceptance of Science' the authors attribute the decline in part to the challenge of the scientific consensus that CO₂ emissions are causing ' anthropogenic global warming', and go on to claim that overall participants in their study greatly underestimate the true level of scientific consensus, and that people are more likely to believe that climate change has a human cause when they are told that 97% of climate scientists agree that it does (Lewandowsky, Gignac & Vaughan 2012). Groups such as Oxfam, and the WWF [World Wildlife Foundation] are campaigning in Australia for the reduction of carbon emissions (Oxfam n. d; WWF n. d). Queensland still relies heavily on the burning of coal to produce electricity, and WWF identify Australia as the highest per capita contributor of greenhouse gases within the 34 OECD countries. It would be useful to know what people are already doing to reduce the impact on climate change.

The lack of policies by the government to help doing more research would not help to solve the climate change problem. The organization WWF believes Australia is lagging behind and lacks investment and policy regarding climate change (WWF n. d). Although Australia is putting significant investment into research relating to climate change (<http://www.climatechange.gov.au/climate-change/adapting-climate-change/adaptation-framework/government-actions>), the Australian Bureau of Statistics has identified an alarming drop in Australian's concern for the environment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Brulle et. al identify some flaws in the conducting of opinion polls in the US (Brulle, Carmichael & Jenkins 2011), and have questioned whether people are changing their opinions of climate

change, or it is just that other political events have taken their attention away.

After exploring a range of literature the question remains, whether people actually care enough to make changes to reduce the human impact on climate change. Thus, the purpose of this report is to determine, through a survey methodology, the awareness and perception of climate change among Australians. Discussing what is believed to be a way forward in shifting public opinion to better valuing the preservation of the planet, and how attitudes toward action could be changed.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data collection tool that was used in the present study is predominantly quantitative. This is due to the importance of collecting data in a straightforward manner, and interpreting the results subsequently. A questionnaire was established in an online website and links were given out to participants. The online questionnaire contained sixteen (16) statements that the participants may rate on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The value of 1 represents “ strong agreement”; 2 represents “ agreement”; 3 represents “ neutral agreement/disagreement”; 4 represents “ disagreement”; and 5 represents “ strong disagreement” with the aforementioned statements. The statements are listed below, in figure 1. Figure 1. The sixteen statements to be rated according to agreement.

The population of the survey totaled to seventy-six (76) participants, fifty-seven (57) of which are male, with eighteen (18) female participants. The mean age group of the entire population is between twenty (20) to twenty-

nine (29) years of age. The individuals that were approached for this study came from a diverse population, including colleagues, family members, co-students, and professors from the university. Moreover, religion, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment were not measured and were considered unrelated.

The overall methodology, despite the success of the questionnaire process, contained some limitations that must first be mentioned. Firstly, the respondents were mostly of Arab descent but were residing in Australia nevertheless. The researchers and authors made sure, however, that the respondents are fully aware of the issues involved and have been acquainted with Australian life and culture during their stay. Secondly, the proportion of male to female respondents may have had adverse effects on the results, but it is important to note that gender is not a primary variable in this survey. What the study seeks is the primary sentiment of Australians with regards to climate change and governmental policies to thwart its global effects.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Figure 2. The overall table of results showing the distribution of responses per statement item.

The results are tabulated in a per-statement item form in Figure 2. The horizontal axis determines the distribution of respondents who agreed or disagreed with a particular statement item. The vertical axis, on the other hand, indicates the statement item itself (please refer to Figure 1 for the specific statement), going from 1 to 16, upwards. It must be noted that

statement items 1-12 mainly inquire about the respondents' sentiment regarding the root human causes of climate change, while statement items 13-16 are an attempt to uncover the political leanings of respondents with regard to climate change. Governmental policies, laws, and regulations are inquired upon in this regard.

The predominance of “ Strongly Agree” responses may be gleaned even upon first glance of Figure 2. General statements such as 1: “ I believe the CO2 emission is the main cause of climate change” and 2: “ I believe some of human activities such as burning the fuels is causing climate change” generated a majority of “ Strongly Agree” and “ Agree” responses. This is true of statement items 1-12 (Figure 2. 1), which may be seen as measuring the sentiment regarding the causes of climate change:

Figure 2. 1. Sentiment regarding the causes of climate change (Statement items 1-12)

70% of respondents either agreed or were in strong agreement that humans have had a direct effect on climate change. Most agreement was on the statement 9: “ I believe the climate change is caused by human activities”, with 83% either agreeing or strongly agreeing to it, while 58% of respondents in strong agreement.

Peculiarly, it is with statement 7: “ I believe that the family size should be reduced to save the climate” that there is a skewed response with regards to the role of family size and population in relation to climate change. Only 19% of the respondents were in strong agreement with the statement, while 55% disagreed, strongly or otherwise.

Figure 2. 2. Sentiment regarding government policies (Statement items 13-

16)

Moving on to the group of item statements that involve governmental policies regarding climate change, there is also a general agreement in support of tighter public policy considerations to minimize greenhouse gas emissions. Statements that were generally agreed upon by the respondents (<50%) are:

13. " I believe the governments should have policies to protect the climate"

15. " I believe the government should put more investment into research relating to climate change"

16. " The government should impose a hefty carbon tax on all companies"

Nevertheless, as with Figure 3. 1, there is an overwhelming sentiment against legislation to restrict family size. In particular, item statement 13: " I think the government should have a policy that limit the number of the family size to a small number, to protect our environment" garnered predominant disagreement, strongly or otherwise.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is a felt need for awareness and educational exposure to the harmful effects of climate change and global warming. As hypothesized in the introduction, there is a critical awareness that must be enhanced for climate change policies to take effect. The present study also proves that most Australians are against public policies that directly contradict climate change claims. Although Australians are generally aware of that humans cause climate change, there is a strong sentiment against the regulation of the population to minimize the effects of climate change. Moreover, and perhaps

more importantly, governmental regulation is supported to encourage public policy efforts to thwart climate change. Questions should thus arise about government response regarding climate change. With recent news stories and public debate over the role of the Abbott government in curtailing the effects and Australia's contributions to climate change, there is a felt need for this information to become known. Only then will public officials, such as Abbott, be informed of the concern most Australians have voiced out in support of climate change policy (Hughes, 2003).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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