

# Why climate change is perfectly designed to be ignored

Our brains are wired to disregard distant threats, climate activist and author George Marshall argues

BY RANDY SHORE, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 6, 2014



Despite a global scientific consensus that climate change is not only real, but already affecting weather, crops and the makeup of the air that we breathe, many people remain skeptical or even believe the opposite.

**Photograph by:** Steve Bosch, PNG

Climate change modelling describes a terrifying future of expanding deserts, extreme weather events, rising sea levels and widespread human misery. Yet few of us are terrified, at least, we aren't acting terrified.

Despite a global scientific consensus that climate change is not only real, but already affecting weather, crops and the makeup of the air that we breathe, many people remain skeptical or even believe the opposite.

Climate activist George Marshall wondered why and sought answers from Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, conservative deniers (including Tea Party stalwarts), risk assessment experts and environmentalists. What he learned will not fill you with hope.

## *Distant threat doesn't concern us*

"In order to survive in this world human beings have to be really good at paying attention to certain things and ignoring others," Marshall said. "Climate change is perfectly designed to be ignored. It is uncertain, it is set in a distant future and it's not clear where it's happening."

Because today's weather is subject to natural variability, scientists take a long view of the expected impacts of climate change, setting them in the future by at least a generation or two. Even though the evidence suggests that climate change is affecting us today — and has been for 50 years — the threat is seldom framed that way, he said.

## *No clearly defined enemy*

"The big problem with climate change is the enemy is us," said Marshall. "We are the cause of it."

Worse, we are culpable in the way we wash our dishes, cook our food, get to work and heat our homes.

"When we perceive that someone has the intention to harm us we respond to that very quickly, but climate change has no intention to harm us and in fact it stems from the things we do to care for the people we love, with just living our lives," he said.

When terrorists threaten our safety and that of our families we feel that as an intense emotional fear, a feeling that climate change fails to ignite.

#### *The consequences are weakly defined*

"We still talk about climate change as uncertain when the evidence is pretty strong," he said. "The way we shape this story is quite deliberately designed to destroy its chances of alerting our sense of the threat."

The media have approached this story as a "balanced debate" seeking out skeptics and opposing viewpoints, which gives people permission to essentially ignore the evidence. Science communicates in a way that is entirely dispassionate, which fails to strike the necessary fear in our hearts.

#### *Most of us aren't talking about it*

A small minority of people are deeply concerned about climate change and walk the talk in their daily lives. But according to survey evidence shockingly few people in the English-speaking world are talking about climate change with their friends and family, Marshall says.

"One third of people can't recall ever having talked about climate change with anyone, ever," he said. "That's a worry. We get fooled by the volume of the debate between polarized sides and the people in between are simply paying no attention to it. They either think it is somehow contested and don't want to sort it out, or they simply prefer not to think about it."

#### *Science has morphed into politics*

Raising the alarm over climate change has largely been the province of the political left and the environmental movement, which has used it as an indictment of corporatism and industrial growth.

"On the other side, people who are politically conservative think that means they shouldn't believe in climate change," said Marshall. "That's a dangerous situation. Climate change threatens everything that (conservatives) hold dear, but the issue has become identified with the liberal left and nothing in their narrative speaks to conservative values."

*George Marshall is the author of Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change. He will be speaking in Vernon on September 6, in Kelowna on September 8, at the University of Victoria on September 9 and in Vancouver on September 10. The Victoria talk will be webcast at [www.pics.uvic.ca/events/live-webcast](http://www.pics.uvic.ca/events/live-webcast).*

For tour details check <http://www.climateconviction.org/events.html>

[Click here to report a typo](#) or visit [vancouversun.com/typo](http://vancouversun.com/typo).

Is there more to this story? We'd like to hear from you about this or any other stories you think we should know about. [CLICK HERE](#) or go to [vancouversun.com/moretosthstory](http://vancouversun.com/moretosthstory)