

Topic : *Evidence to inform policy*

Theme: Confidence in climate science

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DECC Position: The general lack of ‘climate science literacy’ within the UK population has been of concern to DECC, as DECC’s policies are reliant on people being willing to adopt low-carbon behaviours, and to support the move to a low-carbon society. However, the barriers to behavioural change are complex and extend well beyond an understanding of scientific principles – understanding climate science will not alone lead people to adopt DECC’s policies. Nonetheless, a ‘critical mass’ of public scepticism may hinder implementation of DECC’s policies.

Public attitudes to climate change and climate science

Public ‘belief in the science’

- While aspects of climate change – particularly society’s response through mitigation and adaptation – remain topics of active debate, the overwhelming consensus in the scientific literature is that human-induced climate change is real and dangerous.
- The overwhelming scientific consensus is not however shared by the wider public. A number of polls and focus group studies show high levels of uncertainty and confusion on the scientific evidence of climate change.
- An *Ipsos MORI* poll (March 2010) of UK adults found:
 - 31% of adults believe climate change is ‘definitely’ a reality
 - 29% agreed ‘it’s looking like it could be a reality’
 - 31% thought it was ‘a bit over-exaggerated’
 - 6% said climate change was not a reality at all
 - 3% said they did not know
- In part, this perception of ‘controversy’ is maintained by a small number of individuals who are vocal in their scepticism on human-induced climate change. This issue is explored in detail in Steve Jones’s 2011 review for the BBC Trust of how climate science is communicated.
- It is not uncommon for other scientific issues to be controversial - there has been significant concern over the ethics, safety and effectiveness of how science is applied (e.g. GM food, vaccination, nanotechnology). However, climate science is unusual in that it is the core science that is being criticised, not just society’s response.
- There is some evidence that public confidence in climate science dropped as a result of the ‘*climategate*’ incidents of 2009 and 2010. At the height of the controversies, Populus found a 16% drop (from 50% to 34%) over three months in people thinking that it is an established scientific fact that climate change is

largely man-made (n = 1001, aged 18+, UK population, Nov 2009- Feb 2010). However, the impact of these events on long-term perceptions is not yet clear. 73% of people who had seen stories questioning climate science said they had not changed their views. It should also be noted that unusually cold winters in 2009-10 and 2010-11 likely impacted on people's perceptions of the reality of climate change.

Public “concern for climate change”

- Levels of ‘concern’ for climate change differ from levels of confidence in the scientific consensus. The same *Ipsos MORI* poll (2010) that found only 31% of people believed climate change is ‘definitely’ a reality found 71% were either ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ concerned about it. Concern was lower in 2010 than in 2005.
 - 28% were very concerned about climate change (44% in 2005)
 - 43% were fairly concerned (38% in 2005)
 - 19% were not very concerned (12% in 2005)
 - 8% were not at all concerned (3% in 2005)
 - 2% either did not know or had no opinion (1% in 2005)

Links to other core scripts

- Public trust in climate change has been particularly topical since the ‘Climategate’ affairs of 2010 and 2011:
Topical issues > Climategate > IPCC error concerns
Topical issues > Climategate > CRU

External links

- The BBC review of impartiality in climate science discusses the nature of public dialogue on climate science:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/science_impartiality/science_impartiality.pdf