Fear and Serenity in a Changing Climate:
Emotional Reactions to Climate Exacerbated Commons Dilemmas

by

Peter M. Sugrue
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University of Victoria

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With respect, the author acknowledges the Lekwungen peoples, on whose traditional territory his graduate work and thesis were completed, and he acknowledges the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.
Supervisory Committee

Dr. Robert Gifford, (Department of Psychology, School of Environmental Studies)
Supervisor

Dr. Felix Pretis (Department of Economics)
External Committee Member

Abstract

The climate change mitigation targets to maintain a relatively stable climate may not be met. Even if targets are met, substantial climate change could occur. In a changing climate, how can social science facilitate composed decision making? One way is through studying emotional reactions to a changing climate. Therefore, this thesis examined how engagement with climate catastrophe scenarios influenced various emotions. Relative to other conditions, “negative” emotions (e.g., fear) were predicted to increase in scenarios related to climate change, and “positive” emotions (e.g., serenity) were predicted to decrease in the same scenarios.

Participants engaged with one of five conditions, four of which reflected environmental effects (e.g., local harmful effect from climate change). Before and after condition engagement, participants took a questionnaire of specific emotions. Conditions that described environmental harm were associated with large decreases in “positive” emotions (e.g., serenity) compared to other primes. However, they were not consistently associated with “negative” emotions (e.g., fear). Conversely, qualitative responses frequently mentioned increases in feelings of “fear” or “upsetness”; however, decreases in emotions like “calmness” were rarely mentioned.

Error played some role in emotional measurement. Nonetheless, psychological research about climate change may include a blind spot: focusing on emotions that are provoked by climate change while ignoring emotions that are depleted by it. A decrease in a “positive” emotion (e.g., calmness) may
be conceptually distinct from an increase in an assumed “negative” counterpart (e.g., fear). What are the implications of this distinction? Does avoidance of climate change stem from fear of the subject, or more from its perception as a “buzzkill”? Overall, research of emotional reactions to climate change could facilitate engagement, mitigative behavior, contingency planning, and a more composed transition in a changing climate.