Global Change and Sustainability Center
Fall Seminar Series

"I’m not a Warmist! Effective Engagement of Hostile Audiences on Climate Change"

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Tuesday, December 3, 2013
4:00 to 5:00 p.m.
295 FASB (Sutton Bldg.)
Abstract

A wealth of social science research has shown that public perception of climate change is very strongly colored by ideological filters in which facts are evaluated based on their fit to previously held beliefs. Scientific discourse about climate change is well received by environmentalism, which confirms the fears and competitive impulses of libertarianism. When data and belief come into conflict in public discourse, belief nearly always dominates. Scientists, educators, and science communicators must acknowledge the cultural context of climate change in order to lift climate discourse out of its ideological gutter. Many communication strategies emerging from solid social-science research fail to acknowledge the ideological cultural filters through which people experience climate discourse. Emphasizing recent trends, current weather events and impacts, and especially argument from authority of expertise and consensus are effective with average audiences but trigger reflexive opposition from suspicious listeners. Beyond ideology, climate change is Simple, Serious, and Solvable. Effective communication of these three key ideas can succeed when the science argument is carefully framed to avoid attack of the audience’s ethical identity. Simple arguments from common sense and everyday experience are more successful than data. Serious consequences to values that resonate with the audience can be avoided by solutions that don’t threaten those values.

Bio

Scott Denning is Monfort Professor of Atmospheric Science at Colorado State University where he leads a large research group studying the global carbon cycle. He also serves as Director of Education for CMMAP, an NSF Science and Technology Center developing a new kind of multi-scale climate model. He’s the author of about 100 papers in the peer-reviewed climate literature, a former Editor of the Journal of Climate, and served for five years as Founding Science Chair of the North American Carbon Program. He spends as many weekend nights as possible photographing the cosmos from a mountain cabin in Wyoming.