



PennState

sustainability
INSTITUTE

CLIMATE**STORIES**

Connections For Discussion



Climate Stories invites viewers into a conversation on climate change. Each of the people in this very short film recognize that human-caused climate change is a major challenge and that how we talk about it matters. Political polarization, some bad actors, a lot of passion, and misinformation have prevented us from taking the action we need to take. But with a common understanding of the science, by focusing on common values, and by sharing and listening, we can develop solutions together. As Steve Sywensky says in Climate Stories, “Talk is the basis of solution.”

This short guide will help you use Climate Stories to explore and talk about climate change. If you are a teacher, it can help you structure just one discussion or create units on the science of climate change, the social science and history of political polarization and communication, stories from the front lines of climate change in the United States today, and an invitation to create a climate change conversation of your own. If you want to create a community conversation, this guide will point you in the direction of relevant resources to do that too.

If you use Climate Stories and this guide, you will:

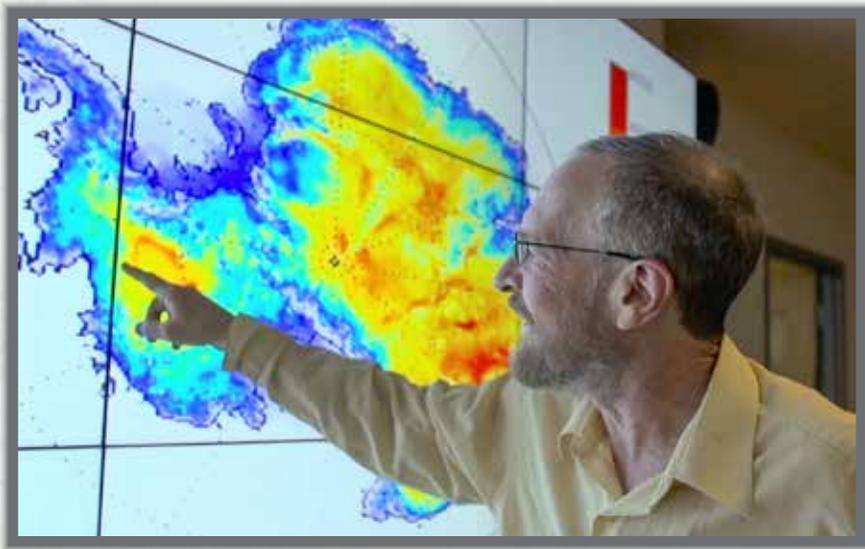
1. Learn the basic science of climate change,
2. Learn about the sociopolitical context of climate change in the United States,
3. Learn methods for communicating about climate change,
4. And develop listening and speaking skills.

1

WHAT IS THE SCIENTIFIC BASIS FOR CLIMATE CHANGE & CLIMATE ACTION?

Watch: *Earth: The Operator's Manual*

Explore how humans have changed the climate by burning fossil fuels, what some of the risks are, and the approaches we can take to mitigate climate change. You can use the materials developed for *Earth: The Operator's Manual* to guide your exploration into the science of climate change. The *Field Guide to Teaching Sustainability* has links to many other materials to introduce students to climate science and climate solutions.



2

WHY IS THE UNITED STATES SO POLARIZED ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

All of the speakers in the trailer address the political polarization in the United States and the passion with which people approach the issue. Richard Alley says there's been organized resistance that's prevented the public from understanding climate change. Janet Swim says that people are passionate that it's happening and that it's not happening. Why? Where did the resistance come from?

Watch: *Merchants of Doubt*, a film by Robert Kenner

Merchants of Doubt explores several avenues and asks many questions. How do people engage in the war for the public's understanding of climate change? Why do people so vehemently deny climate change? What are their motivations for doing so in the face of overwhelming evidence and the consensus of the scientific community? The film shows how a group of powerful, well-connected, and scientifically literate men have poisoned the well for meaningful action on climate change in the United States.

You can explore these and other questions more deeply in at least three ways. The Poynter Institute has created a discussion guide for *Merchants of Doubt* as has Interfaith Power and Light. These discussion guides can help you frame an exploration of climate stories in light of intense polarization and concepts about truth, ethical communication, and religious responsibility. Advanced students can do work that Dr. Janet Swim has assigned to her own psychology students. These explore conspiracies, issues of identity, and psychological processes and how each play a role in climate change denial. Finally, you can also more deeply explore the work behind the film by reading *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway and seeing the complex web of relationships between politicians, cold warriors, freemarket ideologues, the media, and allegedly grassroots campaigns. The book also explores the history of the fight between environmental and health regulation and polluting industries.

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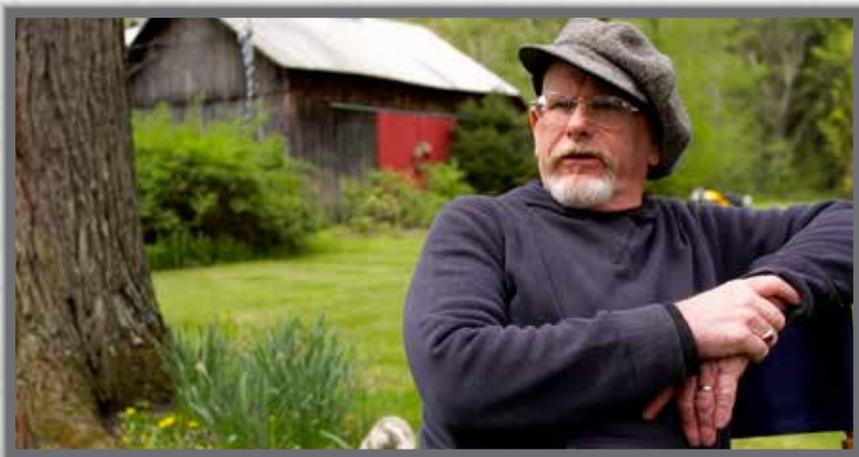
HOW CAN WE TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE TO BETTER THE SITUATION?

Steve Sywensky says that “talk is the basis of solution.” What does he mean by that? You can read other’s stories and share your own and learn how to talk and write about climate change with accuracy grounded in shared values.

Read: Seamus McGraw’s *Betting the Farm on a Drought*

McGraw writes the climate changes stories of fishermen (like Steve Sywensky), engineers, scientists (including Richard Alley), politicians, farmers, ranchers, liberals and conservatives. The breadth of their experiences from all over the United States shows that all kinds of people all over the place are experiencing climate change. Have your students read the book and keep a journal of their own thoughts and experiences regarding climate change. Coupled to instruction on memoir using Beth Kephart’s *Handling the Truth*, students can dive deeply into their senses, memories, beliefs, identities, and world regarding climate change.

What if you are looking for a quick entrance into sharing your climate story? See Peterson Toscano’s *Three Steps to Talking About Climate Change*. It begins with the statement, “I’m not an environmentalist, but I’m concerned about climate change.” This way of starting things off



opens the way for everyday people to talk about climate change in ways that aren’t tied to a political movement. But what if you aren’t concerned about the effects of climate change, but are concerned about what people are saying about it? You can use a similar prompt: “I’m not an environmentalist but I hear a lot of people talking about climate change. I’m concerned that...”

There are also resources available for communicating the science and the moral messages quickly. If you are trying to briefly explain who the greenhouse effect works and why it’s a problem or how CO2 causes ocean acidification, The Frameworks Institute has created a toolbox for communicating on climate change that simplify and clarify the issues and grounds them in shared values. But what if you are dealing with misinformation or unscientific statements? *The Debunking Handbook* by Cook and Lewandowsky guides you through a three-part that focuses on the actual facts and not the misinformation, explicitly labels misinformation as false, and uses a well-grounded alternative explanation that accounts for the misinformation.

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CAN WE GET TOGETHER & TALK?

At the end of the day, you might just want a chance to talk with other people about climate change. Sometimes it’s enough to invite some people to your house or get a community forum room and start sharing. By simply sharing Climate Stories with neighbors, family, co-workers, or in a community forum, you can get the conversation going and the stories flowing. If you want to create a community forum, the Kettering Institute has created Climate Choices as part of their National Issues Forum series.

For more information, contact:

Dr. Peter D. Buckland
Penn State’s Sustainability Institute
Creative Coordinator, Climate Stories
pdb118@psu.edu



sustainability.psu.edu