



Global Footprint Network
Advancing the Science of Sustainability

Exploring a Better *Approach*

Global Footprint Network's
engagement philosophy





Conventional
climate
communication
hasn't delivered.

We haven't succeeded in bucking the *curve*

- » Given massive ecological overshoot and rapid climate change, humanity's long-term success depends on vastly speeding and scaling up its responses.
- » But how can we inspire meaningful action when the news is so stark? In response to the overwhelming bad news and wrenching pleas for change, many people feel guilt, resentment, despair, numbness, disconnect, anxiety or ambivalence. Which in turn leads to internal rejection of sustainability as either overwhelmingly difficult or someone else's problem.

This report discusses:

1. Why conventional approaches haven't delivered
2. What we have learned to create more powerful communication
3. How we're using our tools to motivate meaningful change

Why good efforts have *fallen short*

Clearly, just providing information does not transform. But even newer communication strategies are built on the belief that we need to directly modify people's consumption patterns. It is still heard as a call to embrace frugality and sacrifice, not an invitation. The results aren't promising.

Climate psychologists agree*

- » Moral pressure, a sense of doom, and imposed urgency backfire and produce resistance
- » Global-scale arguments make the issue overwhelming or not actionable
- » Good-will does not last. Good-will applied to one domain erodes good-will efforts elsewhere ('moral licensing')
- » People say they want to be told what to do, but to-do lists of suggestions don't lead to real change

The result? The climate community has not been able to deliver results. Reductions are few, will is feeble and acceptance of *transformational* change is fleeting.

* See page 11 for references



So what's the harm in raising the alarm or telling people *what to do*?

- » For one, inaction is a by-product of poor engagement efforts. **Most people realize that our response to the ecological crisis is outrageously inadequate** and feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem.

As a result, we feel an uncomfortable **tension** which can express itself as feelings of

guilt
shame
sadness
anger
self-judgement

The **coping response** is different for everyone, but often includes

blaming others
feeling victimized
withdrawing
avoidance
further inaction

This becomes the self-reinforcing filter through which most climate communication is received, magnifying our negative emotions and amplifying resistance to action.



Creating more powerful *communication*

So how can we shift climate communication to avoid reinforcing inaction and negative emotional responses?

By communicating in a way that is attuned to peoples' emotional state. By focusing on helping people align their **identity** with sustainable choices. And by standing with people rather than talking at them.

Develop connection. Feel invested. Ignite desire. The rest is *you*.

- » We believe in giving people opportunities to recognize that **resolving the problem is essential for their own success and wellbeing**.
- » And that they can participate and are not alone in their desire to do so.
- » Feeling personally invested in changing how the world operates makes you unstoppable. If enough people develop that sentiment, we can **and will** shift society's trajectory.
- » Given the fear and overwhelm that comes with existential threats like climate change, we are more likely to recognize our own **"skin in the game"** if we also feel that **being** in the game gives us better chances at a successful and fulfilling life.
- » Meaningful examples of exciting, beautiful, generative, scalable, attainable, **sustainable solutions** are therefore key. Giving people opportunity to celebrate them (rather than challenging them to take on as a heroic deed) strengthens their identification with a sustainable future.
- » And the invitation to join the movement becomes more effective if it **generates passion and desire** and meets people where they are by acknowledging both the challenges and the opportunities.

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of *the sea*.”

attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry





Putting the philosophy into *practice*.

- » Our strategy, throughout our entire engagement process, is to help people recognize that they **do** have “skin in the game.”
- » Not only that, we strive to show our audiences that their success and wellbeing depends on resolving the problems in front of us. Once this is achieved, action and engagement becomes far easier and more scalable.
- » In all instances, invitations to engage must be emotionally intelligent and compassionate.
- » A shift toward strengthening one’s sustainability identity is most effective if people publicly express their own desires that contribute to a sustainable future.
- » We give our audiences the ability through our [social platforms](#) to make clear what they desire for themselves, their community and the planet. This is a milestone on the path to becoming unstoppable sustainability advocates – graduating from virtual to physical engagement.
- » This is the ultimate success criterion – does the engagement produce meaningful action on the ground? Let’s test!

This is how we
change the world.

Recognizing that
we have *skin in
the game* and
agency.



References

- » Check out Global Footprint Network's approach and many additional resources [here](#).
- » William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, 2012, *Motivational Interviewing, Third Edition: Helping People Change (Applications of Motivational Interviewing)*, The Guilford Press, 482 pages. [Here](#) a summary.
- » George Marshall, 2014, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, Bloomsbury USA.
- » Per Espen Stoknes, 2015, *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action*, Chelsea Green Publishing, Washington DC.
- » Renee Lertzman, 2013, "Engaging with Climate Change: How we think about engagement," Skoll Global Threats Fund, California, available [here](#). Or her newer summary [here](#).
- » Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 2018, *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life*, Hardcover, Random House, NY, 304 pages.
- » Climate communication organizations including www.climateoutreach.org; www.climateaccess.org; www.climatecommunication.yale.edu.



Global Footprint Network
Advancing the Science of Sustainability

Thank You

👤 Mathis Wackernagel, President & Co-Founder

📞 +1 510 839 8879 x305

✉ mathis@footprintnetwork.org

🌐 www.footprintnetwork.org

