Preliminary Report: Local Attitudes towards Climate Change

Interviews with 41 Olympia Washington Residents

by 1st Year Graduate Students at The Evergreen State College, December, 2011

In Fall of 2011, first year graduate students from Evergreen’s Master in Environmental Studies (MES) Program conducted a qualitative survey of 41 Olympia Washington residents about their beliefs and attitudes about climate change. The interviews were part of a study of U.S. policy and attitudes towards climate change, and impacts of climate change on the Pacific Northwest. Information about that course of study and the project, including a bibliography and student presentation slides, are posted at the web site *Conceptualizing Our Regional Environment* web site, <http://blogs.evergreen.edu/gcore/term-project/>.

Objectives of the project were that students learn about qualitative research (through participating in the study design, and conducting and reporting results of interviews), and that we discover local attitudes about climate change, in particular how residents get their information about climate change and whether they desired more information. Faculty were also interested in 1) piquing student interest in further research in climate change and 2) performing a prototype study that might be replicated elsewhere.In particular, we were interested in:

* how survey participants arrived at beliefs about climate change,
* what participants believed about how climate change might impact them as residents of the region,
* whether there was demand within the community for more information about climate change,
* effective ways for Olympia residents to learn about climate change and its local impacts,
* participants’ concerns about government climate change policy or action.

Each student conducted one interview, and accompanied another student to an interview and observed that interview. Students transcribed the audio recording of their own interview, analyzed the interview, worked with a panel of 5-6 other students to summarize and present findings, and completed a research report on a climate change topic of their choosing. The study was approved by Evergreen’s Human Subjects Review Board. Preliminary findings gleaned from student presentations are below. We expect to post more detailed findings on the program web site during spring quarter (prior to 6/15/2012).

1. Most people interviewed (~85%) were greatly or somewhat concerned, or cautious, about climate change. This result came both from students’ observations and a survey of participants (Maibach et al, Global Warming’s Six Americas 2009:  An Audience Segmentation Analysis). We believe this distribution is not representative of the Olympia population at large, and attribute it to how we identified participants and why the participants who were interviewed agreed to be interviewed. We emphasize that the study was not designed to randomly sample Olympia residents.
2. In spite of their concern, most of those who expressed concern (probably at least 60% of the 85%) either showed misunderstandings or lack of understanding of the underlying causes of climate change. From this observation, we conclude that local education about climate change is needed.
3. Among those who expressed concern about climate change, few (currently estimated less than 10%) had initiated action to learn more or influence public policy.
4. About half of those interviewed trusted scientists as information sources, with others getting information from friend or family, or the media and internet.
5. Among those concerned about climate change and who believed climate change is human caused, nearly half expressed disdain for those who do not believe in or accept climate change as human-caused. We conclude that educators about climate change need to be carefully chosen and trained.
6. Students further observed that about half of those concerned about climate change would welcome government intervention, regulation, or education. Of those who would welcome government intervention roughly half felt that local government would be more effective than the federal government (with the other half favoring federal government action).