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## Perspective: Getting around ideology - When facts divide more than unite

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A friend recently sent me a link to an article about how we are past the point of no return with the melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet and therefore committed to significant sea level rise. She was concerned that reader comments on the article were universally dismissive, citing other sources claiming that sea level isn't going up at all. "If people don't believe there is a problem it will be hard to make changes," my friend wrote.

This got me pondering what's really going on with these sorts of "things are terrible" vs. "there's no problem" exchanges that come up in conservation and resource management.

When we hear people dispute the existence of climate change or overfishing or the perils of biodiversity loss or pollution, it may seem that facts are indeed the issue. Hence the instinct is to respond with more and more facts from more and more experts. But in polarized political environments, this may actually deepen people's commitment to their existing beliefs.

### Why is this?

When positions on particular societal risks become indicators for opposing ideological identities, people's need to affirm their loyalty to whichever camp they fall into tends to outweigh their desire for a dispassionate assessment of the evidence.<sup>1</sup> That is, ideologically motivated reasoning (e.g., "I know climate change doesn't exist so there must be problems with research that says it does") is evidence of a social need to affirm group membership rather than of defective reasoning per se. Calling people idiots for refusing to accept the evidence misses the point. Research shows that, no matter their position on the political spectrum, people are uniformly susceptible to this sort of bias.<sup>2</sup>

In this sort of atmosphere, a report seen as authoritative by one group may be seen by the other camp as an elaborate means to justify a biased agenda. While supporting one's connection to identity-defining groups matters tremendously on an individual level, it makes it harder for us as a society to agree on actions to take to reduce very real risks.

What does all this mean for my friend's concern? We need to get clear on the real hurdles for achieving the changes we want to see. For example, is it that some people truly don't believe in climate change after objectively examining the facts, or that what looks like debate about climate change is really people affirming their ideological identities regardless of the facts? If it's the latter, debating or even stating the facts again will move us farther from rather than closer to agreement.

### Getting around ideology

If the fundamental goal is gaining acceptance for a position that our audience sees as inextricably linked to a particular political stance (e.g., that climate change or overfishing is happening), there's no way around ideological issues. If our goal is more generally focused on reducing vulnerability to climate change effects or creating sustainable fishing livelihoods, here are some tips for discussing risk-reducing actions while sidestepping the issue of ideological identity.

- "Seek out critics and listen to them."<sup>3</sup> This lesson, which comes from a highly contentious process to designate a marine protected area, applies equally well to fraught discussion around adaptation to climate change, or other issues.
- Don't come into the process with a pre-determined solution. Hear what people have to say, and work together to come up with options that everyone can live with. Groups don't have to agree on the scientific facts or even on fundamental values to reach negotiated solutions.
- Get a skilled facilitator who is trusted by all parties. If the core problem is lack of understanding or agreement around values and objectives, this can matter more than bringing in science experts.

#### References cited:

<sup>1</sup> Kahan, D.M. (2013). Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection. *Judgment and Decision Making*. 8: 407-424

<sup>2</sup> Crawford, J. T. (2012). The ideologically objectionable premise model: Predicting biased political judgments on the left and right. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 48: 138-151.

<sup>3</sup> Gershman, D. et al. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary case study. Accessed June 12, 2014, at <http://webservices.itcs.umich.edu/drupal/mebm/?q=node/66>

