

For many years, I didn't really believe in climate change. Not in the sense of skeptics or deniers. It's not like I didn't intellectually understand the science behind climate change, and didn't understand in my head that greenhouse gases were contributing to significant alterations in global climate systems, and that those alterations have the potential to produce tremendous negative impacts on human and natural systems.

Instead, the very concept of climate change was so overwhelming that I just didn't want to deal with it. One of the reasons I focused my career on environmental law and policy was a passionate interest in endangered species and conservation biology. Climate change might result in the extinction of thousands upon thousands of species. That prospect - and the difficulty of doing anything about it - was just too daunting to consider.

So I focused on other issues instead for many years. But while those issues are worthy, important ones, and while I think that my prior work was important, eventually my heart caught up with my head. There's no way to address biodiversity protection, water pollution, or air pollution without also thinking about climate change. And I've begun to write more on the issue ([here](#) and [here](#), for instance).

Why does this matter? For those concerned about climate change who want to have an impact on policy, the lesson is that if it's hard for someone like me (who has dedicated much of his life to environmental issues) to really come to terms with what climate change means, imagine how hard it is for the vast majority of the people around the world who only tangentially or occasionally think about environmental issues. It's understandable why large segments of the population deny the existence of climate change: The alternative - that humans actually might be seriously endangering the long-term viability of the entire planet for human and natural systems - is pretty awful to consider; the alternatives currently on the table to address the problem are hardly appealing. Climate change means that we have to think about the consequences of every single thing that we do in our fossil-fuel powered lives. It requires fundamental reassessments of how we live our lives. That's not easy to do. It's not surprising that many people would just rather wish the problem away.

For those who are skeptical, there is a different message. Many skeptics assert (see Rick Santorum!) that scientists and environmentalists [made up climate change so that they could assert their power over the entire economy and the entire world](#). ([Santorum's exact words were that climate change was "an attempt to centralize power and to give more power to the government"](#)) Setting aside the point that, if this was what environmentalists intended, they've been spectacularly unsuccessful to this point in time, let me assure those skeptics that if I could wave a magic wand and eliminate the possibility of climate change tomorrow,

I would. It would be far easier for me to fight to protect the things I care about – endangered species, clean air, clean water, healthy communities – if I didn't have to worry about climate change. Because of climate change, the legal, political, and organizational resources of environmental groups have been diverted away from all sorts of other pressing battles; because of climate change, [environmental groups have had to accept the sacrifice of other environmental resources \(such as the conversion of desert habitat to solar power farms\)](#); because of climate change, regardless of how successful we are in converting over to a non-fossil-fueled economy, thousands of species are already doomed to extinction, and communities around the world will lose their homes and livelihoods. If I could wish climate change away to save those natural and human communities, I would gladly do so, even if that meant giving away whatever illusory power climate change might give environmentalists over the political process. The world was much easier for environmentalists, and for environmental law and policy, before climate change. Somehow, though, I doubt my protestations will convince Rick Santorum all that much...