

12-1-2015

Paris Talks: Engage With the Environment

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Recommended Citation

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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: Engage With the Environment

DECEMBER 1, 2015 / TED GUTSCHE / 0 COMMENTS

This special series of posts is produced by [Juliet Pinto](#) (Florida International University) and [Phaedra Pezzullo](#) (University of Colorado-Boulder)

In collaboration with [International Environmental Communication Association](#), FIU's [Sea Level Solutions Center](#), and [eyesontherise.org](#). Both Pinto and Pezzullo are attending [COP21](#) in Paris.

By Juliet Pinto, from Paris

“Cognitive dissonance” is a term I am using more frequently. I first heard it as a graduate student learning about communication theory, as we studied the stress people experience when new information confronts deep-held beliefs and attitudes. We are rational creatures, right? We want harmony between our lived experiences and what we believe to be true.

So, as someone who works in research and education dealing with climate change communication, I often now must invoke this phrase. It helps me understand those who deny climate change, in a context of overwhelming climate science consensus; it gives me a phrase, in part, for explaining a building boom in South Florida, the world's most vulnerable region (economically speaking) to sea level rise; as well as processing, in part, U.S. Congressional resistance toward working toward a sustainable and viable future for humankind in the face of this enormous challenge.

However, anecdotally, from my own narrative of communicating sea level rise impacts in Miami, it would seem more and more people have moved past the dissonance stage because they are experiencing the impacts in their own lives. Sunny day flooding due to high tides overwhelming infrastructure, or stormwater easily overtopping flood control structures, are prime examples of a low-elevation region's risk exposure to sea level rise, and a glimpse into our future as greenhouse gases continue to warm the planet, melting land ice and expanding already warming oceans.

So what are we doing to diffuse this cognitive dissonance? A group of us at FIU have been on the front lines of developing innovative ways to engage diverse communities around sea level rise. Together with my FIU colleagues, we have produced two documentaries and developed a website and an app, as well as published and presented various scholarly works, all with the aim of providing everyone a means of understanding what is happening.

For example, Kate MacMillin and I produced a documentary, "[South Florida's Rising Seas](#)," that aired on public television. This all came from an impetus from my mentor and long-time researcher in sea level rise, Hugh Gladwin, who urged me to propose a sea level rise tour for the 2011 Society of Environmental Journalists meeting in Miami. The tour was accepted, and I eventually co-hosted it with Tom Yulsman from UC-Boulder. Kate, a television producer with decades of experience in public and commercial

television, came on the tour and naturally brought a camera. At the end, she said to me, “We have to tell this story.”

And so it began. It took us two years, as the only outside funding we had was a \$1,200 grant from our own SJMC. We worked nights and weekends, and were lucky to have passionate student volunteers who diligently helped to get the project done.

Since the award-winning, half-hour documentary premiered in January 2014, it became the most watched online program for our South Florida PBS affiliate, WBPT2, for all of 2014. It was picked up by PBS NewsHour for a segment for their national newscast, as well as repurposed by various media. We have screened it dozens of times, mostly to packed audiences, held panels and discussions, and answered questions to audience members who really want to know: What is going on?

Following that, another two FIU professors—Susan Jacobson and Ted Gutsche, also very interested in sea level rise—joined the team. Together, the four of us won a grant from a journalism consortium, including the Online News Association, Knight Foundation, McCarthy Foundation, and others, to hack our own curriculum and bring sea level rise in new ways to our classrooms and communities. We did so by developing courses and enlisting willing students to get past the dissonance and converge around sea level rise. Titled, “Eyes on the Rise,” (eyesontherise.org), we developed an app, working closely with the FIU GIS Department and the Fusion multimedia team to provide an interactive, user-friendly app.

Available at eyesontherise.org/app and eyesontherise.org/science, it not only allows South Florida residents to input their addresses and see their neighborhoods at different levels of sea level rise, but also to allow crowd-sourced collection of flood reports and citizen science endeavors. Residents can take photos or videos of flooding, as well as input measurements of flood

depth, salinity and other variables, and upload them to our site. This way, we are not only building a public database that can benefit entire communities in real time, but also providing an additional avenue for residents to interpret and understand what is happening around them.

A second documentary, “[South Florida’s Rising Seas: Impact](#),” followed the first, premiering in June 2015. The important difference, however, is that this one originated from an entirely student-produced web-series that was the final product of Kate’s Multimedia Production course from fall 2014 to update the original documentary. Not only was it picked up by WPBT2, it became the most watched web-series in the station’s history. Building on that success, Kate and a former FIU student, Abel Gonzalez, worked to turn it into another half-hour documentary, available for viewing [here](#).

In part, it tells the story of other initiatives we have held, including our first King Tide Day event, in which the EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy participated, along with U.S. Senators Bill Nelson and Sheldon Whitehouse, the mayors of Miami Beach and Pinecrest, and others. The event happened on the day when the highest tides of the year occur, and increasingly cause severe flooding in parts of South Florida. We provided high school and college students with tools to not only test the flood water for salinity but also to tell stories with that data. In short, to provide them the tools to become not only citizen scientists, but storytellers.

Since then, we have had numerous events, publications and panels, including a recent publication from the team in *Journalism Practice*, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2015.1111159>

But the mission remains the same: To provide community members with the means to not only understand what they are experiencing in real time, but the agency to be a part of progress. To get past the dissonance and on to solutions.