

Climate, Generation Z, and Environmental Justice: A New Communications Framework

Joseph Williams, PhD (joseph.williams@pnnl.gov) (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory,
Seattle, WA, USA)

Maryam Masood (maryam.masood@pnnl.gov) (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory,
Ann Arbor, MI, USA)

Eden Yonas (eden.yonas@pnnl.gov) (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, Atlanta, GA, USA)

Background/Objectives. A framework for the evaluation of justice issues is emerging in climate science debates as it has in other social contexts. While other generations have learned to accommodate and/or embrace the results of climate science, Generation Z (Gen Z) is the first to grow up with climate science as an established societal problem, while recent events have spurred in them a desire to examine issues through a lens of social justice. As a result, Gen Z wants to engage on climate science but specifically in a context of environmental justice. In other words, they see the two as inseparable concerns.

The way older generations communicate about climate science does not resonate with many in Gen Z, particularly in policy debates about how to evaluate the impacts of climate change. The purpose of this project is to provide a solid foundation for understanding and applying the focus and values Gen Z has on climate change, and to establish a framework for Gen Z communication that meets their expectations for a concurrent discussion of environmental justice.

Approach/Activities. We draw on secondary research from peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports on Gen Z core values, attitudes toward climate science, and Gen Z's unique sources of climate change information. We similarly rely on secondary research on generational attitudes on climate science and intergenerational communication behaviors to address:

- How do Gen Z attitudes toward and participation in climate topics differ from previous generations?
- How do the core behaviors of Gen Z inform their communication style for climate change-related issues?
- How can understanding Gen Z communication focus on environmental justice inform cross-generational discourse regarding climate policies?

Using these findings, we map out a Gen Z value-based framework for communicating on climate issues. We also show how “action items” approach for individuals and organizations to reduce climate change impacts are a crucial element of Gen Z messaging.

Results/Lessons Learned. First, Gen Z behavior traditionally reflects their value system and contextualizes how they perceive and engage in climate science, climate security, and climate policy topics. Second, Gen Z inevitably understands climate change as an environmental justice issue, which differs from how previous generations approach climate policy. Ultimately, effective climate policies will require intergenerational cooperation and thus identifying communication differences across generations is a key part of engaging meaningfully in long-term strategies.