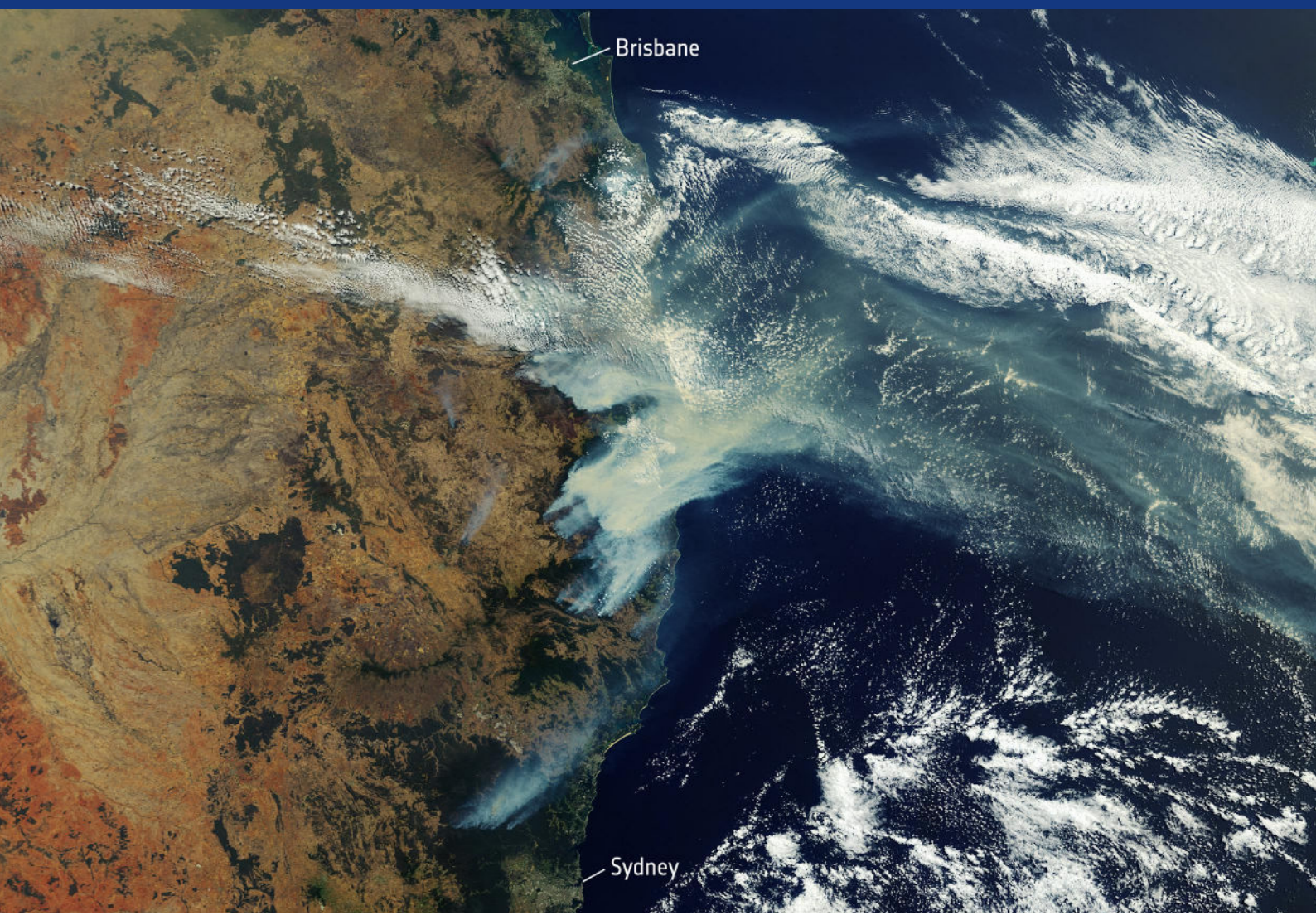


# Engaging Australia in solving the climate crisis

*A guide for funders*



The climate story is, at its core, a story about people. How we think, feel and act. How we come together to tackle problems – or are driven apart. How we make progress, or resign ourselves to loss.

This is a summary of much of what Climate Outreach has learnt about putting people at the heart of addressing climate change. It's a distillation of 20 years of research and experience, applied to the current context in Australia – and an invitation to join us in what we must do next.



**Cover photo:** Bushfires rage in Australia. The Copernicus Sentinel-3 mission captured the multiple bushfires burning across Australia's east coast. *Photo: contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data (2019), processed by ESA, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO*

## About Climate Outreach

**Climate Outreach** exists because we can't tackle climate change without a new climate story – from a lost cause to a story of people, progress and potential. We conduct original research to better understand what people from different places and backgrounds think and feel about climate. We work with people and organisations to help create new climate stories. And we work with governments and policymakers to show them the importance of engaging people in climate policymaking and policy roll-out.

## About ClimateWorks Foundation

This report has been fully funded by a grant from **ClimateWorks Foundation**. ClimateWorks Foundation is a global platform for philanthropy to innovate and scale high-impact climate solutions that benefit people and the planet. We deliver global programs and services that equip philanthropy with the knowledge, networks and solutions to drive climate progress for a more sustainable and equitable future. Since 2008, ClimateWorks has granted over US\$ 1.7 billion to more than 750 grantees in over 50 countries.

If you would like to continue the conversation, please email us at [info@climateoutreach.org](mailto:info@climateoutreach.org).

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# People and climate change: the current state of play in Australia

In recent years, climate-engaged Australians and targeted campaigns have driven climate change up the political agenda and onto the statute books. Extreme weather and devastating bushfires have created a new context: leaders cannot now dismiss climate change or refuse to act in the face of the very real harm it's causing.

The 2022 national election was declared to be "the first time that an Australian Prime Minister has come unstuck for doing too little, rather than too much, to curb climate change." We've since heard promises to make Australia a renewable energy superpower, and seen the introduction of the Climate Change Bill in March 2023.

But translating warm words into concerted action is – and will continue to be – a task like no other. Climate experts are concerned by the level and pace of action. The government is planning to ramp up gas extraction and use for the foreseeable future, despite grave warnings from scientists.

With 2025's federal elections fast approaching, and the possibility of Australia co-hosting COP 31 in 2026, now is the time to get serious about engaging all Australians in tackling climate change.



# What works - and what do we need more of?

A foundational insight underpins Climate Outreach's work around the world over the last 20 years: **simply disseminating information about climate change does not alter beliefs and actions.**

This can be challenging for those working tirelessly to understand and address climate change. Seemingly compelling evidence often fails to spark the desired action.

At Climate Outreach we know that when we **understand how people think and engage** with the climate crisis, we can unlock action. Our research and experience shows that when we engage people, we make huge strides forward.

Here we set out the **three hallmarks of effective engagement**. These principles should guide how we can **move from awareness to normalising action**.



## Messengers matter: support varied voices

To embrace and act on a communication we need to hear it from people we trust or relate to. Before words are spoken, the simple matter of the person speaking instantly signals to us:

- Is this 'for me' – and people 'like me'?
- Is it worth listening to?
- Am I likely to agree with it?

In times of waning trust in institutions and experts, it's vital that we increase the number and variety of people speaking powerfully about climate change.

From high-profile figures to ordinary people who care and want to play their part, different messengers can help audiences understand what climate change means for them. To engage everyone, we need to train, support and platform **varied voices**.

We all need to hear about climate from trusted figures within our communities. Multicultural communities have often been excluded from the climate movement, so it's vital that trust is built within communities. For multicultural communities in particular, trusted messengers from within their communities is vitally important.



## Connection is crucial: elevate values and stories

Our core, fundamental beliefs – our values – guide and motivate us, shaping our opinions and actions. Communication connects when it reflects and amplifies certain values, whether by accident or design. Appeals to our values signal why something *really matters*. They can be in your face, or more implicit.

Those communicating climate often seek to engage people based on the authority of the scientific process – and the urgency conferred by its conclusions. Research points to a number of narratives that tap into much more commonly held values, like **our health, wellbeing and our connection to nature**. It highlights how we can appeal to the common ground in Australia by engaging people through things like sport and our energy transition.

By being intentional about the values we appeal to, we're able to connect and catalyse more widely. By appealing to people's need for hope and agency, we can enable everyone to feel that they can play their part.

It's time for a larger pool of communicators to understand and embrace the power of values and storytelling.



## Go beyond broadcast: involve people in the process

We need to talk **with** people, not just **to** them. We need to interact and involve, not just inform. Organisations can turn their climate communication into a two-way street by:

- Building elements of conversation, including opportunities for people to share their thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes with their peers
- Creating genuine, deep-rooted participatory experiences with people who have been excluded from conversations about climate change
- Designing mechanisms for citizens to help shape policy
- Ensuring all communications and engagement processes are carried out in community languages. This is vital to reach the culturally and linguistically diverse communities that make up one in three Australians

Elsewhere citizens' assemblies and juries have succeeded in breaking out of the traditional broadcast model of communication, and in going beyond standard government consultations or "town hall" events. This involves individuals being selected to be representative of the wider population, and meeting over a set period of time to discuss an issue and make recommendations based on deliberation.

These processes have created a space for dialogue between participants and experts, a forum for people to express their views and mechanisms for collective decision-making. In Scotland they've succeeded in shaping policy.



*Photo: STE, Bart van Overbeeke*

## Moving away from communication based on instinct and assumption

Across all communication and engagement activities, we need to test, iterate and measure impact. By piloting interventions and collecting robust evidence of how they've worked for different audiences, we can move away from communication based on instinct and assumption. Funding organisations can create the time and space to do this. They can also encourage risk taking and open sharing of learning.



*Photo: Sascha Grant*

# Where and how is public engagement driving change?



Photo: Hamish John Appleby / IWMI

In **Ghana** government responded to public climate concern by engaging civil society groups in decision-making. It has launched a committee to oversee the country's transition to more renewable energy, as well as introducing more accountability and transparency in its approach to climate and energy policy.

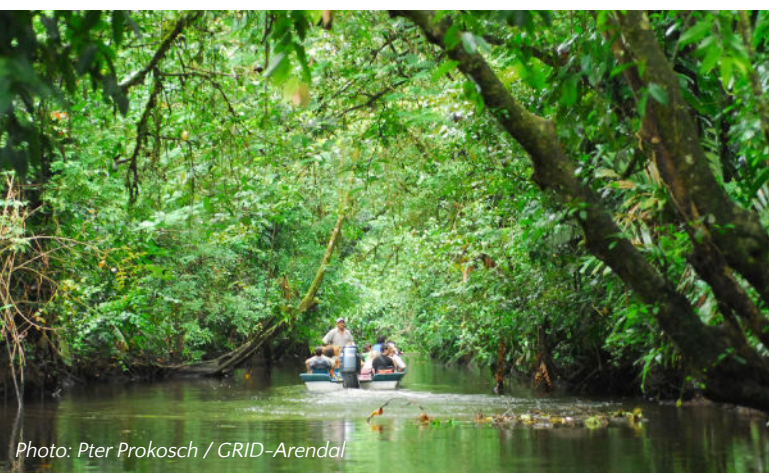


Photo: Pter Prokosch / GRID-Arendal

**Costa Rica** aims to be one of the world's first countries to decarbonise. It provides funds for local people and indigenous communities to maintain rather than destroy nature. This progress has been underpinned by very participatory approaches and opportunities for civil society organisations and citizens to co-create policy.



Photo: Matjaz Krivic / Climate Visuals Countdown

**Scotland's** recently strengthened Climate Change Act goes beyond emissions reduction targets and embeds tackling inequality and promoting fair work. Community-led public engagement activities shaped its approach and a Public Engagement Strategy for Climate Change sits alongside it, marking a new chapter for a people-centred approach to climate change policy.

# What to remember when funding this work

## We can't opt out of taking people with us

The work of making climate action normal is as critical as efforts to make it technically and politically feasible. Fossil fuel extraction and mining is not just central to our economy, it's central to our national identity. This matters. The societal change we need won't be accomplished without the momentum of public backing. The less people see that climate action fits with the world they want to see, the greater the risk of backlash and division.

## We need to go beyond awareness and concern

Climate concern has increased over the last decade – but this does not automatically lead to a willingness to support and be part of ambitious action. The task ahead involves translating concern into a collective appetite for change.

## We all exist in contexts that shape our ability to change

Our options are shaped and limited by money, infrastructure and social norms. Encouraging the public to change – alone – is not sufficient to drive meaningful change. Governments must focus on changing the contexts we exist in so that climate-friendly choices are possible and normal.

## Climate action is a social justice issue, and unfairness matters

Many people already don't feel that they have much of a say over the big things that shape their lives. To win and sustain public support, cuts to emissions must be fair and feel fair. In Australia this means strengthening work on energy affordability and resilience to climate impacts for people on low incomes. It means robustly supporting communities transitioning from coal, First Nations, multicultural communities and those in regional and rural Australia.



## We need diverse perspectives to reach everyone

First Nations peoples are experts in caring for Country and have vital understandings of climate solutions. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities make up around a third of our population. Without engaging these demographics, climate action will not happen at the scale and speed needed. First Nations and CALD organisations should be funded directly.

## COP31 is a real opportunity, but not a silver bullet

Australia is bidding to co-host the world's most important climate negotiations summit in 2026, together with our Pacific Island neighbours. COP31 presents a real opportunity to cement our status as climate leaders, not laggards. But to be successful in galvanising urgent action at a global level, we need to lead by example. This means changing our climate conversation, as well as our ambition. It means investing in the communications and engagement approaches that will allow us to take all Australians with us.

## We'll keep learning

Change is hard – for everyone – and humanity hasn't faced something like climate change before. Climate Outreach will keep doing cutting-edge social science research and updating what we know, and sharing and learning from the latest evidence on what works in Australia and beyond.



