

 **Spotlight on Climate****Hope through Action in a Warming World****DIANA STUART**

Given the many crises and challenges we face as a society, it's been easy to feel discouraged and pessimistic in recent years. For over a decade I have seen a significant shift in the perspectives, attitudes, and morale of students entering my environmental courses at the university. They have learned so much about the serious problems we face and the many obstacles to implementing effective solutions. Some of these realities are indeed discouraging and not only for students.

There is emerging evidence that climate defeatism and fatalism are now bigger impediments to galvanizing support for climate action than climate denialism. While fewer and fewer people now deny the reality of climate change, many more believe that there is no point in acting to minimize global warming.

Defeatist views hinder action, as people do not act when they believe there is no way they can succeed. A major misunderstanding fueling climate defeatism is the notion that if we pass 1.5° Celsius (=2.7° Fahrenheit) of warming, then we have lost the battle. However, every fraction of a degree matters as it means more loss and suffering. A 2° C (=3.6° F) warmer future will be much more livable than a 4° C (=7.2° F) warmer future. Even if we surpass 1.5° C and there are possible thresholds and tipping points, there is no known point of no return that would justify giving up.

Climate fatalism refers to the view that significant global warming and catastrophic climate change is inevitable and there is nothing we can do about it. In other words, it is our fate. Some may even claim that humans deserve the consequences of their actions. Yet, as global hunger-fighting charity Oxfam International points out, 50% of all greenhouse gas emissions have come from the wealthiest 10% of the world's population while those who have produced the least emissions also have the fewest resources to adapt and survive the impacts. Fatalism is often associated with views that people should simply ignore climate change and enjoy life, focusing on time with friends and family and what makes them happy. However, while some people may have the resources and means to attempt to ignore climate change, most people do not. Especially those who live on island nations where rising sea levels are flooding their communities or those facing drought and famine. In these ways, adopting a fatalistic attitude on climate change remains a very privileged position.

Instead of succumbing to defeatism and fatalism, I encourage my students to be actively working to create a livable future – no matter what. Pessimism may be warranted when the odds are not in your favor. You may be pessimistic because you think your actions won't be successful, but simply having some hope that it could do some good can drive you forward. We cannot predict the future, but one thing that is certain is that if the majority of people give up, we will experience much greater loss.

Another reason for hope is that there is a growing climate movement, growing public support for climate action, and increasing opportunities for climate policies. In the US, the Sunrise Movement continues to push climate policy forward. In the United Kingdom, Extinction Rebellion is nudging the government to take bolder actions to address the climate crisis. And globally, youth activists with Fridays for Future continue to hold school strikes on Fridays to demand world leaders address the climate and biodiversity crises. History shows us that every significant social change has involved a critical mass of people continuing to demand change.

Defeatist and fatalistic views may feel comforting because they justify doing nothing and maintaining the status quo. We can attempt to ignore the impacts and dangers ahead, but this won't help. Taking comfort in false narratives only distracts us from the very important work that needs to be done – demanding, supporting, and being part of a transition to a low-carbon society. Warming is happening, but how much is still up to us and there is a tremendous difference between a 2° C (=3.6° F) warmer future and a 4° C (=7.2° F) warmer future.

Dr. Diana Stuart is Associate Professor in the Sustainable Communities Graduate Program and School of Earth and Sustainability at Northern Arizona University

Spotlight on Climate is sponsored by the
NAU Center for Adaptable Western Landscapes, <https://www.cawl.nau.edu/>
and the
Northern Arizona Climate Change Alliance, www.NAZCCA.org/volunteer

Larger logo:

