BOOKS & ARTS

Conveying the campaign message

The arts and advertising can galvanise public and political will in tackling global warming. But shared concern for human health is a better motivator than polar bears, finds **Sanjay Khanna**.

This August at Beijing's Temple of Earth, an installation of 100 ice sculptures of children melted in the heat. It represented the billion lives that will be lost in Asia because of water shortages caused by climate change. The artwork — commissioned by Greenpeace to launch the TckTckTck campaign for 'bold climate action' — is one of many cultural events aiming to sway political negotiators in the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen in December.

"Arts and cultural experiences may be the most effective and powerful ways to communicate the impacts of climate change to a significant portion of the population," says atmospheric scientist David Battisti of the University of Washington in Seattle.

Indeed, many climate campaigns are using arts approaches within a raft of other public-awareness strategies. Artists, writers and musicians are also commenting independently on the potentially grave consequences if governments do not agree to curb greenhouse-gas emissions.

But for climate campaigners to be influential, amid the realpolitik of governments and the din of society, their point must reach and be adopted by a wide audience. Spreading a culture-based message is one of many tools used by the public-relations and advertising industry, which calls on decades of psychological and sociological research to understand how people's attitudes form and change. Historically, such efforts have been directed towards building political following or promoting governmental and business interests and products. Today, the same techniques of persuasion could hold the key to increasing climate-change awareness and ameliorating the cognitive impact of decades of advertising.

Artists, skilled in conveying ideas through the senses, can have an influential role in shaping public opinion about climate change. When engaging with the arts, "people expect to be in the realm of their emotions and of mystery and metaphor, and this is fertile ground for planting seeds of change", notes mezzo-soprano and theatre producer Miranda Loud, who founded the multimedia arts group Rialto Arts near Boston, Massachusetts. Loud's award-winning

production *Buccaneers of Buzz* highlights the devastating effects of climate change on bees.

The cross-fertilization of ideas between artists and climate scientists is being fostered by international projects such as Cape Farewell. Set up in 2001 by the artist David Buckland as a non-profit organization and partly funded by universities, the project runs interdisciplinary expeditions to the Arctic and South America. Participants have included novelists Vikram Seth and Ian McEwan, as well as musicians Leslie Feist and Laurie Anderson. The fruits of such efforts might not always be immediate, but can reach many: for example, McEwan's next book, due out next year, will centre on climate change.

Melting ice sculpture highlights impact on humans.

Iconic photographs of polar bears clinging to ice floes have elicited widespread public sympathy, yet few people have been moved enough to alter their behaviour to become more 'green'. Environmental photographer Matthias Klum thinks that artists should do more to influence the public: "Art is a tool that isn't used enough to effect change," he maintains. During COP15, Klum will unveil *The Testament of Tebaran*, a photographic exhibition that illustrates the effect of deforestation on carbon dioxide levels.

When it comes to persuasion, film is an effective format that can be widely distributed. Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) reached an audience of millions and helped earn him a Nobel peace prize. Several

documentaries released in the past year reflect on what we stand to lose through inaction on climate change. *Home* (2009), by noted aerial photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, evokes sadness at the gradual destruction of familiar landscapes and lifestyles. Director Franny Armstrong's *Age of Stupid* (2009) examines the despondency felt by people in 2055 when they look back and wonder why their predecessors didn't protect the planet from climate change when it was still possible.

This message of urgency is harnessed by the TckTckTck campaign, backed by organizations including Amnesty International, Oxfam, the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Global Humanitarian Forum led by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. Time literally ticks away on the campaign's online clock as it counts down to the start of COP15. The campaign's song, released this month, is a version of the 1987 hit 'Beds are Burning' by Australian band Midnight Oil, who have rewritten and recorded it with more than 60 artists and celebrities including Duran Duran, Lily Allen, Bob Geldof and Youssou N'Dour. Midnight Oil's front man Peter Garrett is now Australia's environment minister.

This cultural clamour for radical action could still get shouted down by those who are lobbying equally vociferously — and with infinitely greater financial backing — to keep the status quo. James Hoggan, public-relations strategist and author of *Climate Cover-Up* (Greystone, 2009), claims that well-orchestrated, big-budget efforts have stoked unfounded controversy: "It's beyond David and Goliath," he says.

Spanning diversity

To find a global consensus, conversations on climate need to span diverse groups and surmount linguistic and cultural barriers. Campaigns that use numbers are one option: "Slogans can mean something different in Johannesburg and Delhi and Vancouver, but numbers remain reassuringly the same," says Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* (Random House, 1989). He leads the campaign 350.org, which advocates decreasing atmospheric CO₂ to 350 parts per million. On 24 October, his group will seek media attention by staging visual stunts that represent the number 350 through group performances, including choreographed mountain climbing and skydiving. "Physics and chemistry are poor

negotiators — they don't haggle or compromise," reflects McKibben. Tied to her film *The Age of Stupid*, Armstrong also leads a number-based campaign: '10:10' calls for a reduction in UK carbon emissions by 10% in 2010.

Human rights is an area of universal concern that can be effective in building consensus, as exemplified by Beijing's ice sculpture. Another motivator is the ethical pressure that lies behind the language of green marketing. Although sustainably designed products promote consumption through their desirability, they offer an easy route for individual action. As a prelude to COP15, Copenhagen last month hosted a design week to showcase sustainable Scandinavian flair, from fair-trade products and energy-saving devices to city parks and cycleways.

Audience fragmentation, a long-standing legacy of marketing, must also be overcome by communicators. Online multimedia projects can reach diverse audiences that are used to being selectively targeted by the media. One such project is *100 Places to Remember Before They Disappear*, organized by Stine Norden and Søren Rud of Danish communications firm Co+Life, which combines a website with short television programmes, educational

Women queue for water at a well near Khudiala in Rajasthan, India, in Yann Arthus-Bertrand's film *Home*.

materials and a travelling photographic exhibition to raise awareness and present climate solutions. It highlights characterful locations that have been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as being at risk of loss in the next 30–60 years — including The Battery in New York City; Rotterdam in the Netherlands; Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania; and Perth, Australia.

So far, the cultural climate debate seems to have been dominated by palpable environmental concerns such as melting glaciers — perhaps because of the dramatic visual evidence they

provide. But the loss of place and habitat affects people's well-being and resilience, bringing with it the severe threat of drought and disease. Promoting such concern over global health would put a human face on climate change — this may be the impetus we need to form a worldwide consensus for action. ■

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Q&A: The science of persuasion

Psychologist **Robert Gifford** is co-author of a recent American Psychological Association report that examined the interface between psychology and climate change. He explains what makes people receptive and how to get messages about climate science across effectively.

Why do climate scientists who speak to the public face a paradox?

Scientists understand that climate models inherently have uncertainty. But as soon as the public experiences some uncertainty in the message, people begin to dither and to say, "Well, I guess it's not so urgent — the experts aren't so sure of themselves".

How can climate campaigners make themselves heard?

Messages have to be carefully targeted to different demographic groups, based on their self-interest. For the older generation, it's about their children and grandchildren; and for the younger generation, it's about them and their generation.

How useful are phrases such 'climate justice'?

For people with social-justice concerns, such a phrase will work. It resonates with members of Greenpeace and of left-leaning political

parties; people more on the right side of the political spectrum will say, "You take care of your problems, we'll take care of ours".

What five elements make up an effective message?

First, it has to have some urgency. Second, it has to have as much certainty as can be mustered with integrity. Third, there can't be just one message: there must be messages targeted to different groups. Fourth, messages should be framed in positive terms. Evidence from a recent thesis I co-supervised shows that people are less willing to change their behaviour if you tell them they have to make sacrifices. If you tell them they can be in the vanguard, be a hero, be the one that helps — that works. Fifth, you have to give people the sense that their vote counts and that their effort won't be in vain.

If some commentators are right and we are past the point of no return, how could

we mobilize people into action?

The same five elements would apply, except that the messages would emphasize adaptation and mitigation. We would need to tell people they can lessen the impact and be someone who helps our own and other species — but with a tilt towards communicating that there will be huge impacts.

How do we communicate difficulties while making clear there are myriad options to be constructive?

We can learn from the success of other campaigns, such as seat-belt, anti-alcohol or anti-smoking campaigns. The fear-appeal approach can be overdone to the point where it has a counteractive effect. Things should be presented more in terms of asking how each person is going to help us face the challenge. Saying "It's all over" makes people give up. ■
Interview by **Sanjay Khanna**.

See report at <http://tinyurl.com/yfaobrg>