

DROPS IN A BUCKET

HALIFAX RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SEA-LEVEL RISE

By: Kayla Sebastian, Zoë Brimacombe & Sarah MacIsaac



Background

Through a community-based research process in SOSA 3300: Community Research Workshop at Dalhousie University, client organization The Ecology Action Center 'hired' us to conduct qualitative research. We worked as a team of three researchers, with other teams of classmates doing the same research on the question of Halifax residents' perceptions of sea level rise. We wanted to find out people's perceptions of SLR without influencing them by educating them about SLR. This research is interesting and important because of Halifax's location on the east coast of Canada, and its relative vulnerability to the consequences of SLR

"When I think of climate change and when I think of the actions specifically to lead a more environmentally-conscious life, I don't first think about 'oh I'm doing this because I'm going to help prevent the sea levels from rising'

Rising sea levels doesn't come to mind"
(Focus Group 2 participant)

Methods

- ❖ We used social media networking to advertise our focus groups
- ❖ We designed community-oriented questions and prompts based on both community-based learning and qualitative research.
- ❖ We utilized Berg and Lune's article *Focus Group Interviewing* to prepare for our focus groups, and White's guide to *Avoid Quantifying Qualitative Data* to aid us in our data findings afterwards.
- ❖ We asked a series of questions pertaining to the participants' understanding of sea-level rise and its consequences
- ❖ Finally, we transcribed the recordings and analyzed the data we acquired during the focus groups

Results

While there were many interesting and important takeaways from our focus group data, there were a few big ideas that we found to be consistent within both sessions and among most participants. For our poster, we have summarized the main three themes that we found through coding and analysis.

How their perceptions were formed

We found that participants across both groups reported learning about SLR in all levels of formal education: elementary school, middle school, high school, as well as through both traditional media (i.e. television) and social media (i.e. Facebook).

However, the unreliability of media sources, and social media sources in particular, was raised in both sessions, particularly the use of "fear tactics" and 'pseudoscience' they saw used online.

"I think there's like a lot of really good ones [articles about climate change] too, that are really well sourced...but then there's some that are just like total pseudoscience, like "oh, yeah, climate change is not real"..."this is just a weird coincidence", so there's kind of like the negative side of social media" (Focus Group 1 Participant)

All participants learned about SLR as an effect of climate change and closely linked the two subjects, both explicitly and implicitly.

Their perceived consequences of SLR

While most participants had a basic understanding of the consequences of SLR, individuals spoke about those consequences without a sense of urgency, with some participants saying that it made them genuinely concerned about SLR and others suggesting that it seemed hyperbolic. Both groups raised flooding and inundation as major concerns of SLR. This participant's quote illustrates the skepticism surrounding the extreme consequences of SLR:

"a thing on PEI where I'm from is that climate activists like to tell people "this whole province is gonna be underwater" and I'm not sure, maybe that is true? I'm not really sure but I always thought of it as kind of an exaggeration, and it's kind of a joke now, actually, on PEI"

Overall, while participants had a basic understanding of the general impacts of SLR, they spoke about those impacts as though they were far off or not personally relevant.

Where the Responsibility Lies

Participants generally felt a personal responsibility to work against SLR, and felt that communities, local/provincial governments, and the international community should all be taking steps to address SLR.

Despite these feelings of responsibility, participants generally did not know *how* to combat SLR and therefore felt unable to act as they saw SLR as a large, global problem. Participants were more interested in ways to stop global warming than in coastal regulations, which were generally dismissed as temporary solutions. They expressed both skepticism about the ability of policies to create any real change, and distrust in the government's commitment to addressing climate change or SLR in any effective way.

Participants felt that a major barrier to finding a solution to SLR was the nature of the issue as gradual and difficult to visualize. In our first focus group, one participant introduced an analogy for SLR as a bucket slowly filling with water, which illustrated the general consensus of the group:

"I kind of picture a drip of water going into some sort of container and then you just notice it rising but then you're sort of just waiting until it actually overflows Before you do anything about it [...] We're waiting for a threat but then we're also waiting for a big cleanup"



Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Dr. Laura Eramian, the instructor of this course, for her mentorship and guidance. We would also like to thank Samantha Page from the EAC for her background information on SLR. Finally, we are very grateful to all focus group participants.