Why Climate Change is Hard to Believe

In the United States, Pacific Northwest winters have been getting milder for years now, with some ski resorts drastically cutting back on operations or closing altogether. But our recent winter (2016-2017) felt like one snow storm after another, with temperatures much lower than usual. So is the climate really getting warmer or not? Despite the assertions of climatologists around the world, is climate change just a hoax?

A recent article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* addresses how difficult it is to grasp the seriousness of a global problem that "looks as though it was designed to be ignored." They define climate change as "an intergenerational global commons dilemma." Intergenerational means the serious consequences of climate change are not likely to be felt during our lifetimes. For example, your summers currently may consist of many warm days and a few really hot days, but your grandchildren's summers will more likely consist of mostly really hot days (temperatures over 100 degrees). Global means that the effects of climate change will not occur everywhere in the same way or at the same time. For example, even as the Pacific Northwest experienced cool weather with lots of precipitation, part of the Deep South was recovering from forest fires. A commons dilemma occurs when the impact of climate change does not affect all individuals equally but adversely impacts the entire community. For example, individual farmers may use their water rights to access water supplies and keep their farms going, but once the water is gone the entire community suffers from drought.

Human beings are good at detecting immediate, local, and palpable threats. This bias in the here-and-now influences how we think about climate change. Studies have shown that people are more likely to believe in climate change when they are faced with adverse weather than when local conditions are "normal," Human beings are also more willing to take action when the threat is immediate than when it is predicted to occur later. Our difficulty in contemplating climate change is thinking beyond our present conditions and our local weather. Adapting to climate change also requires nations around the world to act in concert rather than individually, which is not how nations typically operate. The authors don't say it, but their article suggests that until we learn to think beyond our own generation and local weather we are not likely to do much about climate change.

Pearson, A.R., Schuildt, J.P., & Romero-Canyas, R. 2010. Social climate science: A new vista for psychological science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science.* Vol. 11, Pages 632-650