

Climate Change in Paradise: Engaging the Community in Successfully Preparing for Monterey's Future

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUPS
HELD IN MONTEREY BAY
APRIL AND JUNE 2012

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Successfully navigating the political and emotional terrain of coastal residents facing inevitable change and — in many instances at least some loss — is a challenge.

Understanding how to effectively communicate climate change risks and adaptive responses when the global problem comes “home” can help planners and resource managers in US coastal communities more effectively engage coastal stakeholders. This brief summary highlights key findings from two focus groups held in California’s Monterey Bay area in

April and June 2012, to explore coastal homeowners’ understanding of climate change impacts and possible adaptation solutions, including their visions of being successful in sustaining what they love about living in the region, fixing what is broken, and creating a future that will continue to draw people and business to the Monterey Bay area.

Two focus groups were held in Moss Landing and Monterey and included a total of 13 homeowners of shorefront property in the Monterey Bay area. Participants ranged in age, gender and how long they had lived in the region — some 10 years, some their entire lives. All individuals were interested in coastal management issues, in particular coastal hazards, and engaged actively in two hours of lively conversation about a wide range of coastal issues and concerns that included concerns about climate change and sea-level rise and involved extensive discussions about how to manage current and intensifying future risks related to climate change. All participants were avid observers of their coastal environment, and of coastal management and politics.

“I’d say that this place is Paradise. It’s a beautiful area. You walk down the beach sometime in the sunset and the birds and sea lions... that picture is Paradise to me.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Deep Connection to Place

To place participants’ expectations of the future and their notions of successfully dealing with climate change impacts in context, it is important to understand how they view their environment currently. All participants love their home region. Words like paradise, treasure, magical, wonderful, idyllic, restorative, and special are used emphatically; people openly acknowledge their strong, compelling, and in several cases long ties to Monterey Bay. Particular aspects of the natural and cultural environment (the birds, sea life, trees, beach and nearby mountains, the fog and climate overall, its people, music and other cultural offerings, the accessibility, and deep family ties) feature prominently in their descriptions of what they enjoy about living there. Thus, place attachment is significant, even for people who moved to the area only in the last 10 years, and climate and the environment are an important part of it.



Worries about the Coastal Environment

Coastal residents have a long list of concerns about what is happening to the coastal environment, and — without prompting — climate change and sea-level rise are quickly mentioned among them as major threats to the region (and the globe). Specific concerns include:

- Garbage on the beach
- Coastal erosion and loss of beach sand
- Sand mining
- Coastal and river flooding
- Earthquakes, tsunamis, and access to functioning emergency escape roads
- Declining bird and sea life
- Less fog
- Inappropriate siting and development
- Climate change and sea-level rise

Coastal residents did not view these problems as isolated threats, but instantly connected them to challenges with governance (lack of coordination, communication and alignment among relevant institutions, bureaucracy, overreach); lack of local leadership; inadequate funds; an uneducated, politically disengaged public; and a general decay of morals and responsibility among young and old.

“And it makes me upset — the lack of responsibility, that people just take it for granted... I think we need to be more proactive.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Personal Hazard Preparedness

Overall, focus group participants feel there is little they can do as individuals to address the flooding and erosion issues they experience. When pressed, they mention a number of personal preparedness measures they are taking, including:

- Sandbagging
- Flood insurance through home owners' association
- Preparing “the emergency suitcase”
- Participation in Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) or neighborhood safety committees

To address the larger issues, however, they feel strongly that a comprehensive, region-wide, systemic solution is needed and that the public needs to become educated about it and engage actively.

Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise

Climate change is on everyone's mind, and those most actively engaged in civic, political and coastal management issues express the greatest concerns about it. Not all participants believe that human activities caused recently observed changes in climate, but the majority accept the views held by the vast majority of scientists.

While some speak freely about their climate change-related concerns, without prompting, others find the topic emotionally distressing (bringing up grief and frustration) and would rather not talk about it. Their rather fatalistic views are partly related to the magnitude of the problem, partly to associating sea-level rise to unstoppable “forces of Mother Nature”, but also to the perceived lack of adequate (“responsible”, visionary, common-good oriented) local, national, and global responses with respect to mitigating the causes and reducing the impacts. These reactions are entirely consistent with broader scientific understanding of emotional responses to climate change, denial, and despair.

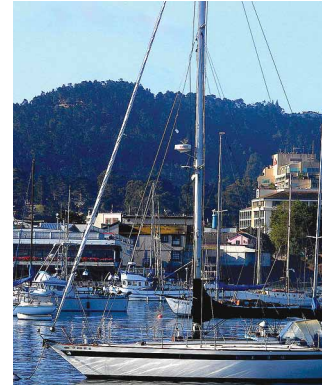
“So we're like in the second row of the Titanic, kind of.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



Preparing for the Future

Participants have a very good understanding of the causes of erosion and the impacts of sea-level rise on urban areas, properties, agriculture, and tourism; they also understand the impacts of individual protection measures on neighboring properties, and — given the magnitude of the task — the scale of the “real solutions” needed. They frequently mention the institutional problems and politics (“the politics of erosion”... “the death of common sense”) that get in the way of finding systemic solutions.



In general, the more familiar participants are with local coastal management issues, the more willing they are also to talk about adaptation, and they are quite familiar with the range of options. Everyone understands retreat. Those less familiar are hard pressed to venture into the topic since it seems to demand more technical knowledge than they feel they have. They differ over whether seawalls and riprap are useful temporary solutions but clearly recognize the limitations of piecemeal, property-by-property protection efforts over the long term. They point toward larger regional approaches (e.g. regional sediment management, artificial reefs offshore), and far more fundamental interventions (e.g. changes in electoral politics, greater community engagement in local politics, basic education of children and the public, change in worldviews).

Their advice to coastal managers is to seek common ground; to act now and not wait for a disaster; to stay focused on a larger vision and the common interest rather than engage in self-interest battles; and to step forward with clear leadership

“The apathy of people is just — ...terrifying — it boggles the mind.”

EXCHANGE BETWEEN TWO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

to send an important signal to the community that this big and seemingly overwhelming issue is being addressed. They expect authenticity and truth-telling from their leaders, but also expect them to give people hope. They urge community leaders to work toward adaptation strategies for multiple timescales, with particular emphasis on the medium term (30–50 years) as a time scale that still garners interest without raising red flags. They want help with temporary but flexible solutions to address near-term crises at erosion hotspots; tactical strategies for the medium term, and finally plans for the inevitable, i.e., retreat, in the long-term, should sea-level rise turn out to be as severe as projected.

The Language of “Adaptation”

Focus group participants did not on their own use the language of “adaptation”, but understood its meaning. However, when asked to give their reactions to the word, the first association was evolutionary biology (“adapt or die”). Over the course of the conversation, participants quickly developed a sophisticated understanding of common sense adjustments to new circumstances, involving personal and governmental action.



“Wordle” – Most frequently used words in Focus Group 1

Hopes for the Future: Successful Adaptation

Participants generally feel that they do not have “the answer” to solving the massive adaptation challenges ahead of them, but they offer elements that collectively amount to a multi-faceted vision of a desirable future. The collective vision involves aspects of a beautiful coastal natural environment, and a deep sense of appreciation for it among those who are privileged enough to enjoy it; acceptance that they might not have that privilege forever; a large-scale solution; a thriving local economy; an educated and civically engaged populace; improvements in governance and collaboration among relevant institutions; extended outreach to the community; strong leadership; and an orientation toward the common good.

Virtually everyone understands that continuation of “business-as-usual” coastal management is insufficient. And everyone has a clear and emotionally charged moral compass as to what type of future they would like to see unfold. Participants wish for three categories of desirable futures: (1) creating something better – expressed in ways that echo the traditional American dream, i.e. leaving a better future than was bequeathed, and most often related to things people see going wrong at present; (2) keeping things the way they are corresponding most directly to what people value about their community and environment; and

(3) obtaining some kind of tolerable outcomes in the future (only to be achieved with a focus on the common good) emerged in response to the intolerable alternative of a hopeless, destructive future when sea-level rise and climate change impacts are expected to be much more severe.

“Preserve the beauty that we have and nourish the people that we have....”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Implications for Communicating Adaptation and Community Engagement

The findings highlighted here serve to generate valuable qualitative insights into people’s thinking on a specific topic, and thus allow for the development of testable hypotheses and practical pilot applications.

Coastal residents wish for local government leadership but also want a meaningful role in governance of the shoreline, not just an “illusion of inclusion;” they reprimand ineffective government and special interests as much as an uninvolved, apathetic public. They also recognize narrow self-interest ultimately as a losing proposition (i.e. protecting one’s own property from erosion results in neighbors facing increased erosion) and offer as remedy a “common self-interest” where the main draw to the coast – the natural shoreline – is the primary asset to protect even if individuals lose their homes.



“I think what will mobilize people is... to protect the shore resource itself. That’s really why we’re all here.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants enjoyed the focus group conversation and urged that more such dialogs be held to educate the community and to offer opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns. Tapping into what people love – their place attachment and identity, reminding them of their connectedness to each other and the more-than-human world, and engaging citizens meaningfully in joint problem-solving with realistic and visible outcomes are key to effective engagement. Contributing to a caring and considerate society and to a future rich in opportunities can engage even the more skeptical.

“We’re lucky to be able to live here.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT