

**Our Climate, Our Change:
Using Visual and Interactive Practices
to Expand Participation and Leadership in Climate Action**

Authors:

Jennifer L. Hirsch, Ph.D.

Abigail Derby Lewis, Ph.D.

Ryan Lugalía-Hollon, Ph.D.

Lisa See Kim

Sarah Sommers

Alexis Winter

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Introduction

Since 2008, anthropologists, ecologists, artists, and communications specialists from the applied science division of The Field Museum of Natural History have worked, in partnership with the City of Chicago, to engage diverse Chicago communities in city and regional climate action efforts. This work began when the Chicago Department of Environment commissioned the museum to help them engage communities throughout the city in the Chicago Climate Action Plan, launched in October 2008. The Plan aims to reduce carbon emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% by 2050 by implementing five strategies focused on energy efficiency in buildings, clean and renewable energy, improved transportation options, waste reduction, and adaptation (City of Chicago, 2008).

The museum was seen as a strong intermediary between the City and communities for two reasons. First, as a scientific institution, it was viewed as apolitical. Second, it had been conducting action research and implementing urban ecology projects in communities for over 15 years and was regarded by many as a

trusted partner, bridging grassroots and institutional stakeholders and simultaneously focused on nature and people.

From 2008 to 2012, Museum staff conducted rapid research studies in nine communities and developed and led or co-led three major community action programs that built on research findings. The six authors of this chapter participated in this work. Communities were chosen to achieve geographic, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity. The research resulted in two energy efficiency programs initiated by the City in low-income communities: the Energy Action Network and the South Chicago Retrofit Project. Additionally, The Field Museum worked with community partners to develop the Chicago Community Climate Action Toolkit, discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The community action programs were designed to engage communities in both the Chicago Climate Action Plan and the region's other major climate action plan, the Climate Action Plan for Nature, which was launched by the Chicago Wilderness alliance in 2010 with significant leadership from The Field Museum. The Climate Action Plan for Nature addresses the broad "Chicago Wilderness" region that surrounds southern Lake Michigan. While the Chicago Climate Action Plan focuses primarily on people and the built environment, the Climate Action Plan for Nature specifically addresses climate change impacts and adaptation strategies for the region's plants and wildlife.

Our approach to working with communities includes four stages and goals, each described in Table 1. Stage 1, the first and most critical stage, entails research specifically targeted to identify **community assets**, or those strengths and resources that can be mobilized to effect change (see Box 1), as well as concerns. Stages 2, 3, and 4 build on the research conducted in Stage 1.

<<Insert Table 1>>

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In all of this work, creative visual and interactive practices have been key to engaging urban residents in an issue that often seems distant and less than urgent. These practices include photo/object elicitation (using photos or objects to start a conversation), collecting and telling stories, participatory mapping/photography, drawing, art, data visualization, and more. (Read more about these practices in the section below, “Creative Visual and Interactive Practices: Making Climate Change Relevant, Tangible, and Fun.”)

This chapter introduces some of our most successful creative practices, drawing particularly from our research and our most recent project, the Chicago Community Climate Action Toolkit. We have found that these practices can help leaders and residents from racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse communities: understand climate change as something that has to do with their particular histories and lives; recognize the varied ways in which they are already taking climate action, even if they do not realize it; begin to envision themselves as a key part of climate action solutions; and then develop community projects based on these visions. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion on the potential of using visual and interactive practices to engage more groups of people in climate action and lift up diverse cultural perspectives within a field that is otherwise largely focused on technological solutions.

Deep Engagement in Climate Action: A Brief Look at the Literature

Our approach to engaging diverse communities in climate action can be seen as a case study of deep engagement. Anthropologists who study contemporary global climate change (a small but growing group) as well as scholars and practitioners of climate change communication have recently begun to call for expanded efforts to dialogue with the public on this issue, beyond just conveying scientific facts and

information. Anthropologists explain the importance of exploring climate change as a cultural, rather than simply environmental, phenomenon. They argue that people experience climate change, both its discourse and its impacts, through the ‘mediating layers’ of their lives, such as social networks, cultural identities, and other issues that they care about (Roncoli, Crane, and Orlove, 2009; see also Crate and Nuttall, 2009—the book containing Roncoli et al.’s chapter; Crate, 2011; Barnes et al., 2013).

Scholars and practitioners of climate change communication make similar arguments, although they often talk in terms of ‘values’ rather than ‘culture.’ They suggest that climate action efforts should engage people by:

- Working through groups or networks, rather than focusing on individuals (e.g., Michaelis, 2007)—including and perhaps especially groups that have not been engaged in climate- or environment-related issues and thus “perform a critical role in spreading change through society” (Corner and Randall, 2011, p.1011);
- Highlighting the *human* (in addition to the planetary) benefits of a low-carbon lifestyle, including but also going beyond the benefit of saving money (often referred to as ‘co-benefits;’ see Westphal and Hirsch, 2010); and,
- Constructing narratives, or stories, to help people situate climate change in relation to local conditions and their deeper or intrinsic values, “such as duty, stewardship, self-reliance, and prudence” (Pike, 2012; see also, e.g., Agyeman, 2007; Marshall, 2012).

In a particularly strong call to move beyond social marketing—the application of marketing principles to social issues—Corner and Randall (2011) argue that the response to climate change must be cultural transformation, not just isolated behavior changes. This, they suggest, means that climate action efforts must work through social networks to create long-lasting ‘pro-environmental social identities.’

Meanwhile, anthropologist Sarah Pink, who writes about the emerging field of applied visual anthropology (2007; 2011), explains that visual practices—including visual research methods, analysis of visual culture, and visual representation—provide “routes through which other people’s understandings, experiences and ways of doing things can become ‘visible,’ and therefore comprehended, explained to others” (2011, p.446). As such, these practices nurture empathy and connections and provide especially strong tools for helping lift up the voices of marginalized populations (2011). In this chapter, we build upon Pink’s claims, demonstrating the key role that visual and other creative practices can play in moving climate change work beyond surface-level communication, particularly among people who have had little previous involvement in climate change-related efforts.

Creative Visual and Interactive Practices: Making Climate Change Relevant, Tangible, and Fun

In our research and subsequent community climate action programs, we employed a wide range of ethnographic practices. These included the traditional methods used by anthropologists (interviews, focus groups, and participant-observation) as well as creative visual and interactive practices such as visual collages of climate-friendly practices, data visualization (e.g., word clouds), participatory photography, home tour interviews, and exercises using prompt questions such as, “What three words come to mind when you hear ‘climate change?’” These latter practices are the focus of this chapter.

Climate change is an issue that people often do not relate to personally, and the creative practices we used were particularly effective during all four stages of our work in creating a place-based model for climate action: turning climate change from a technical, scientific, and distant topic requiring particular expertise into conversations and actions focused on Chicago and people’s lives. These practices often helped people see that they are already taking many actions that can be considered climate action. This framing helped people make their own connections to the issue and to climate action practices, which they were

able to share with us during the research stage and then incorporate into their local projects. These connections would likely not have come forth using traditional practices alone.

Our overall methods—collaborative research and story collecting—comprise two of these creative practices. Leaders from one to two community organizations worked with us on each of the nine research studies. In all cases, they connected us to residents and other organizations and also commented on report drafts. In three communities, Field Museum anthropologists worked with professional storytellers to train our community partners to use some of our tools to collect stories about residents’ climate-friendly practices, which contributed key data to the research (see Figure 1). The stories that our researchers and partners collected were highlighted in our reports; used by partners in their community work; and performed by our storyteller partners in an online video, “Telling Our Stories: Creating Green Communities” (<http://vimeo.com/35764542>).



Figure 1: Collecting Stories

As part of our research study in Pilsen, a Latino community on Chicago’s Near West Side, a staff member from the Mexican hometown association Casa Michoacán collected stories from residents passing by on the street. **Image Credit:** © The Field Museum

The collaborative research process that we used, wedding the museum's scientific expertise with partners' story collecting, laid the groundwork for community-initiated action later on. By training community leaders in some of our research methods, we helped them realize that they could indeed take ownership over the climate science required for larger-scale climate action. Their participation in the research helped expand their knowledge of a pressing contemporary issue as well as the resources their communities have to address it. Additionally, since community partners conducted the research, they were more invested in using the findings as a basis for their action projects.

Our work also involved many visual and interactive tools. These tools were key to our research success. Pictures and interactive activities allow people to understand a topic and contribute to a conversation in many ways, tapping into multiple areas of knowledge. They are inherently more experiential than words and give a wide range of people entry points into a topic in ways that can transcend boundaries of age, race, class, language, and literacy. Similarly, photographs are always open to interpretation and often elicit responses that are less formally directed than surveys or traditional interviews.

One of our most effective tools was a series of visual collages depicting photos of a variety of climate action strategies (see Figure 2). Each collage depicts a different type of climate action strategy, such as improved transportation options, energy efficiency, etc. Many of the photos relate specifically to the Chicago region and the diverse cultures represented here. Some actions are traditional, such as carpooling or turning off the faucet. Others are creative or rooted in cultural heritage, such as a Polish greeting card that depicts a young girl hanging her doll's clothes out to dry on a clothesline or a youth recycling program run by a community development corporation on the South Side of Chicago. Interviewers showed these collages to interviewees and asked, "Do you do any of these things? Do you know others who do these things?"

In response to these collages, residents shared stories about practices that they likely had never thought of as climate action but which served to personalize a seemingly impersonal issue. For example, during a focus group with African Americans living on Chicago’s West Side, a lively discussion about gardening broke out in response to our visual collage on climate-friendly practices related to the land (representing the “Adaptation” strategy of the Chicago Climate Action Plan). One elderly woman who had grown up in Arkansas was reminded of all the crops her family grew and expressed pride in their farming knowledge and self-sufficiency. She commented, “You’re dealing with a country lady. I know everything and can do everything.”

Visual practices were also a key strategy for creating accessible materials based on the research, all of which aim to help community leaders take ownership of climate action. For example, our reports include visual story packages that pair research photos and stories highlighting specific climate actions as central to residents’ lives—literally changing the face of climate change from the polar bear to your next-door neighbor. Relatedly, asset maps highlight the assets identified in the research by our ethnographers and research participants. They visually depict the large quantity of climate-related work already happening in a community, providing an expanded frame for thinking about community identity and work that likely has not been thought of to date in terms of climate change. Our intention in creating and sharing these types of visualizations was twofold: to present the assets in an easily accessible way, and to prompt new thinking about potential actions and partnerships.

Finally, our multimedia engagement materials rely heavily on visuals, as demonstrated by our Chicago Community Climate Action Toolkit. Launched online in May 2012, the Toolkit comprises over 60 multimedia tools that communities can use to develop and implement local climate action projects in ways that also advance their ongoing work for improving quality of life, for example, around issues such as education, food access, and economic development. The Toolkit documents four projects that The Field Museum created and implemented with community partners in the research communities of Pilsen,

South Chicago, Forest Glen, and Bronzeville. It also includes education and engagement tools created by Field Museum scientists, with input from community and environmental partners around the region. The projects and the tools built on and addressed our community research findings.

Toolkit materials use visuals towards multiple ends. They help people understand complex scientific concepts—such as the difference between climate change and the problem of the “hole” in the ozone layer, two issues that research participants often conflated. They also help people see climate change and climate action as related to Chicago—including our extreme weather events such as a major snowstorm in 2011 that stranded people in their cars for over 24 hours. Finally, they help local groups develop their own ideas for action tailored to their communities that will simultaneously advance the region’s climate action strategies at the local level—such as the Council of Islamic Organizations’ “Green Ramadan” campaign, which promotes local action among Muslim residents as part of a long-term solution to drought and famine in Somalia.

Community Projects: Using Visual and Interactive Practices for Action

Visual and interactive practices have also emerged as key components of our community climate action projects themselves. Specifically, they have helped with: 1) integrating climate action into a community’s identity and vision; 2) communicating the project to residents and broader audiences; 3) making climate action fun and engaging; and 4) connecting climate action to other community issues and co-benefits. In this final section, we use examples from the four community projects that we worked on as part of the Toolkit to demonstrate each of these points.

Together, these communities represent a significant portion of Chicago’s diversity. Pilsen, just west of Chicago’s downtown, is largely Mexican and working-class and is known as the hub of Chicago’s Mexican community and an artistic enclave. South Chicago, on the far South Side, is known for its industrial history, proximity to natural areas, and immigrant populations. It is racially and ethnically

diverse (African American, Latino, and white) and largely working-class. Bronzeville, just south of Chicago's downtown, is an area rich with black history that is often compared to Harlem in New York. It is almost wholly African American and is class stratified, with many subsidized public housing residents living next to affluent homeowners, most of them African Americans who have 'returned' to help revitalize the area. Forest Glen, located on the far North Side, is largely affluent and white. It is known for its natural areas and suburban feel.

Point 1: Integrating Climate Action into a Community's Identity and Vision—South Chicago Project

The South Chicago community project was highly visual and aimed to create a community-wide exhibit that celebrates local green practices and promotes the community's vision for a green future. Titled "Retrofit Your Neighborhood," the exhibit includes a mural, two large outdoor planters made from recycled sewer pipes, ten displays made from old windows and shutters, and a website and video. The various pieces all highlight stories collected by a group of local youth using The Field Museum's visual collages. The stories describe how people are already caring for the environment, in small and large ways, individually and together. Taken together, they show the many different paths that can lead people to see themselves as stewards of their physical environment and to view their community as 'green.' The fact that the exhibit represented community members' stories also makes it interactive, in the sense that it represents conversations held between exhibit creators and residents, thereby prompting more investment in the exhibit from the community.

The exhibit was part of a community-wide effort to increase residential retrofits, and each piece of the exhibit also advertised the retrofit project. According to Sarah Ward, Executive Director of the art center that created the planters, a visual strategy like this exhibit is important in a diverse community, including one like South Chicago where some speak limited English. She explained: "Because the neighborhood has such a diverse mix of people...there's a lot of public art...I think the community responds to art as a vehicle for communication."

Point 2: Communicating Climate Action to Residents and Beyond—Forest Glen Project

The Forest Glen community project was not as explicitly visual in nature. Initiated by a local Chamber of Commerce as a way to unite multiple stakeholders around a common vision, it included a variety of activities aimed at promoting climate-friendly practices. These included installing bat boxes in a local nature preserve as an alternative to pesticides, installing rain barrels in 40 homes for storm water management and water conservation, and planting native plant and food gardens using climate-friendly gardening methods. All of this work was done by local Scout troops.

It was exactly this broad scope of work that led the partners to decide to brand their project with a graphic identity that would allow them to communicate the project to the wider community and recruit other organizations to participate. The project team held a series of meetings to brainstorm a list of objects, places, and symbols that represent the project in relation to the community's broader identity. They then created icons representing the community and chose fonts and colors that captured the look and feel of the project. The icons represent important community assets. For example, a smiley face is the logo of a small grocery store called Happy Foods, which is one of two key community gathering places. Icons like this one situate the climate action project as part of Forest Glen's unique community culture. They are featured in local advertisements and large signs with QR codes that were installed at project sites and other popular places throughout the community, such as train stations.

Project partner Jennifer Herren, of the local chamber of commerce, led the development of this communications strategy. She explained, "Any project, no matter how great it is for the community, or how great it is for the environment or anyone else, will stand alone as an island if you don't share what you're doing with other people. And that is what is so fascinating to me about this Community Toolkit, that it's designed to be shared with the rest of the city, as well as potentially the world."

Point 3: Making Climate Action Fun and Engaging—Bronzeville Project

Like the Forest Glen project, the Bronzeville community project brought together multiple activities, in this case aimed at building a local green economy centered on African cuisine. Project partners included a community developer, a local chef, and two community organizations. Two key activities took place in community gardens: vegan soul food cooking demonstrations and a youth horticulture program.

Additionally, project partners led green tours for residents and visitors, which focused on the green economy and public art.

The project’s focus on public art, and the visual and interactive elements in the gardens, made the climate action activities more accessible and inviting to the broader community by adding elements of beauty, fun, play, and physicality. These elements came together most successfully at the Bronzeville Community Garden, a space designed both for food cultivation and social interaction (see Figure 2). The garden’s lead cultivator, Guadalupe Garcia, explained: “There aren’t too many green spaces, and I think there are different things here that kind of make it an ideal meeting space: the cooking pavilion, the chess set. It’s just connecting them with where their food comes from.” The garden also includes colorful mosaics. Mecca Brooks, a project leader from the Bronzeville Alliance community organization, shared: “A lot of people that are into public art are also into urban gardening. So the two almost come hand in hand. So I think the use of public art allows the people that are installing the gardens to provide a more appealing backdrop.”



Figure 2: Bronzeville Garden

A father and daughter play chess in the Bronzeville Community Garden in Chicago's historic African-American community. **Image Credit:** © The Field Museum

Indeed, the garden was included as a stop on both of the community tours run by the Toolkit partners. At the conclusion of both, it served as a meeting place where tour attendees celebrated Bronzeville's African-American heritage with food, music, dancing, and play. Said otherwise, it served as a central venue for the multi-sensory engagement of community members young and old in Bronzeville's project. Public art, music, games, and food help create vibrant public spaces and foster appreciation for outdoor environments—key ways to bring awareness to issues like climate change that can often feel distant otherwise.

Point 4: Connecting Climate Action to Other Issues—Pilsen Project

Like the Bronzeville project, the Pilsen community project took place at the intersection of gardens and public art. Project partners included a Mexican hometown association, an environmental justice group, and a local daycare center. The partners worked together to turn a vacant lot into a climate-friendly native plant garden that would serve as a play space for the daycare and an outdoor classroom where the two other partners could engage constituents and hold workshops. As with the Forest Glen project, this project included important icons, and one in particular: the Monarch butterfly. This garden is part of a larger effort in Pilsen to plant milkweed throughout the community. Milkweed provides habitat for Monarch butterflies, and the goal is to turn all of Pilsen into a Monarch sanctuary. Like many of the Michoacanos who live in Pilsen, Monarchs migrate between Michoacán and Chicago. They serve as a cultural symbol and as a powerful symbol of the ability to freely cross borders. Meanwhile, climate change is expected to spur massive migrations in the years to come, including movement between Mexico and the United States as Mexico continues to see the effects of climate change, such as landslides.

The Pilsen garden includes many milkweed plants, and artwork in the garden, created by a renowned

local muralist with local youth, prominently features the Monarch butterfly. Signage in the garden explains the connection in both English and Spanish, establishing the Monarch as “a symbol of peace and freedom across borders” (see Figure 2). As it is employed in the garden’s visual content, the Monarch connects the issues of play, education, health, industrial pollution, climate change, and immigrant rights. This connection invites multiple constituents to the table, and points towards the need for holistic solutions.

Conclusion: Visual and Interactive Practices are Key in Creating Community Climate Narratives

In our work at The Field Museum over the past four years, we have seen the power of visual and interactive practices to engage diverse sectors of society in larger climate action efforts, such as the Chicago Climate Action Plan and the Climate Action Plan for Nature. These practices help communities understand and relate to climate change and integrate climate action work into their ongoing efforts to improve local quality of life. Perhaps most significantly, we have found that they help communities create their own narratives about climate change as it relates to their assets, concerns, and local cultures. These narratives situate the scientific discourse of climate change, and the technological solutions that dominate the climate action movement, within the fabric of local life. This visual, interactive—and narrative—approach to community engagement is resulting in local efforts that advance broader climate action strategies, such as energy-efficient buildings or climate-friendly gardens, but in unique ways that resonate with local communities. In turn, these community approaches suggest new models for asset-based approaches to climate action.

Unlike surveys, traditional scientific presentations, or policy discussions, visual practices adapted from fields such as applied visual anthropology can create bridges for involving new allies and leaders in the pressing work of climate change. As described above, the tools that can be created within this emerging sub-discipline are well suited to support widespread engagement projects like collaborative research and community-based interventions led by micro-coalitions. These approaches take time, but they will build

the leadership and relational infrastructure that will be needed for successful, long-term adaptation efforts. In contrast, initiatives that seek to transform communities without involving their local leadership can happen very quickly. Yet such externally-driven approaches often do not leave the areas where they work with stronger ideas, local leaders, or partnerships.

To successfully respond to the challenges of climate change, we will need to develop transformation projects that can both manifest quickly and inspire new local leaders and bonds. Doing so will require the creation of new tools and methods, and the creative work of ongoing experimentation. In this chapter, we have attempted to show how the work of applied visual anthropology can help with the important task of climate-conscious community building that can serve as the basis for broadening climate action to be a movement led by and benefitting us all.

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