

Two words kept running through my head: “pole, pole.” Near the start of the trip, I was informed that this Swahili phrase, pronounced “polay polay,” was the informal motto of Mount Kilimanjaro. Meaning “slowly, slowly” in English, this line could be heard countless times around campsites and on trails by Tanzanian guides desperately trying to steady restless climbers. On this trek, maintaining an irritatingly sluggish pace is a climber’s best weapon against altitude sickness. Also known as Acute Mountain Sickness, or AMS, this trip-ending condition is especially dangerous because of its subtlety. It doesn’t jump out of the bushes and slap you across the face once you reach a certain altitude. Unfortunately, AMS comes in a slow onset of symptoms over many hours to a few days. Due to the the nature of the condition and an ever-prevalent fear of failing to reach the summit, climbers often attribute the early symptoms to other causes. Feeling a bit dizzy? Definitely dehydration. Nauseous? Breakfast just isn’t sitting well. Many climbers fail to summit because they believe they can’t possibly have AMS. They protect themselves with the idea that altitude sickness only happens to other people. By the time they accept the truth of their condition and realize that their dream of reaching the peak is in jeopardy, it is too late. Climate change is not any different. Just like stubborn climbers with early symptoms of altitude sickness, people are unwilling to accept the truth of climate change because they not only disregard it as an insignificant threat, but also protect themselves with an unfounded assumption of personal immunity from the effects of climate change.

The scientific community has made it clear that climate change is not only real, but also a serious danger to the lives and livelihoods of everyone around the world. Just as dizziness and lethargy are symptoms of altitude sickness, increases in the frequency and severity of heat waves, droughts, hurricanes, rainfall, and flooding are just some of the symptoms of climate

change (USGCRP 4). These threats pose secondary consequences such as personal property damage and infrastructure failures (12). Despite the dangers of climate change, the lifestyles of most citizens of developed nations have remained relatively unchanged over the past few decades. In the United States, gas cars still dominate automobile sales, and most of the country's electrical power comes from coal and natural gas (Annual Energy Outlook 91-127). Although renewable sources of energy, predominantly solar and wind, have increased in use over the past decade, their slow expansion is certainly not indicative of a society that is legitimately concerned with climate change (92).

In the face of climate change's disastrous effects, why is there so little perceptible apprehension? The answer partly lies in how disconnected people perceive themselves from climate change threats. Effective motivation to proactively work towards reducing one's environmental footprint often stems from a sense of vulnerability. Just as with altitude sickness, if the public as a whole legitimately sensed that they were personally threatened, true concern would emerge. According to the *Nature Climate Change Journal* on the public's response to climate change, "Research on public perceptions of climate change often shows that people, at least in Western countries, typically perceive climate change as a distant threat, as something that affects strangers, and as something that happens in remote times and places, rather than in the here and now" (Brügger 1031). It is seemingly human nature to disregard all that is inessential to the preservation of one's immediate self. Climate change is no exception. When all warnings state that repercussions are ten, fifteen, or fifty years away, a sense of vulnerability is not instilled in society. One can imagine how people's responses would differ if they were warned

that a house-raising hurricane would hit tomorrow if they did not reduce their carbon footprint today.

Having a sense of responsibility also plays a key role in motivating action to reduce environmental impacts. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. Individuals may question both their personal accountability in environmental degradation and their ability to make a positive impact. An appealing technique for ignoring climate change is to shift blame and responsibility to others. One may argue that if large corporations and even entire countries exercise unsustainable actions, then they, as individuals, can hardly be considered responsible for climate change (Brügger 1034). To continue that form of reasoning, people may also doubt how a change in their lifestyle could truly have any significant impact on something as powerful as the climate. This mentality assuredly contributes to the lack of societal concern for climate change.

In today's society, climate change and politics have unfortunately become permanently bonded. For someone unfamiliar with the current political climate in the US, this would make sense. As climate change poses both a national and global threat, one would assume that discussing differing opinions on possible solutions would become a political priority. However, the reality is far worse. American political debates on climate change are often not on *how* the government should respond, but *if* anthropogenic climate change even exists. Undoubtedly, this has influenced public opinion. When one public figure argues for increases in government expenditures on environmentally focused projects, and another responds with blanket skepticism of the reality of climate change, it becomes clear, especially to those uninformed of climate science, which answer is easier to adopt. Climbers who are assured that they are healthy and can continue climbing by one guide and yet informed that they have early symptoms of AMS and

may not summit by another are put in a similar situation. Rather than truly delve into climate change and the resounding evidence of its existence, it is less painful to disregard the need to make one's lifestyle more sustainable with the false belief that the warming of earth's atmosphere remains unproven.

Another unfortunate reason that climate change fails to capture the public is because it is not the world's sole problem. If a climber slips and cuts their knee, it is obvious that their predominant concern is probably not altitude sickness. The same goes for climate change. As the world unknowingly sped towards the economic tragedy of 2008, climate change concern was soaring at a record high (Weber 336). Leading up to 2008, 47% of US adults considered climate change a "very serious" problem and 77% believed there was "solid evidence" supporting climate change. Just one year later, those rates plummeted to 35% and 57% respectively (Weber 336; Scruggs 506). The "finite pool of worry" hypothesis—the idea that as concern for one issue increases, concern for another must decrease—was undoubtedly supported by this situation (Capstick 51). The economic crash took priority. The world had slipped and cut its knee.

As uphill progression serves simultaneously as both a climber's goal and biggest threat, progression in the quality of life serves as humanity's. While humanity's insatiable desire for more is not inherently wrong, it comes at the price of increasing energy usage and carbon emissions. Kilimanjaro's guides vehemently spread the "pole, pole" mantra for this reason. Slowing down uphill progression forces climbers to be more observant for possible AMS symptoms, allows for better acclimatization, and can possibly prevent climbing to a point of no recovery. Similarly, humanity could greatly benefit from adopting the "pole, pole" mentality as it would not only provide the surest way of reaching the intended goal, but also facilitate a more

realistic, safe, and sustainable method of progression. So then why do so few, in both situations, actually heed the advice? People are hyper-focused on the immediate. In daily life, the immediate could include economic recessions, personal issues, career changes, and so on. In the climber's world, these concerns could entail tripping, dehydration, sunburn, leg cramps, or gear malfunctions. While all of these are important and can undoubtedly slow or halt progress, the real threat is constantly looming in the background, easily overlooked, and getting stronger with every step. The best solution may be to just walk a little bit slower.

Works Cited

- “Annual Energy Outlook 2019.” *U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis*, 24 Jan. 2019, www.eia.gov/outlooks/aeo/.
- Brügger, Adrian, et al. “Psychological Responses to the Proximity of Climate Change.” *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 5, no. 12, 12 Oct. 2015, pp. 1031–1037., doi:10.1038/nclimate2760.
- Capstick, Stuart, et al. “International Trends in Public Perceptions of Climate Change over the Past Quarter Century.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 35–61., doi:10.1002/wcc.321.
- Scruggs, Lyle, and Salil Benegal. “Declining Public Concern about Climate Change: Can We Blame the Great Recession?” *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 22, no. 2, May 2012, pp. 505–515., doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2012.01.002.
- USGCRP. “Analyses of the Effects of Global Change on Human Health and Welfare and Human Systems (SAP 4.6).” *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*, Washington, D.C., 2008.
- Weber, Elke U. “What Shapes Perceptions of Climate Change?” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, vol. 1, no. 3, 8 June 2010, pp. 332–342., doi:10.1002/wcc.41.