

The Psychology of Denial

Why *do* we find it so hard to act against climate change?



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THE  INDEPENDENT

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INSIDE
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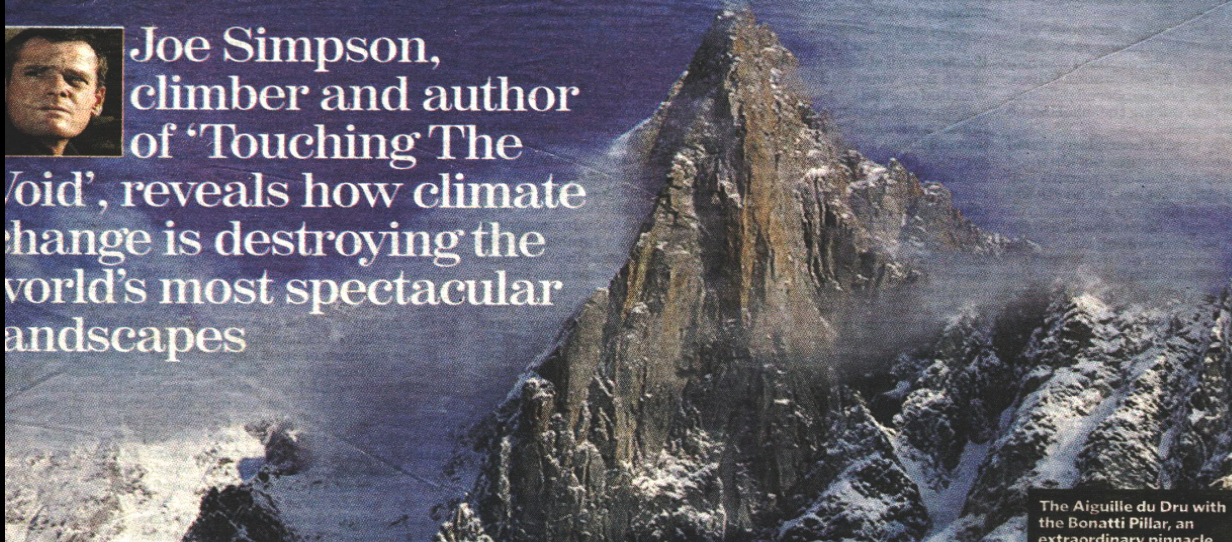
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THE AWARD-WINNING LIKE WATER FOR CHO

THE MELTING
MOUNTAINS




Joe Simpson,
climber and author
of 'Touching The
Void', reveals how climate
change is destroying the
world's most spectacular
landscapes



The Aiguille du Dru with
the Bonatti Pillar, an
extraordinary pinnacle

Green rock



'As it steadily melts, the whole infrastructure of Alpine tourism is at risk - as well as many lives'

up our winter sports holidays. Climatologists, geologists and civil engineers from all over the world are making disturbingly similar reports. Glaciers in Antarctica are thinning twice as fast as they were a decade ago and this may destabilise the west

the inflow of fresh water possibly lead to the shutting of the Gulf Stream, which would plunge Europe in warm waters that would be the equivalent of those in northern Canada. It wouldn't save the ski industry unless you like skiing conditions of 40C below.

Boreholes sunk to monitor temperatures in Switzerland, Austria, the Dolomites, the French Alps, the Sierra Nevada and the Abisko mountains in Sweden have all recorded temperature increases of between 1C and 10C during the past 100 years.

The ground temperature in the Alps has risen considerably in the past decade. As air

THE INFORMATION

THE INDEPENDENT 5 - 11 NOVEMBER 2005
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The essential guide to going out & staying in

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**NEW MINI SEEKS FORGIVENESS
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Numbers of mentions of “climate change” on websites of major NGOs

	“CLIMATE CHANGE”	“ICE CREAM”
Amnesty International	0	1
Human Rights Watch	16	25
World Vision US	4	12
Survival International	0	1
Refugees International	4	27
YWCA	0	1
CARE US	1	1

Source: website search 8/6/06.

‘Asleep on their watch: where were the NGOs?’ from ‘Surviving Climate Change: The Struggle to Avert Global Catastrophe’, Pluto Press, 2007.

Our response to climate change is out of proportion to the threat and urgency of the problem.

This lack of response cannot be satisfactorily explained as a deficit of information...

...or as a temporary failure in the political and economic system...

and is not related to an individual's capacity to effect change.

**We can observe a profound psychological
disconnection between
what people **know** about climate change
and
what people **do** about climate change**

Responses to mass human rights abuses

Morally neutral euphemisms

Suppression

Denial of knowledge (“I didn’t know”),

Denial of agency (“I didn’t do it”)

Denial of personal power (“I couldn’t do anything”, ‘no one else did anything’)

Bystander effect

“Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about), and without being punished for “knowing” the wrong things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged”

Professor Stanley Cohen, London School of Economics

States of Denial, Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering, 2001

“ Denial of global warming was socially organized... It took place in response to social circumstances and was carried out through a process of social interaction”

Kari Marie Norgaard,

Dept. Evolution and Ecology, University of California

Environmental Justice and Socially Organized Denial of Global Warming, 2004

Denial strategies specific to Climate Change

Metaphor of displaced commitment	<i>I protect the environment in other ways</i>
Condemn the accuser	<i>You have no right to challenge me</i>
Denial of responsibility	<i>I am not the main cause of this problem</i>
Rejection of blame	<i>I have done nothing wrong</i>
Ignorance	<i>I didn't know</i>
Powerlessness	<i>I can't make any difference</i>
Fabricated constraints	<i>There are too many impediments</i>
After the flood	<i>Society is corrupt</i>
Comfort	<i>It is too difficult for me to change my behaviour</i>

Source: S. Stoll-Kleemann, Tim O'Riordan, Carlo C. Jaeger, The psychology of denial concerning climate mitigation measures: evidence from Swiss focus groups, *Global Environmental Change*, 11 (2001) 107-117

Failure of the “risk thermostat”

Our response is strongest
to threats that are:

Visible
With historical precedent
Immediate
With simple causality
Caused by another ‘tribe’
And have direct personal
impacts

Climate change is:

Invisible
Unprecedented
Drawn out
With complex causality
Caused by all of us
And has unpredictable
and indirect personal
impacts

How do we move forward?

We recognise that information alone cannot produce change

We openly recognise the tendency to denial

We encourage emotional responses and “whistle blowers”

We develop a *culture of engagement* that is visible, immediate, and urgent.

As individuals we act with integrity and clarity.