

ON THE BRINK

Communities around the world are confronting unique challenges to sustain their local environment, culture and identity in the face of climate change. From B.C.'s coastal communities to Arctic gateway cities in the north, UBC Vancouver sociology professor Ralph Matthews is leading teams of researchers in the study of the sociological and cultural implications of climate change through two distinct projects: The Co-Management of Climate Change in Coastal British Columbia (C5) Project and The City of Whitehorse – Climate Change and Institutional Adaptive Capacity Project.

Frontier: *What was the objective behind The C5 Project?*

Ralph Matthews: The C5 Project aimed to examine how people living in the same space and place understand that shared environment within their own cultural, social and economic circumstances. Specifically, we were interested in the way First Nations and non-First Nations people understand and perceive climate change and global warming by gathering individual-level data on cultural models, or culturally standardized perspectives that people use to interpret their environment.

f: *What are the challenges that Aboriginal people face in Coastal B.C. in regards to climate change?*

RM: All communities in these areas are resource communities, making them vulnerable to climate change because they tend to be highly dependent on a single industry like fishing, farming, agriculture or forestry. For Aboriginal peoples, these

changes affect the interdependency of people, culture and nature that is fundamental to their way of life.

f: *How do Aboriginal people understand climate change in these communities?*

RM: Aboriginal people understand climate change in the context of their culture, experience and history. These are people who have a history of having their culture threatened one way or the other so they liken climate change to other overall long-term challenges to their culture to which they have to adapt.

f: *How do non-Aboriginal people understand climate change in these communities?*

RM: Non-Aboriginal people seem to be split on climate change. Firstly, unlike Aboriginal people, they do not relate it to their history or culture but may, for example, talk about it in terms of the current economy. Secondly, there is a sizable proportion that are still in denial that the problem is real or different from past climate change events and have very little understanding about how global warming expresses itself.

f: *How did the findings of The C5 Project drive your current research with The City of Whitehorse – Climate Change and Institutional Adaptive Capacity Project?*

RM: From The C5 Project, I learned much about how individuals think about and interpret climate change, but didn't come away with a good sense of these communities' capacity to respond to climate change. The City of Whitehorse – Climate

Change and Institutional Adaptive Capacity Project focuses entirely on what is going to happen to Arctic gateway cities like Whitehorse as a result of environmental changes, what processes they are using to deal with them and what is their capacity to respond.

f: *How is climate change impacting these cities?*

RM: A major issue for the Arctic at a social and governance level is that two thirds of the population lives inside the cities. They are affected by what the climate is doing to their natural resources. For example, it is melting the ground and their roads are flooding. However, climate change is also producing an economic boom in the north through exploration and tourism. We're capturing all of the dilemmas of management, politics and governance in regards to these issues and investigating the institutional capacities that they have to deal with them.

f: *Why is it so important to understand sociological responses to climate change?*

RM: Climate change is brought about by social behaviour. Our responses, either mitigation of it, or adapting to it, require changes in our behaviour and our social structures. ■■■

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