Understanding Climate Skepticism Through the Lens of a Mexican Marinero

Introduction: What Is a Climate Skeptic?

A climate skeptic can be thought of as someone who questions different pieces of climate science– such as causes, spectrum of effects, or different solutions. However, the extent to which climate skepticism exists depends on a wide range of differing perspectives shaped by lived experience, institutional trust, and personal worldview rather than the lack of knowledge around the sciences (Whitmarsh, 2011; Corner, Whitmarsh, & Xenias, 2012). Specific to Latin America, research finds that climate skepticism does not necessarily involve denying environmental changes, but instead questioning causes, how severe, or the justness around proposed responses/solutions (Spektor et al., 2023).

With the hopes of better understanding the complexity of this, I interviewed my neighbor Sergion– a 51 year old marinero from Mazatlán, Mexico. Sergio has spent most of his life working alongside the sea. His means of living are directly tied to ocean conditions, weather, and fish populations. While he has directly witnessed the environmental changes firsthand, he also expressed a certain degree of skepticism about climate change as it exists politically and globally.

We spoke for over an hour at the marina– present with the smell of salt and diesel both hanging in the air as bots rock alongside the evening sunset.

Sergio's Relationship With the Ocean

Sergio's view of the ocean is not necessarily an abstract concept– his livelihood, history, and passion are tethered to the sea.

"I've been on boats since I was a child," he told me. "My father was a fisherman, as well as my grandfather. I have always seen the ocean constantly change. Some years are good, some years are bad. That's pretty normal."

Sergio talked about noticing warmer water temperatures and noticeable changes in fish populations and accessibility.

"There are times when the fish are found farther away," he said. "We venture farther to locate them. The seasons don't feel the same."
His observations align with current scientific research showing that many Mexican coastal communities are already undergoing many environmental shifts associated with climate change–

not limited to changing marine systems and altered weather patterns.(Escudero et al., 2021). However, despite his recognition of these changes– Sergio does not immediately correlate these changes with global climate change.

“The ocean is fully alive,” he explained. “It goes through different cycles. Storms come and go. Sometimes it is hotter. Sometimes it’s colder.”

The way he interprets this reflects a certain reliance on experiential knowledge– lived experience. Research across Latin America finds that climate perceptions are strongly linked with personal experience rather than knowledge simply based on scientific messaging alone (Fasolin et al., 2025). Sergio speaks with a deep confidence in what he has seen with his own eyes.

Skepticism Rooted in Distrust

One of the strongest elements found in Sergio’s perspective was distrust– not necessarily of nature itself, rather institutional distrust.

“I do not trust politicians,” he explained. “They are only worried about making everything about money.”

When I asked him about different climate policies, he expressed deep concern and opinions around climate change being used for economic or political gain.

“They say it’s out of care for the planet,” he expressed, “but the rich people still go about their lives in the same way. They will still fly on their planes, but we are the ones expected to change”

For Sergio, climate change simply feels unequal.

“It feels like the people with less money are asked to make the biggest sacrifices”

Research finds that skepticism towards climate solutions are often associated with distrust of institutions and concerns around fairness rather than rejecting the presence of environmental change itself (Corner et al., 2012). In Latin America specifically, perceptions around inequality and government distrust has a lot to do with shaping climate attitudes (Spekto et al., 2023). Sergio was not by any means denying the environmental change. He more so questions the outside factors influencing climate solutions.

Economic Survival and Immediate Priorities

Another significant theme present in the conversation with Sergio was economic survival.

“My priority is feeding my family,” he shared. “I cannot be expected to stop working because of climate change.”

He expressed that fishing access is often limited by environmental regulations.

“When fishing areas are closed, they don’t necessarily help the fisherman afterwards,” he said. “We are left alone to find solutions”

For Sergio, climate policies are directly tied to immediate economic realities. Research shows that those who depend on natural resources to live, often view climate policies as threatening to their economic stability. (Whitmarsh, 2011). In coastal Mexico specifically, social and economic vulnerability is often complicated by climate adaptation efforts– limiting community support for climate interventions (Escudero et al., 2021). Sergio navigates finding the balance between efforts tied to environmental protection and his own survival.

Emotional and Cultural Dimensions

Despite Sergio’s skepticisms, he shared such a deep respect and care for the ocean.

“The ocean provides us with everything,” he expressed. “And we need to respect it.”

He shared a particular concern around pollution.

“The trash is way worse now than ever before,” he said. “There is plastic everywhere”

Sergio did not question the fact that ocean pollution was a problem. His skepticism is directed towards climate change as a political element in the global narrative of government gain, rather than the observable degradation of the environment.

This distinction aligns with research that finds that many people who question climate changes still maintain strong environmental values and care for the natural world (Whitmarsh, 2011). Sergio’s skepticism was not rooted out of indifference. Rather, in cultural knowledge, economic reliance/vulnerability, and institutional distrust.

My Experience as an Interviewer

One of the most challenging parts of conducting this interview was resisting the urge to debate and to remain indifferent. As a graduate student studying environmental management, there is deep familiarity with science as it relates directly to the climate. I felt moments of internalized tensions wanting to give scientific consensus or discussion. But there was a deepness also felt in simply listening and a cultural understanding around the roots of distrust. Sergio’s perspective is

not radical or irrational. It is simply logical when looking at it through the lens of his lived experience.

Research confirms that climate skepticism is often linked to identity, trust, and social/cultural contexts rather than scientific knowledge alone (Corner et al., 2012). Sergio's experiences have enabled within him a self-trust.

Most Compelling Insights

One of the most compelling pieces I found from this interview with Sergio was the fact that he is not skeptical of significant changes in the environment. His skepticism is tied to systems of power. He has first-handedly observed changes in the ocean and cares deeply for nature. But his questions around climate solutions are fair and understandable. Latin Americans' skepticism of climate change is often reflected in questions around justice, power, inequality, and distrust rather than the denial of environmental change (Spektor et al., 2023). Sergio's perspectives reflect this thinking and findings.

Learnings for Future Engagement

This interview really shaped and offered an understanding of climate skepticism. Before this interview, I associated it with being misinformed. Now I can comprehend it differently– with more empathy. Skepticism may really reflect the distrust often shaped by inequality and the reassurance from lived experiences historically marginalized folks may feel. I was able to learn that engaging with different opinions and views around climate change requires listening with empathy, trust, and humility. Scientific facts are not significant enough to consider singularly. Relationships, stories, and conversations matter. Climate change is not just an environmental issue– it also encompasses many cultural and social contexts as well.

Conclusion

Climate skepticism is very complex and so deeply human. In my conversation with Sergio it became evident that skepticism is not necessarily rooted in ignorance, but in economic realities, lived histories, and institutional distrust. He never denied the presence of environmental change, but was also surviving an uncertain world where safety and protection of oneself is deeply tied to many previous distrusting encounters with the very institutions who prepare climate solutions and information.

For climate solutions to take precedent, they must consider and include voices like Sergio's. They must include lived experiences and work towards bridging trust and honest conversations. Listening to Sergio was a great reminder that meaningful climate change starts with deep listening.

References

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