

5 THINGS PLANNERS NEED TO LEARN ABOUT CLIMATE ACTION

Keltie Craig RPP, MCIP

From devastating wildfires to raging floods, there's no doubt that our planet is facing a climate emergency.



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But there's also hope: collaboration and more diverse forms of leadership, ecological practices, and technological advances mean we now have workable solutions to prevent or mitigate some of the worst effects of climate change.

Still, despite the availability of these real and effective solutions, many governments and communities remain slow to act. The primary hurdle, unfortunately, is systemic in nature; from dominant worldviews related to consumer capitalism and extractive colonialism, institutional resistance, and siloed thinking to lack of political will. As planners, what role can we play in moving climate



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action forward? And do we have the skills to help lead the change we so urgently need?

First, let's consider what planning is about. While planning is an incredibly diverse discipline, at its core it's about relationships: human relationships to each other and to our surroundings; different elements of the land and ecosystems and how these interact. As planners, we play a big role in trying to understand these relationships and in learning and sharing about their impacts. We work to explore what might be possible to bring out the benefits and diminish the challenges or conflicts related to these relationships.

When it comes to climate action, planners have an opportunity to bring forth our skills and experience to achieve the goal of changing patterns—patterns of use, of behaviours, of relationships—towards more sustainable, just and respectful ways to live, learn, and grow.

In effect, planners are required by our profession to work for the public good. But there is no one singular “public.” So, we need to work on developing a deep understanding of privilege and equity: intergenerational, interspecies, and intersectional. Seeking out professional development opportunities that delve into issues of climate justice and equity can help cultivate this rich understanding.

I've been fortunate to be involved with an incredible cohort of climate leaders through the new Climate Action Certificate program recently launched by SFU Continuing Studies. The online program focuses on helping professionals build the knowledge and confidence necessary to turn climate ideas into action.

Through a lens of climate justice and Indigenous ways of knowing, the program was developed by experts in a number of different climate fields. Along with myself, the instructional team includes: Ginger Gosnell-Myers, Board Chair of Greenpeace Canada; Lindsay Heller, Nehiyaw Scholar and SFU Fellow in Indigenous Ways of Knowing; Maya Chorobik and Pat Bell of the Community Energy Association; community leader and former Vancouver city councillor Andrea Reimer; Dara Parker of the Vancouver Foundation; Rita Steele, Manager of Campus Sustainability at SFU; Melina Scholefield of Metro Vancouver Zero Emissions Innovation Centre; Tara Mahoney of SFU's Community-Engaged Research Initiative, and facilitator and systems change consultant Olive Dempsey.

Drawing on the perspectives, words, and insights of these colleagues behind the SFU program, I would suggest the need to grow professional and personal capacity in five key areas if you want to get serious about implementing a climate action plan:

1. Navigating power

We know the main obstacle to climate action isn't technological; it's people and power dynamics. How do we identify power and leverage it strategically? When power appears to be held in the hands of very few, what can we do to change the playing field? Learning about power, including your own, and how we can navigate power in the workplace and the community can help us to transform climate policy into actual action and implementation, rather than have it languish in a document.

2. Climate communication

It's easy to get lost in the doom and gloom of our current and future state. But despair is not a good starting place for action. Narratives and storytelling, creating a context for engaging in climate conversations, being able to counter misinformation—all of these are necessary skills to help break through persistent barriers so you can effectively talk about climate action with different audiences and motivate the necessary changes in behaviour.



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3. Climate justice

We have to recognize that climate change doesn't affect us all evenly, nor have we all contributed to climate change to the same degree. Those with the most power and privilege have a greater ability to avoid the worst climate impacts, and most often contribute a higher carbon footprint. Climate justice recognizes that climate change impacts and causes—as well as benefits that may accrue from taking climate action—are disproportionately distributed, at a global, national, and local scale. We must ensure that decisions made around climate policy, grants, and actions consider equity and justice so we don't continue to exacerbate the problem as we're working toward a solution.

4. Indigenous perspectives

As SFU's Lindsay Heller shares, Indigenous peoples are among those who contribute the least to the climate crisis, yet are impacted the most through changing weather patterns and the loss of lands and

waterways. Indigenous peoples are also structurally excluded from the political discourse and policy processes designed to combat the effects of climate change. Despite this suppression of rights and lack of decision-making authority, many Indigenous communities have demonstrated significant leadership on climate action. In planning or implementing a climate solution, it's critical to develop the skills to respectfully and reciprocally engage with Indigenous communities.

5. Dialogue and engagement

Obviously, a problem like climate change is far too massive for any one organization to solve. Engaging in collaborative partnerships across different silos, areas of experience, and organizations is necessary for us to respond to important questions about how to prepare for and adapt to the impacts of a changing climate. Learning how to have conversations without triggering fear and overwhelming others, and doing so in ways that are self-aware and embrace learning and self-reflection—these are all skills planners can work on.

As planners, most of us are already familiar with working within systems and navigating complexity, which is invaluable experience for tackling climate change. Ultimately, it comes down to how we use our own power, as professionals and individuals, to bring forward critical, reflective and justice-centred climate solutions.



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