

In search of the Climate Change Monster

Blog post by Su Wild-River, while at Centre for the Public Awareness of Science, September 2013



If you are a climate obsessive like me, you spend a lot of time reading the [science](#), watching the [weather](#) and taking action on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Each new [off the chart heatwave](#), [warmest winter on record](#) and [extreme flooding event](#) just reinforces the message that we are already feeling the personal effects of climate change. So why is the world [backing off](#) on action?

According to Cass R. Sunstein, the barriers are partly [psychological](#). Action would be easier if climate change caused a recent and repeatable crisis, had a clear and hateable perpetrator and posed an immediate threat. Extreme weather events has some of these features, but [by definition, climate change](#) doesn't. It's the bigger, slower trend surrounding and influencing weather, exacerbating the extremes, but never

fully explaining them. The USA came up with [Frankenstorm](#) to help mobilise action on Hurricane Sandy. Does Australia need to name its weather demons to gain more traction against the Climate Change Monster?

The Climate Commission named Australia's record-breaking heatwave of 2013 the "[Angry Summer](#)". This weather demon attacked me directly – although I got off more lightly than others. I spent the [catastrophic fire danger](#) day cleaning up my rural property, spraying water on the chickens, and watching as the smoke from a bushfire 100km away came quickly closer before being halted by fire fighters and a creek. But even dangerous weather demons have several faces, and for many, the Angry Summer was a great day at the beach.

Weather demons like the Angry Summer are a powerful drawcard for science communication. Every time there's an extreme weather event, the Bureau of Meteorology's website is snowed under. In 2010-11 the [BoM](#) received [3 billion hits](#) for its 30,000 warnings and 140,000 forecasts. The Climate

Commission also has [great graphics](#) and regular updates, but while ‘weather deniers’ are unheard of ‘climate denial’ is still a most popular Australian spectator sport.

I was touched by the Climate Change Monster this year. The hateable perpetrator was the tiny, invisible Irukandji Jellyfish, perhaps the most [venomous creature in the world](#). A fluther of these monsters were nearly 1000km outside of their [normal range](#) when they stung and killed two [friends](#) of mine at Ningaloo Reef. The repeatability of the event and its potential threat is evident when I see elegant tropical fish while snorkelling in ‘temperate’ waters. I have no doubt that the presence of Irukandji where they weren’t expected was due to the [Very Much Above Average](#) ocean temperatures in Australian oceans. But even though this event was more ‘climate’ than ‘weather’, climate change was not mentioned in the news reports on the tragedy.

The [scientific consensus](#) tells us that climate change is a real and growing ever more dangerous. Scientific knowledge is essential for understanding and tackling climate change. But if we are psychologically hardwired to not see the climate for the weather, then solving this global crisis will take more than science. We need to find new and creative ways to focus public attention on climate change. Perhaps we need to conjure the spectre of a giant, invisible and many-tentacled Climate Change Monster that creeps slowly then suddenly spits out deadly weather and venomous pestilence.