To: Journalists, Editors, Photo Editors, Science Reporters, Producers, Weathercasters
From: The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication
Date: August 7, 2025 (Updated February 2026)

Fun in the sun images can decrease the perceived threat of heat waves.

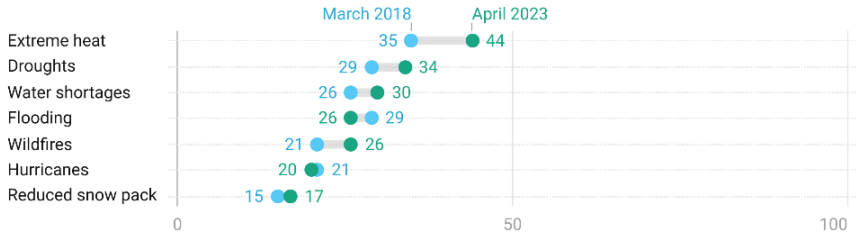
Jump to images that decrease risk perceptions and better choices.

Some of the imagery currently used by the media to depict extreme heat unintentionally decreases risk perceptions, putting Americans at greater risk of heat-related illnesses like heat exhaustion and heat stroke. This is the key finding of a YPCCC study that was recently published in the journal *Environmental Communication*. Applying this research insight can help keep Americans safe.

Most Americans are interested in learning more about the impacts of global warming on their local community (78%) or the US (77%), but only 36% have heard about global warming in the last month. While Americans have grown more worried about extreme heat over the past 5 years, only 44% are even moderately worried that extreme heat will harm their local area.

Americans have grown more worried about extreme heat more than other impacts from climate change

How worried are you that the following might harm your local area? % "Very" or "Moderately" worried



March 2018 - April 2023

Base: March 2018 (*n* = 1,278 U.S. adults) and April 2023 (*n* = 1,011)

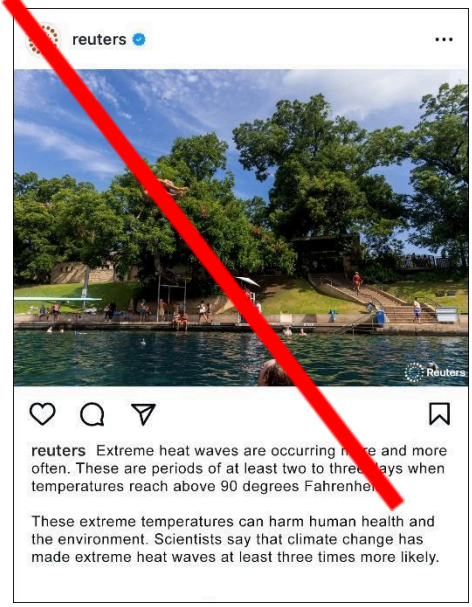
Source: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication;
George Mason Center for Climate Change Communication • Created with Datawrapper

Covering extreme heat waves is incredibly important because they can harm public health, food, water, energy, and vital infrastructure. Heat waves, known as “silent killers,” are already the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the U.S. and will intensify in frequency and severity as human-caused climate change increases global temperatures. Further, extreme heat waves are “teachable moments” that can help people connect their lived experience to climate change. But choose heat imagery carefully.

Decreases Risk Perceptions	Better Choices
Images of fun summertime activities like crowded pools can unintentionally decrease risk perceptions	Reflects the danger of extreme heat









[Covering Climate Now collected some better choices in a Getty Images gallery.]

YPCCC researchers recently tested the effect of mock Instagram posts about extreme heat on public risk perceptions. The test included a variety of images sourced from US news reports on heat waves, including images of fun summertime activities that are often paired with stories about heat waves. Results show that identical messages accompanied by either negative or neutral imagery increased perceived risk and strengthened beliefs that climate change is

exacerbating heat waves, whereas the same messages accompanied by positive imagery did not. These findings underscore the importance of visual framing in climate communication.

Other best practices and reporting resources:

Covering the story of extreme heat can be challenging for reporters, as impacts like deaths are spread across a population and are often undercounted by the medical system. Covering Climate Now has valuable, evidence-based reporting guidance to help journalists cover extreme heat. They recommend:

1. Connecting extreme heat to climate change and fossil fuels.
2. Sharing safety information.
3. Using Climate Central's reporting tools, especially the Climate Shift Index.
4. Check out CCNow's new Climate Change Reporting 101 guide.

As attribution science has improved, extreme heat presents an opportunity to connect the dots between an audience's current experience and climate change. The scientists at World Weather Attribution have a valuable guide for reporting on the connection between climate change and extreme weather, and the Climate Shift Index from Climate Central provides localized and timely assessments of the role climate change played in the likelihood of extreme heat events.

Extreme heat is also a chance to provide "news you can use." The Centers for Disease Control has a valuable guide to help Americans stay cool and safe during extreme heat. It directs people to cooling centers, resources for paying their electric bills, and tips for staying safe in high temperatures. This advice is especially valuable for readers who are at greater risk than others. It is also vital to encourage readers to check on family, friends, and neighbors, especially as heat waves worsen and surprise people who are unaccustomed to these extremes.

About YPCCC

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication conducts scientific research on public climate change knowledge, attitudes, policy preferences, and behavior, and the underlying psychological, cultural, and political factors that influence them. We also engage the public in climate change science and solutions, in partnership with governments, media organizations, companies, and civil society, and with a daily, national radio program, Yale Climate Connections.

Questions about the experiment can be directed to Dr. Matthew Goldberg at matthew.goldberg@yale.edu.

Other questions can be directed to Joshua Low, Partnerships Director, at joshua.low@yale.edu.

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