

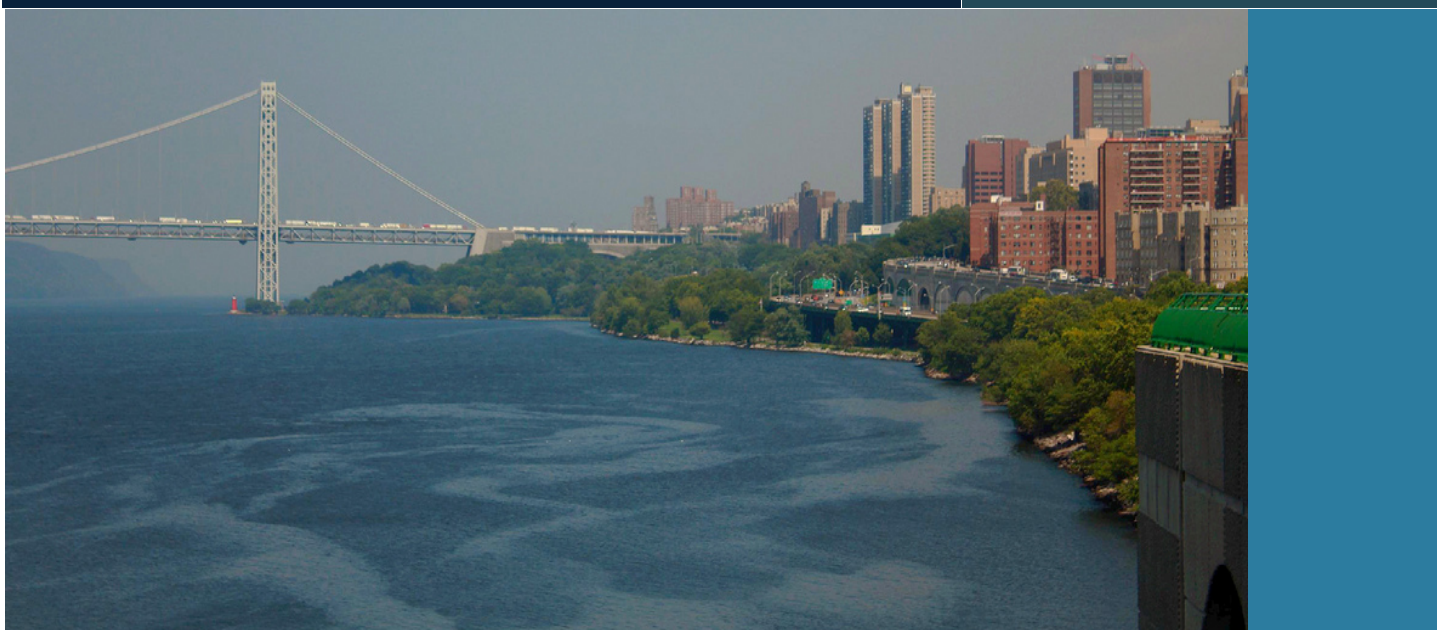


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Climate conversations: Understanding climate change in our communities

By Elka Brandt, Charles Callaway, Cecil Corbin-Mark, Anhthu Hoang, Ogonnaya Dotson Newman and Peggy Shepard





Preface

Engaging residents of environmental justice communities in discussions around climate change will continue to be important as we move into the future. As we begin to understand more and more about our changing climate, we will be forced to figure out ways to address stress related to extreme weather events, shifting availability of resources essential to our livelihood and well being.

Many organizations have begun to identify holistic methods to support community resilience related to unexpected weather events. The key to identifying and understanding what communities will need to survive in the face of an unplanned weather event can only be identified through collaborative efforts. This report back focuses on the varying visions of what climate change looks like to a diversity of residents that live in Northern Manhattan.

WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT) was funded by the United States Environmental Protection Agency to understand how residents living in Northern Manhattan view climate change.

Our goal is to continue to facilitate conversations that engage communities in planning to address drastic changes in the future due to climate change; create opportunities for collaboration that promotes community climate resilience; and educate stakeholders on the holistic approach that should be taken to understanding how we create climate justice for all people.

Our research supports and promotes the work of community-based organizations and the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank everyone that contributed to this report. There were a number of individuals that filled out surveys, participated in focus groups, provided input in developing the project plan to implementing the project components. We would also like to thank the many organizations that continue to work with us as part of the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change.

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2012 West Harlem
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Background

Locally and globally, vulnerable communities are the ones that have produced the Environmental Justice Movement of which WE ACT is an active partner. The multi-ethnic, multi-racial grassroots movement is one that understands the importance of science in advancing its community-driven goals. Over the years, movement groups have waged evidence-based campaigns, engaged in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and translated research findings into policy and interventions that help build sustainable communities.

As a result of global warming, we will experience impacts to key areas like water, ecosystems, food, and health. Vulnerable areas face multiple stresses that affect their level of exposure, sensitivity, and capacity to adapt. Currently, the American Lung Association reports that 71 percent of African-Americans and 80 percent of Latinos live in areas that fail to meet air quality standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In an era of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we continue to bear witness to an increase in the number of severe weather events impacting communities in the United States. Whether it is the mighty Mississippi River rising along the shores of the Midwest, or the melting permafrost creating displacement in the Arctic, out-of-season record-breaking tornadoes in Mississippi and Kentucky, the burning hills in Sacramento and San Diego or the droughts experienced in Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama, all of these events can be linked in some way to climate change.

In the end, we are likely to implement a portfolio of adaptation and mitigation measures that can reduce the risk of climate change. As some regions begin to realize the negative impact, they will compete for power to control the diminishing resources, especially agricultural and grazing land, water and food: conflicts which can result in violence, displacements, migrations and death.

Introduction

In 2010 WE ACT received funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the federal agency tasked with protecting the environment in the United States, to make a climate change plan for Northern Manhattan. Northern Manhattan is a large community spanning from 96th Street on the East Side and 125th Street on the West Side all the way to the northernmost tip of Manhattan. This is a diverse community with different needs and interests. In order to make an effective climate readiness plan to suit all of Northern Manhattan we wanted to begin with the people themselves. We needed to know what the people of the communities and neighborhoods know and see every day and how their community wisdom could point us to areas that most need planning as the climate changes.



To this end, WEACT held a series of four community conversations, interviewing volunteers from East Harlem, West Harlem, Central Harlem, and Washington Heights/Inwood. The community volunteers agreed to be interviewed and had their interviews recorded anonymously. We were able to use the valuable information we collected to inspire a Community Climate Change Readiness Campaign aimed at working in collaboration with New York State and City agencies, as well as with local community members, to address Northern Manhattan-specific needs.

In the past few years, climate change has gone from being a question to being a fact. There are things in the environment that are changing and in Northern Manhattan we can see them all around us. The summers are getting hotter, storms are becoming more frequent, and extreme weather events are getting worse. We used to wonder if climate change was going to happen and what it might look like, but now we wonder what we can do about it. Northern Manhattan, including West Harlem, East Harlem, Central Harlem, and Washington Heights are unique communities with special concerns and needs. These concerns are becoming more pronounced as the climate changes, and we need to find solutions for the many problems this community faces. But what are the problems? What are the concerns? And most importantly, what should we do about it?

Northern Manhattan needs a plan of action for now and for the future. The Community Climate Change Readiness Campaign, came directly from the people of Northern Manhattan who are quoted here speaking about their ideas of what they think politicians and city agencies should be working on as well as their concerns over changing weather patterns. The summary of all our findings will culminate in the Community Climate Change Readiness Plan.

What concerns do residents of Northern Manhattan have regarding Climate Change?

SUMMER AND HEAT

The past several years have included some of the hottest weather in New York. Over the 2010 summer we saw 37 days over 90 degrees when the average is 14.9. Northern Manhattan residents responded in a variety of ways but also expressed concerns about future summers, which may be even hotter. As one resident in East Harlem said, ***“We’re going to have to start thinking how we can face it next summer.”***

Extreme heat can come with many negative health effects. As explained by the Center for Disease Control heat can cause many symptoms, “from mild heat rashes to deadly heat stroke. Heat exposure can also aggravate several chronic diseases, including cardiovascular and respiratory disease.”

This is why as climate change brings more hot days it is especially important to be prepared. As one East Harlem resident expressed, ***“I work outside—I have to water the plants and [I’m] gonna be prepared with short[s] with t-shirt and [I’m] gonna drink a lot of water.”*** When asked how they handled the 2010 summer, one community member said, ***“More air conditioning, that’s what I did.”*** Many people pointed out, however, that air conditioning is not always an available option.

In Washington Heights, a resident described the situation of one of their neighbors, highlighting the importance of cooling in the heated months for vulnerable populations like older adults.

The Washington Heights resident explained ***“He don’t have [an] air conditioner [...] and he has an elderly person in the house and not even the old lady has the AC.”*** There are cooling centers provided by the city, places where anyone can go and have access to air conditioning and cold water, but the meeting in Central Harlem revealed that many people who wanted to get to cooling centers were unable because no one was available to push their wheelchair, or they were nervous about leaving home for the centers.

Heat and transportation were of major concern to those attending the meetings. ***“Sometime when you [are] in the subway too, the subway very hot and humid,”*** said one resident in East Harlem. In Washington Heights another said, ***“The trains and the buses are, well air conditioned [but] a lot of times you get on the trains or the buses and [the] air conditioning [doesn’t work].”*** Participants across the board were anxious to see better ventilation in subway stations, including the possibility of air conditioning to prevent dangers in the subway like one Washington Heights resident described: ***“There was a girl that fainted on the platform [...] and she died [because] she fell [on] the train tracks.”*** Protecting the Northern Manhattan community from the deadly effects of extreme heat was one of the most prominent interests of the interviewees.

What concerns do residents of Northern Manhattan have regarding Climate Change?

WINTER AND COLD

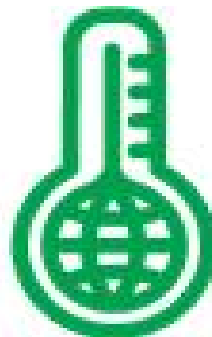
Climate change will not only make summers hotter, but it could also make winters colder. The winter of 2010-2011 had three of the biggest snowstorms on record, each bringing many feet of snow to the East Coast. Not only did many residents have difficulty getting to and from work, but they were concerned about time they missed off work when schools were closed, meaning they had to stay home with children. In Washington Heights one resident said, *“I feel like [the cold] affected me because after the snowstorm you still have ice on the [ground], you know the buses aren't running the same way [...] And then after that was when I went into work and it was just really [hard because] I had to leave extra early to, you know, make sure I caught my bus.”*

Another noted, *“There was a lot of people that had to [walk to and] from work because there was no public transportation.”*

And yet another, *“So my job told us that we had to use our vacation time, personal time, or sick time... they weren't going to give it off for us.”* Missing work or facing a dangerous or difficult commute could become commonplace if the changing climate causes continued severe snowstorms.

HEALTH

Another effect of climate change in Northern Manhattan could be the worsening of health impacts because of the heat, cold, pollution, or spread of new diseases. In our conversations, however, the community was primarily concerned with asthma. One Central Harlem resident explained, *“The way the weather is changing, its very hard for asthmatics to be able to breath [...] We have too many kids dying from things that are preventable in this day and time. So the air quality, to me, is very important.”*



A West Harlem community member also noted worsening of allergic asthma and in Washington Heights residents were discussing how children missed school due to their asthma. Asthma is a problem for Northern Manhattan in all seasons and residents are concerned about worsening symptoms due to climate change. Although rates of asthma in New York City have been decreasing slowly climate change could alter asthma rates if steps are not taken to improve air quality in the city.

What concerns do residents of Northern Manhattan have regarding Climate Change?

SEA LEVEL RISE AND STORMS

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the Northeast “heavy rainfall events (defined as those in excess of 1 inch of rainfall) have increased by as much as 100%.” This piece of information should not be surprising to New Yorkers who were affected by storms like Hurricane Irene in September of 2011. As the possibility of extreme weather events - like storms, that can possibly shut the city down become more frequent, residents in areas that are low in the city become more aware of their risk of being affected.

Storms that bring high waters and flooding, as well as rising sea levels from melting at the polar ice caps, could raise Northern Manhattan’s coastline as much as 23 inches by the end of the century, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

This would put large parts of Harlem under water, and could drive numbers of people to the higher ground of Washington Heights. Out of all the concerns expressed by the Northern Manhattan community, this was the one on which people were most vocal.



2011 is a real possibility for New York City.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ **Continued integration of community resilience and emergency preparedness programs that use localized emergency planning groups to support at risk populations during an extreme weather event.**
- ❖ **Education, outreach and organizing that focuses on the principles of climate justice for community residents, policy advocates and local elected officials.**
- ❖ **Continued support for community-based organizations to partner with public health departments, academic institutions and local preparedness officials to implement community-based strategies to address community concerns related to climate change.**
- ❖ **Continued integration and communication amongst New York City public health, environmental and emergency response teams at the local level to ensure that a comprehensive community-based climate mitigation plan is in place.**



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1854 Amsterdam Avenue,
2nd Floor
New York, NY 10031
<http://www.weact.org>

GENERAL

- Determining the difference between change in weather due to seasons and climate change was a recurring theme.

SUMMER & HEAT

- Longer or shorter summers and extreme heat are a concern because of:
 - cooling costs.
 - impacts on public transportation.

WINTER & COLD

- Longer or shorter winters and extreme cold are a concern because of:
 - heating costs.
 - impacts on public transportation.
 - vulnerable community residents.

SEA LEVEL RISE & STORMS

- The possibility of an extreme weather event is high and is a cause of concern given odd weather patterns identified by residents.

HEALTH

- Climate change can impact health and is a concern for vulnerable people like older adults and community residents with asthma.