

PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS

by

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DEDICATION

For my mom, and the mountain.

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I. Introduction

The phrase ‘think globally, act locally’ is a popular saying that is often used when considering how we can be better stewards for our planet, to prevent and mitigate some of the more serious consequences of human impact. The greenhouse effect, a process in which the atmosphere retains heat leaving the planet, has largely been the result of human behavior and has been causing the global temperature to rise continuously (NASA 2021). Practices such as the burning of fossil fuels and demolishing land for agricultural purposes contribute to increases in the gasses that prevent heat from leaving the planet, thereby changing the ‘greenhouse’ (NASA 2021). The effects of a changing greenhouse are not uniform, and each region in the United States is impacted in different ways. California has seen rising temperatures statewide, increasing heatwaves, and is forecasted to experience water supply shortages (EPA 2021 [2016]). The Environmental Protection Agency notes that these changes increase the risk of wildfires and pose a threat to the health of the diverse ecosystems in the state (EPA 2021 [2016]). As the climate continues to drastically change, the question of how we can take care of our environment becomes even more pertinent.

California has long been a state that fluctuates between years of drought and years of increased precipitation. However, the severity of weather events has intensified over the past few decades, and California has become an epicenter for some of the most severe consequences of climate change fueled by human action. Global warming means that California is more prone to heat waves, snowpack is melting earlier, and droughts are becoming more common as the temperature around the world increases (EPA 2021 [2016], 1). In 2020 a succession of extreme weather events rolled out, one right after the

other from coast to coast in the United States. California experienced its worst fire season in decades. While disasters happen nearly every year somewhere in the world and find their way to headlines across various news outlets, the gravity of California's wildfires continuously earned itself a top spot. The fires in the late summer of 2020 were so severe that smoke from the wildfires reached the East Coast and were seen in Washington D.C. (Baker 2021 [2020]). By October, which usually marks the beginning of fire season in California, the state had already seen 8,400 wildfires and 4.1 million acres of land burned, with strong winds and scorching temperatures above the yearly average pushing the state into a prolonged elevated risk status (Freedman 2021 [2020]).

As the population grows, the divide between wild country and suburban life narrows and brings residents closer to lands that are at higher risk for disasters like fires and mudslides. My research explored how residents respond to and understand the crisis, their connection to the land, and how the media, political affiliation, and local/federal leadership influence their perceptions. The goal of my research is to answer questions about the communities that exist along the urban and rural interface in the mountains of central California. My research aims to understand how political affiliation shapes residents' perceptions of the climate crisis in the area and influences their decision-making. An important aspect of this is media consumption. Media consumption is molded in part by political affiliation. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center investigated political polarization in America by examining how people across the political spectrum find and share information regarding the government and politics via social media, news media, and discussions with friends and family. The study found that those on the furthest ends of the political spectrum focus

on distinct information streams on government and politics from those three arenas, with the greatest differences existing between those who express consistently liberal and consistently conservative views (Pew Research Center 2021 [2014], 1). Which media sources inform them on the subject? How do these media sources influence their risk assessment of environmental dangers caused by climate change? How do people share and obtain information, and how does it strengthen their own perspectives?

Natural Hazards, Disaster, and Risk

The term natural hazard is one that is often used freely and flexibly within disaster research. Technically speaking, a ‘natural hazard’ is the “potential interaction between humans and extreme natural events” (Hagelman, Montz, Tobin, 2022 [2017]). Living near a floodplain or on top of a fault line is a natural hazard; the events of flooding or earthquake have always happened, but it is the introduction of humans that makes these things hazardous. Geographers Hagelman, Montz, and Tobin, whose research centers on natural hazards, note that the “hazardousness” of something changes with time and human occupation; as the world changes, so do the things that are considered hazardous (2022 [2017]). A disaster is what happens after a natural force (such as an earthquake or flood) disrupts society, where the natural processes that take place on the planet collide with the human use systems (Hagelman, Montz, Tobin 2022 [2017]). The extent of the disruption and how it is measured is often subject to debate. Should it be quantified by only loss of life, or by the negative financial impact it has on society?

The process in which a disaster occurs can be described by several stages: hazard, risk, threat, disaster (when impact is made), and aftermath (post-impact)

(Hagelman, Montz, Tobin 2022 [2017]). For example, when the Northridge Earthquake hit California in 1994, the residents were living in a hazardous area, felt the impact when their community was disrupted by the quake. Risk is defined as when a “hazard threat is impending, eventually leading to the impact and post impact phases” (Hagelman, Montz, Tobin 2022 [2017]).

How people perceive, react, and assess risk and disasters is created within a number of social and cultural arenas. Anthropologist Doug Henry points out that people calculate and weigh risk based on things that they believe will provide them with a lifestyle that aligns with their social preferences (Henry 2021 [2005], 5). People may choose to live in a certain area even though risk for disaster is high because it aligns with and supports their cultural preferences (though there are several other factors that may constrain an individual’s ability to leave an area). People, for example, may live in beach towns that provide a laid back and relaxed aesthetic or in cities that offer ample social opportunities even though threats of rising sea levels or pollution are present respectively (Henry 2021[2005], 5).

The ways in which people mobilize responses to disasters and comprehend their circumstances are formed, in part, by the information available within their political circles (Henry 2021 [2005], 6). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016 found that on the topic of climate change, the political right and left have differing views on what or who is causing it, who is responsible for addressing it, and what acceptable solutions are available (Pew Research Center, 2016). The study notes that even among conservative Republicans who acknowledge global warming, the group is less likely to anticipate severe weather events as a result and less likely to

believe that policy and individual changes can have a mitigating impact (Pew Research Center 2021 [2016]).

How people identify politically influences where they go to obtain information and how they share it with others. A study by the Pew Research Center found that conservatives gravitate towards Fox News as a single news source and trust fewer sources than their liberal counterparts (2021 [2014], 5). Democrats consume media in a similar fashion: about 20% of Democrats and Independents get their political news from media that largely cater to the political left (Pew Research Center 2022 [2020]). Personal relationships and social media interactions are also shaped by political affiliation. Those identifying as conservative are more likely to see likeminded posts on social media or keep relationships with people who share their political views (Pew Research Center 2021 [2014], 8).

The topic of climate change has become increasingly politicized, and disinformation on the topic has permeated channels of knowledge. Additionally, those people who place themselves on opposite ends of the political spectrum (consistently liberal and consistently conservative) are more likely to utilize their power as voters and donors, contributing to campaigns and causes more frequently than their counterparts who exist somewhere in the middle (Pew Research Center 2021 [2014], 1). Motivated voters and political donors are important actors in the climate change discussion because the solution for anthropogenic climate change lies within systemic change and a collaborative effort to reduce CO² emissions, alter land use practices, and changing to more sustainable fuel sources (EPA 2022). This solution requires a unified voter base to mobilize and understanding how they view the issue of climate

change is an important factor to take into consideration.

For example, the Oakhurst/Coarsegold area, where I conducted research for this study, has grown increasingly right leaning in the past few years and has elected government officials that reflect this. During the 2020 presidential election, even though both Coarsegold and Oakhurst increased their Democratic vote by a few points, the Republican presidential candidate won the area with a 35-point and 25-point lead, respectively (New York Times 2021 [2020]). Tom McClintock, the current Representative for the 4th Congressional District, which houses Coarsegold and Oakhurst, remarked during the 2020 fire season that Governor Gavin Newsom's stance on climate change is 'delusional', and that "environmental laws abandoned science for ideology" (House.gov 2021 [2020]). The scope of this project will look specifically at how current day political ideologies influence pre-disaster risk assessment and post-disaster trauma processing and recovery.

History of Fire Control in California

Fire suppression tactics in California have long given the idea that we are battling against something, winning some war against a foe that has naturally occurred for centuries in the state. However, quite the opposite has happened, and it is now clear that California's fire suppression techniques are not as successful as some originally thought. Since the early 1900s, the primary method of disaster prevention was to eliminate fires completely (Forest History Society 2021). After a series of wildfires in 1910 the Forest Service "convinced themselves, and members of Congress and the public that only total fire suppression" could prevent future disasters (Forest History Society 2021). The "10:00 am" law established in the mid 1930s restricted burning to

limited hours (Forest History Society 2021). Smokey the Bear was introduced in 1944 as a marketing tactic aimed at the public to support total fire suppression policies (Forest History Society 2021). These policies, which lasted until around the 1970s, ensured that intense vegetation overgrowth would take place (Little Hoover Commission 2021 [2018], 12). As the climate warmed, that vegetation became dry and brittle, and with any small spark, able to easily catch fire.

While California has a long history of experiencing drought periods, from 2011-2017 the state entered an extended period of drought and was accompanied by warmer temperatures related to anthropogenic temperature changes (NIDIS). A report from the United States Department of Agriculture found that California's forests and landscape have been poorly managed; trees dead from drought or disease catch fire easily and are situated so close together that fires spread easily from one dry branch to another (Little Hoover Commission 2021 [2018], 10).

The policies pushed from the 1930s through the 1970s worked in tandem to change both public and governmental opinion on how to control the state's wildfires (Forest History Society 2021). What people believe and their understanding of how the world works influences how they vote, how they live, and how they carry out their day to day lives within the confines of the ever- changing sociopolitical sphere. For decades, fire suppression was at the forefront of forestry services and promoted by the federal and state government (Forest History Society 2021). Anthropogenic climate change has caused temperatures to rise all over the globe, and California's landscape has transformed from golden to charred as lack of rainfall and overgrown vegetation have made the state susceptible to uncontrollable fires (NASA 2021 [2016], 2). The mountain

area in Central California was under threat for nearly four months in 2020 as the Creek Fire burned through federal and private land, eventually moving west towards residential areas (ABC30 2021 [2020]). After years of land mismanagement, California is seeing the consequences of a global issue in its most severe forms on a local level.

The idea that humans are in total control of their environment is intricately woven into the fabric of American tradition, especially in California. Lynn White Jr., speaking on the burgeoning ecological crisis, notes that the early years of agricultural changes highlighted the concept that “man and nature are two things, and man is master” (White Jr.2021 [1967], 406). This sentiment can be seen throughout our history and relationship with the environment: agriculture has now expanded into an industry that requires the intensive control and exploitation of land to stay profitable. Housing developments continue to be constructed on unstable ground that increase the risk that residents will be in the path of a hazardous event. Our history as a nation is infused with this idea of conquering that is closely tied to Manifest Destiny and the Homestead Act, which fueled the colonization efforts of America. Former President Truman noted that “land hungry immigrants found a golden opportunity to conquer the land” and H.W. Bush said, “the Homestead Act empowered people and freed them from poverty, allowing them to control their own destinies and create their own opportunities” (NPR.com 2022). Though numerous leaders in this country have noted the need for a healthy environment, these sentiments are uttered in a capitalist society that inherently relies on exploitation to function, and thus this ecological crisis has continued as unsustainable farming and consumption practices continue.

Elected officials represent their constituents and advocate for the causes the community cares about. Policies meant to have a lasting effect are in the ever-changing

hands of the lawmakers. The government and forest services of the 1930s, at the time, included individuals who strongly believed that complete fire suppression was the only option (Forest History Society 2021). These two entities, which held power, then promoted their ideas to the public and enforced policies and laws that ultimately defined how people operate within their spaces. For California, this has presented a thorny issue; a little over half of the state's land is owned by the federal government and is at the mercy of changing administrations that may or may not prioritize land management or climate change. If people do not believe that climate change is an issue, or that the government does not have the power or ability to alleviate its consequences, then enacting meaningful and successful disaster prevention becomes increasingly difficult (Barrios 2021 [2020], 34).

Fire suppression and subsequently climate change have long been framed as the responsibility of the individual—from Smokey the Bear's tagline of "only you can prevent forest fires" and the reduce, reuse, recycle initiative urging citizens to create the solution to climate change in their own homes. Many of the solutions proposed to climate change under capitalism necessitate consuming more, but in a 'greener' way: buy green energy, buy ecofriendly products, purchase, and drive hybrid cars. While the focus is on the actions of individuals, 100 producers of coal and gas are responsible for 71% of global industrial greenhouse gas emissions (Carbon Majors Report 2022 [2017]). At the individual level, though reducing our consumption is important, the major driver of climate change comes from a handful of corporations. While under the neoliberal state, individuals are held responsible for managing their environments responsibly and mitigating disaster, exemplified by the responses of

moderate and conservative residents who feel as though they can only control so much. However, the drivers of climate change and the resulting wildfires require large scale energy reform.

II. Role of Anthropology

Disasters do not occur and affect individuals in a uniform manner; how people understand what has happened and how they choose from the available avenues for recovery are bound in cultural and socioeconomic constructions. Anthropologist Roberto Barrios, with a background in anthropology of disasters, points out that options for survival and reaction may be limited by and illustrate the effects of economic systems and developmental policies (Barrios 2021 [2017], 155). Anthropologists have emphasized the need for studies on disasters centered at both the local and population levels. To successfully apply disaster prevention and mitigation, one must consider the process from a local context. How people perceive, react, and assess risk and disasters is created within a number of social and cultural arenas. Henry points out that people calculate and weigh risk based on things that they believe will provide them with a lifestyle that aligns with their social preferences (Henry 2005, 5).

As anthropologists have become more involved in the field of disaster studies, they have noted the problematic meaning the term “natural disaster” holds. Coining it as the result of something “natural” lessens the reality of what is happening and shifts responsibility away from people and determines cause to be something that we cannot control (Barrios 2021 [2020], 23). How people understand their relationships with and influence over their environments shapes their responses to such disasters on local, state, and federal levels. Roberto Barrios raises an important question: if people (including state, federal, and nonprofit organizations and groups) don’t recognize such events as the direct result of our own activity, what level of disaster prevention is truly achievable (Barrios 2021 [2020], 23).

Often, disaster management takes precedence over disaster prevention. Any real or efficient work towards preventing disasters can be lost in bureaucratic shuffle, and consequently some states or countries may instead implement quick fixes to address the immediate needs of the affected communities without establishing long term solutions. While many countries detail emergency expenditures, anthropologist Terry Jeggle states that few have been able to provide budgets specifically meant for risk management activities (Jeggle 2021 [2020], 63). From 1985-2004 the United States spent \$195 million on preventative measures, and \$3.5 billion on disaster responses (Jeggle 2021 [2020], 62). DRM requires “collective sensitivity and locally relevant” methods in order to obtain progress (Jeggle 2021 [2020], 65). For successful preventative action to occur there must be cohesion throughout the various acting agency levels or governing bodies that consider the distinctive features of each community.

Anthropology can look closely at how people’s cosmology and culture affect their analysis of risk and how the systems they exist in either enable or constrain their actions (Hoffman 2021 [2020], 270). How people experience and understand disaster is contingent upon their place in cultural space and time. In this way, anthropology can help both reduce extraneous government spending and provide assistance and prevention to communities on the local level.

Anthropology is thus positioned to understand the many moving parts of how people determine disaster responses, understanding, and belief (these can include social, political, and historical aspects) (Hoffman 2021 [2020], 270). These elements are constantly changing and dependent on the time in history they occupy, who is in

power and how that power is wielded, and the ways in which people understand how disasters occur. It is becoming increasingly clear that what people believe and how they understand their environment (built and otherwise) is connected to how they use their power as citizens, voters, and consumers to contribute to the varying policies related to disaster prevention. If people do not consider themselves to live in a hazardous area or do not believe climate change to be a pressing matter, they are less likely to take action to mitigate the extreme results of both. Perception studies seek to understand how people's understanding of hazards translates into action and often unveil complex and interconnected answers as to why people underestimate the severity of a hazard. Tobin, Hagelman, and Montz, a trio of hazards researchers, state that a person's understanding of hazards and their risk arise from fluid and interconnected factors, including situation factors such as socioeconomic status, and cognitive factors such as attitude (Tobin, Hagelman, and Montz 2022 [2017]). All these elements work to shape what people prioritize: both on the ballot and in their everyday lives.

As anthropology becomes more integrated into the topic of climate change, some have emphasized that the previous interdisciplinary climate research trends towards favoring quantitative analysis (Crate 2021 [2011], 176). Interdisciplinary research both at home in the United States and abroad is necessary to execute a solution to a global issue. Crate likened the climate crisis to the sinking of the Titanic, saying that even though disaster is ensuing many resist acknowledging its presences (Crate 2021 [2011], 184). There are multiple compounding factors that may influence this resistance and reaction. The slow unfurling of the climate crisis, media representations

of climate change and politically defined perceptions of disaster influence the way people interact with and respond to their relationships with the planet.

The media aspect is a particularly important component of how people understand the topic of climate change. A 2012 study found that of three prominent cable news programs in the United States (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News) Fox News was not only more dismissive of climate change overall, but that it hosted more climate change deniers (Feldman et al 2022 [2012]). Furthermore, the study found that the more often participants watched Fox News the more likely they were to be skeptical of climate change (Feldman et al 2022 [2012]). A separate study of Fox News coverage, conducted by Public Citizen, discovered that from January to June of 2019 Fox News Networks programs mentioned the topic of climate change 247 times, and 212 of those instances were dismissive of climate change or countered scientific consensus (Public Citizen 2022 [2019]). While conservatives tend to doubt the realities of climate change and take in more misinformation, they also tend to have a stronger connection to the media they watch and their opinions tend to reflect this, regardless of how they identify politically (Feldman 2022 [2012]). However, because there is a strong link between conservatives and the media they consume, they are also more open to embracing the gravity of climate change when it is presented to them via media (Feldman 2022 [2012]).

The connection between what is presented in the media and how people assess climate change, and its consequences, is thus critical in the discussion of hazards and disasters. People may underestimate the severity of a hazard or the changing climate and not feel the need to act against it. Research centered within disaster and climate

change can “bridge what we know to facilitate global research and reach” and to provide local understandings of a global problem (Crate 2021 [2011], 184).

Theoretical Perspectives on Human Action and Reproducing Systems

Practice theory examines how the system is both produced and reproduced and tries to understand where it comes from (Ortner 2021 [1984], 146). The ‘system’, as Ortner says, is not divisible into smaller building blocks, but rather constitutes a ‘seamless whole’ that includes norms, values, ideals, and political processes (Ortner 2021[1984], 148). The goal of practice theory is to explore the connections between human action and the system within which it takes place. The system and its actors function in a complex and fluid manner, each one shaping the other in a continuous manner.

Additionally, the system operates on a set of inequalities and asymmetries that are contingent upon the time and space it works within (Ortner 2021 [2006], 10). In studying disaster events I hope to gain a better understanding of the political processes operating within the system and how they guide and constrain actions and decision making. Ortner acknowledges that both material and political constraints are present in practice, but also points out the importance of the ways in which culture “controls the definitions of the world for actors and limits their conceptual tools” (Ortner 2021 [1984], 153). What is a true and urgent matter for some may be nonexistent to others, sculpting the way that action can (or should) be taken. For people on opposite ends of the political spectrum, the definition of climate change varies greatly and guides their responses to it.

By using practice theory as a framework, I explore the political processes

involved in shaping people's understanding of climate change and disasters and how people function within these political structures to reinforce them. Practice theory also provides insight into how beliefs and perceptions influence people's decision-making process post-disaster in the current sociopolitical context. I center these in a historical context, linking them to larger scale political movements that have influenced the interpretations of anthropogenic climate change. In this context, I examine how the communities are constrained or enabled to act locally and think globally, in terms of climate change and their understandings of disasters.

III. Setting

This research took place in the mountain communities of central California. Located among the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Oakhurst and Coarsegold sit about 20 miles outside of the entrance to Yosemite Valley, a popular attraction for both local and non-local tourists. The area experienced a prolonged traumatic climate crisis from September to December of 2020. The Creek Fire, which burned over 350,000 acres during a 184-day period forced thousands of citizens from the surrounding areas to evacuate. The burn scars from this disaster have prompted mud-slide warnings for the upcoming year as severe winter weather collides with that of the summer.

Moving north on Highway 41 takes you from the foothills of dry, brittle shrubland farther into the forests of oak and pine trees. The road jumps almost 2,000 feet in elevation from the valley below. The elevation typically allows for good to moderate air quality year-round, as the towns are high enough on the mountain to escape the pollution from larger northern cities. Coarsegold and Oakhurst spread out along the singular main highway into the mountains, with small paved and semi-paved roads branching off into the mountains and residential areas. With just under 10 miles and no phone reception available between the two towns (this stretch of highway is aptly named Deadwood), the winding road opens to sheer, tree lined cliffs on either side. Summertime now regularly sees temperatures upwards of 90 degrees, followed by the winter months where the snowfall can create dangerous road conditions and rock or mud slides.

Both Oakhurst and Coarsegold are small towns- 3,446 and 1,585 residents, respectively (Data Commons). For both towns, median household incomes fall below

the national (\$68,703) and state average (\$80,440): Oakhurst households average \$44,310 and Coarsegold households \$62,992 (US Census Data 2021). Individual income levels drop even further below the state average of about \$31,000. Men in Oakhurst earn on average \$21,315 and women earn \$20,374; in Coarsegold the discrepancy between genders widens with men earning \$32,135 and women \$19,639 (US Census Data 2021). While housing costs are lower in this area than in many other places in California, income levels are as well and do not offer residents a large degree of financial freedom. In Oakhurst the poverty rate is 36.1%, and it is 4.4% in Coarsegold (US Census Data 2021). The available job market is primarily white collar, administrative positions, and a smaller amount of blue-collar employment; commuting into the city offers options for some who qualify for higher paying jobs.

Founded by miners during the Gold Rush, the area remains connected to its roots as a Wild West town. The town website for Oakhurst prompts visitors to “travel through time on Highway 49”, the main road leading into the area. Feelings of independence and connections to the mountain are strong, reminiscent of John Muir’s classic writings. Much of the tourism in the area is tied to its history as a gold mining town. The small downtown area of Coarsegold (in reality, a handful of buildings that sit along the highway) panders to tourists, with wagon wheels and a teepee on the main road that give travelers a curated experience, even if it is not historically accurate.

In 2016, the Sierra Sky Ranch Firewise Community and Fire Safe Council was formed to help educate community members on how they can take their safety into their own hands and protect themselves (Flanagan 2021 [2016]). Residents of the area

are close knit, but also pride themselves on being self-reliant and free from the everyday trappings of city life-they do not follow the mainstream currents and do not want to. The mountain prides itself on tradition, doing things how they have always been done-a sentiment that pervades numerous social and political topics.

A columnist for the Sierra Star, a small local newspaper, wrote in August of 2020 about the joys of mountain living. At a time when larger cities were gripped with social unrest, Oakhurst residents were “proving to be good neighbors to one another” and “waving at law enforcement with full hands and smiles under their masks” (Atwood 2021[2020]). In this brief essay, the author describes how the residents of Oakhurst are kind, caring, and familiar with one another. These qualities, he says, cannot be found in larger cities like Seattle and New York where rioters are “ignoring the great aspects of our nation” and destroying property, failing to recognize that America is the land of opportunity where anyone can enjoy the national parks and medical care (Atwood 2021 [2020]).

Soon after this was published, incumbent representative Tom McClintock (a vocal climate change denier) debated Jessica Morse during the election cycle. The Sierra Star posted several letters from local readers after the debate. One reader said she would be voting for McClintock because not only does he share the same conservative principles, but he has been legislating for a long time and can effectively “navigate the swamp” of Washington D.C. Another reader explained that while America’s “hallowed principles” were attacked under President Obama’s term, Morse’s “Soros-funded campaign” would not succeed here in the mountains. A third reader noted that the Democratic party is now under the control of “radical liberals”,

and that California is no longer a place for the middle class, instead turning their attention to “defending antifa, MS-13, and providing free everything whether you are legal or not” (Sierra Star 2021 [2018]). McClintock won his reelection and continues to occupy the seat he has held in California’s District 4 since 2009. During my time as a student at the high school, calls to conserve the land and maintain local history were common, but only so long as it did not require acknowledging a progressive political agenda.

Methods

I attended high school in Oakhurst, and my mother taught at the same school. The friends I made during those years either grew up on the mountain or had lived there for some time, and many have remained in the area despite the declining environmental state. The area still holds meaning to many people, though from the outside it may appear that the means to maintain a life there are slowly fading. The main goal of my interviews was to ascertain how residents of the area understand the causes of the environmental changes taking place around them, their personal experiences with the recent Creek Fire, and how their political affiliation shapes these perceptions.

Using my established contacts and relationships within the community I recruited eight participants who had lived in the mountain area for a minimum of five years to participate in interviews. I recruited one male and seven female participants who have lived in the mountain area for a minimum for five years. I focused on residents who have lived in the area for an extended period of time as I wanted to interview people who were familiar with the environment before the onset of severe fires.

To abide by Covid-19 restrictions, I conducted one-time, semi-structured interviews via Zoom. I used an interview protocol to help guide the conversation, and the questions focused on how participants mitigate the negative effects of disaster, how they understand the changes taking place in the mountain environment, and how their political affiliations shape their experiences and understanding. I used Otter to transcribe the interviews and then coded the transcripts for emergent themes. Coding allowed me to trace certain themes and identify connections to political affiliation. I also consulted archival data on the history of the community and environmental health of the area. Additionally, I considered media coverage, news reports, and social media posts from the last year to see how information about the fire season was presented to the public.

Description of Sample

Of my eight participants, one was male and seven were female. The sample had an age range from mid-30s to late-60s. All the participants had lived on the mountain for a minimum of five years; five had lived in the area for more than a decade. During the interviews, I asked each of the participants how they identified politically to see if and how the politics of climate change shaped their experiences and perceptions. Two participants self-identified as politically moderate, three as politically liberal, and three as politically conservative. This balance of political representation helped me to see how the participants diverged along party lines in terms of attributing causes of the changing climate.

What is Happening on the Mountain and How do you Deal?

The interviews were aimed at learning more about the residents' experiences with the recent influx in wildfires, their perceptions of what was causing these changes, and how their political affiliation might influence their understanding and responses to hazards. The conversations with residents of the Oakhurst and Coarsegold area revealed four key findings shared among all participants: their love of the mountain, acknowledging extreme changes in the environment and climate, acceptance and normalization of fire season preparation, and a persistent level of fear. However, a divergence occurred along political lines when residents were asked what they feel the driving cause of these changes are. Participants who self-identified as conservative or moderate tended to feel as though the fires were just something that comes along with natural weather and climate cycles, whereas those who self-identified as liberal felt that large scale, systemic change was the answer and also prioritized individual sustainability. The next chapter details the personal experiences, regardless of political affiliation, participants share. The following chapter addresses the bifurcation of assigning cause.

IV. Shared Experiences

Living in the mountains requires residents to lead a unique lifestyle that emphasizes collaboration and care for others; there are things to be considered that those living in the valley below do not need to think about. In short, it is work: brush must be cleared away to maintain a defensible line between the wild country and your property, wild animals abound and are not to be toyed with, dogs and pets must be inoculated against rattlesnakes, you must remember to store extra water and have chains at the ready during the winter months, and there is an appreciation and respect for the mountain that residents express. One longtime resident prodded my memory of how to conduct yourself in the mountains, “You know, you went to school up here! You know what it’s like. It’s work.” There are skills that you must learn, not just because they keep you safe, but because they keep your community safe. Failing to maintain your property can be a serious threat to your neighbors when fire season rolls around and having a fire in the summer is more than a laughable offense-it could, literally, set the entire community ablaze with one errant spark.

All the participants interviewed expressed four major shared feelings and experiences. The first is that they all love the mountains and their lives there, enjoying the sense of community that is brought by their responsibilities for keeping the mountain safe. At the same time, regardless of political affiliation, those interviewed conveyed feelings that their mountain is changing drastically, both in terms of weather and landscape, a sense of hypervigilance, and a general acceptance that the extreme fires and temperatures are now an aspect of mountain life that is ‘normal’ and unavoidable. The following four subsections will describe these shared experiences in detail.

For the Love of the Mountain

One of the first questions I asked in my interviews was, “How long have you lived here and what drew you to the area?” Residents responded with stories of their unequivocal love for the mountain. Some moved to the area for a job or for their spouse, some have lived in the area their entire lives, but all of them expressed a love for the environment and what it has to offer. One woman, who moved to the area with her husband and children, was drawn in by the small, close knit-community and the landscape, saying, “You know, there's a reason we moved from the desert to the mountains.” When the family was preparing to move, her daughter told her, “You won’t believe how beautiful it is Mama.” She later told me that when she and her husband had to be away from the house, the neighbors would keep an eye on their children and report back to them; this closeness to the community was something that attracted them to the area and persists to this day in different forms.

Another resident, while relatively new to the area (they moved a little under ten years ago), has spent quite a bit of time enjoying hiking and camping nearby, telling me, “I also am personally very interested in hiking and being in the mountains. And I really love native plants.” The proximity to nature was something residents loved and something that excited them. Upon learning that their family would be moving to the Sierras, one woman shared memories of her daughter’s excitement regarding their upcoming transition to the mountains, “And it was that we had... there was so, so much forest in the area, you know. And she was just thrilled

that I was going, that we were going to be living in that.” The mountain environment, a stark contrast from the dry and bare southern California desert where they used to live, was enticing to the entire family. That environment which once attracted the family is now beginning to take on qualities of their former home: scorched, dry, and with relentless summers.

Put simply by longtime resident, “It was green. It was beautiful.” She later expressed frustration at how much landscape has changed with the burn scar left by multiple fires and collapsing forest, “It looks absolutely horrible during the summer. It looks horrible, and what can I say? It's just so many dead trees and falling and falling.” This sentiment was shared among many of the residents; the landscape that they once cherished has rapidly changed, at a great cost to them, and has been replaced by something they consider ugly and is a constant reminder of what they miss.

Extreme Changes

A particularly strong emergent theme was that each of the residents could identify the changes they see in the landscape and weather patterns and pinpoint the time when they felt these changes became noticeable. This marked the era, for the participants, when the fluctuations in precipitation, temperature, and length/intensity of wildfire season began to stray from the norm. As the participants have lived in the area for a minimum of five years, with some living in the area for decades, many have been present for the extreme drought which took place from 2011-2017. The precipitation average for 2011-2014 is the second lowest in state history and sent the state into a D4 level drought. The US Drought Monitor contains six categories, beginning with “no drought” and ending with a D4 designation as the most severe. A D4 level drought, the most extreme end of

the scale, is characterized by fallow fields, costly fire seasons, poor air quality that impacts health, increases in West Nile Virus cases, increases in greenhouse gas emissions as hydropower decreases, and pine beetle infestation (CPO 2022 [2014] and US Drought Monitor). This time frame between 2011-2014 is one that was pinpointed by multiple participants as the stage where things really began to change for them; they noticed the grasses were drier and the temperatures hotter, and it marked the point where residents began to both see and feel the extreme changes in weather, climate, and landscape.

Every resident, regardless of political affiliation, described in detail the extreme changes they have seen in three broad categories of weather, climate, and landscape of the mountain. One resident of Coarsegold who told me they identify as politically liberal, described the shifts in weather patterns: “Well, it's the changing weather patterns, the increased heat, and the decrease in rainfall. It's being cooked there.” Another resident of a nearby mountain town (and a self-identified liberal) added, “No, we don't get the rain, or I think the last year that we had a lot of rain was about it about three or four years ago. Anyway, it's a lot less frequent.” One woman who identifies as politically conservative and has lived in the area for more than two decades, compared the weather patterns that she experienced when first moving to the area versus today.

In giving an example when we moved here, it was in September school had already started. And it rained for that first entire week of school. And we, having lived in the desert, we had no umbrellas. The girls were frantic because of their hairdos. Go rush, rush out and buy umbrellas. No, we haven't had that kind of rain in a long time.

These quotes exemplify the extent to which the climate and landscape have changed over the years, and how intensely these changes have been felt by residents of both liberal and conservative political ideologies. An area that once provided mild

and enjoyable summers is now being ‘cooked’ or drying up, a feeling shared among all the residents.

These extreme changes have impacted the way the residents live. Some members of the mountain community have begun to avoid outdoor activities to mitigate the effects of the weather changes, with one saying that she changed her daily walking schedule during the summer to avoid the afternoon heat. Multiple members of the community pointed out that the nightly temperature drops of the summers no longer happen, and instead the mountain stays hot all day and night. One conservative resident mentioned that the fluctuations in summer temperatures used to offer them a chance to cool the house down, “Even though it was warm during the day, you could cool the house off in the evening, and you're having a lot more trouble doing that now.” The environment and weather they used to enjoy has all but disappeared.

Each resident interviewed was able to articulate the many ways that the environment and climate had changed over the past decade. Some connect the changes they see to the influx of recent wildfires and their intensity. One interviewee, who identifies as liberal leaning, noted that, “The tree mortality was a direct result of the drought and the increased temperatures because the trees did not have enough moisture to raise sap and protect themselves from the bark beetles.” I spoke with one resident, a self-professed ‘old timer on the mountain’ who has lived in the area for decades and considers themselves more conservative politically. She pointed out what she felt was a direct link between the intensified weather and the intensity and frequency of the fires, saying, “It's hotter, it's drier, the fires, I think are part of that

whole change process.”

Hypervigilance

The residents also share a sense of hypervigilance whenever there is a fire in the region, even if they are not under an evacuation warning. Residents of conservative, moderate, and liberal political parties shared that they feel they must always be on guard and aware of active fires, ready to evacuate at a moment’s notice. In terms of estimating safety and evaluating risk, everyone participates in a similar practice of calculating how far away the fire is and how it quickly it could travel. One woman, a conservative, recalled a recent fire about 15 miles away from Coarsegold: “The most recent one was last month, and it burned between Raymond and Ahwahnee. And it was like, so that was another way I’m calculating. All right, that’s five miles from our house. You know, if it really goes crazy, when would it be here? And just being on that.”

This process was shared among others as well, across the political spectrum, with some residents using apps on their phone to track not just the fire itself but the air quality and heat flow, allowing them to watch the fire grow before their eyes via information relayed by satellite. Even when not under an evacuation warning, residents engaged in this persistent process, knowing how quickly a fire can overtake a large amount of territory in just a small amount of time. During a recent fire, Oakhurst and Coarsegold had not yet received an evacuation notice, but this changed quickly; one resident told me, “And then all of a sudden we’re the ones that are on evacuation notice. It just it came. So, so far so quickly.” This understanding of how a fire functions is learned from each resident’s own personal experience and the stories

they hear from others in neighboring communities.

Normalization of Wildfires and Evacuations

Normalization and acceptance of the wildfires and evacuations was a common theme throughout my discussions. While each of the residents could describe how different recent fire seasons have felt or how unpleasant it is to live in a constant cycle of preparation for the worst, they also accepted it as part of living on the mountain. One woman described to me how residents share tips on how to better prepare for evacuation in the same manner one would trade recipes. While at an extracurricular event for her children, the woman spoke to another parent who told her to, “Grab your dirty clothes basket! Those are your most often worn clothes. You can wash them later. They're already in a basket. You don't have to pack them, grab them and go.” Tricks like this are always circulating in the community; wildfires and subsequent evacuations happen so often and regularly that people have begun to develop best-practices for how to evacuate efficiently and at any moment.

Many people had evacuated more than once or hosted someone else who was under an evacuation warning. One resident, who has lived on the mountain for almost a decade, stated with a somewhat defeated tone that she had either been evacuated or been on an evacuation notice almost every year since she moved to the area and often encountered fires on backpacking trips. Another woman more explicitly stated, “So, it's a thing, it's a normal part of the summer, basically.”

V. Diverging Perceptions

Among the participants there was a consensus on the increasing intensity and frequency of fires, and how it has begun to strip the mountain of the qualities they used to enjoy. As the people interviewed were longtime residents of the area, they have been able to not only experience but also identify the changes in climate, weather pattern, and landscape that have occurred over the past few decades. They recognize that the mountain was not always threatened by wildfire at this level, and that evacuation, while quite a regular part of their routine now, has not always been a condition of living there.

However, when asked to articulate their beliefs on what might be causing the changes and potential solutions to the severe wildfires, the residents split along political party lines. Residents also looked at different media sources for information on the wildfires, and their responses reflected their perceptions of power and control. Among conservative and moderate participants, two major causes of environmental change were proposed: the end of logging and natural cycles.

Conversely, those identifying as liberal expressed the belief that the wildfires, increased temperatures, and droughts are the result of human action. They also wanted to see large scale, systemic change (such as curbing emissions) as a solution to anthropogenic climate change. Among liberal participants, one major cause of environmental change emerged: humans and the way we live. The following section will detail the perceptions of and responses to the changing environment among the conservative, moderate, and liberal residents as well as the media they use to inform themselves on the topic.

Logging and Natural Cycles

Those identifying as conservative or moderate felt that the changes they have seen recently in the general mountain area were the result of natural processes, not specifically linked to human activity. For them, the changes they see cannot be attributed to climate change caused by humans.

Among moderate and conservative residents, many pointed to the end of logging as a reason for the intense fires. Multiple people cited the end of logging in the mountains at the hands of the Sierra Club, a well-known environmental group, and the negative impact they feel it has had on the area. One resident called for thinning out the dead trees left behind by a recent bark beetle infestation: “So thinning the forest is good, that's where I think probably the majority the people would say we need, you need to log and thin the forest and can't let it get so thick. Because then when that fire starts, it just, it makes it worse.” Other conservative participants echoed this statement, expressing a desire for the dead brush and excessive trees to be removed, thereby limiting the amount of fuel available for future fires.

The second reason cited by conservatives and moderates for the increase in wildfire intensity and frequency is that they are the result of the planet’s “natural cycles”. A conservative woman mentioned to me that she had read the Farmer’s Almanac from the early 1900s, and she found that severe fires and droughts were expected then too. She considered this historical proof that the conditions Californians are experiencing today, while still dangerous and frightening, is just a moment in time that humans don’t have control over. Another resident, who identifies as hovering somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum, stated, “I

think that Earth just goes through changes maybe every 100 years.” To conservatives and moderates of the area, this is just the way things are. The planet moves through natural cycles, regardless of human action aside from things like the ban of logging.

Furthermore, when asked about the topic of climate change, conservative and moderate residents questioned whether it exists. After being asked if they know of other causes of the wildfires, they said they have heard others say the changes can be attributed to climate change, though they are not sure if that is real. One resident casually questioned, “Do I know if it’s manmade? I’m not really sure.” Another woman brought up that she wonders who the drivers of climate change really are: “When you hear about climate change... is it really climate change? Are there people affecting it in general? There is some sort of little conspiracy theorist in my mind, just slightly. So I’m like, is the government controlling it?” The general feeling among conservative and moderates was that even though the climate may be changing, it is not anthropogenic climate change as described by the scientific community. However, conservative and moderate residents are still interested in mitigating the more severe wildfires though they do not agree with their liberal neighbors on the causal factors behind the increasing intensity and frequency.

For the conservative and moderate residents, addressing extreme and destructive wildfires focused on taking care of the forest by thinning out densely packed areas. This is the extent to which they feel systemic change should take place. Primarily, the responses to disasters proposed by conservative and moderate participants are centered in lack of control; the fires are the result of natural and ongoing cycles, and while dangerous, they are unable to be stopped. Instead,

responses to and control of these natural cycles are shifted to the individual: teaching children about fire safety, educating residents on the best ways to protect their land and maintain defensible space are prioritized over sweeping systemic changes.

Feelings expressed by liberal residents fall in line with the responsibility placed on the citizen within a neoliberal state. Neoliberalism, recently emerging as a political ideology as well as an economic framework, values fiscal austerity and minimal interference from the government. Christina Scharff, writing on how neoliberalism today is embodied as the entrepreneurial self, says that competition is now directed towards both the ‘other’ and the self; in essence, when things go awry the onus of fixing the error is placed solely upon us, often ignoring the widespread and systemic issues that enact their forces upon us (Scharff 2022 [2016]).

Anthropogenic Climate Change

Among liberal residents, however, the answer to why they are seeing more intense, frequent fires and changes in both landscape and climate can be explained by anthropogenic climate change. One resident stated, “Scientifically, it’s climate change.” The answer was said with equal certainty among the other liberal residents. Residents who identified as liberal agreed that human action, without question, has exacerbated the prolonged droughts and wildfires in California. One woman explained how she thinks our behavior has affected the planet, “But I think everything in general, just how we treat the earth affects it. With our day to day lives, our modern lives, cars, trash, getting our goods via boat... I think just how we have lived on this earth in general affected the way our world works.” Other liberal townspeople felt similarly; the current model for how we live functions off

exploitation of our planet and isn't a viable method if we want to continue to live here.

A sense of personal duty to find a solution to the wildfires and changing climate was expressed by liberals as well, though in a different tenor. While conservatives and moderates focused more on educating others on how to live in the mountains, liberals felt motivated to utilize strategies such as implementing water conservation strategies on their property, driving electric cars, and reducing their consumption. One woman, with an affinity for native plants and trees, told me that she had relandscaped her yard to include more drought tolerant plants to try and limit her water consumption. Among liberals, the sense of personal responsibility they feel is directly linked to climate change, not simply reducing fires.

Moreover, liberal residents wanted to see widespread, systemic changes directed at combating climate change. Solutions for widespread change included things such as limiting fossil fuels, transitioning to 'green' energy, and altering agricultural practices. A woman told me that she had recently read an article on how current farming practices (especially in the nearby Central Valley of California) use an exorbitant amount of water: "Those are the kinds of things I think a lot of people aren't aware of. And when you read them, you're like, 'Okay, wait a minute, maybe we need to change some of the things' especially in the San Joaquin Valley-you know, we grow everything, but maybe we need to be more aware of what we're growing and the impact that it has." California contains over 25 million acres of farmland, nine million function using irrigation (PPIC 2022 [2019]).

Media Sources

Another point of divergence among the residents was what media sources they consume and consider legitimate. Conservative and moderate residents tended to look towards the past for information: they examined the Farmer's Almanac, looked at historical records of past fires, and both sources confirmed their belief that the fire season is out of their control as it is part of a naturally occurring cycle. Conversely, liberal residents cited research papers and cable news programs like the BBC, MSNBC, and CNN that referenced specific studies that align with the consensus of the scientific community. For conservatives and moderates, legitimate information on what is causing the wildfires can be found in history, but for liberals it can be found in scientific research.

The media consumed by the residents reflects their perception of control: for conservatives and moderates, the historical sources they read told them that California has always burned, and that the extent of their control is to do things like maintain their own property and avoid fires during dry months. For liberals, their media consumption was more oriented towards the future and emphasized preventative strategies and remedies for anthropogenic climate change.

Climate Change and Voting

When asked if they consider climate change and the environment an important factor when voting, conservative and moderates stated that they usually do not and did not prioritize environmental measures during the last election. Instead, the most important issues for conservatives and moderates tended to be on personal and medical freedom. They wanted to elect candidates that could ensure both of these

things, wanting to secure government officials who could guarantee that the government would not interfere with their lives.

Liberal residents, however, said they prioritized environmental measures and looked for candidates who would implement initiatives to combat climate change. One woman emphasized the importance of taking climate change into account: “Yes. I mean, the things that are most important to me, really, we’re talking about human rights and protecting our environment. Those are probably the things that that influence how I vote.” Another linked future risk of food inequality to climate change: “Yeah, I think it's one of the biggest issues there is. If our food supply becomes impacted, I think it’s serious trouble.” The general agreement among liberal residents was that climate change is one of the most important issues to think about when voting, as it can and will have the ability to affect things like our food supply and ability to inhabit this planet.

VI. Discussion and Suggestions

Data analysis revealed a clear divide among the residents and the way they handle living in a hazardous area. Liberals focused on being proactive and how they can utilize their power to prevent the fires from happening in the first place, while conservatives and moderates are more reactive and place emphasis on the best ways to protect themselves against a naturally occurring event. Additionally, both conservative and moderate residents did not appear to feel an urgent need to address climate change. It is not an important ballot item for them, and they often wondered if anthropogenic climate change exists.

Their responses point towards a belief that such matters are naturally occurring and out of their control. Within the modern-day conservative movement, climate change denial has become a popular talking point and is regularly communicated to conservative citizens on popular cable programming like Fox News. As one of the most viewed cable programs on television, Fox has a wide reach among conservatives in the United States and often hosts climate change deniers or gives airtime devoted to espousing false information on climate change. Multiple studies have shown a connection between Fox News and climate misinformation; a study conducted by researchers at Stanford in the early 2010s found that more exposure to programs on the cable network were associated with higher rates of rejection of mainstream scientific positions and less trust in scientists (Krosnick and MacInnis 2022 [2010]).

On the other end of the political spectrum, liberal residents' positions mirrored those of the media and scientific reports they consume. For them, control is

represented in both their power as voters and in individual action: liberal participants considered the environment an important item on the ballot and said that they factor in a candidate's stance on climate change when thinking about who to vote for, hoping to see widespread reform with the goal of transitioning to cleaner and renewable energy. Furthermore, they also felt that individual action at home, like recycling and consuming 'green' energy, are beneficial for the environment and they make consistent efforts to practice sustainability.

This research aimed to look at how political affiliation shapes perceptions of hazards, disasters, and climate change. While the results provided from interviews indicate a clear divide among conservative and liberal residents, there are limitations to the scope of this project. First, research that is primarily qualitative cannot be generalized. Second, the limited sample size available for this research is small considering the population size of both Oakhurst and Coarsegold. Additionally, individual opinions do not necessarily translate into how people will behave and feel when confronted with varying group and power dynamics.

Climate change is an urgent issue, and while living sustainably and reducing consumption on an individual level are important, transitioning to clean and renewable energy and restricting the exploitation of our land is even more important. This means enacting policies that alter farming and agriculture methods, revise forestry practices, and address the manipulation of and misuse of our planet's resources by companies that burn fossil fuels. These differences in perceptions and responses to climate change between liberal and conservatives may appear to lead to a stalemate when considering future actions to curb the progression of climate

change.

However, studies show that conservatives feel a stronger link to the media they consume, even if it doesn't match their political stance, and thus are more open to receiving urgent information regarding climate change (Feldman 2022 [2012]). During an interview, one liberal resident told me that it was a shame that so much climate change denial is present on the mountain, because it is something that affects all of them, and that "it has to be climate change, we just can't call it that." This opens the possibility for utilizing trusted sources within the community to communicate the urgency of climate change to skeptical residents, reframing the issue as a shared struggle between everyone that requires a collective effort. Furthermore, hazards and disasters research has emphasized that individual perspectives do not necessarily translate into group opinions on assessing risk and responses to disasters. Opinions at the individual level may change and shift when you take into account the varying group dynamics of a community. This research is thus a small piece of a much larger puzzle, and to shift from living in a reactive way to a proactive manner requires further understanding of internal and external group dynamics and political power.

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