The Hidden Lens Behind Every Climate Discussion

By Nan Farley

Behind every climate discussion lies a hidden lens: a set of values, assumptions, and core beliefs, informed by culture, experience, and identity, that influences how we understand problems, evaluate solutions, and decide what matters most. This lens, often called a worldview, shapes how we interpret climate challenges and which solutions we see as most important.

Over a decade of working in climate communications and advocacy, I've become increasingly interested in how these worldviews shape our responses to climate change. I've seen people look at the same challenge, accept the same science, and yet prioritize very different solutions.

Research suggests that climate disagreements are often rooted in deeper worldview differences rather than factual disagreements. Thus, understanding our underlying worldviews may be essential for understanding climate change disagreements and finding pathways beyond polarization and gridlock (Witt, 2015). Research also suggests that climate communication is more effective when messages align with an audience's existing worldview (Hornsey, 2021). In other words, recognizing and naming our differences can help us move from division toward collaboration. This shift, moving from positions (specific climate solutions) to interests (values), is what negotiation scholars Roger Fisher and William Ury describe as essential to finding common ground.

To explore these dynamics more directly, I developed the Climate Worldview Survey. Its purpose is not to rank climate solutions, but to illuminate the different motivations that drive people toward climate action. By making these underlying mental models more visible, we can better understand ourselves and one another, communicate more effectively, and ultimately expand the range of solutions we are able to imagine and create together.

Link to the Climate Worldview Survey: https://tally.so/r/RGJZQd

What Research on Ethics Taught Me

My interest in worldviews is rooted partly in my early academic research on ethics and moral judgment, where I worked as a researcher on a study examining how values shape decision-making that was later published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (Hildreth & Anderson, 2018).

Consider a simple question: which matters more to you, loyalty or honesty? Most people find it surprisingly difficult to answer. As with many ethical questions, the response is often, “It depends.”

The study explored this tension by examining how people navigated these competing moral values. We found that participants were more likely to lie when doing so benefited a group to which they felt loyal. When called to be loyal, people's moral views of deceit and honesty flipped.

The key finding was not about deception itself, but about context: people shift between moral frameworks depending on what is most salient in a given situation. The same action can be judged very differently depending on which value is activated.

That insight has stayed with me as I've explored climate action. If the way we make moral judgments is shaped by context, then the way we understand the morally laden issue of climate change may be shaped by context as well.

Survey Setup: Uncovering Priorities

This idea became the foundation for the Climate Worldview Survey.

The survey asks people to respond to questions about climate priorities and tradeoffs. There are no right or wrong answers. Instead, it is designed to identify patterns in how people think about solutions.

The framework considers several underlying dimensions:

Moral focus: whether someone tends to prioritize human wellbeing or takes a broader systems perspective that includes ecosystems and non-human life.

Mechanisms for change: whether someone favors working within existing systems through policy, institutions, and governance, or places greater emphasis on markets, innovation, grassroots organizing, or more transformative approaches outside established structures.

Time horizon: whether attention is oriented toward immediate relief or long-term transformation.

Risk and uncertainty: how people weigh avoiding worst-case outcomes versus pursuing the greatest possible long-term benefits.

Together, these dimensions generate a set of climate archetypes that reflect different ways of reasoning about the same problem. Upon completing the survey, participants receive a primary climate worldview archetype.

What the Results Revealed

To date, the survey has received 79 responses, all from individuals connected by at least one degree of separation to the Presidio Center for Sustainable Solutions.

Across all respondents, no one consistently selected a single archetype. In fact, every respondent drew from at least three different archetypes throughout the survey.

This suggests that climate worldviews are not fixed categories, but flexible combinations of perspectives that shift depending on context. The same person might emphasize urgency in one scenario and long-term systems change in another, or support institutional approaches in some cases and community-led action in others.

The final result reflects only the most frequently selected archetype, not a fixed identity. For some participants, this felt highly accurate. For others, it felt like a partial reflection of a more varied mix of perspectives.

What stood out most, though, was what happened after people read their results: conversation. People were eager to compare answers, question assumptions, and explain their reasoning to one another. The framework became less about classification and more about reflection and dialogue.

Toward Greater Coherence and Collaboration

Climate action is often fragmented because people are trying to solve the same problem from different starting points, shaped by different assumptions about what matters most and how change happens.

By recognizing the assumptions shaping our own thinking, we can better direct our energy toward approaches that align with our values. By understanding how others are reasoning, collaboration becomes less about persuasion and more about coordination.

Climate solutions require many approaches operating at once. The opportunity is not to reduce these differences, but to make them more visible and complementary.

Suggestions for using the survey:

Individuals: The survey can help identify value-aligned sectors and industries where you may want to work, volunteer, or contribute. At a minimum, it provides context for understanding your own perspective within a broader landscape of climate viewpoints.

Companies: The survey can help organizations connect their mission and strategy to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals. For companies already focused on sustainability, it can help make the underlying values and approaches driving their work more explicit.

Policymakers: The survey can help illuminate the competing priorities and values that inform climate policy debates. Recognizing that people often care about multiple dimensions of climate action, even when they disagree on solutions, can support more inclusive and durable policymaking.

Coalitions: The survey can help identify the range of perspectives that need to be represented within a coalition and create opportunities for alignment across key dimensions, including moral priorities, theories of change, time horizons, and tolerance for risk and uncertainty.

I invite you to take the Climate Worldview Survey and share it with others. Use it as a starting point for conversations with friends, classmates, colleagues, and collaborators about how you each understand climate solutions and why. As I've discovered, the most valuable insight is not the result itself, but the dialogue it creates.

Sources

Hildreth, J. A. D., & Anderson, C. (2018). Does loyalty trump honesty? Moral judgments of loyalty-driven deceit. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 79*, 87–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.06.001

Hornsey, M. J. (2021). Why facts are not enough: Understanding and managing the motivated rejection of science. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 30*(6), 518–523. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211025813

Witt, A. (2015). Climate change and the clash of worldviews: An exploration of how to move forward in a polarized debate. *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, 50*(4), 906–921. https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12226

Climate Worldview Survey

Link to the Climate Worldview Survey: https://tally.so/r/RGJZQd Written version below.

What's Your Climate Worldview?

This quick survey to help understand your **climate worldview**.

👉 Takes ~2 minutes 👉 No wrong answers, just what matters to you 👉 Go with your gut, answers are anonymous

This is a fun, non-scientific quiz created to explore different ways people think about climate solutions. It is not definitive, just a starting point for reflection and conversation.

To take this quiz, follow the three steps:

1) Select only one answer for each question.
2) Tally your results.
3) Read about your primary archetype.

Step 1) Select one answer for each question.

Q1 What feels most urgent to you right now?

A Preventing catastrophic climate tipping points
B Reducing suffering for people today
C Addressing inequality and injustice
D Implementing solutions that can realistically scale
E Developing breakthrough technologies
F Preparing for climate impacts already happening

G Protecting ecosystems and biodiversity

Q2 Which tradeoff feels most acceptable?

A Limiting human activity to protect nature
B Slower implementation to ensure justice and equity
C Economic disruption to rapidly cut emissions
D Imperfect solutions that can scale quickly
E Delaying action while better technology is developed
F Accepting some climate damage while adapting
G Slower climate progress to avoid harming people now

Q3 When making climate decisions, what guides you?

A Risk and resilience to disasters
B Economic and political feasibility
C Human well-being and affordability
D Fairness and historical responsibility
E Scientific thresholds (like staying below 1.5°C)
F Technological potential
G Ecological health and natural systems

Q4 What kind of solution excites you most?

A Policies that shift power to front-line communities
B Climate-resilient infrastructure and planning
C Market-based solutions that can expand widely
D Programs that lower costs and improve lives immediately
E New technology breakthroughs and adoption (like fusion)
F Rapid fossil fuel phaseout policies
G Conservation and ecosystem restoration

Q5 What worries you most about climate action?

A It won’t scale or get implemented
B It won’t happen fast enough
C It will hurt vulnerable people
D It will ignore justice and equity
E It will miss better future solutions
F It won’t prepare us for impacts
G It will ignore nature beyond carbon

Q6 Which success excites you most?

A Thriving ecosystems and biodiversity
B Improved quality of life for people today
C A more just and equitable society
D Communities resilient to climate impacts
E Widely adopted, practical solutions
F Game-changing technological breakthroughs
G Net-zero emissions achieved quickly

Q7 Which feels worse to you?

A Acting too slowly and missing the window for climate stability
B Acting too quickly and causing harm

Step 2) Tally your results.

Each answer is listed below with the corresponding archetype. Add a tally each time you answered for the corresponding archetype. Sum your results to select your primary archetype. If some are tied, read the descriptions to determine which one you identify with most.

_____ Stabilizer
_____ Reliever
_____ Rebalancer
_____ Scaler
_____ Inventor
_____ Adapter
_____ Steward

Q1

A - Stabilizer
B - Reliever
C - Rebalancer
D - Scaler
E - Inventor
F - Adapter
G - Steward

Q2

A - Steward
B - Rebalancer
C - Stabilizer
D - Scaler
E - Inventor
F - Adapter
G - Reliever

Q3

A - Adapter
B - Scaler
C - Reliever
D - Rebalancer
E - Stabilizer
F - Inventor
G - Steward

Q4

A - Rebalancer
B - Adapter
C - Scaler
D - Reliever
E - Inventor
F - Stabilizer
G - Steward

Q5

A - Scaler
B - Stabilizer
C - Reliever
D - Rebalancer
E - Inventor
F - Adapter
G - Steward

Q6

A - Steward
B - Reliever
C - Rebalancer
D - Adapter
E - Scaler
F - Inventor
G - Stabilizer

Q7

A - Stabilizer and Inventor
B - Reliever and Adapter

Step 3) Read about your primary archetype.

Overview of Worldviews

🌍 Stabilizer You prioritize preventing catastrophic climate change above all else. You tend to trust scientific consensus and push for fast, decisive action—even when it's politically or economically difficult.

❤️ Reliever You focus on people first. Climate solutions should improve lives today, not create additional hardship—especially for the most vulnerable.

⚖️ Rebalancer You see climate change as inseparable from injustice. Who caused the problem—and who pays to fix it—matters just as much as emissions themselves.

⚙️ Scaler You care about what actually works. Big ideas only matter if they can be implemented across politics, markets, and institutions.

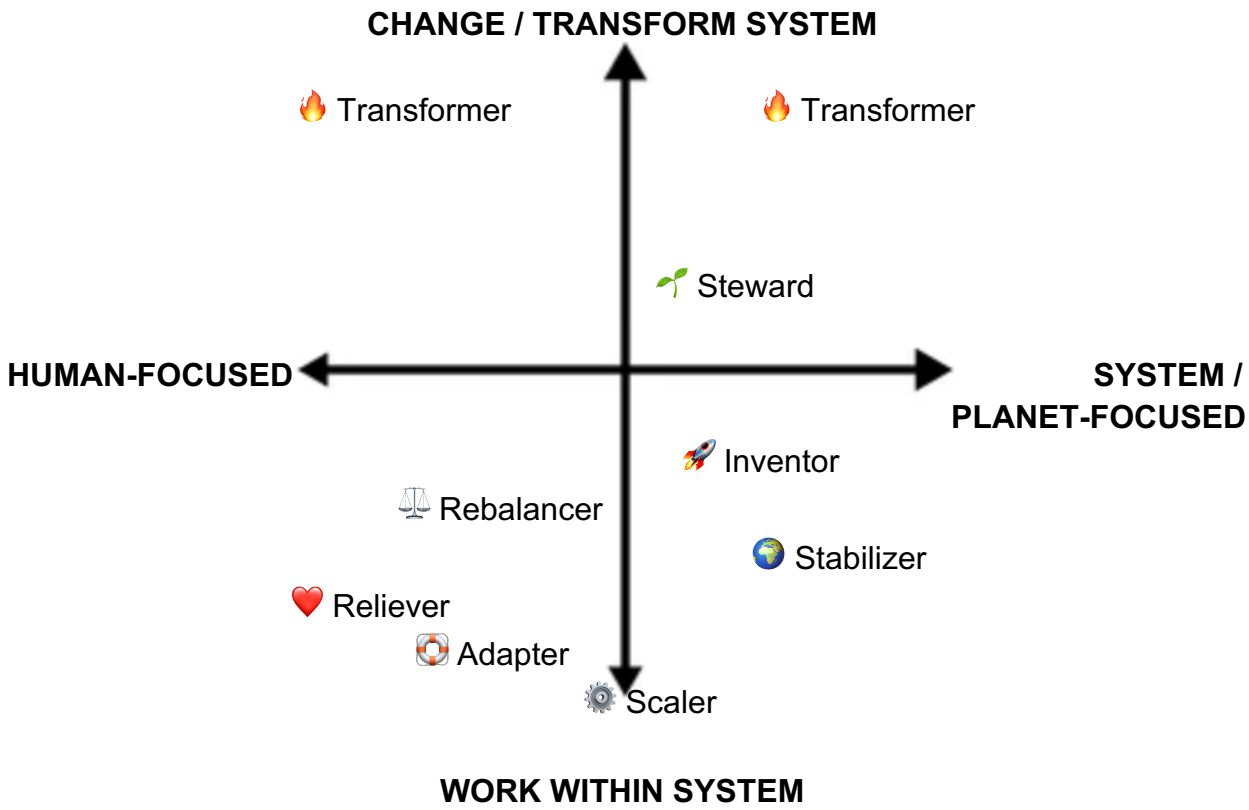
🚀 Inventor You believe human ingenuity can unlock better paths forward. Instead of choosing between tradeoffs, you look for solutions that redefine what's possible.

🛟 Adapter You focus on protecting people and communities from current and near-term climate impacts.

🌱 Steward You value nature intrinsically—not just for what it provides to humans. Climate is part of a broader ecological crisis.

🔥 Transformer (Not in survey) You believe the root problem isn't just emissions—it's the system itself. Real solutions require rethinking how society, the economy, and power are organized.

Worldview Spectrum



Rationale

🔥 **Transformer:** Fully system-changing. Can be human OR planet motivated

🌱 **Steward:** Planet-focused, Often challenges system values (growth, extraction). Softer than Transformer.

🚀 **Inventor:** System-focused, Pushes boundaries (but not always political/system change)

⚖️ **Rebalancer:** Human-focused, Pushes toward system change

🌍 **Stabilizer:** Planet/system-focused, Works within system (policy, markets)

❤️ **Reliever:** Human-focused, Works within system

🛟 **Adapter:** Human-focused, Works within system (practical resilience). Near Reliever, but more pragmatic.

⚙️ **Scaler:** Neutral (human + system), Strongly within system

---

🌍 Stabilizer

You prioritize preventing catastrophic climate change above all else. You tend to trust scientific consensus and push for fast, decisive action—even when it's politically or economically difficult.

Primary goal: Maintain a stable climate system
Time horizon: Long-term, intergenerational
Theory of change: Rapid emissions reduction guided by science and policy
Acceptable tradeoff: Short-term economic or social disruption
Risk tolerance: High — willing to accept disruption and uncertainty to avoid catastrophic long-term risks
Core fear: Irreversible climate tipping points and systemic collapse
Decision logic: Delay creates exponential, irreversible damage—speed is essential

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Public sector, nonprofit, corporate sustainability
- **Industries:** Energy & infrastructure, environmental services, climate tech, government
- **Issues:** Decarbonization, carbon accounting, energy systems

👉 "If we don't stabilize the system, everything else fails."
👉 "We don't get a second chance at this."

🤌 *You may also relate to: **Scaler** (focus on implementation) or **Inventor** (if you believe technology is key to rapid decarbonization)*
🤌 *You may also resonate with: Ecomodernism, Science-Based Targets (SBTi), Paris Agreement–aligned frameworks, or Climate Mitigation pathways*

❤️ Reliever

You focus on people first. Climate solutions should improve lives today, not create additional hardship—especially for the most vulnerable.

Primary goal: Reduce human suffering now
Time horizon: Immediate to near-term
Theory of change: Direct improvements to affordability, health, and well-being
Acceptable tradeoff: Slower or partial climate progress
Risk tolerance: Low — prioritizes stability and minimizing immediate harm
Core fear: Climate action making people's lives worse in the short term
Decision logic: Solutions must help people now—harm today is unacceptable

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Nonprofit, public sector, international development
- **Industries:** Public health, disaster response, food systems, social services
- **Issues:** Climate adaptation, food security, water, health

👉 "Climate action should help people, not hurt them."
👉 "Don't make things worse for people today."

💡 *You may also relate to: **Rebalancer** (if you focus on equity) or **Adapter** (if you focus on protecting people from impacts)*
💡 *You may also resonate with: Just Transition, Climate Justice, Sustainable Development (UN SDGs), or Solarpunk*

⚖️ Rebalancer

You see climate change as inseparable from injustice. Who caused the problem—and who pays to fix it—matters just as much as emissions themselves.

Primary goal: Fair distribution of harms, benefits, and power
Time horizon: Present + historical accountability
Theory of change: Redistribution, justice, and community leadership
Acceptable tradeoff: Slower progress if it ensures equity
Risk tolerance: Medium — willing to challenge systems, but prioritizes fairness over speed
Core fear: Solutions that reinforce or worsen injustice
Decision logic: Who benefits and who bears the cost matters as much as the outcome

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Nonprofit, advocacy, public sector
- **Industries:** Legal, policy, community organizations, think tanks
- **Issues:** Environmental justice, labor, equity

👉 “There is no climate solution without justice.”
👉 “Fast action often ignores justice.”

💡 *You may also relate to:* ***Reliever*** *(people-first focus) or* ***Transformer*** *(if you push for deeper systemic change)*
💡 *You may also resonate with: Environmental Justice, Climate Justice, Just Transition, Degrowth, or Solarpunk*

⚙️ Scaler

You care about what actually works. Big ideas only matter if they can be implemented across politics, markets, and institutions.

Primary goal: Solutions that scale in the real world
Time horizon: Near- to mid-term
Theory of change: Markets, policy feasibility, incremental adoption
Acceptable tradeoff: Less-than-perfect solutions if they deploy widely
Risk tolerance: Low to medium — prefers proven, feasible approaches
Core fear: Solutions that fail to scale or get implemented
Decision logic: Impact only matters if it works in real systems at large scale

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Private sector, consulting, cross-sector partnerships
- **Industries:** All (consumer, finance, tech, energy, logistics)
- **Issues:** Implementation, operations, supply chains

👉 “If it can’t scale politically or economically, it doesn’t matter.”
👉 “Bad execution kills good ideas.”

💡*You may also relate to:* ***Stabilizer*** *(if you are motivated by emissions targets) or* ***Inventor*** *(if you lean toward innovation)*
💡 *You may also resonate with: Green Capitalism, Sustainable Business, ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance), Impact Investing, or Ecomodernism*

🚀 Inventor

You believe human ingenuity can unlock better paths forward. Instead of choosing between tradeoffs, you look for solutions that redefine what's possible.

Primary goal: Breakthrough solutions that remove constraints
Time horizon: Mid- to long-term
Theory of change: Technological innovation and new capabilities
Acceptable tradeoff: Delayed action while better solutions are developed
Risk tolerance: Very high — embraces uncertainty, experimentation, and failure
Core fear: Missing transformative breakthroughs due to incremental thinking
Decision logic: Innovation can change the constraints—don't settle for tradeoffs

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Private sector, startups, research
- **Industries:** Climate tech, energy, materials, software
- **Issues:** Carbon removal, clean energy, industrial innovation

👉 "We can solve this without sacrifice—if we innovate."
👉 "Speed is necessary to discover better paths."

💡 *You may also relate to:* ***Scaler*** *(if you care about deployment) or* ***Transformer*** *(if you believe innovation should reshape systems)*
💡 *You may also resonate with: Ecomodernism, Techno-optimism, Climate Tech / Deep Tech innovation, or Solarpunk*

🛟 Adapter

You focus on protecting people and communities from current and near-term climate impacts.

Primary goal: Reduce harm from unavoidable climate impacts
Time horizon: Immediate and ongoing
Theory of change: Resilience, infrastructure, and preparedness
Acceptable tradeoff: Accepting some level of climate damage
Risk tolerance: Low — focused on minimizing exposure to risk
Core fear: Being unprepared for climate impacts

Decision logic: We must prepare for what's already happening, not just prevent future risks

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Public sector, consulting, nonprofit
- **Industries:** Infrastructure, urban planning, insurance, engineering
- **Issues:** Climate risk, resilience, disaster preparedness

👉 "We need to survive what's coming."
👉 "We need to get this right, not just fast."

💡 *You may also relate to:* ***Reliever*** *(protecting people) or* ***Scaler*** *(practical implementation of resilience solutions)*
💡 *You may also resonate with: Climate Adaptation, Resilience Planning, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), or Loss and Damage frameworks*

🌱 Steward

You value nature intrinsically—not just for what it provides to humans. Climate is part of a broader ecological crisis.

Primary goal: Protect and restore ecosystems
Time horizon: Long-term, planetary
Theory of change: Conservation, regeneration, ecological balance
Acceptable tradeoff: Limits on human growth or consumption
Risk tolerance: Medium — cautious of high-risk interventions, but accepts systemic limits
Core fear: Irreversible ecological and biodiversity loss
Decision logic: Human systems must operate within ecological limits

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Nonprofit, public sector, some private (agriculture)
- **Industries:** Conservation, forestry, agriculture, land management
- **Issues:** Biodiversity, ecosystems, regenerative systems

👉 "Nature has value beyond us."
👉 "Nature can't wait."

💡 *You may also relate to:* ***Rebalancer*** *(justice + nature) or* ***Transformer*** *(if you believe systems must change to protect ecosystems)*

🤌 *You may also resonate with: Solarpunk, Regenerative Agriculture, Permaculture, Deep Ecology, Degrowth, or Doughnut Economics*

🔥 Transformer

(Not in survey.) You believe the root problem isn't just emissions—it's the system itself. Real solutions require rethinking how society, the economy, and power are organized.

Primary goal: Redesign or transcend the current system
Time horizon: Long-term, paradigm-shifting
Theory of change: Structural change, new economic and social models
Acceptable tradeoff: Disruption, instability, or uncertainty during transition
Risk tolerance: Very high — embraces disruption and systemic uncertainty
Core fear: Being locked into a fundamentally broken system
Decision logic: The system itself is the root problem—incremental fixes won't solve it

Where you thrive:

- **Sectors:** Cross-sector (nonprofit, academia, startups, policy)
- **Industries:** Social innovation, economic reform, governance, think tanks
- **Issues:** System change, alternative economics

👉 "We can't solve this within the system that caused it."
👉 "Incrementalism is the real danger."

🤌 *You may also relate to: **Rebalancer** (justice-driven change) or **Inventor** (if you see innovation as part of system change)*
🤌 *You may also resonate with: Degrowth, Post-capitalism, Commons-based economics, Doughnut Economics, or Solarpunk*