

ABOUT AGU

Schmidt Receives 2011 Climate Communication Prize

Gavin A. Schmidt was awarded the 2011 Climate Communication Prize at the AGU Fall Meeting Honors Ceremony, held on 7 December in San Francisco, Calif. The Climate Communication Prize is funded by Nature's Own, a purveyor of fossils, minerals, and handcrafted jewelry in Boulder, Colo. The prize honors an "AGU member-scientist for the communication of climate science, and highlights the importance of promoting scientific literacy, clarity of message, and efforts to foster respect and understanding of science-based values as they relate to the implications of climate change."

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Citation

Tonight we celebrate Gavin Schmidt as the first recipient of the AGU Climate Communication Prize. In this citation we speak for over 2 dozen individual scientists around the world who were cosignatories on four independent nominations led by Kim Cobb, Peter deMenocal, Stephen Schwartz, and Martin Vermeer. More important, we speak for the many beneficiaries of Gavin's exceptional abilities and accomplishments in setting the record straight on climate science for scientists and the general public.

Founded by Schmidt and others in 2004, the RealClimate.org blog has become *the* Web site on climate science that specialists and nonspecialists alike have learned to rely upon. It consists of weekly plain-language articles contributed by Schmidt and other scientists, each followed by hundreds of comments from the online community. This Web site has become the "go to" resource for informed, factual, and often entertaining summaries of current climate science issues. The numbers speak for themselves: RealClimate has had over 15 million hits since 2004, with 27 million page views (or about 5000 visitors per day on average). RealClimate articles have been translated into 12 other languages by native-language climate scientists.

In addition to his public outreach activities, Gavin Schmidt is a highly accomplished climate scientist. Gavin is the author of more than 90 peer-reviewed papers on aspects of climate forcing and sensitivity. His work has enjoyed an average of 43 citations per paper. This thorough grounding in climate science is essential to Gavin's outreach activities.

Climate scientists compete with a wide variety of nonscience entities in satisfying the public's thirst for information about climate change science. As noted in a recent AGU article, 97% of publishing climate scientists agree that humans have a role in present climate change anomalies, but the percentage of U.S. citizens agreeing with this statement is now closer to 50%. These figures speak to the need for communicating to

society what is known about climate change and its uncertainties. Gavin leads the charge, bringing clarity and rigor to climate science communication on a daily basis.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate Gavin's impact is to imagine what it would be like if he were not here. How many climate scientists would speak out about the reality and causes of climate changes happening right now? How many would stand up to well-coached climate change contrarians on live television? How many would be willing to commit hours each day to setting the scientific record straight in the face of countless readers eager to find fault?

In summary, Gavin Schmidt is both an outstanding climate scientist and an outstanding communicator of climate science. He has transformed the climate science dialogue on the Web and thereby elevated communication of this science among scientists, within the research community, and to the broader public.

—KIM COBB, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta; PETER DEMENOCAL, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University, Palisades, N. Y.; STEPHEN E. SCHWARTZ, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton, Long Island, N. Y.; and MARTIN VERMEER, Department of Surveying, School of Engineering, Aalto University, Aalto, Finland

Response

First, let me thank AGU, my nominators, and all the people who have been so supportive since this was announced. I also thank Nature's Own for endowing this award. I am profoundly touched.

A few years ago, people at meetings would occasionally tell me they liked a paper I had written. More recently, the people who notice my name badge usually mention that they liked something I wrote on RealClimate.org or said in an interview.

I don't think this is because my papers have gotten less interesting—indeed I'd like to think the converse is true. Rather, it is a sign that communicating science at multiple levels reaches far more people than you might have thought.

Climate science now encompasses so many diverse fields that it is impossible



Gavin A. Schmidt

for any of us to have a complete grasp. Being part of the global climate modeling group at NASA has been key to my ability to integrate scientific fields, but the unanticipated side effect has been that it also helped enormously in translating the science for the outside world.

Science journalism is perhaps inevitably drawn to what is new (and news), not what is known and understood. Yet new science is at the edge of our understanding—it is the part of science that is most contested, most exciting, and sometimes completely wrong. This is part of scientific progress, but the focus on novelty can present a distorted view because the context that explains why these results matter is often missing.

For most fields this poses few problems, but for some politically contested areas like climate change science, it can feed confusion and is often used by people who want to exaggerate scientific uncertainty for political purposes. It takes scientists speaking out to provide that missing context, to show by example why the scientific method is sound, and to explain what the state of the science is. Conversations about our science will continue regardless of what we do, but only by speaking about our expertise will those conversations be informed by the actual science, as opposed to some lobbyist's interpretation of it.

For the future, I hope that this prize will serve as a beacon that shows that the science community values the effort that goes into explaining how and why we do the things we do. It should also serve as encouragement to many young scientists and graduate students who I know are bursting with enthusiasm to tell their stories.

Communication is not a waste of our time; indeed we have no time to waste.

—GAVIN A. SCHMIDT, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, New York