

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TOWARDS CLIMATE CHANGE: A 2022 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

For most of us, climate change is a scientific topic. But at the same time, it provokes a deeply emotional response in many people. That's because our fears for the future greatly influence how we respond to this topic ... and that's true for people across the spectrum of attitudes towards climate change.



Attitudes about Climate Change Content in Museums (estimates)

	ANTI-GREEN	LEANS LESS GREEN	STATUS QUO	LEANS MORE GREEN	GREEN
FREQUENT MUSEUM-GOERS	10%	6%	32%	25%	28%
US ADULTS	11%	9%	35%	24%	20%

Those emotions matter—and understanding how those emotions play out across that spectrum of attitudes is vital if we are going to communicate effectively about climate change.

The last question of the 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers delved into that emotional response. After answering a number of questions about climate change content in museums, we wrapped up the survey by asking respondents why they felt the way they did.

We then hand-coded a representative sample of **8,000** responses to immerse ourselves into that emotional response.

Let's start with those who we would characterize as "anti-green."¹ First off, we want to be very careful here to not **over-amplify** their concerns.

Only about 1 in 5 US adults fit in this category ... and even fewer frequent museum-goers. Instead, we want to **understand** their viewpoints so we can **anticipate** any pushback we receive from this small, but vocal, segment of the population.



See our Data Story "Amplification vs Over-Amplification" to learn more about working with critical comments.



There were three main themes that came up from the "anti-green" segment.

1 Not your mission.

The majority of this small segment deeply feels that climate change is not the mission of museums. Period.



"Museums according to definition display objects of historical, scientific, artistic or cultural interest. I don't recognize that climate change fits in this definition."

2 It's too political.

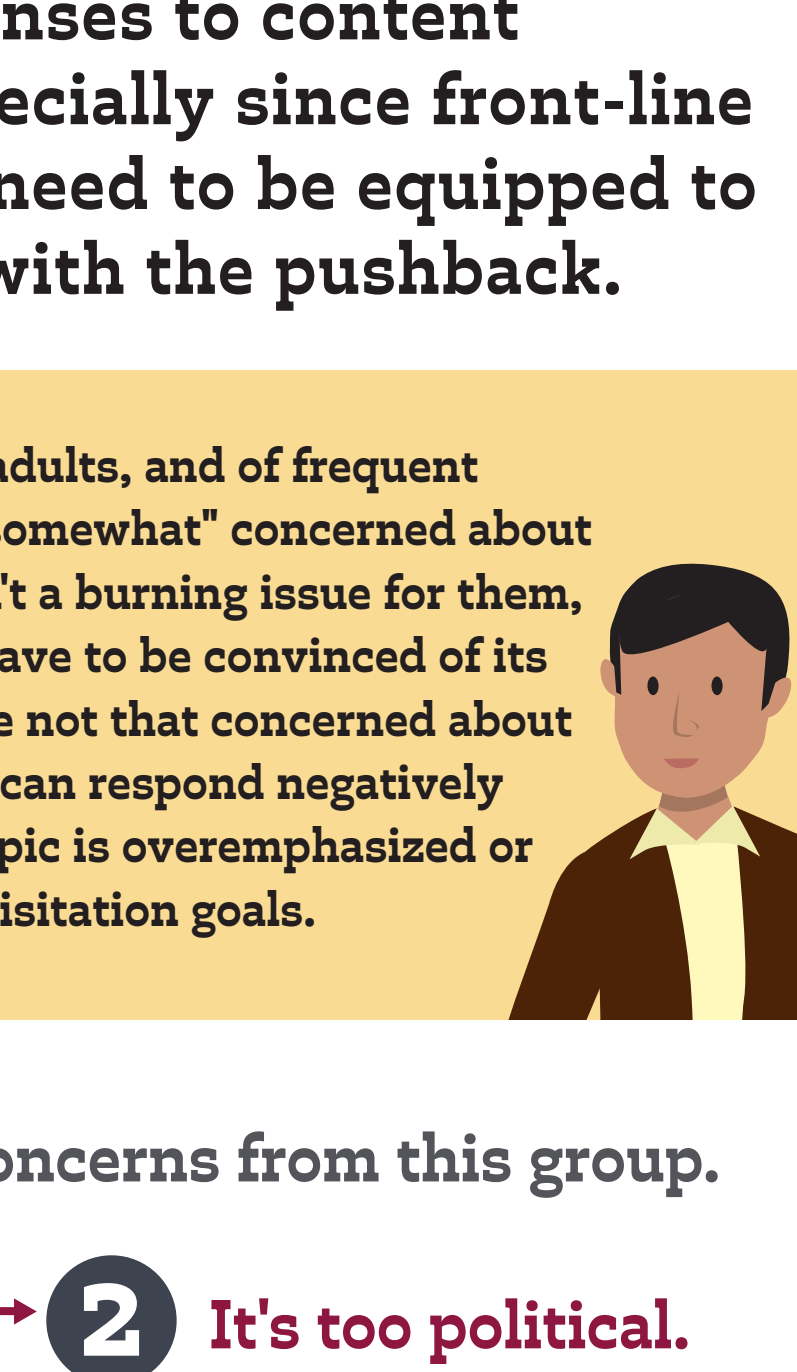
These respondents tended to have the most emotional, defensive responses, using words like "woke" and "liberal" as pejoratives and accusing museums of propaganda. As we have seen before, however, using the word "political" tends to be a linguistic defense mechanism from those who feel threatened by content.



"I am not interested in being lectured on this topic -- which apparently carries an inherent bias and politicization"

3 It isn't necessary.

These respondents were roughly split into two camps: those who think climate change is a hoax and those who think it is a natural process beyond our control. Either way, since they don't think we can do anything about it, there's no point discussing it.

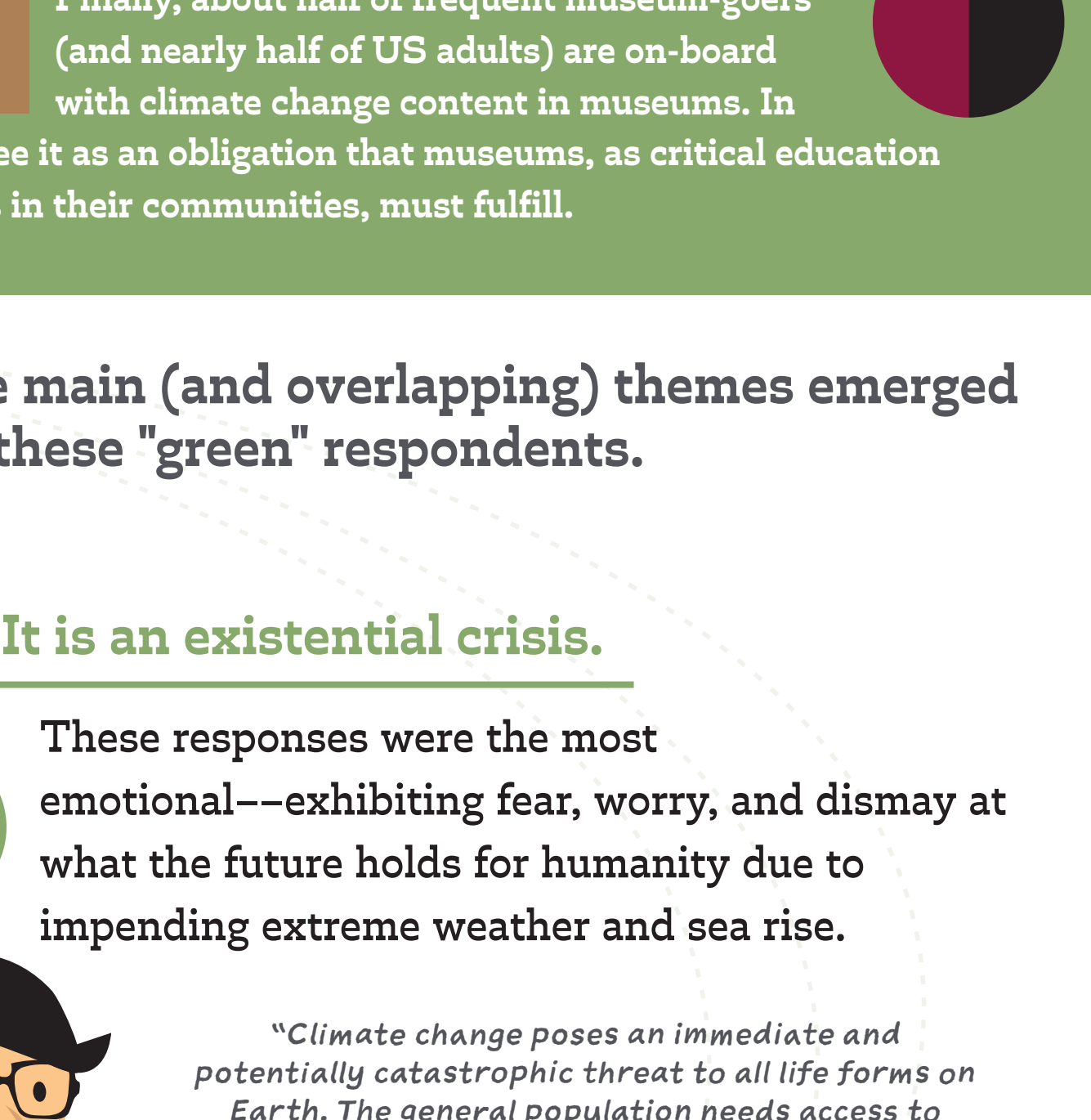


"I think 'climate change' has been going on since the beginning of time."

While we don't want museums to back off from the science, we must also acknowledge these deeply negative emotional responses to content ...especially since front-line staff need to be equipped to deal with the pushback.



About a third of US adults, and of frequent museum-goers, are "somewhat" concerned about climate change. It isn't a burning issue for them, but neither do they have to be convinced of its reality. Since they are not that concerned about climate change, they can respond negatively when they feel the topic is overemphasized or distracts from their visitation goals.



There were two main concerns from this group.

1 Others should lead the charge.

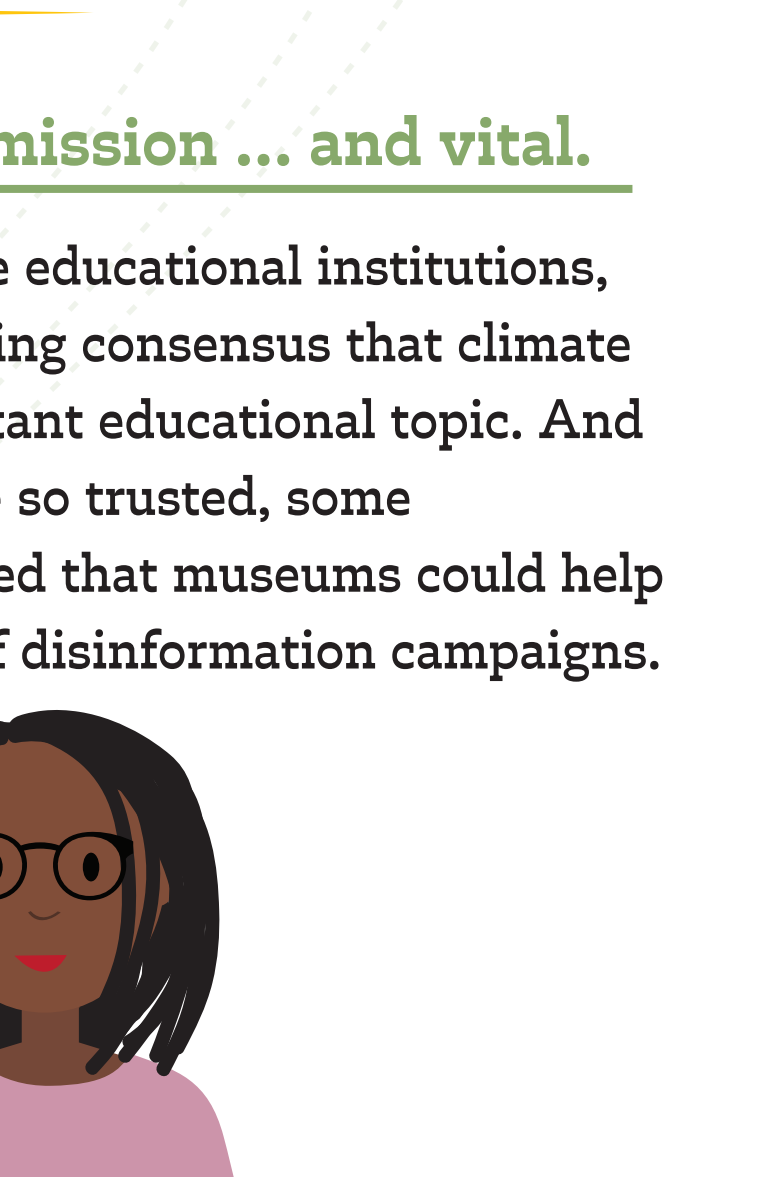
These respondents simply didn't feel that climate change was an essential topic for museums, but they also expressed that others should instead be on the forefront (such as schools, government, or environmental organizations).



"Governmental bodies, local, state, and federal should be at the forefront of this global issue. School districts need to be fully invested at addressing the issues."

2 It's too political.

While this is similar to those who are "anti-green," we want to be clear that many of these respondents expressed it as a caution instead of a reason not to do it (and their language wasn't as emotional as the "anti-green" respondents). They were more likely to express a desire for multiple viewpoints and the necessity of facts and evidence.



In practice, of course, this is impossible. Since climate change is established science, presenting "multiple viewpoints" could require the amplifying of inaccurate opinions to present that other side (i.e., the both sides fallacy). This creates a bit of a conundrum as this segment also warned museums against sharing opinions!



"I am not opposed to learning more about it. It seems information out there is heavily one-sided. I would love to learn more about it in a balanced way with facts and not opinions."

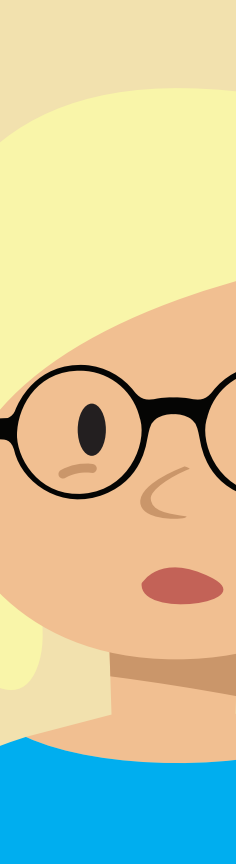
Finally, about half of frequent museum-goers (and nearly half of US adults) are on-board with climate change content in museums. In fact, they see it as an obligation that museums, as critical education institutions in their communities, must fulfill.



Three main (and overlapping) themes emerged from these "green" respondents.

1 It is an existential crisis.

These responses were the most emotional—exhibiting fear, worry, and dismay at what the future holds for humanity due to impending extreme weather and sea rise.



"Climate change poses an immediate and potentially catastrophic threat to all life forms on Earth. The general population needs access to engaging and relevant information about our planet — this is a role that museums can fill."

2 Education is your mission ... and vital.

Because museums are educational institutions, there was overwhelming consensus that climate change was an important educational topic. And because museums are so trusted, some respondents speculated that museums could help reverse the damage of disinformation campaigns.



"I believe that all institutions involved in education of any type should use that platform for the good of our planet."

3 It's everyone's responsibility and everyone's future.

Green respondents felt everyone needed to step up to address climate change. No one gets a pass, not even museums.

"Everyone, everywhere, should be working to fight climate change. Museums included."

There is one last thing to note. Virtually no "green" respondents, regardless of their political values, used political language to describe climate change. For them, it isn't a political issue, but a crisis that will affect all life on Earth.

These emotional responses reinforce a larger pattern seen with any issue where our society hasn't reached consensus. Individuals who respond defensively often use "politics" to shut down a conversation that, in reality, we all need to be (constructively) having. This challenge extends beyond climate change to our civil society and discourse ... and it is a topic we are examining more closely in the 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.

"Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 13, 2022 for more information on methodology."

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.