

CLIMATE CHANGE EDUCATION USING ROLE-PLAY SIMULATIONS: THE NEW ENGLAND CLIMATE ADAPTATION PROJECT

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The four New England National Estuarine Research Reserves partnered with local communities, the Consensus Building Institute and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the two-year National Estuarine Research Reserve Science Collaborative-funded “New England Climate Adaptation Project”, or NECAP. The project aimed to increase awareness about climate change risks and adaptation opportunities and build support for local management efforts.

Many communities in New England and across the country face multiple climate change-related risks that threaten residents, infrastructure, and ecosystem health. While decisions can and should be made to reduce vulnerability and increase resilience, making such decisions requires a collaborative process that allows people to effectively work together while accounting for diverse interests and opinions.

The NECAP team developed risk assessments for each community that summarize how the climate could change over the 21st century and outline key climate change-related risks and possible adaptation efforts. These documents provided targeted content for role-play simulations, which are experiential exercises that help community residents and decision-makers learn more about the scientific or technical issues being debated in various public policy conversations such as climate change adaptation. Stakeholder assessments were also produced, determining current perceptions about climate change risks, adaptation options, and potential barriers to (and opportunities for) action. These documents helped guide the NECAP team in developing roles for the simulations that represent the interests and concerns of stakeholder groups involved in local decision-making. The documents reveal that many stakeholders think that the time is ripe for action on managing climate change-related risks. Such findings were complemented by public polls of randomly selected residents to establish a baseline of local opinions about climate change risk and adaptation.

NECAP engaged hundreds of local residents, decision-makers, and other stakeholders in dozens of workshops featuring role-play simulations. Workshop participants were surveyed before each workshop to establish their opinions on climate change risk and adaptation, and surveyed again after the workshop to gauge whether the experience had affected their perspective in any way. Approximately four to six weeks later, NECAP staff conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with a subset of participants to probe more deeply into the longer-term effects of the experience.

One of the most important outcomes of the project was that while concerns about climate change impacts were already high, the workshops led to higher levels of concern. They also contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, resulted in an increased sense of local responsibility, increased participants’ confidence in the ability of local government to address climate change risks, contributed to increased support for integrating climate change considerations into both short-term and long-term planning,

and increased participants' empathy for other viewpoints and made it easier for them to have difficult conversations about climate change.