**Advancing climate change research with open science**

Travis C. Tai1\* and James P.W. Robinson2

1Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, 2202 Main Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada V6T 1Z4

2Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK LA1 4YQ

\*Corresponding author at ttai2@alumni.uwo.ca

**Abstract**

**Effective climate change science requires interdisciplinary research that is rapidly conducted and widely disseminated. We argue that these goals can be achieved by adopting open science (OS) practices. Citations and altmetrics indicate that open access studies receive more citations and are communicated more widely in news media and policy documents, suggesting that OS has the potential to improve research communication among scientists and public institutions. Opening data and code will increase collaboration opportunities and enable climate change triage. By enhancing both the academic and societal impact of climate change research, OS can facilitate mitigation and adaptation efforts for the most vulnerable regions of the world.**

**Main text**

Climate change research aims to understand global environmental change and how it will impact nature and society. The broad scope of climate change impacts means that successful adaptation and mitigation efforts will require an unprecedented collaboration effort that unites diverse disciplines and is able to respond to rapidly evolving climate issues (IPCC, 2014). However, to achieve this aim, climate change research practices need updating: key research findings remain behind journal paywalls, and scientific progress can be impeded by low levels of reproducibility and transparency (Ellison, 2010; Morueta-Holme *et al.*, 2018), individual data ownership (Hampton *et al.*, 2015), and inefficient research workflows (Lowndes *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the level of public interest and policy engagement on climate change issues relies on fast communication of academic research to public institutions, with the result that the societal impact of climate change studies will differ according to their public availability and exposure. Here, we argue that by adopting open science (OS) principles, scientists can advance climate change research and accelerate efforts to mitigate impacts; especially for highly vulnerable developing regions of the world where research capacity is limited. We underscore the benefits of OS in raising the academic and societal impact of climate change research using citation and social media metrics.

OS enables rapid and robust collaborative research, which can be critical for fast-moving interdisciplinary fields such as climate change. OS principles aim to improve reproducibility and transparency throughout the research process by openly sharing data, code, and papers (Hampton *et al.*, 2015; McKiernan *et al.*, 2016). Such practices can have wide-ranging benefits specific to climate change research, including improved collaboration, reproducibility, and scientific progression through sharing of data and code (Ellison, 2010; Ram, 2013; Lowndes *et al.*, 2017), greater public engagement (Wang *et al.*, 2015), and increased citation rates of open access (OA) publications (‘the OA citation advantage’) (Lawrence, 2001; Eysenbach, 2006). OS has transformed research practices of entire disciplines (e.g. preprints in mathematics, open genome data in genetics; Nielsen, 2011), but the transition to OS for climate change research is incomplete.

*OA benefits to citations and research communication*

The proportion of OA studies increased substantially over time in publications containing ‘climat\* change’ in their title, abstract or keywords between 2007-2016 (www.scopus.com), accounting for only 4% in 2007 and increasing to 26% in 2016 (Fig. 1). However, this varied by journal rank (JR; see Fig. 1 caption). For low and very high JR categories, OA publications in 2016 accounted for <16%, while medium and high ranked studies were 41% and 29% OA, respectively. Popular OA journals such as PLoS ONE and Nature Scientific Reports comprised 72% of OA publications and 21% of all publications in the medium-ranked group. Across all journal ranks, OA climate change studies were cited XXX more than closed studies (Fig. 2a), indicating that adopting OA can lead to earlier and increased citations of climate change research, and thus accelerate scientific progression by building upon existing science at a faster rate (Eysenbach, 2006; Lowndes *et al.*, 2017).

Beyond academic citation advantages, OA climate change research can have a greater societal impact when studies are communicated to non-academic audiences by mainstream news and social media, as well as used by policymakers (Wang *et al.*, 2015; Bornmann *et al.*, 2016). In ‘mentions’ of climate change studies in online news sources, Twitter feeds, and policy documents (www.altmetric.com), we show that OA studies from low, medium, and high ranked journals (< 2.7 JR) were communicated XXX times more frequently (Fig. 2b-d), likely due to those studies being accessible to non-academic audiences. Although media reporting was higher for closed studies in the highest-ranking journals, those studies are often promoted with academic press releases. Indeed, given that high-ranking journals are typically closed access (e.g. *Nature*, *Science*), these patterns indicate that the most widely-reported research is kept behind paywalls, limiting public understanding and engagement of academic knowledge (Parker, 2013).Beyond mainstream media, higher Twitter activity for OA studies—irrespective of journal rank—supports a longstanding perception that open research is more widely disseminated and discussed online (Darling *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2015). Overall, policy documents also cited OA studies more often than closed (Fig. 2d), supporting evidence that subscription-only publishing models can limit the uptake of current scientific knowledge by policymakers (Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2014). On the flip side, policy uptake of closed research published in high-ranking journals exceeded that of OA studies, possibly because policymakers choose to cite high-impact closed studies which have received substantial media attention.

Our results show that OA facilitates both academic and non-academic communication of climate change, which may be especially important for developing nations. Most climate change research is published through institutes within the developed world (McSweeney, 2015), yet the greatest impacts will be observed in some of the least developed and most vulnerable regions of the world (e.g. IPCC, 2014; Blasiak *et al.*, 2017). Inability to access subscription-only publications may inhibit science-based policy in developing countries. For example, inaccessibility of primary research has contributed to low citation rates in policy plans for tropical marine protected areas, implying that environmental management may fall behind current scientific knowledge (Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2014).

*OS facilitates collaboration and triage*

The pace of climate change combined with a need to address societal and ecological impacts with limited resources make aspects of climate change research, such as biological conservation, triage disciplines. Successful triage requires efficient and rapid decision making (Bottrill *et al.*, 2008) and, to this end, OS principles can help to minimize scientific uncertainty while increasing collaboration potential. For example, OS encourages data and code sharing, assists the peer-review process with fully-reproducible manuscripts (Ram, 2013; Lowndes *et al.*, 2017), and reduces time to publication with preprints and OA journals (Vale, 2015). Most scientists agree that publicly-funded research should be freely available (Dallmeier-Tiessen *et al.*, 2011) and several institutions have successfully implemented open data climate science. For instance, research on climate-driven thermal bleaching events in coral reef ecosystems has benefited hugely from open access to NOAA’s large-scale monitoring data (e.g. NOAA CoralWatch; Harris *et al.*, 2017). Comprehensive open data policies have also been implemented by some governments (e.g. USA; Obama, 2013) and journal groups (e.g. Nature editors, 2018). These examples demonstrate the success and importance of adopting open data principles; comprehensive uptake of these and other OS practices will substantially enhance application of academic research to climate change issues.

Despite the clear benefits of OS in enhancing research output and communication to stakeholders, considerable barriers to OS uptake persist, including closed publishing, fear of being ‘scooped’, and clarity of data ownership (Nosek *et al.*, 2015). Research outputs—usually publications—are already required by most granting agencies, and grants and institutions typically include costs to cover OA (Dallmeier-Tiessen *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, most climate change research is funded by developed countries yet focus on climate issues in developing countries that may lack the institutional capacity for journal subscriptions (van Helden, 2012; McSweeney, 2015). Thus, to incentivize OS climate change research, we propose funding bodies should require grant holders to openly publish datasets, papers and code, and mandate active dissemination of climate change findings to stakeholders rather than passive dissemination by publication.

Scientists across disciplines have argued, convincingly, for improving research practices by adopting OS principles (Hampton *et al.*, 2015; Nosek *et al.*, 2015; McKiernan *et al.*, 2016). We extend these arguments to show that adoption of OS practices, such as OA publications, OS workflows, and sharing data, can also improve the academic and societal impact of climate change research. Given that global efforts to combat climate change impacts will require both rapid collaborative research and communication among academics, policymakers and the public, climate change research is in need of strong OS stewardship.

**Table 1. Recommendations to advance climate change research with open science tools.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Open science practice** | **Benefits** | **Application to climate change**  **research** |
| *Publish open access* | Increase uptake of primary research by public institutions (government and policy) | Limited uptake of scientific knowledge by policymakers (Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2014) may be addressed with open access (Fig. 2d) |
| Improve access to science by developing countries, thus enhancing climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts | Developing countries, which are most at risk to climate change impacts (IPCC, 2014), can access up-to-date climate research |
| Improve public communication of scientific evidence, thus raising public understanding of science | Prior knowledge of climate change causes are correlated to heightened concern (Shi *et al.*, 2016) |
|  |  |  |
| *Adopt reproducible and transparent research workflows* | Increase efficiency of research and robustness of findings | Progression of open science data tools and practices for increased transparency (Lowndes *et al.*, 2017) |
|  |  |  |
| *Archive data, code, and preprints* | Greater sharing of data, code, and ideas will stimulate more collaborative and interdisciplinary research | Journals publishing climate change research should adopt transparency policies (Nosek *et al.*, 2015)  Standardized metadata reporting will facilitate literature comparisons and meta-analyses (Morueta-Holme *et al.*, 2018)  Openly-available environmental monitoring datasets have been critical sources of information (e.g. NOAA's SST product; Reynolds *et al.*, 2002)  Open science workflows facilitate large collaborations (e.g. GitHub, Open Science Framework) (Ram, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2014) |
| Data availability will advance practices of 'climate change triage' | Climate change triage that supports long-term values of multiple stakeholders (e.g. scientists, Indigenous communities, government, industry) (Wheeler *et al.*, 2016) will require integration of diverse datasets from multiple disciplines  Access to open datasets at global and local scales facilitates conservation triage of coral reefs (Harris *et al.*, 2017) |
| Fast release of ideas and improved research before peer-review | Archiving pre- and post-prints on open access repositories such as arXiv, biorXiv, and MarXiv. |

../Documents/git_repos/open-climate-change/figures/Figure1.pdf

**Figure 1. Increasing prevalence of open access (OA) climate studies published between 2007-2016.** Proportional increase in OA climate change publications (black line) and across four journal ranking categories (colored lines; low = 0.1-1.2, medium = 1.2-1.7, high = 1.7-2.7, very high = 2.7-18.1). Publications were extracted from Scopus ([www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com/)) for articles and reviews published between 2007-2016 containing the term “climat\* change” in title, abstract, or keywords. We further restricted publications to those journals with >200 total citation records (i.e. journals which regularly published climate change research, n = 116). Journal rankings are 3-year weighted citation rates (SCImago Journal Rankings; [www.scimagojr.com](http://www.scimagojr.com/)), ranging from 0.14 to 18.13. Bins are the 25th, 50th, and 75th quantiles of the journal rank distribution.

**../Documents/git_repos/open-climate-change/figures/Figure2_vert.pdf**

**Figure 2. Citations, communication, and media influence of closed and open access climate change studies published between 2007-2016.** Points are predicted mean number of citations (a), news mentions (b), twitter mentions (c), and policy mentions (d) in four journal ranking categories, controlling for effects of publication year and journal on citations/mentions. Dashed lines are mean citations/mentions controlling for journal rank, publication year and journal name. Citations were extracted from Scopus for the same studies in Fig. 1. News, twitter and policy mentions were extracted from Altmetric ([www.altmetric.com](http://www.altmetric.com/)) for study DOIs in Fig. 1. Citations and mentions were averaged for each journal in each year, and fitted to linear mixed effects models with journal ranking bin (4 bins represented by the 25th, 50th, and 75th quantiles) and access (open/closed) as fixed effects and year and journal as random intercepts. Citations were log10 transformed for normality and presented on a log10 scale; Altmetric models were fitted with Poisson distributions. All analyses were conducted in R 3.4.4 (R Core Team, 2018).

**Code and Data availability**

Journal citations and mentions were extracted from Scopus (www.scopus.com) and Altmetric (www.altmetric.com). We provide our queried search terms and R coding scripts at [github.com/travistai2/open-science-cc](http://www.github.com/travistai2/open-science-cc)

**Acknowledgements**

We thank Andres Cisneros, Cameron Freshwater, and Nick Graham for useful comments.

**Author contributions**

TT conceived the idea. Both authors contributed equally to data analysis and writing.

**Funding**

The authors did not receive any specific funding for this work

**Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial conflicts of interest

**References**

Blasiak R, Spijkers J, Tokunaga K, Pittman J, Yagi N, Osterblom H (2017) Climate change and marine fisheries: Least developed countries top global index of vulnerability. *Plos One*, **12**, e0179632.

Bornmann L, Haunschild R, Marx W (2016) Policy documents as sources for measuring societal impact: how often is climate change research mentioned in policy-related documents? *Scientometrics*, **109**, 1477–1495.

Bottrill MC, Joseph LN, Carwardine J et al. (2008) Is conservation triage just smart decision making? *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, **23**, 649–654.

Cvitanovic C, Fulton CJ, Wilson SK, van Kerkhoff L, Cripps IL, Muthiga N (2014) Utility of primary scientific literature to environmental managers: An international case study on coral-dominated marine protected areas. *Ocean and Coastal Management*, **102**, 72–78.

Dallmeier-Tiessen S, Darby R, Goerner B et al. (2011) *Highlights from the SOAP project survey. What Scientists Think about Open Access Publishing*.

Darling E, Shiffman D, Cȏté I, Drew J (2013) The role of Twitter in the life cycle of a scientific publication. *Ideas in Ecology and Evolution*, **6**, 32–43.

Ellison AM (2010) Repeatability and transparency in ecological research. *Ecology*, **91**, 2536–2539.

Eysenbach G (2006) Citation advantage of open access articles. *PLoS Biology*, **4**, e157.

Hampton SE, Anderson S, Bagby SC et al. (2015) The Tao of Open Science for Ecology. *Ecosphere*, **6**, 120.

Harris JL, Estradivari E, Fox HE, McCarthy OS, Ahmadia GN (2017) Planning for the future: Incorporating global and local data to prioritize coral reef conservation. *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems*, **27**, 65–77.

IPCC (2014) *Climate change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (eds Field CB, Barros VR, Dokken DJ, Mach KJ, Mastrandrea MD, Bilir TE, Chatterjee M, Ebi KL, Estrada YO, Genova RC, Girma B, Kissel ES, Levy AN, MacCracken S, Mastrandrea PR, White LL). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA.

Lawrence S (2001) Free online availability substantially increases a paper’s impact. *Nature*, **411**, 521.

Lowndes JSS, Best BD, Scarborough C et al. (2017) Our path to better science in less time using open data science tools. *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, **1**, 160.

McKiernan EC, Bourne PE, Brown CT et al. (2016) How open science helps researchers succeed. *eLife*, **5**, e16800.

McSweeney R (2015) Analysis: the most “cited” climate change papers. *Carbon Brief*.

Morueta-Holme N, Oldfather MF, Olliff-Yang RL et al. (2018) Best practices for reporting climate data in ecology. *Nature Climate Change*, **8**, 92–94.

Nature editors (2018) Two documents for greater transparency. *Nature*, **555**, 6.

Nielsen M (2011) *Reinventing Discovery: The New Era of Networked Science*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, 272 pp.

Nosek BA, Alter G, Banks GC et al. (2015) Promoting an open research culture. *Science*, **348**, 1422–1425.

Obama B (2013) Executive Order—Making open and machine readable the new default for government information.

Parker M (2013) The ethics of open access publishing. *BMC Medical Ethics*, **14**, 16.

R Core Team (2018) R: A Language and environment for statistical computing.

Ram K (2013) Git can facilitate greater reproducibility and increased transparency in science. *Source Code for Biology and Medicine*, **8**, 7.

Reynolds RW, Rayner NA, Smith TM, Stokes DC, Wang W (2002) An improved in situ and satellite SST analysis for climate. *Journal of Climate*, **15**, 1609–1625.

Shi J, Visschers VHM, Siegrist M, Arvai J (2016) Knowledge as a driver of public perceptions about climate change reassessed. *Nature Climate Change*, **6**, 759–762.

Vale RD (2015) Accelerating scientific publication in biology. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **112**, 13439–13446.

Wang X, Liu C, Mao W, Fang Z (2015) The open access advantage considering citation, article usage and social media attention. *Scientometrics*, **103**, 555–564.

Wheeler HC, Berteaux D, Furgal C, Parlee B, Yoccoz NG, Grémillet D (2016) Stakeholder Perspectives on Triage in Wildlife Monitoring in a Rapidly Changing Arctic. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, **4**, 1–14.

Wilson G, Aruliah DA, Brown CT et al. (2014) Best Practices for Scientific Computing. *PLoS Biology*, **12**, e1001745.