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For a Trendy Night Out in Paris, How About a Climate Change Workshop

More than a million people in France have attended a “Climate Fresk” class to understand the process of global warming. The project is now spreading abroad.



Participants in a “Climate Fresk,” a workshop that teaches the fundamentals of global warming. Groups use cards to recreate the chain of climate change and debate possible solutions. Credit...Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times



By [Constant Méheut](#), Reporting from Paris, August 21, 2023

On a recent summer evening in central Paris, a handful of people trickled into a trendy Brazilian bar blasting bossa nova, passed customers toasting with caipirinhas and headed for a wooden staircase in the back. They emerged into a small room featuring a table strewn with large printed cards that showed charts explaining the science behind climate change.

“Welcome,” a young man said. “We’re going to have fun.”

For the next three hours, the group used the cards to recreate the chain of global warming, frowning as they tried to understand phenomena such as radiative forcing and ocean acidification. Then, they debated limiting energy-hungry air travel and developing nuclear power.

The group was taking part in a “Climate Fresk,” a workshop run by [a nonprofit of the same name](#), that teaches the basics of global warming and highlights possible solutions. The events have become a trendy night out in France, with more than a million participants.

The popularity of the Climate Fresks, named for the “fresco” that participants create with the cards, comes as [much of Europe](#) faces hotter summers [associated with climate change](#). (France is expected to experience its strongest heat wave of the summer this weekend.)

Since they began in 2018, Climate Fresks have increasingly been adopted by public and private organizations to spur people to take environmental action. As France has committed to [reduce carbon emissions and drastically cut waste](#), major universities, companies and even some government departments are sending more and more students, employees and civil servants to the workshops.

The workshops are also expanding beyond France. They has been translated into some 50 languages, and about 200,000 people abroad have participated, including in the United States.

Some green activists and environmental experts criticize the workshop for not going far enough and for not questioning the political and economic decisions that have accelerated climate change.

Cédric Ringenbach, creator of the Climate Fresk, said the workshop focused on the science behind climate change and let participants make up their minds.

“It’s not the fresco that challenges the political-economic paradigm,” he said, “It’s the participants themselves who come to these conclusions.” “We’re here to pave the way,” he added.

An engineer by training and a longtime lecturer on climate change, Mr. Ringenbach said that he had imagined the workshop as a way to better engage his students.

“I wanted them to piece together the climate change chain by themselves,” he said. “It’s much more powerful from an educational point of view, because you’re not just passively listening to a lecture — you’re an actor.”

The workshop, which is based on reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations body, uses 42 cards representing the various stages of climate change, from the use of fossil fuels to the melting of glaciers. With the help of a facilitator, participants are asked to arrange the cards on a large sheet of paper to represent the causes and consequences of climate change.

“Not easy!” said Ariane Prin, who took part in the workshop in the Brazilian bar, as she looked at a card on little-known greenhouse gases that warm the planet.



A “map including cards and drawings, from a session of Climate Fresco in Paris in June. Credit...Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Around her, participants debated the process of disruption of the water cycle, their faces contorting with concern as they placed cards showing chilling pictures of flooding and droughts. They drew arrows between the cards to illustrate the links between deforestation and carbon dioxide emissions and called their fresco “The Map of Awareness.”

“We feel so small in front of this map,” Ms. Prin said. “And yet we also feel empowered, because we’ve learned so much.”

The popularity of the Climate Fresk workshops echoes a growing interest in France in understanding the environmental changes affecting the country, whether [raging wildfires in the south](#) or [rising waters eroding D-Day’s beaches in Normandy](#). The [best-selling book in France](#) last year was a [comic book about the climate crisis](#), “Le Monde Sans Fin” — or “World Without End” — which sold over half a million copies.

Several participants said the workshop had prompted them to take action, such as cutting down on their consumption of meat, [a major source of greenhouse gas emissions](#), and lobbying their employers to institute greener practices.

The Climate Fresk workshop has grown so quickly thanks also to its relative ease and accessibility: Card templates are [available free online](#), and training to become a facilitator takes just a few hours.

Interest in the workshops has been such that it is now a fixture of introductory courses at several [elite French universities](#) and is taught at major companies such as the bank BNP Paribas. The French government is also considering including it in [a plan to train the country’s 25,000 most senior civil servants](#) in the green transition by the end of next year.

Claire Landais, who as the government’s secretary general is one of France’s top civil servants, said the stakes were high in training her colleagues, because they were the ones who would be putting climate policies in place. She underwent an initial training last year that included a Climate Fresk, which she described as “a very rich and dense” workshop.

“Until then,” Ms. Landais said, “I had never been trained in these topics.”

Mr. Ringenbach said his goal was to “reach the winning triangle” — citizens, businesspeople and politicians — to create enough momentum to speed up the fight against climate change.

Critics warn that the workshop could be used by companies for greenwashing, offering an easy way to profess concern for climate change while actually doing little to address it.

BNP Paribas, for example, has [boasted](#) of using the workshop to train thousands of employees but remains one of the world’s biggest funders of fossil fuel projects, according to a [2022 report by nongovernmental groups](#).

“The Climate Fresk has become a bit of a simplistic way of tackling these environmental issues,” said Eric Guilyardi, a climate scientist and president of the [Office for Climate Education](#), a United Nations-linked group that promotes climate education in schools around the world.

“It’s like saying, ‘OK, I’m aware of the issue, I’ve done my part,’” he added.

Stéphane Lambert, a Climate Fresk development officer at BNP Paribas, said the accusations were unfounded, arguing that the workshop had helped the bank’s plans to move away from fossil fuels. BNP Paribas [said in May](#) that it would reduce its financing of oil exploration and production 80 percent by 2030.

As the workshop in the Brazilian bar in Paris drew to an end, the group gathered for a photo. They stood behind their fresco, a colorful poster covered with drawings that expressed both hope and fear: lush forests and flooded buildings, seas teeming with fish, and a tornado.

“Should we smile?” Ms. Prin asked. “Or should we cry?”