Making the Case

Michelle Covi
Assistant professor of practice
ODU’s Ocean, Earth and
Atmospheric Sciences Department

Michelle Covi spends a lot of time thinking about
the words people use when talking about environ-
mental issues. She prefers “challenge” to “disaster”
and worries that characterizing storms and floods as
hundred- or thousand-year events confuses people
—and lets them off the hook. (“Well, that kind of storm
won’t happen again in my lifetime . . . ”)

A word she does like? “Empowerment.”

Through her work at ODU and with the Virginia
Sea Grant extension program, Covi helps communi-
ties get environmental cooperation from all the players,
including corporations, residents, civic groups,
academic institutions and lawmakers.

Her dual role as researcher and communicator
represents new ground for scientists, who in the past
presented their research on climate change but left to
others the work of finding solutions.

“One of the most difficult things about commu-
nicating about climate change is that we are moving
into a different world than we’ve ever experienced,”
she says. “There’s a lot of uncertainty.”

The search for answers, combine with the size of
the problem, can lead to a kind of fatalism. City
leaders and residents clam up:

“If we talk about it, won’t we scare off businesses and
tourists?”

“What can I do to stop all this flooding, anyway?”

“Maybe it’s God’s will.”

That’s why Covi wants everyone to talk more. She
spent more than a decade in Illinois working with city
governments and nonprofits to improve recycling pro-
grams, an effort she sees as a model for other environ-
mental areas.

“People under 30 cannot just throw something
away,” she says. “They want to recycle it. I think kids
growing up today will feel the same way about solu-
tions we’re working on now.”

Many of those solutions fall under a “green-gray”
umbrella of infrastructure development, she says, in-
cluding the city of Norfolk’s collaboration with the
Elizabeth River Project to create a berm that prevents
nuisance flooding while protecting the living shoreline
along the Ohio Creek Watershed, near Norfolk State
University.

“The impacts of climate change go beyond what
one person can do,” she says. “You can raise your
house, but if the street floods, your home is still inac-
cessible. There is this feeling that we need to be-
ning bigger, beyond small, individual fixes. We
need to get more citizens involved. We need commo-
solutions.”