Climate tipping points — too risky to bet against

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The growing threat of abrupt and irreversible climate changes must compel political and economic action on emissions.

Politicians, economists and even some natural scientists have tended to assume that tipping points[1] in the Earth system — such as the loss of the Amazon rainforest or the West Antarctic ice sheet — are of low probability and little understood. Yet evidence is mounting that these events could be more likely than was thought, have high impacts and are interconnected across different biophysical systems, potentially committing the world to long-term irreversible changes.

Here we summarize evidence on the threat of exceeding tipping points, identify knowledge gaps and suggest how these should be plugged. We explore the effects of such large-scale changes, how quickly they might unfold and whether we still have any control over them.

In our view, the consideration of tipping points helps to define that we are in a climate emergency and strengthens this year's chorus of calls for urgent climate action — from schoolchildren to scientists, cities and countries.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) introduced the idea of tipping points two decades ago. At that time, these 'large-scale discontinuities' in the climate system were considered likely only if global warming exceeded 5 °C above pre-industrial levels. Information summarized in the two most recent IPCC Special Reports (published in 2018 and in September this year)[2,3] suggests that tipping points could be exceeded even between 1 and 2 °C of warming (see 'Too close for comfort').

If current national pledges to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions are implemented — and that's a big 'if' — they are likely to result in at least 3 °C of global warming. This is despite the goal of the 2015 Paris agreement to limit warming to well below 2 °C. Some economists, assuming that climate tipping points are of very low probability (even if they would be catastrophic), have suggested that 3 °C warming is optimal from a cost–benefit perspective. However, if tipping points are looking more likely, then the 'optimal policy' recommendation of simple cost–benefit climate-economy models[4] aligns with those of the recent IPCC report[2]. In other words, warming must be limited to 1.5 °C. This requires an emergency response.

Ice collapse

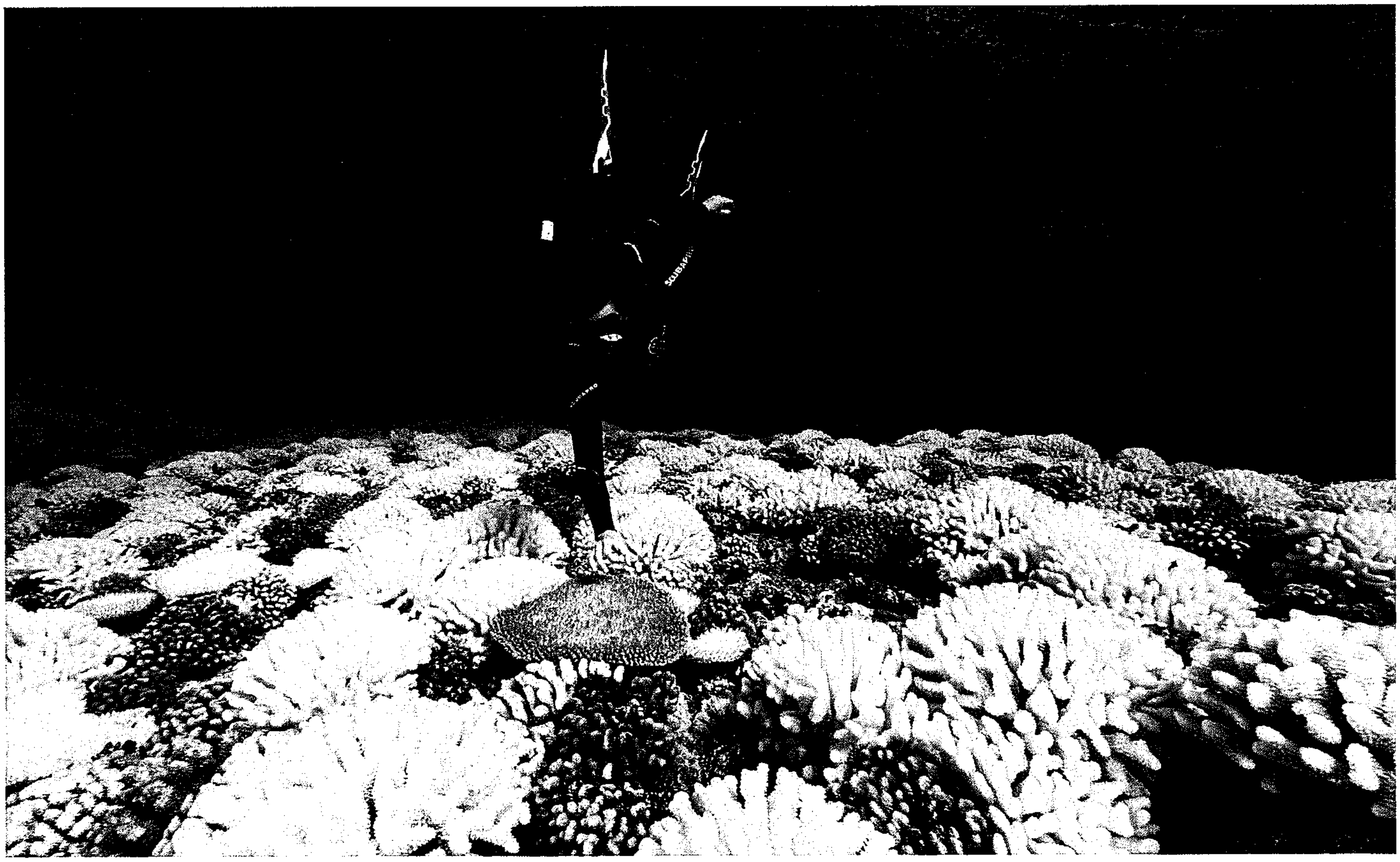
We think that several cryosphere tipping points are dangerously close, but mitigating greenhouse-gas emissions could still slow down the inevitable accumulation of impacts and help us to adapt.

Research in the past decade has shown that the Amundsen Sea embayment of West Antarctica might have passed a tipping point[3]: the 'grounding line' where ice, ocean and bedrock meet is retreating irreversibly. A model study shows[5] that when this sector collapses, it could destabilize the rest of the West Antarctic ice sheet like toppling dominoes — leading to about 3 metres of sea-level rise on a timescale of centuries to millennia. Palaeo-evidence shows that such widespread collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet has occurred repeatedly in the past.

The latest data show that part of the East Antarctic ice sheet — the Wilkes Basin — might be similarly unstable[3]. Modelling work suggests that it could add another 3–4 m to sea level on timescales beyond a century.

The Greenland ice sheet is melting at an accelerating rate[3]. It could add a further 7 m to sea level over thousands of years if it passes a particular threshold. Beyond that, as the elevation of the ice sheet lowers, it melts further, exposing the surface to ever-warmer air. Models suggest that the Greenland ice sheet could be doomed at 1.5 °C of warming[3], which could happen as soon as 2030.

Thus, we might already have committed future generations to living with sea-level rises of around 10 m over thousands of years[3]. But that timescale is still under our control. The rate of melting depends on the magnitude of warming above the tipping point. At 1.5 °C, it could take 10,000 years to unfold[3]; above 2 °C it could take less than 1,000 years[6].



ALEXIS ROSENFELD/GETTY

Bleached corals on a reef near the island of Moorea in French Polynesia in the South Pacific.

in fires that have led to dieback of North American boreal forests, potentially turning some regions from a carbon sink to a carbon source[9]. Permafrost across the Arctic is beginning to irreversibly thaw and release carbon dioxide and methane – a greenhouse gas that is around 30 times more potent than CO_2 over a 100-year period.

Researchers need to improve their understanding of these observed changes in major ecosystems, as well as where future tipping points might lie. Existing carbon stores and potential releases of CO_2 and methane need better quantification.

The world's remaining emissions budget for a 50:50 chance of staying within 1.5 °C of warming is only about 500 gigatonnes (Gt) of CO_2. Permafrost emissions could take an estimated 20% (100 Gt CO_2) off this budget[10], and that's without including methane from deep permafrost or undersea hydrates. If forests are close to tipping points, Amazon dieback could release another 90 Gt CO_2 and boreal forests a further 110 Gt CO_2 (ref. 11). With global total CO_2 emissions still at more than 40 Gt per year, the remaining budget could be all but erased already.

Global cascade

In our view, the clearest emergency would be if we were approaching a global cascade of tipping points that led to a new, less habitable, 'hothouse' climate state[11]. Interactions could happen through ocean and atmospheric circulation or through feedbacks that increase greenhouse-gas levels and global temperature. Alternatively, strong cloud feedbacks could cause a global tipping point[12,13].

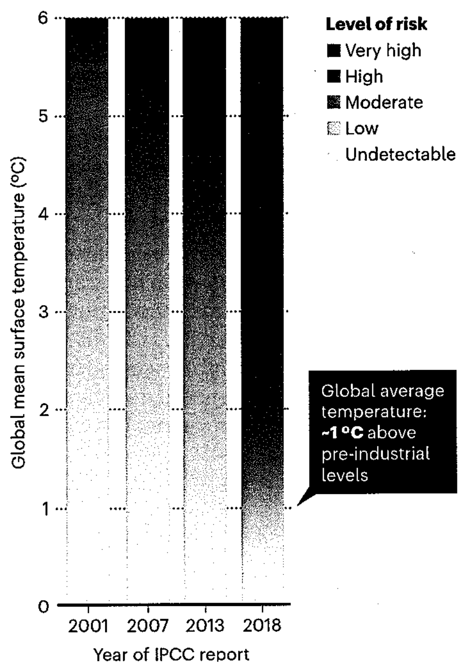
We argue that cascading effects might be common. Research last year[14] analysed 30 types of regime shift spanning physical climate and ecological systems, from collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet to a switch from rainforest to savanna. This indicated that exceeding tipping points in one system can increase the risk of crossing them in others. Such links were found for 45% of possible interactions[14].

In our view, examples are starting to be observed. For example, Arctic sea-ice loss is amplifying regional warming, and Arctic warming and Greenland melting are driving an influx of fresh water into the North Atlantic. This could have contributed to a 15% slowdown[15] since the mid-twentieth century of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC), a key part of global heat and salt transport by the ocean[3]. Rapid melting of the Greenland ice sheet and further slowdown of the AMOC could destabilize the West African monsoon, triggering drought in Africa's Sahel region. A slowdown in the AMOC could also dry the Amazon, disrupt the East Asian monsoon and cause heat to build up in the Southern Ocean, which could accelerate Antarctic ice loss.

The palaeo-record shows global tipping, such as the entry into ice-age cycles 2.6 million years ago and their switch in amplitude and frequency around one million years ago,

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Abrupt and irreversible changes in the climate system have become a higher risk at lower global average temperatures.



SOURCE: IPCC