

CLIMATE MODELLING

Accounting for the human factor

One of the greatest sources of uncertainty about future climate change is the path greenhouse gas emissions will take. Now research using a coupled model of human behaviour and climate finds that individual behaviour can significantly alter emissions trajectories and global temperature.

Jonathan M. Gilligan

Despite growing awareness that human behaviour is an important driver of emissions^{1,2}, virtually all global energy–climate models reduce behaviour to simple economic treatments. Indeed, anthropogenic climate change is perhaps the largest and most complex human–natural system, but while models of local and regional coupled human–natural systems routinely use complex treatments of human behaviour, which can include feedback cycles between changing behaviour and a changing environment^{3,4}, most integrated models of society and climate treat behaviour economically, as rational wealth or utility maximization⁵. In contrast, models of adaptation to climate change often explicitly consider complex behavioural responses to risk and uncertainty^{6,7}. Writing in *Nature Climate Change*, Brian Beckage and colleagues⁸ present the Climate–Social Model (CSM), a novel system–dynamics model that couples a psychological model of behavioural response to risk with a model of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, and find that characteristics of individual decisions about energy use can raise or lower the global temperature in the year 2100 by as much as 1.5 °C relative to a baseline emissions trajectory.

In CSM (Fig. 1), personal actions drive emissions, which affect global temperatures. CSM represents human responses to climate change using the theory of planned behaviour, a psychological model that is widely used to describe environmental and health-related behaviour^{9,10}. Personal emissions reduction is driven by a combination of perceived climate risk (here defined as proportional to the number of extreme heat events in recent years, which is consistent with research findings¹¹), perceived self-efficacy (belief that taking action can affect the risks), perceived social norms (a sense of how much society expects a responsible person to reduce personal emissions), and perceived behavioural control (the sense of how easily and successfully one can reduce greenhouse gas emissions). Perceived risk combines with

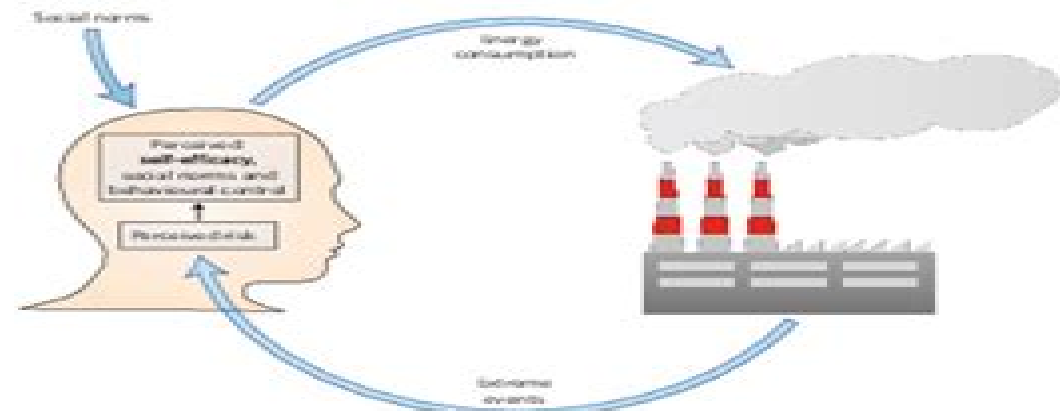


Fig. 1 | The coupled climate–social model (CSM) examines a feedback loop in which climate-related extreme events affect people’s perceived risk, which then interacts with perceptions of societal expectations and personal capabilities to stimulate actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

perceived self-efficacy to produce an attitude toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions; attitude, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioural control determine emissions reduction; attitude changes over time as the number of extreme heat events drives changes in perceived risk, but perceived social norms do not change.

Empirical data were not available to calibrate the behavioural model, so Beckage et al. sampled 766,656 combinations of parameters and functional forms to explore its dynamics and sensitivity to the different unknowns. They find that under the same policy conditions, different behavioural responses can change global temperatures by up to 1.5 °C relative to a baseline trajectory.

Several noteworthy details emerge from this analysis. First, even though perceived social norms do not change in response to changing climate and perceived self-efficacy modulates the effect of a changing climate on attitude, perceived social norms have the

strongest effect on behaviour and perceived self-efficacy has very little effect. This suggests that if social norms are static, they add inertia to behaviour, slowing down its response as experience of extreme weather raises perceived risk and that behaviour is shaped more by a sense of what others think than whether one believes that one’s own actions can make a difference.

Second, perceived behavioural control interacts with perceived social norms to amplify behaviour changes: for high perceived behavioural control, emissions are lowest with high perceived social norms and highest with low perceived social norms. It may seem puzzling that making it easier to reduce emissions (increasing perceived behavioural control) leads to greater emissions when norms are weak. This may just be an artifact of the mathematical realization of the behavioural model, but one can also interpret it in human terms: if there is little social pressure to reduce emissions,

Accounting For The Human Factor

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