

NATURE –A Bahá'í Perspective

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Introduction

In the Ridván 1989 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, it was stated that "assisting in endeavors to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community must assume more importance in Bahá'í activities". To that end, it is useful to increase our knowledge of the natural world and our place in it. In this paper we will present perspectives on nature - its purpose and relationship to the rest of creation, appropriate attitudes toward nature, the state of the natural world at the present time, and appropriate actions we can take.

The Purpose of Life and the Purpose of Creation

In the short Obligatory Prayer Bahá'u'lláh tells us to say "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou has created me to know Thee and to worship Thee." One dictionary definition of worship is "reverent love and allegiance". In this discussion we will take our purpose in life to be, simply stated, knowing and loving God.

The most direct evidence of God comes through His Manifestation, thus knowing God is primarily accomplished through knowing the Messengers of God - the Founders of the world's great religions. Another way to know God is by communing with Him, i.e. through prayer. Yet a third way to know Him is by observing His creation. In the same way we begin to be able to recognize and admire the traits of a master artist through his or her works, i.e. we see the artist in the work of art, we are able to know God by observing His creation.

Bahá'u'lláh says "He... chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him - a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation..." (GWB p.65). This statement is pregnant with meaning - first of all it confirms that we have the capacity to know and love God, secondly it says that nothing else does, and thirdly it implies that creation exists primarily to assist in this process of knowing and loving.

Bahá'u'lláh says "Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge" (GWB p.160), thus we shall say that the purpose of creation is to help humanity know and love God. The natural world is an important part of creation.

Other statements of Bahá'u'lláh support this concept:

- "...not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity." (GWB p.60)
- "Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that

Most Great Light..... How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop!.... From that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God." (GWB p.177)

- "Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God. Each, according to its capacity, is, and will ever remain, a token of the Almighty. Inasmuch as He, the sovereign Lord of all, hath willed to reveal His sovereignty in the kingdom of names and attributes, each and every created thing hath, through the act of the Divine Will, been made a sign of His glory. So pervasive and general is this revelation that nothing whatsoever in the whole universe can be discovered that doth not reflect His splendor." (GWB p.184)

Nature

A dictionary definition of "nature" is "The forces or processes of the physical world, generally personified as a female being" (e.g. Mother Earth, Mother Nature). 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines nature as "the material world". (PUP p.308)

The physical world is an incubator or womb. It is a place where we exercise our free will to develop qualities and attributes which will be of use to us both here and in the next life. So we are born from this life - from the Earth, from the natural world - into the next. Therefore we see how appropriate it is to personify nature as being female.

Bahá'u'lláh is careful to point out that although nature reflects the attributes of God, nature is not part of God. We are reminded of the story of the dervish who was cooking his meal and explained to Bahá'u'lláh that he thought he was "cooking God" (DB p.118). Bahá'u'lláh says "Such an error hath been committed by certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies, have interpreted Divine Unity to mean that all created things are the signs of God, and that, consequently, there is no distinction whatsoever between them.... Everything besides Him is as nothing when brought face to face with the resplendent revelation of but one of His names....." (GWB p.187)

And again He says "Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures." (GWB p.166)

As we observe nature we begin to understand the idea of the unity of creation, because it becomes apparent that all of nature is interconnected. Try to imagine a room full of balls connected and suspended by springs. If we tap any one ball, the effect will eventually affect all the others. Similarly tossing a pebble into a still pond eventually affects the whole pond. Bahá'u'lláh says "It should be borne in mind, however, that when the light of My Name, the All-Pervading, hath shed its radiance upon the universe, each and every created thing hath, according to a fixed decree, been endowed with the capacity to exercise a particular influence, and been made to possess a distinct virtue.... He is a really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator." (GWB p.189)

Another aspect of creation that we learn from the Bahá'í writings is that it is an ongoing process, not a single event. As Bahá'ís we do not believe that creation is a random process, however, as is often put forward by those supporting the theory of evolution. We believe the physical world does evolve gradually over time, but that evolution is a process which the Creator designed as part of His creation. "All that is created.... is preceded by a cause." (GWB p.162) "The process of His creation hath had no beginning and can have no end." (GWB p.61)

Our relationship with nature is an interesting one. Physically we are part of nature - we must eat, we must sleep and deal with the many demands associated with our physical selves. Indeed we can observe in our physical selves (when we are feeling particularly detached!) the evidences of God as we do in the rest of the natural world. In fact Bahá'u'lláh says "How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him.... 'We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves.'" (GWB p.177)

Bahá'u'lláh tells us that God's creation is perfect. "So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures." (GWB p.62) And yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that nature is imperfect! "Nature is the material world. When we look upon it, we see that it is dark and imperfect. For instance, if we allow a piece of land to remain in its natural condition, we will find it covered with thorns and thistles; useless weeds and wild vegetation will flourish upon it, and it will become like a jungle. The trees will be fruitless, lacking beauty and symmetry; wild animals, noxious insects and reptiles will abound in its dark recesses. This is the incompleteness and imperfection of the world of nature." (PUP p.308)

These two statements can be resolved when we realize that there is more to God's creation than nature. What completes the picture? What "added ingredient" results in the perfection of creation? In the opinion of the author the answer is "humanity". 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "...it (nature) is, nevertheless, imperfect because it has need of intelligence and education.... Education is a necessity. If a piece of ground be left in its natural and original state, it will either become a thorny waste or be covered by worthless weeds. When cleared and cultivated, this same unproductive field will yield plentiful harvests of food for human sustenance." (PUP p.329) This implies that it is man's lot to "interfere" with nature.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "God has deposited within the human creature an illimitable power by which he can rule the world of nature." (PUP p.178) He goes on to give examples such as telegraphy and flying and then says "He discovers latent realities within the bosom of the earth, uncovers treasures, penetrates secrets and mysteries of the phenomenal world and brings to light that which according to nature's jealous laws should remain hidden, unknown and unfathomable. Through an ideal inner power man brings these realities forth from the invisible plane to the visible. This is contrary to nature's law." Again He says "God has created man lofty and noble, made him a dominant factor in creation". (PUP p.351)

The Universal House of Justice tells us "the beauty and magnificence of the Gardens and Terraces... are symbolic of the nature of the transformation which is destined to occur both

within the hearts of the world's peoples and in the physical environment of the planet." The barren hillside of Mount Carmel has become a thing of beauty in Haifa. From this we get a glimpse of how our proper use of nature will help make this world a spiritual paradise. It is encouraging to know that such changes are destined to occur.

Attitudes Toward Nature

Therefore we are intended to dominate the planet, not simply to "fit into" the forces of nature, as important as that is. This is a key point, and one that many environmentally conscious people might find hard to accept. With this fact of dominance goes a terrific responsibility to act with wisdom, something we are failing to do at the moment and the result of which will be discussed shortly. We are presently dominating as ruthless and ignorant dictators, whereas we should be loving and reverent caretakers. Bahá'u'lláh says: "Look not upon the creatures of God except with the eye of kindness and of mercy, for Our loving providence hath pervaded all created things, and Our grace encompassed the earth and the heavens." (GWB p.33)

First of all this material world is a creation of our Creator, deserving of reverent care and conservation. When we think of those first photographs of the earth taken from outer space, we realize it is a precious blue and white gem, more awe-inspiring than the most beautiful work of art, and it should be treated as such.

Secondly it is our common womb. The conditions of the womb certainly affect the child within it, and so we must help optimize the conditions of this world for our spiritual growth. Once again the gardens and terraces of the World Center offer us a vision of the future.

We know that our collective purpose is to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization". Shoghi Effendi gives us a glimpse of the future and of our wise domination of the planet when he says "A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving." (WOB p.204)

It is daunting to think of the wisdom this will require, but under the divine guidance of the Universal House of Justice this becomes possible. At the present time we are comparatively ignorant of the complex interrelationships of the natural world, and because of this we must be particularly careful when we exercise our dominating influence. But because managing the natural environment will require detailed knowledge of creation and therefore the Creator, this responsibility of dominance will help us fulfill our life purpose.

The State of the World

The present condition of the physical world is a reflection of the spiritual condition of humanity - it is in crisis ('Abdu'l-Bahá says that the spiritual and physical worlds are "exact counterparts" of each other - PUP p.10). Forests are shrinking, deserts are growing and soil is eroding - all at record rates. Thousands of species disappear annually. Pollution of many

kinds is growing worse. Our population is increasing much too rapidly. One of the most important threats we face is that of climate change. It is now clearly understood that global warming is occurring, is man-made, and is a threat to human civilization. The facts in the Appendix from the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report show magnitude of this particular problem.

Explanations and Courses of Action

The environmental crisis is one of many interrelated crises facing the world today - and an integrated solution is required. The World Commission on Environment and Development was so-named because it is impossible to separate social development issues and environmental issues. Their 1985 landmark report *Our Common Future* states: "The next few decades are crucial. The time has come to break out of past patterns. Attempts to maintain social and ecological stability through old approaches to development and environmental protection will increase instability. Security must be sought through change. The Commission has noted a number of actions that must be taken to reduce risks to survival and to put future development on paths that are sustainable. Yet we are aware that such a reorientation on a continuing basis is simply beyond the reach of present decision-making structures and institutional arrangements, both national and international." (OCF pp.22-23)

Shoghi Effendi said "If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine." (WOB p.45) The deterioration of the environment is heightening public awareness of the inability of present social and political systems to cope with a changing world, and forcing movement toward a world civilization. Thus it is playing a part in the plan of God.

The following statements from *Our Common Future* put the situation in perspective. "...These developing countries must operate in a world in which the resources gap between most developing and industrial nations is widening, in which the industrial world dominates in the rule-making of some key international bodies, and in which the industrial world has already used much of the planet's ecological capital. This inequality is the planet's main 'environmental' problem... Most of these countries face enormous economic pressures, both international and domestic, to overexploit their environmental resource base." (OCF pp.5-6) This is obviously unjust.

This is a direct confirmation of the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh: "Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men... If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation." (BWF pp.138-39)

Present day society is unsustainable environmentally, socially, and politically. National politics are inadequate for a world civilization.

Neither capitalism nor socialism have proven adequate to deal with the demands of society today. "The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the 'new world' promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace to whose ideals they proclaim their devotion? Where are the breakthroughs into new realms of cultural achievement produced by the aggrandizement of this race, of that nation or of a particular class? Why is the vast majority of the world's peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?" (PWP, p.2)

It is clear that "the integrated and interdependent nature of the new challenges and issues contrasts sharply with the nature of the institutions that exist today." (OCF p.310) We have technological tools to deal with a world society but at present lack institutions which they can serve.

There is plenty of evidence that we are physically able to sustain a world civilization. Infant mortality is falling, life expectancy is increasing, the proportion of the world's adults who can read and write is climbing, and the proportion of children starting school is rising. It seems to be a question of needing a new world organization that is capable of managing global needs in addition to national and local needs - a new world order.

There are many things we can do as Bahá'ís to help the process along. Back when the Universal House of Justice talked of "assisting in endeavors to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community", the institute process did not exist. This process has lent a new and important "rhythm" to our community life which did not exist before. Acts of service and community-building now are a normal, natural, and regular part of Bahá'í community life. Various conservation activities have become part of this process, and these will become more significant as the community grows.

In general we can a) work as advocates of the principles that we know will be a part of a sustainable civilization and b) bring our own lifestyles into patterns that will contribute to a sustainable civilization. On a personal level we can:

- Participate in the institute process, and initiate conservation activities within it
- Become more aware of the environment and ways of "living lightly" upon the earth for our brief span of years
- Use public transport if you can
- Minimize the use of chemical-based fertilizers in your garden
- Minimize energy usage
- Recycle as much as possible
- Plant trees
- Emulate the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's moderate, simple lifestyle as He travelled in the West
- Pursue careers that help foster sustainability

On a social level we can do the following in ways appropriate to our own circumstances:

- Advocate energy conservation
- Advocate water conservation
- Advocate renewable energy development
- Advocate conservation of species
- Advocate rainforest conservation
- Advocate international development projects
- Advocate the equality of men and women (This has far-reaching positive consequences, and can have an immediate effect on population control in developing nations)
- Support initiatives to develop and implement international laws and treaties related to the environment and development
- Support initiatives to develop and implement national policies related to development and the environment
- Work with environmental and interfaith groups
- Advocate world-level government

Conclusion

The entire world is intended for our training, intended to aid us in our efforts to know and love God. We can help "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" by assisting the world to develop along paths that are sustainable and that will result in the world order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. At the present time society is beginning to understand the folly of its present course of development, and the crises found in nature are helping to increase awareness of the need for a truly global world order. The wisdom of the Universal House of Justice's suggestion that "assisting in endeavors to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community must assume more importance in Bahá'í activities" is evident.

REFERENCES

- GWB – Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Bahá'u'lláh)
DB – Dawnbreakers (Nabil)
BWF – Bahá'í World Faith (Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá)
PUP – Promulgation of Universal Peace ('Abdu'l-Bahá)
WOB – World Order of Bahá'u'lláh (Shoghi Effendi)
OCF – Our Common Future (World Commission on Environment and Development)
PWP - The Promise of World Peace (Universal House of Justice)

APPENDIX

Summary of IPCC 5th Assessment Report (AR5) "Summary for Policymakers"

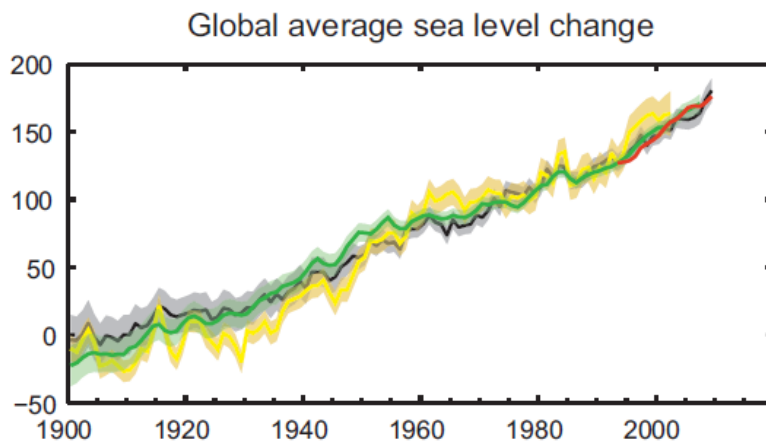
This is a summary of the 2013 "Summary for Policymakers" released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It considers the new evidence of climate change based on many independent scientific analyses from observations of the climate system, paleoclimate archives, theoretical studies of climate processes, and simulations using climate models.

1. Observed Changes

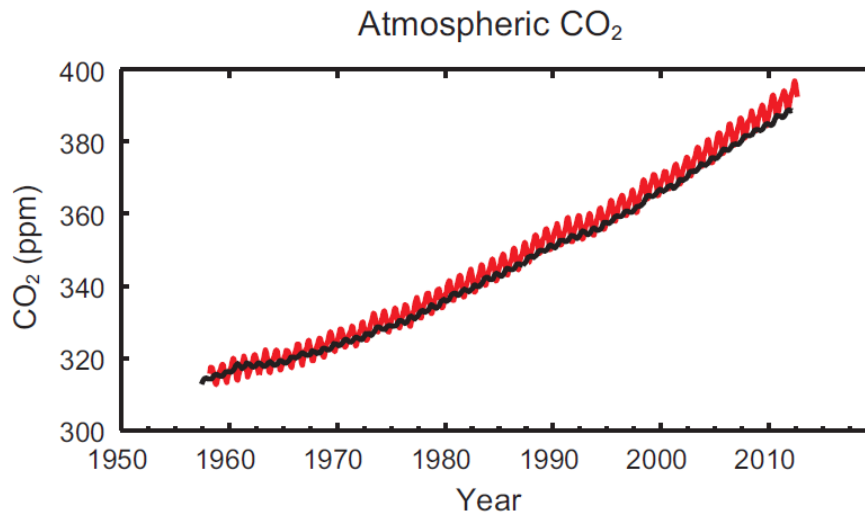
Observations of the climate system are based on direct measurements and remote sensing from satellites and other platforms. Global-scale observations from the instrumental era began in the mid-19th century for temperature and other variables, with more comprehensive and diverse sets of observations available for the period 1950 onwards. Paleoclimate reconstructions extend some records back hundreds to millions of years. Together, they provide a comprehensive view of the variability and long-term changes in the atmosphere, the ocean, the cryosphere, and the land surface.

Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased.

- a. Atmosphere - Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth's surface than any preceding decade since 1850. In the Northern Hemisphere, 1983–2012 was *likely* the warmest 30-year period of the last 1400 years (the meanings of confidence levels, which are italicized, can be found in the report).
- b. Ocean - Ocean warming dominates the increase in energy stored in the climate system, accounting for more than 90% of the energy accumulated between 1971 and 2010 (*high confidence*). It is *virtually certain* that the upper ocean (0–700 m) warmed from 1971 to 2010, and it *likely* warmed between the 1870s and 1971.
- c. Ice (Cryosphere) - Over the last two decades, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have been losing mass, glaciers have continued to shrink almost worldwide, and Arctic sea ice and Northern Hemisphere spring snow cover have continued to decrease in extent (*high confidence*).
- d. Sea Level - The rate of sea level rise since the mid-19th century has been larger than the mean rate during the previous two millennia (*high confidence*). Over the period 1901 to 2010, global mean sea level rose by 0.19 [0.17 to 0.21] m. The figure below shows sea level change in millimeters.



- e. Carbon Cycle - The atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Carbon dioxide concentrations have increased by 40% since pre-industrial times, primarily from fossil fuel emissions and secondarily from net land use change emissions. The ocean has absorbed about 30% of the emitted anthropogenic carbon dioxide, causing ocean acidification. The figure below shows atmospheric CO₂ concentration in parts per million since the 1950s.



2. Climate Change Drivers

Natural and anthropogenic substances and processes that alter the Earth's energy budget are drivers of climate change. Radiative forcing (RF) quantifies the change in energy fluxes caused by changes in these drivers for 2011 relative to 1750, unless otherwise indicated. (Radiative forcing is defined as the difference between radiant energy received by the Earth from the sun and energy radiated back to space. Greenhouse gases impede the energy leaving the earth, increasing radiative forcing and causing warming.) Positive RF leads to surface warming, negative RF leads to surface cooling. RF is estimated based on in-situ and remote observations, properties of greenhouse gases and aerosols, and calculations using numerical models representing observed processes.

- a. Radiative Forcing - Total radiative forcing is positive, and has led to an uptake of energy by the climate system. The largest contribution to total radiative forcing is caused by the increase in the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ since 1750.

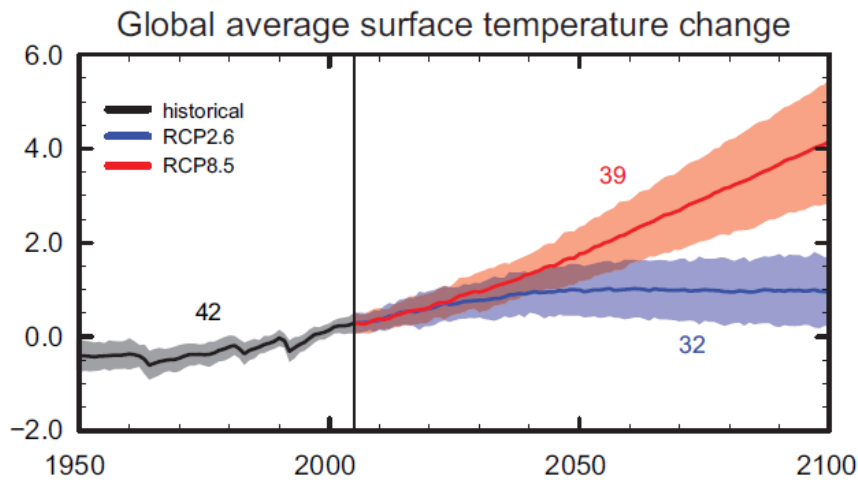
3. Understanding of Climate Change

Understanding recent changes in the climate system results from combining observations, studies of feedback processes, and model simulations. Evaluation of the ability of climate models to simulate recent changes requires consideration of the state of all modeled climate system components at the start of the simulation and the natural and anthropogenic forcing used to drive the models. Compared to AR4, more detailed and longer observations and improved climate models now enable the attribution of a human contribution to detected changes in more climate system components.

Human influence on the climate system is clear. This is evident from the increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, positive radiative forcing, observed warming, and understanding of the climate system.

- a. Climate Models - Climate models have improved since the AR4 (the previous IPCC assessment report). Models reproduce observed continental-scale surface temperature patterns and trends over many decades, including the more rapid warming since the mid-20th century and the cooling

immediately following large volcanic eruptions (*very high confidence*). The figure below shows model predictions of temperature change in degrees Celsius for high and low levels of positive radiative forcing.



- b. Quantification of Climate Responses - Observational and model studies of temperature change, climate feedbacks and changes in the Earth's energy budget together provide confidence in the magnitude of global warming in response to past and future forcing.
- c. Detection and Attribution of Climate Change - Human influence has been detected in warming of the atmosphere and the ocean, in changes in the global water cycle, in reductions in snow and ice, in global mean sea level rise, and in changes in some climate extremes. This evidence for human influence has grown since AR4 (IPCC fourth assessment report). It is *extremely likely* (see definition in Appendix) that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.

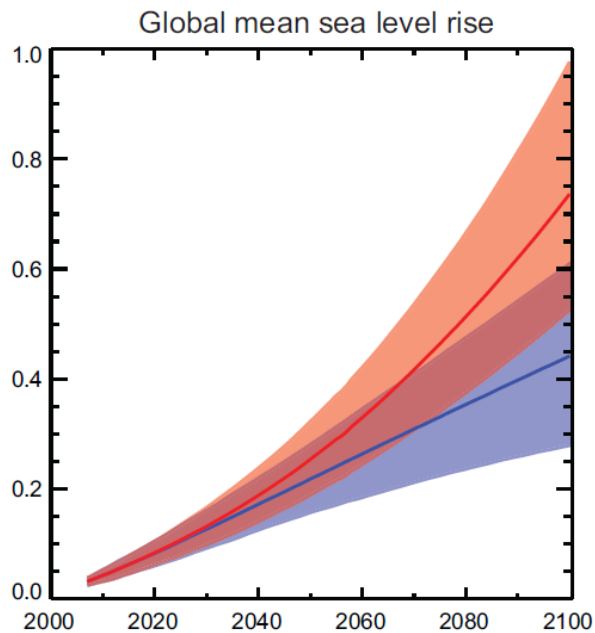
4. Future Global and Regional Climate Change

Projections of changes in the climate system are made using a hierarchy of climate models ranging from simple climate models, to models of intermediate complexity, to comprehensive climate models, and Earth System Models. These models simulate changes based on a set of scenarios of anthropogenic forcings. A new set of scenarios, the Representative Concentration Pathways (RCPs), have been created. In all RCPs (even ones where substantial emissions reductions are achieved), atmospheric CO₂ concentrations are higher in 2100 relative to present day as a result of a further increase of cumulative emissions of CO₂ to the atmosphere during the 21st century.

Continued emissions of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and changes in all components of the climate system. Limiting climate change will require substantial and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.

- a. Air Temperature - Global surface temperature change for the end of the 21st century is *likely* to exceed 1.5°C relative to 1850 to 1900 for all RCP scenarios except RCP2.6. It is *likely* to exceed 2°C for RCP6.0 and RCP8.5, and *more likely than not* to exceed 2°C for RCP4.5. Warming will continue beyond 2100 under all RCP scenarios except RCP2.6. Warming will continue to exhibit interannual-to-decadal variability and will not be regionally uniform.
- b. Ocean Temperature - The global ocean will continue to warm during the 21st century. Heat will penetrate from the surface to the deep ocean and affect ocean circulation.

- c. Water Cycle - Changes in the global water cycle in response to the warming over the 21st century will not be uniform. The contrast in precipitation between wet and dry regions and between wet and dry seasons will increase, although there may be regional exceptions.
- d. Ice (Cryosphere) - It is *very likely* that the Arctic sea ice cover will continue to shrink and thin and that Northern Hemisphere spring snow cover will decrease during the 21st century as global mean surface temperature rises. Global glacier volume will further decrease.



- e. Sea Level - Global mean sea level will continue to rise during the 21st century. Under all RCP scenarios, the rate of sea level rise will *very likely* exceed that observed during 1971 to 2010 due to increased ocean warming and increased loss of mass from glaciers and ice sheets. The figure above shows model predictions for sea level rise in meters for high and low levels of radiative forcing.
- f. Carbon Cycle - Climate change will affect carbon cycle processes in a way that will exacerbate the increase of CO₂ in the atmosphere (*high confidence*). Further uptake of carbon by the ocean will increase ocean acidification.
- g. Climate Stabilization (or otherwise) - Cumulative emissions of CO₂ largely determine global mean surface warming by the late 21st century and beyond. Most aspects of climate change will persist for many centuries even if emissions of CO₂ are stopped (man-made CO₂ emissions accumulate in the atmosphere, and only gradually return to natural levels). This represents a substantial multi-century climate change commitment already created by past, present and future emissions of CO₂.