

Getting real about 1.5°C

Only by admitting our failure can we really tackle climate change

NEGOTIATORS from nearly 200 countries are meeting in Bonn, Germany, to discuss how to put the world on track for its climate change ambitions. Chief among those is holding global warming to 1.5°C.

Scientists maintain that the temperature target is still achievable, in the sense that hitting it wouldn't require breaking the physical laws of science.

But the 1.5°C goal has long since moved beyond these realms, into the arena of politics. Here, most climate researchers fear to tread. They say their job is to lay out the evidence and model scenarios estimating the planet's thermostat depending on how policy-makers and leaders act. As Katharine Hayhoe at Texas Tech University puts it, they "stay in their lane".

Is this enough, though? Maintaining an

objective viewpoint, unsullied by politics, is crucial to science, but to suggest that there is any reality in which political action will come fast enough for the world to stay below 1.5°C of warming is as much a form of denialism as politicians who somehow still claim Earth isn't warming.

"A more constructive conversation would admit that 1.5°C is beyond our grasp"

To truly aid the public, researchers must feel freer to be more outspoken about the Herculean assumptions that allow their models to show that hitting 1.5°C is still possible. And they should speak candidly about the real-world signs – global emissions are still growing while national climate plans are stalling – that mean

realistically 1.5°C is out of reach.

The importance of science in public discourse about climate change cannot be overstated. Countries' delegates were falling over themselves at COP26 last November to point to scientists saying that 1.5°C is still possible. Yet the status quo of false hope isn't helping us act quickly. A more constructive conversation would admit that 1.5°C is beyond our grasp. That can only happen with researchers' help.

Such an admission shouldn't justify fatalism or inaction. Quite the opposite. It should act as a shock that finally spurs the technological and behavioural changes we need in order to cut emissions enough to avoid the far-worse ravages of a 2°C world. Being open about our failure on 1.5°C could be our best bet for successful action on climate change. ■

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