

# Climate change

Global warming is one of the greatest environmental threats currently facing life on Earth. This factsheet looks at the potentially devastating impacts of this climate change on the Earth's ecosystem and wildlife, and suggests some things that everyone can do to help.

## What is global warming?

Global warming is a form of climate change. An 'ice age', for example, is a period of natural climate change when the Earth cools dramatically. At the moment however the Earth is undergoing a period of climatic warming caused by the greenhouse effect.

## What is the greenhouse effect?

The greenhouse effect is a process that happens when gases in the Earth's atmosphere trap the Sun's heat. Greenhouse

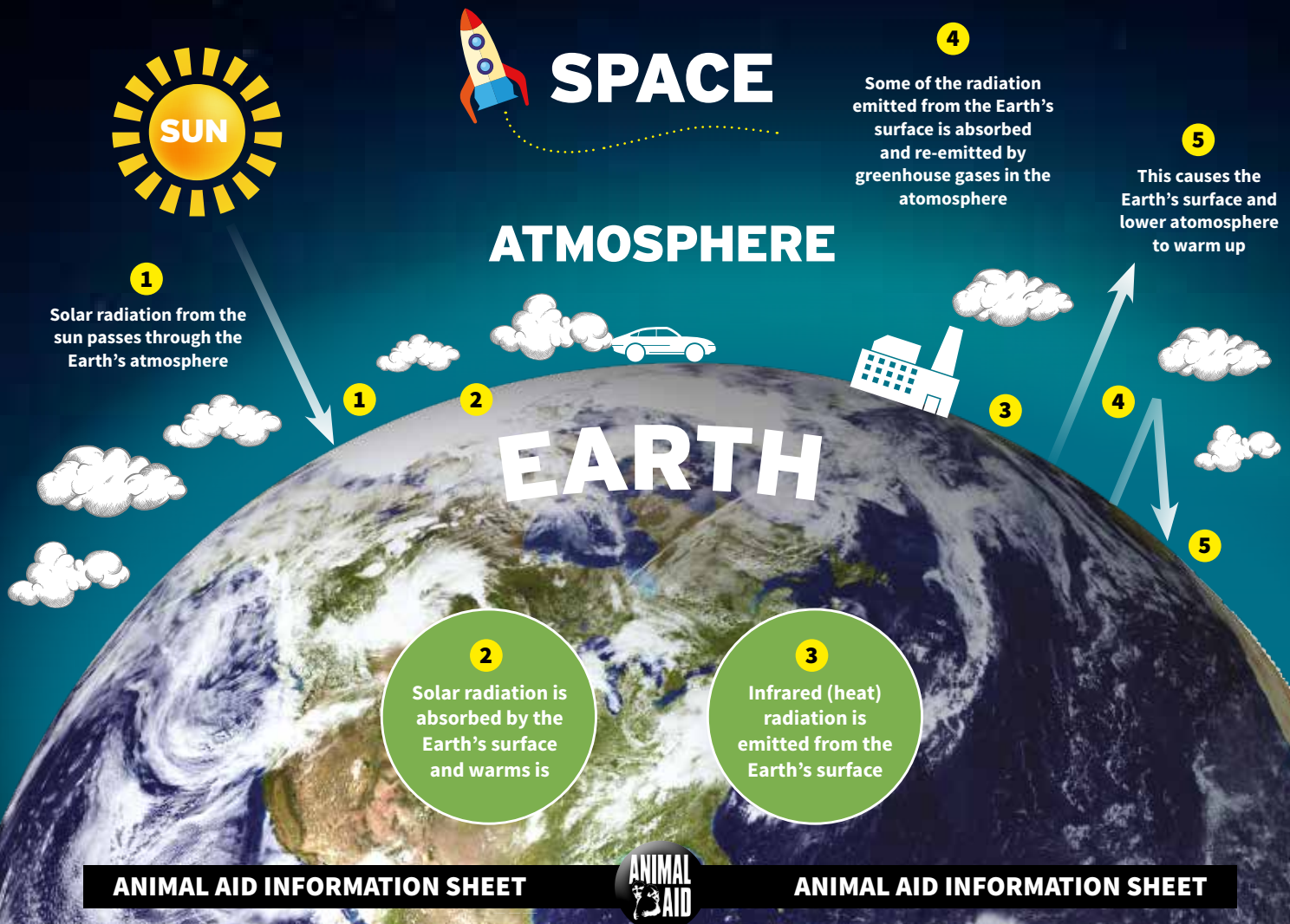
gases (GHGs) such as water vapour ( $H_2O$ ), carbon dioxide ( $CO_2$ ), methane ( $CH_4$ ) and nitrous oxide ( $N_2O$ ) act like a blanket keeping the Earth's heat in. This makes the Earth much warmer than it would be without an atmosphere.

This was a totally natural process before we started polluting the atmosphere. The greenhouse effect would normally keep the average temperature of the Earth's surface at about  $15^\circ C$ . Without any greenhouse effect at all, the planet would be a lifeless  $18^\circ C$  below freezing.<sup>1</sup>

## How does the greenhouse effect work?

Shortwave solar radiation from the sun passes easily through the atmosphere **1** and heats the Earth's surface **2**. The warmed Earth gives off heat in the form of longwave infrared radiation **3**. While some of this escapes into space, most of it is absorbed and re-emitted by the GHG molecules in the atmosphere **4**, causing the Earth's surface and lower atmosphere to heat up **5**. The more of these gases there are in the atmosphere, the warmer the Earth gets.

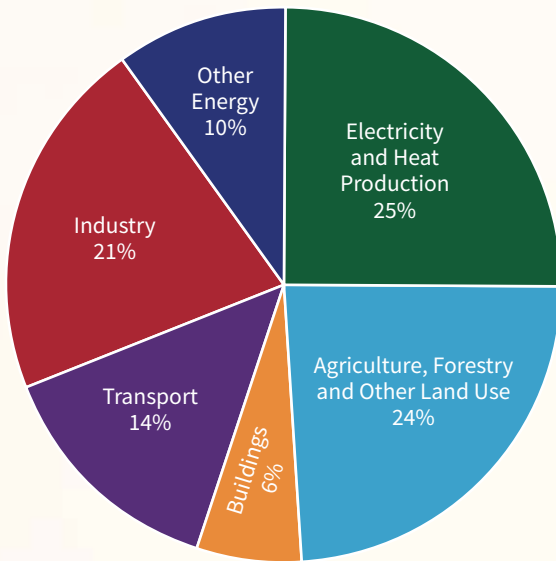
The trouble is that people are pumping more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, causing the climate to warm up so fast that people and animals may not be able to adapt to the change.



# What is causing global warming?

Human activity is increasing the concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere, which is boosting the power of the greenhouse effect and causing the Earth to warm up.

## Global greenhouse gas emissions by economic sector <sup>2</sup>



Source: IPCC, 2014

## Electricity generation and heating

Burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas to generate electricity and to heat homes releases CO<sub>2</sub> and is responsible for a quarter (25%) of all GHG emissions.

## Industry

Industry such as the manufacture of iron and steel, chemicals and cement releases CO<sub>2</sub> and is responsible for around a fifth (21%) of all GHG emissions.

## Transport

Motor vehicles, aircraft, trains and ships that burn petrol and diesel release CO<sub>2</sub> and are responsible for around a sixth (14%) of GHG emissions – road traffic alone is responsible for a tenth (10%) of transport emissions.

## Animal farming

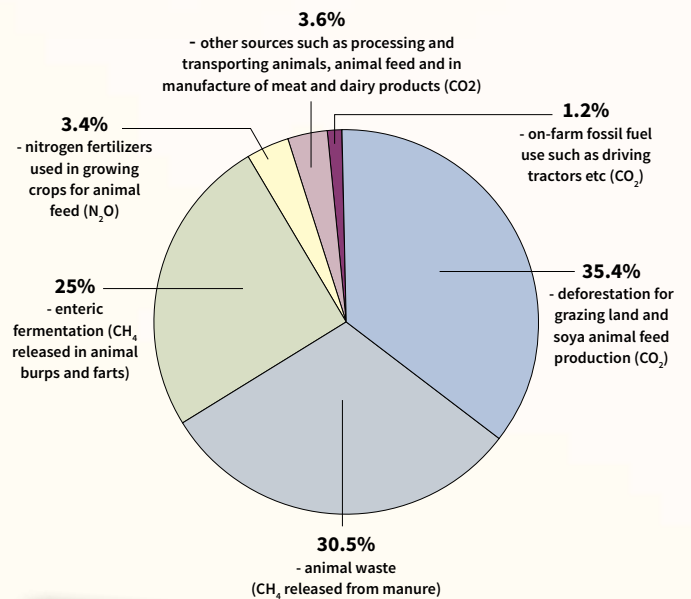
Rearing animals for food is responsible for over a sixth (14.5%) of all GHG emissions. Meat farming is responsible for around 10% of all GHG emissions while dairy accounts for the remaining 4%. <sup>3</sup>

## Animal farming releases: <sup>4</sup>

- 9% of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions
- 35-40% of all methane emissions
- 65% of all nitrous oxide emissions.

Methane and nitrous oxides are much more powerful greenhouse gases than CO<sub>2</sub> – methane causes 25 times more warming than the equivalent amount of CO<sub>2</sub>, and nitrous oxide causes 300 times more warming than the equivalent amount of CO<sub>2</sub>. <sup>5</sup>

## Sources of GHG emissions from animal farming: <sup>4</sup>



Deforestation of tropical rainforest for the creation of cattle grazing land is a major cause of carbon dioxide emissions.

Cattle rancing in the Amazon rainforest.



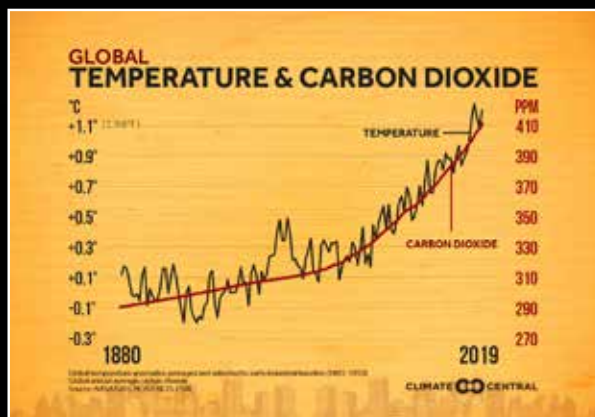
# What is happening?

Since the start of the industrial age just over 170 years ago the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the Earth's atmosphere has increased by 47%, and the concentration of methane in the Earth's atmosphere has increased by 159%.<sup>6</sup>



The Earth is warming faster than at any time in the past 10,000 years. The last five years are the warmest five years on record.<sup>7</sup>

**Graph of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration (PPM) average global temperature (°C) from 1880 to 2019.**<sup>8</sup>



As carbon dioxide levels rise, so do temperatures.

The average surface temperature has increased by about 1°C since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1750.<sup>9</sup>

The Earth's ice cover is melting at a faster rate than at any time since records began. Also, as the water of the oceans warms, it expands. Scientists estimate that thermal expansion of the oceans and melting of glaciers and land-based ice sheets have caused sea levels to rise globally by about 10 - 20 cm in the last 100 years.<sup>10</sup>

## What could happen next?

If we continue to burn fossil fuels, rear animals for food and clear forests, the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will keep rising. It is predicted that CO<sub>2</sub> levels could double by the year 2100 unless we take dramatic action to reduce emissions.<sup>2</sup>

The Paris Agreement signed by some, but not all,

countries in 2016, set a target to keep the global temperature rise this century below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, but to try and limit the increase to 1.5°C.

An increase of 2°C in the average global temperature is thought to be the critical level above which there would be catastrophic climatic effects.<sup>11</sup>

In 2015 global temperatures broke through the 1°C barrier as the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere reached an all-time high.<sup>12</sup>

It is very difficult to judge what will happen to the world's climate as a result. Scientists use complex computer models of the Earth's climate and oceans to try to make predictions. These indicate that without swift reductions in emissions the world's average global temperature could rise by between 2.9 - 3.4 °C<sup>13</sup> and that sea levels could rise by between 61 cm and 110 cm by 2100.<sup>14</sup> These changes may not sound much but the consequences could be catastrophic.

There will be regional differences that are difficult to predict. Some areas of the world may warm up more than others. It is thought that temperatures will increase most at higher latitudes - in the Arctic and Antarctic regions, causing ice sheets to melt. Other areas may experience heat waves and wildfires. In

some parts of the world, rainfall will increase causing flooding, while elsewhere rainfall will decrease causing severe drought. Agricultural yields will probably fall in most parts of the world. The rise in sea levels will lead to the flooding of low-lying coastal areas. No one really knows what will happen for sure - it's rather like using the Earth in a giant climatic experiment.



# What will be the consequences for wildlife?

Around the world a great variety of ecosystems have evolved in balance with their local climate. These ecosystems range from tropical rainforest, savanna and hot dry desert in the tropics, to frozen Arctic tundra and ice at the poles.

As the world's temperature increases due to global warming, these climate zones will shift towards the poles. The ecosystem and their wildlife habitats will have to try and migrate as the climate changes. Some adaptable plants and animals will be able to keep up. But others will be threatened with extinction. Many species are already under stress due to human activity and will be less able to cope.<sup>15</sup>

A recent study by Scientists at the University of Arizona predicted that a third of all plant and animal species on our planet could be threatened with extinction by 2070 if current temperature trends continue.<sup>16</sup>

The IPCC estimates that 20-30% of the plant and animal species evaluated so far in climate change studies are at risk of extinction if temperatures reach the levels projected to occur by the end of this century.<sup>17</sup>



Examples of species that are particularly climate-sensitive and could be at risk include animals that are adapted to mountain environments, such as the pika<sup>18</sup> and the snow leopard,<sup>19</sup> those that are dependent on sea ice habitats, such as ringed seals and polar bears and animals that inhabit coral reef ecosystems.

## Case studies:

### The Arctic

Many Arctic marine species depend on the presence of sea ice. There is already evidence that Arctic sea ice is beginning to melt due to global warming. Recent data shows that there will be almost no summer sea ice cover left in the Arctic in the next few decades.<sup>20</sup> The average September Arctic sea ice (its maximum extent at the end of the winter) is shrinking at a rate of roughly 13% per decade.<sup>21</sup> If this rate continues the Arctic could be ice-free in the summer by the middle of the century. This could spell disaster for many Arctic species.<sup>22</sup> Sea ice provides a platform from which polar bears can hunt seals, who they catch through holes in the ice - they cannot catch them in the water. Polar bears could become extinct if the Arctic ocean is free of ice for long periods in the summer.

A study in 2016 found that there is a 70% chance that the global polar bear population (estimated at 26,000) will decline by more than 30% over the next 35 years - a period corresponding to three generations.<sup>23</sup>

Walrus use the sea ice as a platform from which to feed on sea floor shellfish. Several species of seal (including harp, spotted, ringed, ribbon and bearded) rely on the sea ice as a platform to give birth and nurse their young.



### Coral reefs

The tiny animals who are responsible for building the world's coral reefs in tropical waters are very sensitive to changes in water temperature. There is evidence that many of the world's coral reefs are already dying because of higher sea temperatures. Coral reefs are projected to decline by a further 70-90% if global temperatures increase by 1.5°C. At a warming of 2°C virtually all coral reefs will be lost.<sup>24</sup>

## Things you can do to help make a difference

### Reduce your greenhouse gas emissions:

- Eat less meat, or better still go vegan. The carbon footprint of a vegan diet is up to 60% lower than a meat-based one and 24% lower than a vegetarian one.<sup>25</sup>
- Walk, cycle or use public transport rather than travelling by car.

### Find out more and spread the word:

- Visit [animalaid.org.uk/youth](http://animalaid.org.uk/youth) to order a free *Go Vegan info pack*.
- Ask your geography or citizenship teacher if a speaker from Animal Aid can visit your school to give a talk on the environmental impact of animal farming.



For more information on animal issues, please contact: Animal Aid, The Old Chapel, Bradford St, Tonbridge, TN9 1AW  
Tel: 01732 364546 ext. 221 | [www.animalaid.org.uk](http://www.animalaid.org.uk) | [education@animalaid.co.uk](mailto:education@animalaid.co.uk)

For glossary and references, see the Climate change factsheet on our website