in·coherence

30 Oct 2025

Issue #1

(revised 6 May 2026)

The Age of Incoherence

Foreword

Collectively we face what many are calling a 'polycrisis' – multiple crises interconnected by causal relationships. From industrial civilization to a warming planet. From economics to the health of people. The complex web of relationships in modern society extends to the challenges that result from it.

And while we are increasingly aware of these dynamics and the challenges we face, we are becoming less able to affect the outcome. Time is running out. Some say it may be too late. Yet even then, how we respond is critical.

The Coherence Project (TCP) is intended to support new levels of awareness and responsiveness for people and organizations to the uncertain and disorienting times that we live in. The Life Framework (TLF) provides the grounding – a set of nested and integrated understandings that map the mechanism of being human. I call it "Ontological Cartography."

At its core, the Framework is also phenomenological – it is grounded in experience and allows for anyone to reflect on their own lives through it. It organically sprouted from and continues to evolve through my own ongoing life experience. For years I have been exploring and inquiring how I might choose to be, think, and respond to my own life crises, as well as the broader context of the human-generated and planetary polycrises we will discuss in this article.

The Age of Incoherence, is the first invitation to explore key parts of our collective predicament and how it has come to be, and seeds of a Theory of Response. The articles following in this and other TCP ‘vehicles’ will invite you to further unpack these concepts, models, and approaches more deeply.

In-Coherence is TCP’s periodical for articulating the results of this self-inquiry and research over the past years. I invite you to engage at any level and please reach out to me with any questions, thoughts or feedback.

Moments of Coherence

March 2026

It's quiet. Dark. I sit at the back of my truck overlooking the Pacific Ocean from a cliff along the Oregon coastline. The stars are still visible – Orion low on the horizon. Between the sound of waves and the cool air moving through the trees, everything feels in the right proportion.

Dawn is close, but I prefer this moment, when everything is in quiet relationship - the waves with the coastline. The wind with the trees. The trees with the soil. The crickets with the quietness. The dark with the light. There is no story or purpose. Awareness within movement and relationship.

April 2026

I'm starting one of my thrice per week swims in a coral-infused bay on the coastline of Flores, Indonesia. As I swim away from the shore, I look over to see a large turtle swimming just under the surface, not 10 feet away on my left. For a minute or more we swim together, going in the same direction at the same pace. Together. The turtle decides to go deeper than I am able and disappears from my sight – but the felt relationship remains.

The natural experience of life with life. The felt quality when parts are in "right relationship" with each other. The stage on which life happens, without the stories and scripts of modern society.

When and how have you experienced moments like these? A felt moment of connection with Life. A sense that you are not simply an observer or participant in life, but a member of it. A primal sense of belonging.

The Evolution of Incoherence

It's easy to overlook those moments with nature. We have become conditioned by the unnatural systems and relationships of our own creation – consumed by and captive within them. Our focus sharpened to perform within them – to both succeed and help those systems succeed. What we think about, value, and are rewarded (or threatened) by, captures our consciousness.

And so we are distanced from the relationships that we evolved within over hundreds of thousands of years – and the related capacities that helped us navigate through them.

We can trace this far beyond our conventional frames of historical reference – perhaps to 10,000 years ago – a blip of time geologically speaking. Step back with me to that moment (broadly speaking): As our climate stabilized, coming out of the last ice-age, into what geologists refer to as "The Holocene" – conditions favored the development of agriculture. Instead of hunting and gathering what was naturally available, we recognized that we could grow food with our own intention.

This began to change our relationship with nature – and our understanding of it. Now, instead of sensing and responding to the natural ebbs and flows of the food web within its ecological relationships, of its complexity and uncertainties, we started to control the growth and access to food ourselves. Knowledge cultivated along with it as practices were developed and replicated.

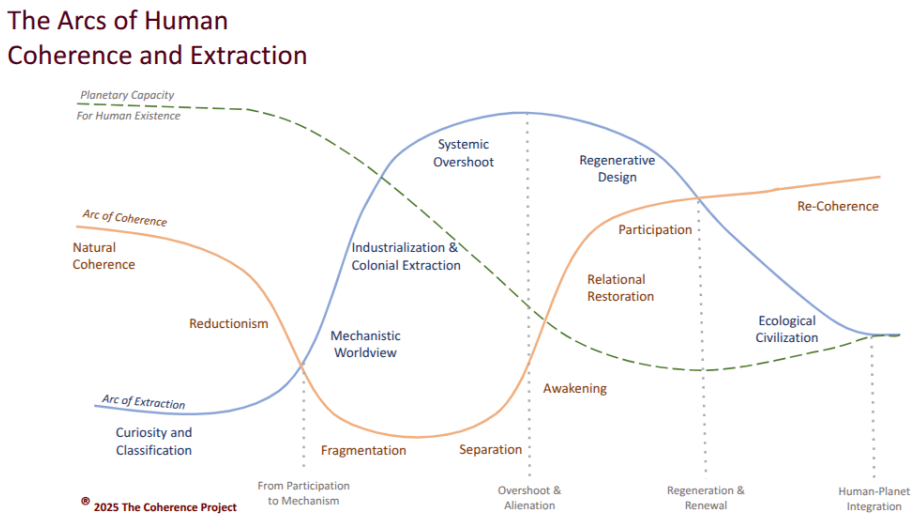
What soon followed from planting and growing food was a sense of ownership – as property became a tool and claim for production. That also required more labor to manage food production – which meant more people, which required more food. And in turn other animals would 'raid' the crops, so we shifted from seeing them as fellow members to seeing them as threats to our property. Conversely, some animals (e.g., oxen), we would draft into labor and perceive as assets – indeed, the precursor to seeing other animals (i.e., humans) the same way.

This, I believe, was when the seeds were planted that shifted our relationship with Life itself. We began to see ourselves as masters of it. Controlling not just other living beings (plants included)

but outcomes generally. Over time we became increasingly separate from our evolutionary conditions, and increasingly self-referential. From smaller nomadic tribes to more centralized and stationary communal systems.

And in these larger communities, more complex social systems began to take hold. From the first evidence of religion dating back to 9,000 BCE to the Code of Hammurabi in the 18th century BCE (4,000 years ago), humanity began to see itself as the center of life. This remained unchallenged until Galileo confronted it with the idea of a helio-centric universe in the 1630's, which led to him being branded a heretic and arrested. Religion continued to reinforce this self-referential framing and separation, claiming that God or the gods had granted humans "dominion" over nature, which continues today. And so the mental models about our relationship with the ecology around us were being implanted over time through belief systems and related stories beyond religion into how we devised our economy, our education, our government, businesses and more. And as religion and society became more hierarchical, those in power began to extract not just from the ecology, but from people as well.

Along the way, these systems conditioned us away from the natural capacities we evolved with into ones that were more functional in those systems – from the presence of being in the moment to the preoccupation with achieving an artificial objective, outcome, or possession.



At its essence, it was a shift of attention toward the 'what' (objects and their function), rather than the 'how' (relationship and process). We can see it today in the larger ways we see society, address problems and solutions, how we learn in school, measure our success and status in our professions, and operate within our relationships. It is how we attend to reality. You may recognize this in your own experience, when you feel the difference between being present to something versus trying to manage it.

We had in essence re-oriented ourselves with new compass settings, increasingly diverging our path from the route we had sailed throughout the millions of years of our evolutionary history. We can see it not just in what we did, but in the very essence of how we attend to reality.

Expansion, Extraction, and Separation

As science and the scientific method developed during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods of the 14th - 18th centuries, humanity shifted from theocratic-dominated belief systems to one incorporating a more balanced view. Some saw the life of other plants and animals as entirely foreign to human-experienced life – like machinery without consciousness, emotion, or even feeling (See Bacon, Descartes). While these thinkers contributed greatly to the advancements of science and its application in medicine, they often missed the element of intelligence within the organism and the system's relationships.

And so the mental models of extracting from the planet's life systems were buoyed by the perceived authorities on thought itself. A mechanistic worldview was taking off and technology (e.g., the steam engine) was providing the mechanism for action. Industrialization gave all of that a container into the early 1800s across Europe and soon after in the United States, while colonial extraction began its expansion into new territories around the world. With the extracted power of fossilized energy – ancient sunlight – human civilization expanded its capacity for extraction, for food growth, for deforestation, for industrial and economic output, and for the production of waste and pollution.

In turn, the mental models and narratives that underwrote the legal, financial, economic, and governance systems at the time continue even today. You may be familiar with some of them, at least at a felt level:

"The 'Invisible Hand' of the market will efficiently guide society."
"Growth is imperative – there is no such thing as too much profit."
"If it's not accounted for in the annual report, we don't need to concern ourselves with it."
"If it's not against the law, then we have no problem with it."
"The only things that matter are what can be quantified."
"Democracy will safeguard society."

As a former practicing accountant and lawyer, these mostly unconscious narratives are all too familiar to me. They, with other narratives, shaped the environment of my education, my understanding of reality – of how things worked and how they should work. And they shaped the system I called my profession. What I assumed was right and wise – afterall it was part of my education and the infrastructure of society, so it had to be right…right?

More fundamentally these mental models shaped our economic systems, supporting the assumption of separation – that our economic system is separate from nature and impacts it has upon it. A closed system that operates independently. That mental model has enabled and perpetuated centuries of externalizing costs onto the natural environment (e.g., carbon

emissions) and onto people (e.g., nutritional diseases and cancer). And now, as we are exploring, that feedback is threatening to collapse the entire system.

How have these or other narratives shaped your development and view of reality?

The Ego v. Life

After the American colonies gained their independence from Great Britain in the late 1700s, they increasingly pushed westward across the continent that they had not yet explored. Along the way they encountered native Americans, tribal “Indians” who had existed on the continent for many thousands of years. The experience of the tyranny that had framed the experience of the colonists, and spurred on the revolutionary war, were now increasingly being imposed on native Americans. The United States sought the subjugation of previously independent peoples and the acquisition of the lands on which they lived. This was framed as “Manifest Destiny” in the 1800s, to justify the slaughter of many of these tribal populations.

But this slogan wasn’t new to humanity. It had been the underlying logic through much of human history and its conquests and remains so today. It underlies how we see ourselves - and what we feel we are entitled to, even owed. And today it is threaded throughout society, from business to sports to TV shows – “...to boldly go where no man has gone before.”

While this may appeal to our ego, insecurities, and desire for status, it remains antithetical to the planet’s life systems. And no one ever really stopped to question what we were doing more broadly. As industrialization took hold, our focus on achieving the insatiable goals for profit within the system became even more paramount, rendering us oblivious to the risks that led to the stock market crash of 1929. A pattern we have seen repeated since.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt responded to the resulting Great Depression with “The New Deal” – a set of laws and regulations to protect the financial condition of the country and its citizens. But even then, the environmental health of the planet and its impact on society wasn’t seriously considered until the 1970’s when it became clear to everyone that within just 200 years of industrial production, humanity was changing the nature of nature on the planet. Numerous environmental protections were made into laws at the time, many of which focused on human health and wellness. Others, such as the Endangered Species Act of 1973, were a recognition of the importance of biodiversity and habitat. Yet, when that concern conflicted with the mental models of industrialization, the latter would leave us in cognitive blindness – even when we had plenty of warning about issues like planetary warming.

As early as the late 1800’s, it was clear that carbon dioxide (CO_2) had heat trapping properties. By the mid-1950’s the fossil fuel companies were actively hiding their own studies that projected massive consequences for the planet and society of their products, even engaging in all-out propaganda campaigns to deny and distract.

And so it wasn’t until the 1990s that we collectively started discussing the issue, with little to no meaningful action for over 30 years. Current CO_2 concentrations rose from 340ppm in 1990 to

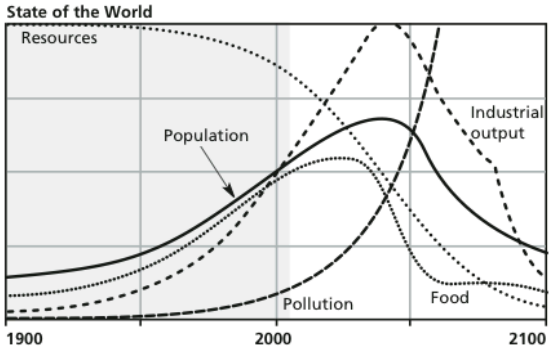
426ppm today, which equates to levels from 20 million years ago when land temperatures were 4 to 6° Celsius higher than they are today - the direction we are clearly headed. Today, at almost 1.5C degrees above pre-industrial temperatures, we are already seeing significant impacts to human systems and wellbeing, not to mention a working ecology. And projections are that temperatures will reach 2.0C by 2040-2045. From more intensive heatwaves, droughts, and fires to devastating storms and floods. From the receding Himalayan Glaciers to the Amazon Rainforest, turned from carbon sink to carbon source, to the slowing Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) to the reduction in Arctic sea ice and Antarctic ice sheets.

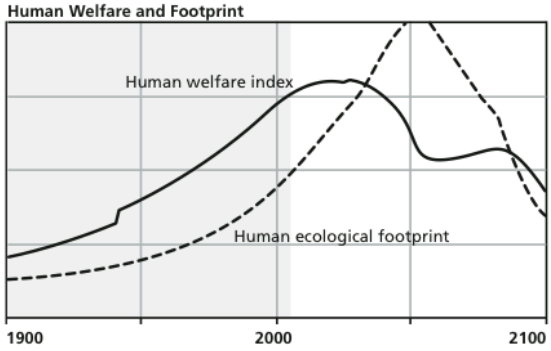
We've given even less attention to what happens in the oceans, where 90% of the heat energy is absorbed, affecting weather patterns and currents, and destroying the marine ecology, on which life on this planet (including ours) depends. We have already triggered some reinforcing feedback loops in the ecological systems that may render any plausible efforts ineffective.

Limits and Boundaries

Human society tends to celebrate its advances in knowledge and technology, and rightly so – but not without some costs. Driven by our focus on these and similar objectives, we have sacrificed a felt understanding of the systemic relationships between our activities and the consequences.

In 1972 the Club of Rome published a multi-year study that modeled the relationships between our activities and planetary capacity. The study, led by Donella Meadows at MIT, used computer modelling to project different scenarios into the next century, given trends of population and industrial growth, as well as food and planetary capacity limitations. Called "Limits to Growth", this study was presented to Congress and specific recommendations were made to support awareness and meaningful Congressional response. By 2002, none of those recommendations had been implemented – Congress had dismissed this ground-breaking systems-wide understanding.

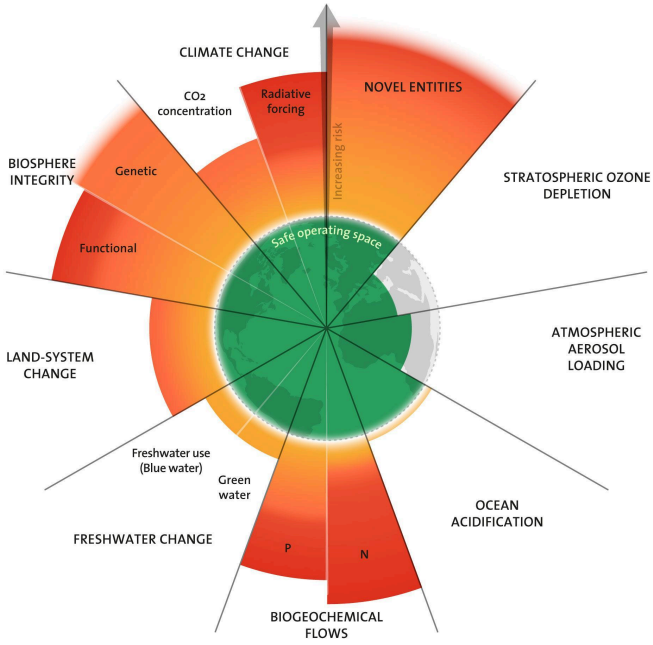




The graphs from the 30 year-year update are shown here. It projected that without fundamental shifts in how humanity relates to growth and resource use, the ongoing overshoot would create steep declines in food production, population and economic activity in the first half of the 21st century – essentially today. The real life data has tracked their projections. We are now in the period they described – not approaching it.

The bookends of the last ten millennia say it most clearly: It began as the Holocene Epoch provided conditions for us to thrive in line with nature and has culminated in what scientists have labeled “The Anthropocene.” The ‘domination’ of nature is more accurately the disruption of nature, as we shifted into a state of “Overshoot” more than five decades ago, and have since hit the hyperdrive button, yet continue to pretend it isn’t happening.

The Stockholm Resilience Center’s work indicates just how systemic our impacts have become. Seven of the nine ‘Planetary Boundaries,’ they’ve identified through methodical and quantifiable research, have been exceeded. Thresholds crossed that would require major global structural reforms to simply stop from worsening the conditions. Beyond climate, we have significantly impacted the systems on land (e.g., deforestation), fresh water and oceans (e.g., pollutants, acidification, and water use), and biodiversity/biosphere impacts (species extinctions and systems function).



Collectively this means that humanity has reshaped the planet in ways that are making it inhospitable for civilization itself. We have foisted these changes upon ourselves in line with the *Limits to Growth* projections – yet were unresponsive to its repeated warnings and even today are controlled by narratives separated from reality.

The question that I’ve wrestled with over the past 15 years: How did this happen?

The Human Contradiction

While we push natural systems outside their boundaries, we also have to contend with our own fundamental contradiction: The systems of modern society that we built to support our existence are themselves destroying the conditions we need to exist – to grow food, access water, maintain infrastructure, and engage in social activities.

And it is those same systems that reinforce our apparent unwillingness and/or inability to respond to the unstable conditions they generate. They drive behaviors that reinforce our propensity for self-reference and limit our capacity for critical thought and understanding – overwriting our natural capacities for engagement with life in favor of artificial ones that distance ourselves from it. From economy, to governance, to technology, to media, to transportation, to religion, to education.

Consider the education system that measures performance on tests to perform for those systems, rather than cultivating understanding, curiosity, or the capacity to navigate complexity. Or the governance systems designed to represent the interests of people, now captured by money and self-interest such that the people they were designed to serve have lost faith in them entirely. Or the media, perceived as so corporate-driven that it has largely lost the trust of the public to adequately inform them of the facts and the context (i.e., “news”). Or the food systems, which feed people with products loaded with addictive and toxic substances that result in fatal diseases. Or economic systems that promise prosperity, while polluting nature and our future for the sake of short-term profits, while calling this arrangement "growth." Or the technology that promises to better our lives, yet rather than informing, drives new levels of divisive disinformation and emotional disorder through social media.

These are not broken systems. They are systems operating exactly as they've been designed. Systems that have performed not just in the short-term, but over the longer arc of humanity’s existence, as they themselves evolved.

And every system we participate in carries implicit deals furthering that tendency – unwritten and mostly subconscious exchanges of provision for participation, belonging for compliance, safety and certainty for captivity. We rarely examine these deals because we are conditioned into them – they lie beneath the surface of how we engage in the system. Today, many of those deals are beginning to unravel, to falter, in part because they were never designed in a way that could be sustained. And people are beginning to sense this collapse.

We explore this dynamic more deeply through what we call “The Deal Lens” in IC4 and IC5.

Losing Our Attention

For all of the knowledge and advancements of humanity over these last centuries – our brains and our capacities for thought and consciousness remain unchanged from what they were circa 300,000 years ago. Yet how our brains function can be impacted on a much shorter timescale.

Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist's groundbreaking work in "The Master and His Emissary" and "The Matter with Things" explains that in our modern systems, our brains have become conditioned to rely more heavily on left-hemisphere processing – narrowing focus onto objects and outcomes at the expense of the broader relational awareness the right hemisphere supports. His research with stroke patients whose right hemisphere was compromised reveals what this looks like in its extreme: a tendency to fixate on parts rather than wholes and objects rather than relationships. If unmoderated by the right-hemisphere, the left-hemisphere is prone to delusions and fantasy, and fails to even physically see beyond a specific object of focus, and amplifies ego-centrism.

This isn't incidental to the story we've been telling. It's the deepest layer of it. The systems that captured our attention also shaped the quality of that attention — reinforcing a narrowed, self-referential focus that makes the systems themselves invisible to us. We can't see what's happening because the way we've learned to look is part of what's happening.

And so here we are — able to accumulate more knowledge than any generation in history, yet unable to act on what it tells us. Able to name the crises, map the boundaries, track the projections — yet unable to change course. Because knowledge gathered through the same narrowed attention that produced these conditions will only reproduce them.

What's needed isn't more information. It's a different quality of awareness – one that can hold relationship, complexity, and uncertainty without immediately collapsing them into problems to solve. The very quality our systems have most effectively overwritten – the innate awareness that made us who we were, long before these systems told us who to be.

Orienting in Disorienting Times

It’s a Saturday night, I'm still on the island of Flores. I just came back home from the bustle of the marina in Labuan Bajo – a small town with unique traits and good people. The restaurants were buzzing with tourists and traffic was zipping around as usual. It all feels normal – because other people are engaging in seemingly normal behavior, because other people are also engaging in seemingly normal behavior. Yet increasingly, even in this semi-remote part of the world – a place that tries to step back into prehistory, Komodo Dragon-style – there is an unease about the future.

What have you been sensing about our collective future?

From my conversations with people on three continents over these last couple years, I get the sense that people are experiencing the incoherence more and more deeply. Where the stories about society aren't matching up with reality. Where compassion and honesty feel more and more scarce, both systemically and in closer relationships. Where the outlook and promises of the future are ringing hollow way ahead of their time. And where we are experiencing real-time feedback from our natural environment – while those with the power to do anything about it respond with denials, blame-shifting, and deflection.

It's the parents trying to explain what's happening to their children, without clarity themselves or any ideas around a solution. It's the graduates from universities whose investment in time, money, and energy, and a hope for a manageable life have no anchor point in the future. It's the people who care and have voted, but time and time again whose votes are erased by a system that has been hijacked by money and self-interest. And it's the inner sense of isolation for so many who sense that things are not right, but feel increasingly alienated in systems that have no interest or capacity to address it.

We all face some level of disorientation today, as what we believed in seems to have been a mirage – painted by the human systems that were never grounded in the reality of life itself. We've explored where that seed was possibly planted and how it grew over the millennia into what it is today.

The question now is how do we respond to the apparent collapse of these systems as our ecology becomes less stable? How do we respond when analyzing and trying to solve with what

we know only pushes things into worse states? And how do we respond when the capacities we've developed within our own systems are maladaptive to our own survival in a changing world for which we have no map?

The Coherence Project is not a practical solution to address these challenges. It is a map of the mechanisms of human consciousness that got us here – and a compass for how we orient going forward. Not a solution – because solutions assume we know the destination. A compass works when we don't.

But before any map or compass, something simpler is needed. As Gandhi observed, self-purification precedes meaningful action. No plan will work, as the Dalai Lama put it, unless we first learn to be present with ourselves.

And yet presence is not as distant as it sounds. You may have witnessed it – in someone facing a diagnosis who, in the first minutes after hearing the news, watches the layers of everything that never mattered fall away. And what remains is not despair. It's clarity. A willingness to face what is real. A reaching toward the people beside them. A strange, quiet freedom from the pretenses that had been running their life. And an openness to whatever comes next – even if it cannot be known.

Presence – the practice and availability of it – is foundational to TLF and explored in context within the In-Coherence Issues.

That is coherence. Not as a concept. Not as a solution. Simply as the natural state of being that was inherent in our lives over the hundreds of thousands of years of our existence that our modern systems have displaced. As I've experienced over these years, walking outside of those systems, when the noise falls silent long enough, coherence begins to return.

What TCP offers is a way of being grounded in that natural response – not through meditative techniques reserved for practitioners, but through orientations based in presence and grounded in reality, free of the narratives and stories of modernity that we adopted as our own:

Truth – the willingness to face what is here, without turning away.

Connection – the felt recognition that you are not separate from the life around you.

Freedom – the capacity to think, sense, and choose from your own ground, uncaptured by the systems that shaped you.

Adventure – the willingness to step into what you cannot yet see – including whatever is coming next.

These are orientations for coherence that function as a compass, not a map. In my own life they have functioned to orient me through the disorientation of my own life's collapse – as they were developed from the journey itself. For more on that journey, please read Issue #2 - The Maps We Carry.

Across all of the I-C Issues we will explore the dynamics at play in our lives, and how the quality of our attention shifts what is understood and what is possible in how we might respond. But the starting point is here – in presence, in orientation, in the willingness to see clearly and walk forward together.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. As opposed to the conventional science of Bacon and Descartes, contemporary ecology and biology increasingly recognize intelligence, communication, and cooperative behavior in non-human living systems – from mycorrhizal networks connecting forest communities to chemical signaling between plants.

2. Svante Arrhenius (1896) identified the potential impacts of increasing CO2 as it related to human-made emissions, published in the Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science. He claimed that a doubling of CO2 in the atmosphere could lead to 5-6 C of warming. https://www.rsc.org/images/arrhenius1896_tcm18-173546.pdf

3. The first climate conference among nations took place in 1979, the second in 1990. Since 1994, each year has seen climate conferences, while GHG emissions, CO2 concentrations, and temperatures have accelerated.
https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-negotiations-timeline/
https://earth.org/data_visualization/a-brief-history-of-co2/

4. CO2 concentrations of 426ppm equate to levels last seen approximately 20 million years ago, when temperatures were 4-6°C higher than today.
https://research.noaa.gov/noaas-greenhouse-gas-index-up-41-percent-since-1990/

5. Fossil fuel companies actively hid and lied about the impact of greenhouse gas emissions. https://www.ucs.org/resources/decades-deceit

6. Real-world data track the Limits to Growth projections – Gaya Herrington, Sustainability Director at KPMG, ran the numbers.
https://www.clubofrome.org/blog-post/herrington-world-model/

7. Seven of the nine planetary boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Center have already been exceeded.
https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html

8. Armstrong McKay, Lenton et al. (2022) demonstrate that at current warming levels, several climate tipping points may already have been triggered.
https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn7950