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Perspective

‘Tipping points’ confuse and can distract from urgent climate action

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Tipping points have gained substantial traction in climate change discourses. Here we critique the ‘tipping point’ framing for oversimplifying the diverse dynamics of complex natural and human systems and for conveying urgency without fostering a meaningful basis for climate action. Multiple social scientific frameworks suggest that the deep uncertainty and perceived abstractness of climate tipping points render them ineffective for triggering action and setting governance goals. The framing also promotes confusion between temperature-based policy benchmarks and properties of the climate system. In both natural and human systems, we advocate for clearer, more specific language to describe tipping points, why different framings can support scientific understanding and climate risk management.

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