Global Temperature in 2020

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Abstract. **Global surface temperature in 2020 was in a virtual dead-heat with 2016 for warmest year in the period of instrumental data in the Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) analysis. The rate of global warming has accelerated in the past several years. The 2020 global temperature was +1.3°C (~2.3°F) warmer than in the 1880-1920 base period; global temperature in that base period is a reasonable estimate of 'pre-industrial' temperature. The six warmest years in the GISS record all occur in the past six years, and the 10 warmest years are all in the 21st century. Growth rates of the greenhouse gases driving global warming are increasing, not declining.**

Update of the GISS (Goddard Institute for Space Studies) global temperature analysis (GISTEMP)[1,2,3] (Fig. 1) finds 2020 to be the warmest year in the instrumental record, but by an amount so slight (<0.01°C) that the difference with the 2016 temperature is insignificant. More detail is available at http://data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/ and http://www.columbia.edu/~mhs119/Temperature. Figures shown here are available from Makiko Sato on the latter web site.

We use 1880-1920 as baseline, i.e., as the zero-point for temperature anomalies, in part because it is the earliest period with substantial global coverage of instrumental measurements. Global temperature in 1880-1920 should approximate 'preindustrial' temperature, because the small warming from human-made greenhouse gases in that period tends to be offset by unusually high volcanic activity then.[4]

The six warmest years in the GISS record are the past six years, 2015-2020. Figure 2 compares the temperature anomalies for each of these years relative to the 1951-1980 base period. We use 1951-1980 as base period for global maps because it allows good global coverage, including data for Antarctica.

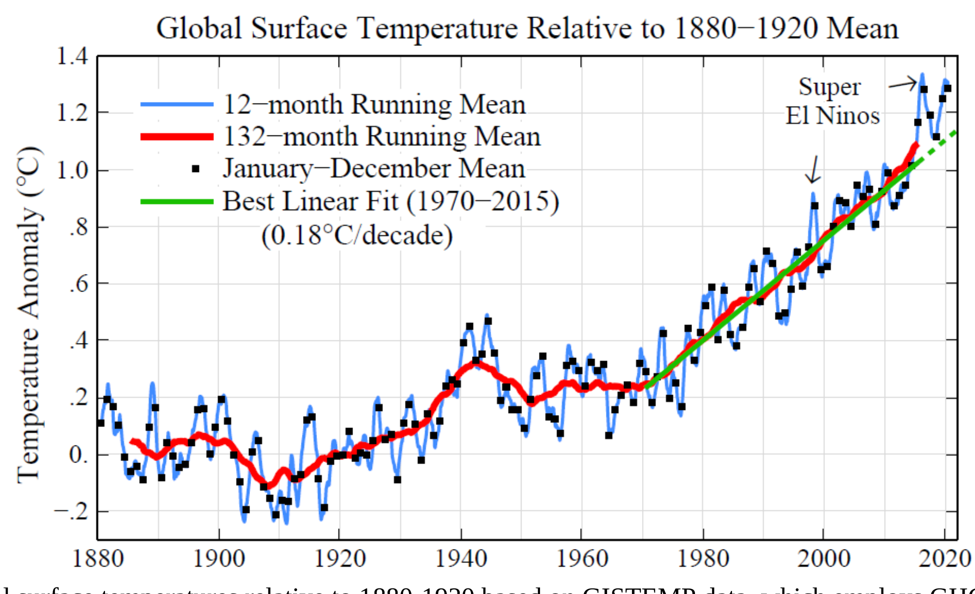

Fig. 1. Global surface temperatures relative to 1880-1920 based on GISTEMP data, which employs GHCN.v4 for meteorological stations, NOAA ERSST.v5 for sea surface temperature, and Antarctic research station data[1].

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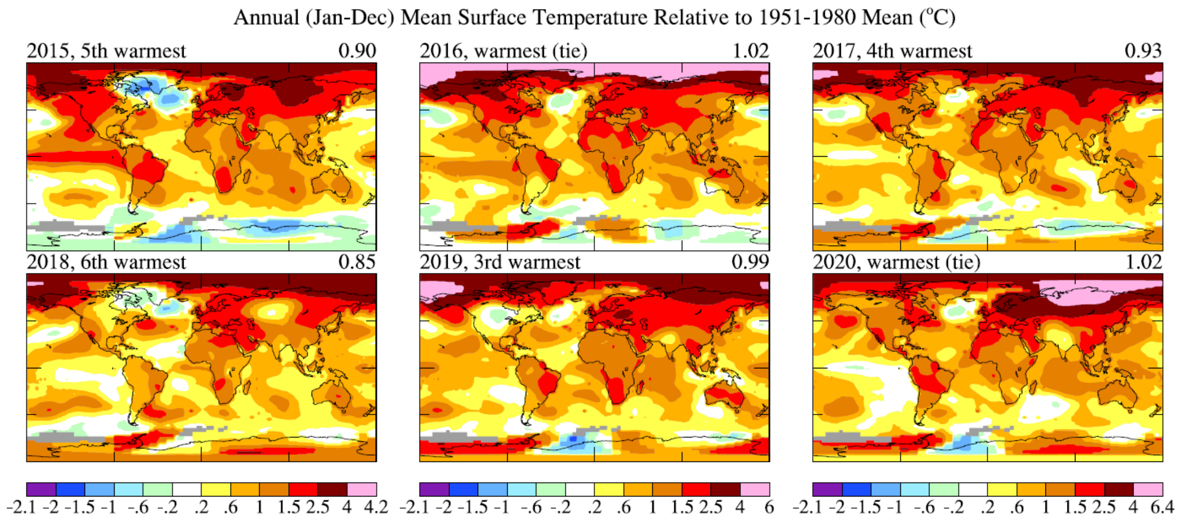

Fig. 2. Temperature anomalies in the past six years relative to the 1951-1980 base period.

Decadal average surface temperature anomalies (Fig. 3) show that since the 1970s each decade has been notably warmer than the prior decade. Average warming over land is twice as large as over ocean, and warming is greatest in the Arctic (Figs. 2 and 3). Average warming over land is now about 3°F (more than 1.5°C). The warming is reaching magnitudes at which it is easier for the public to notice that warming is occurring, even though it is small compared with the magnitude of weather fluctuations.

Cooling or absence of warming southeast of Greenland and in the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica is associated with and likely a consequence of injection of freshwater in the upper ocean layers as a result of increasing melt of ice shelves and the ice sheets.[5] If the melting rate continues to increase, the associated regional cooling will increase and may put a damper on (slow the rate of) global warming. That relative cooling effect, if it occurs, would be no cause for celebration, as it would imply an increased heat flux into the ocean, an increased warming rate within the ocean that further increases the melt of ice shelves, and an accelerating rate of sea level rise.[6]

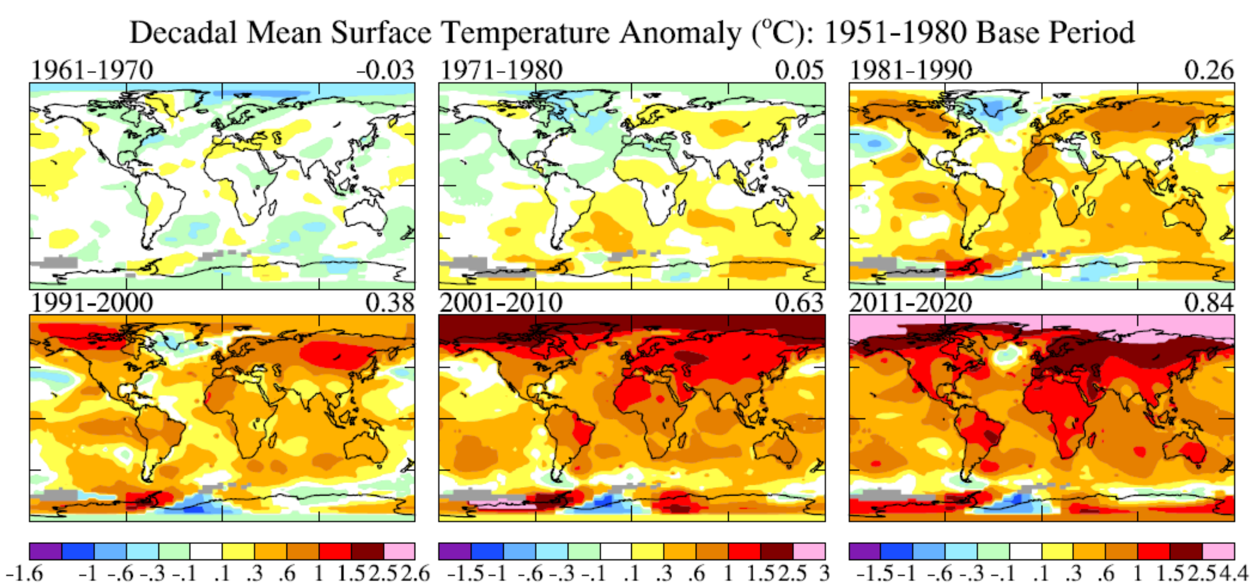

Fig. 3. Temperature anomalies relative to 1880-1920 for global land and global ocean areas.

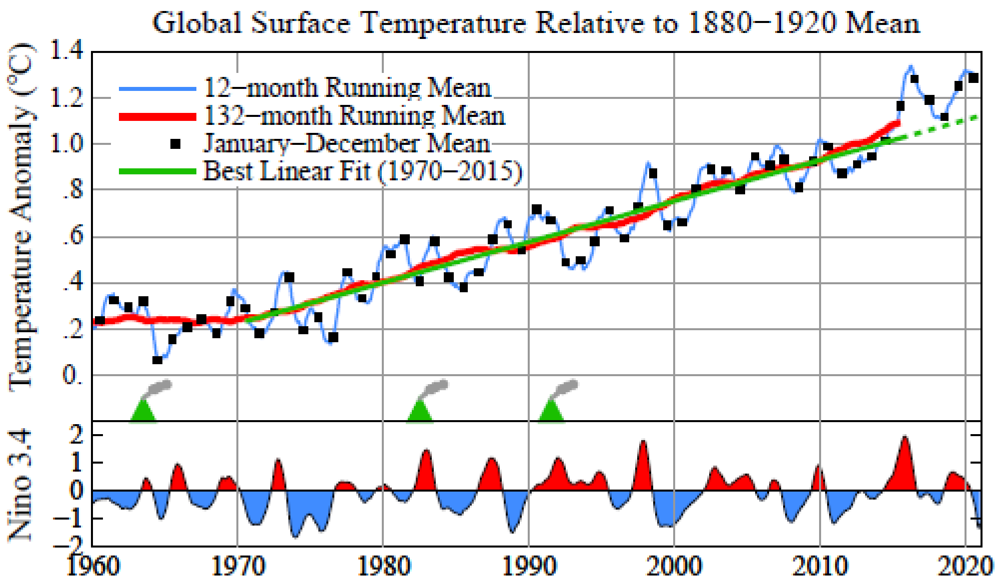

Fig. 4. Global surface temperature since 1960 relative to the 1880-1920 base period. The red-blue diagram is the Niño3.4 index, which is the temperature in a region along the equator in the Pacific Ocean used to characterize the El Niño status. Green triangles mark volcanic eruptions that produced a large amount of stratospheric aerosols. Niño3.4 index in last half of 2020 is monthly mean, which exaggerates the depth of La Niña minimum.

Interannual variability of global temperature is highly correlated with the Southern Oscillation, the El Niño/La Niña cycle (Fig. 4). The rate of warming had been almost constant for several decades, at about 0.18°C/decade, if short-term variability is removed by the linear trend or 132-month (11-year) running mean (Fig. 4). However, data for recent years suggest that the warming rate may be accelerating.[7]

Global warming is linked to increasing long-lived atmospheric greenhouse gases,[8] especially CO_2 and CH_4, and in turn these are linked to a substantial degree with fossil fuel use. Thus, we also update here fossil fuel CO_2 emissions, CO_2 and CH_4 growth rates, and the resulting growth rate of greenhouse gas climate forcing. The latest data on global energy use and fossil fuel emissions (Fig. 5) are through December 2019. Greenhouse gases are up-to-date within a few months, and are estimated to the end of 2020, as is the resulting climate forcing. Energy use and CO_2 emissions continued to rise through 2019 (Fig. 5). Although both quantities surely will decrease in 2020 data because of the covid-19 pandemic, the decline would need to continue for the warming to be slowed.

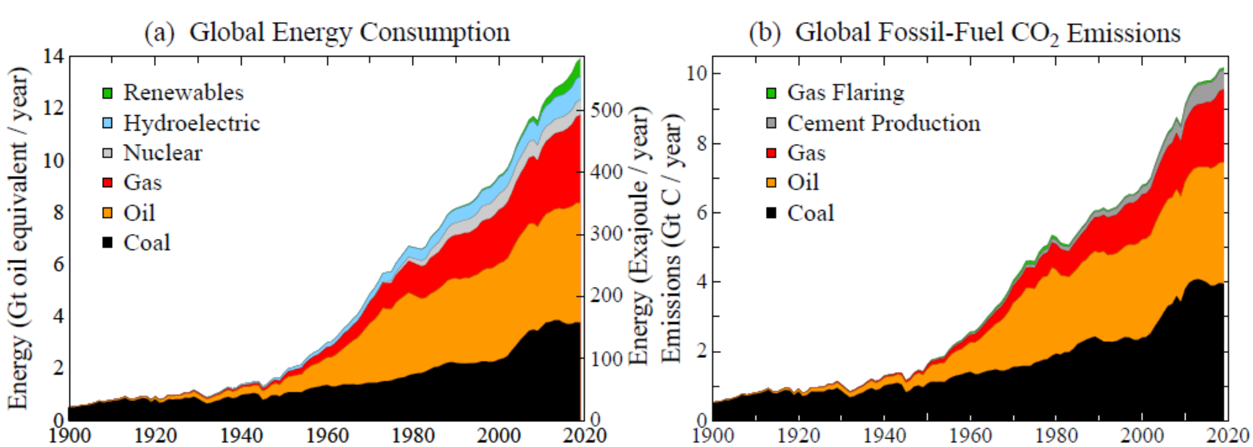

Fig. 5. Global energy consumption and fossil fuel emissions through December 2019. Energy is based on Boden et al.[9] to 1965 and BP[10] subsequently. CO_2 is based on Boden through 2016 and subsequently BP.

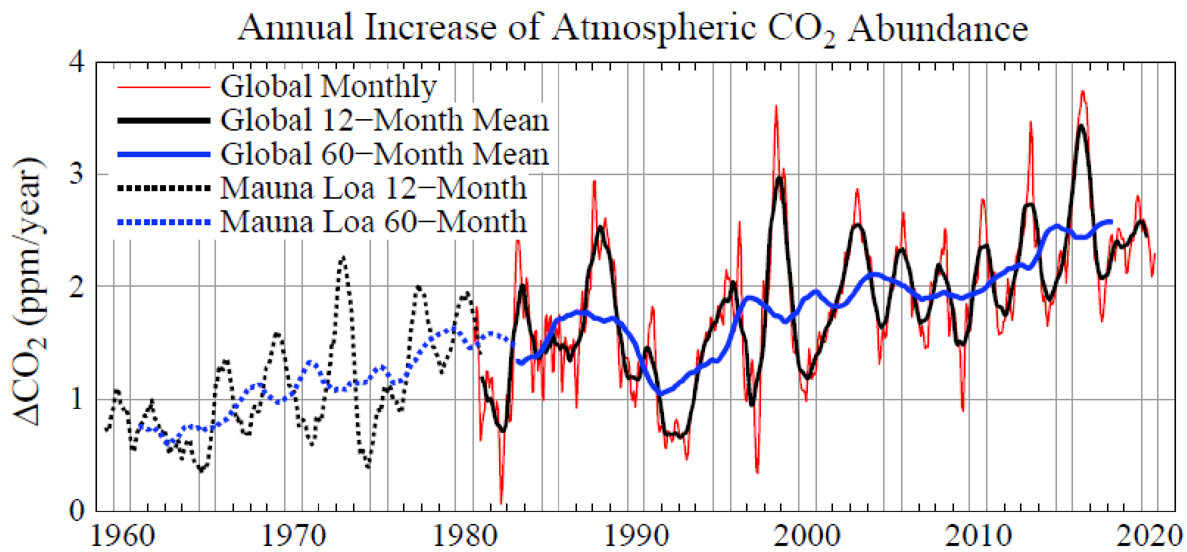

Fig. 6. Global CO_2 annual growth based on NOAA data (http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/). Red curve is monthly global mean relative to the same month of prior year; black curve is 12-month running mean.

Annual growth of atmospheric CO_2 has increased from less than 1 ppm (parts per million) per year when Keeling began his measurement in the late 1950s to about 2.5 ppm per year averaged over the past several years (Fig. 6). Is this a peak growth rate that will begin to decline? That depends on whether we can get global fossil fuel emissions (Fig. 5) to begin a long-term decline.

The annual growth of atmospheric CH_4, after falling to near zero in the early 21st century, has increased to about 10 ppb (Fig. 7). Mechanisms that may have contributed to this resurgence of methane growth include leakage during increased use of hydrofracturing in fossil fuel mining, increased emissions from warming wetlands, increased emissions from melting tundra and methane hydrates, but contributions from these processes have not been adequately quantified.

The increasing growth rates of CO_2 and CH_4 have caused the growth rate of the total greenhouse gas (GHG) climate forcing to increase (Fig. 8). Large interannual fluctuation in the CO_2 growth causes interannual fluctuation in annual growth of the total greenhouse gas climate forcing, but the smoothed growth rate has increased steadily over the past decade.

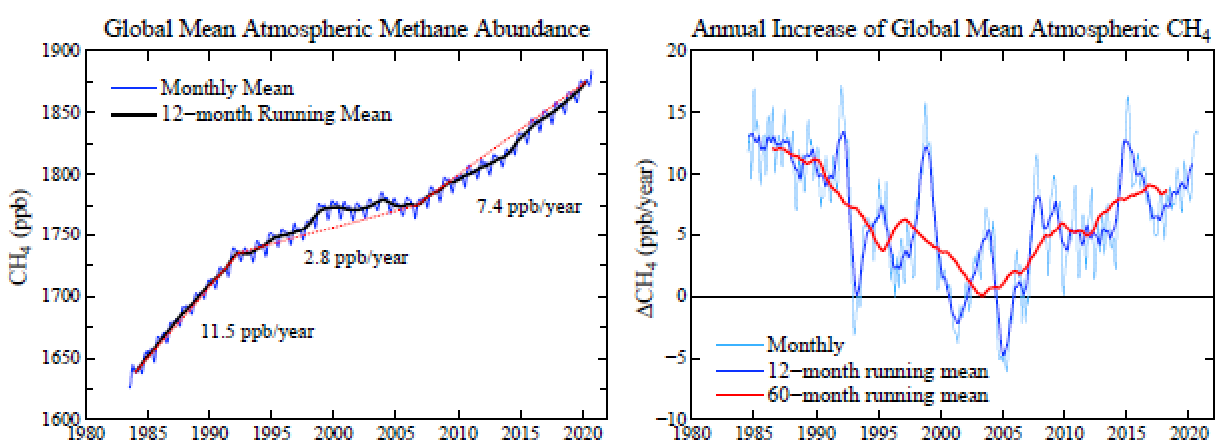

Fig. 7. Global CH_4 from Dlugokencky[11] NOAA/ESRL (http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends_ch4/). Data extend through September 2020. End months for three indicated slopes are January 1984, May 1992, August 2006, and September 2020.

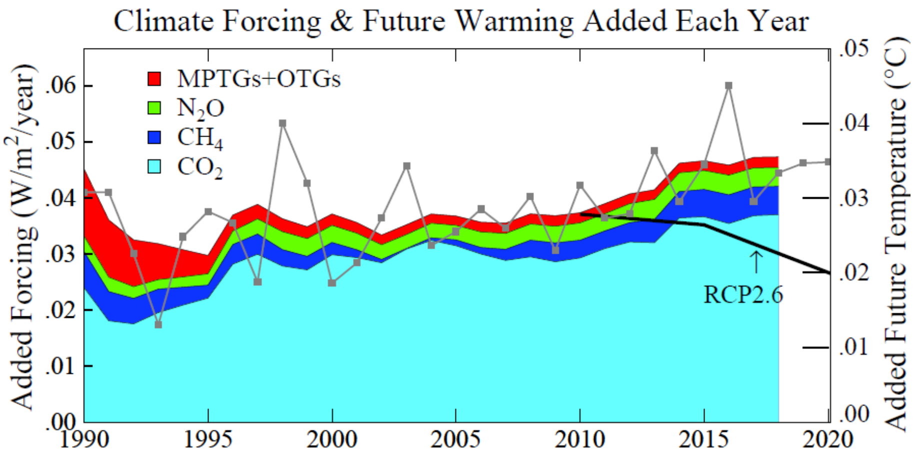

Fig. 8. Greenhouse gas climate forcing annual growth rate. Colored areas are 5-year running means. Gray dots connected by grey lines are annual changes of the total forcing by all gases. Greenhouse gas amounts are from NOAA/ESRL Global Monitoring Division. O_3 changes are not fully included, as they are not well measured, but O_3 tropospheric changes are partially included via the effective CH_4 forcing. MPTGs are Montreal Protocol Trace Gases and OTGs are Other Trace Gases. The added future warming (right scale) is the equilibrium warming for the added forcing, assuming a climate sensitivity of 0.75°C per W/m^2.

The other well-measured climate forcing is change of solar irradiance, which decreased during the 2015-2020 period of accelerated warming by an amount such that the growth rate of the sum of GHG and solar forcings slowed during that period. This has led to an inference that the one large unmeasured climate forcing, human-made atmospheric aerosols, likely became less negative (decreased aerosol amount) during that period.[7]

The alternative is that unforced variability of global temperature is larger than what is suggested by observations in the prior half century (Fig. 1). Observed global temperature over the next year or two will help inform us whether the apparent acceleration of global warming is significant. The current La Niña (Figures 4 and 9) is moderately strong, so this year – 2021 – should be notably cooler than 2020. If global temperature falls back below the trend line, the apparent acceleration may be unforced variability.

In any case, long-term warming will continue because of the continued large annual increases of the greenhouse gas climate forcing (Fig. 8). The greenhouse warming will be abetted by solar irradiance; solar minimum was reached in 2019, so irradiance should be increasing for the next several years.

The greenhouse climate forcing has strongly diverged from the Scenario RCP2.6, which would have retained a likelihood of keeping maximum warming at about 1.5°C. Instead, we continue to pile a larger and larger burden on young people, if they hope to have a livable planetary environment.[4]

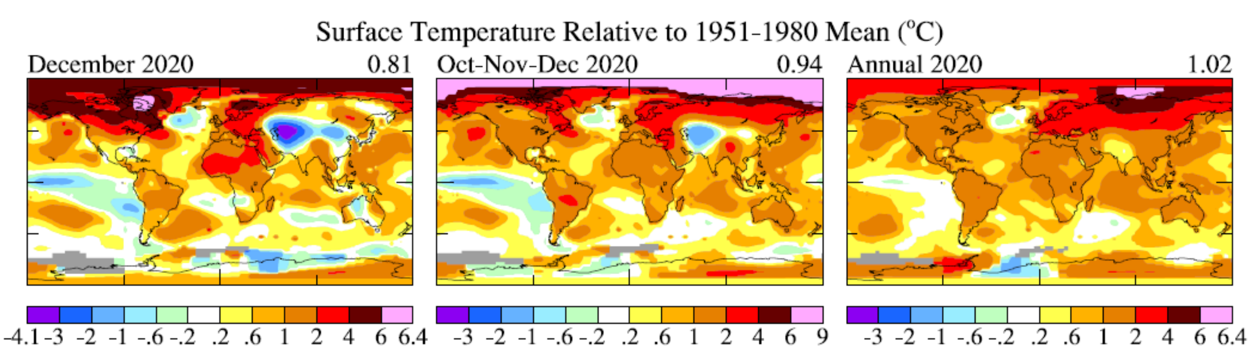

Fig. 9. Temperature anomalies in the past month, three months, and year relative to the 1951-1980 base period.

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