

THREE MYTHS ABOUT ADAPTATION: LIMITS, BARRIERS, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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It seems very likely that the climate is going to change, and it seems very likely that this puts at risk things that people value. Managing these risks is called 'adaptation', which is increasingly being seen as a panacea for the problems of climate change. In this paper I discuss three popular assumptions that inform contemporary thinking about adaptation. First, while it is tempting to think that adaptation can compensate for our failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (i.e. that adaptation policies are fungible for mitigation policies), this is clearly not the case. Adaptation cannot avoid all the impacts of climate change, particularly under increasing levels of warming. Recognising these limits to adaptation is important, for it highlights areas where investments in adaptation may fail to be effective, and underscores the need for emissions reductions in order to sustain the places, lifestyles, livelihoods and cultures that give meaning to our lives.

Second, recognising that humans manage to live decent lives across diverse climates, and have done so through different climate episodes in the past,

has led some to believe that adaptation to climate change is easy. True, there is much to be said for ingenuity, and there is much to be learned from the way different societies have and do live in different climates. But there are also some unique features of the contemporary problem of climate change, as well as some recent evidence about adaptation, to suggest that adaptation will be a very complex process that faces many barriers and is prone to failure.

Third, the scale of the risks climate change poses has led to a widespread belief among researchers and decision-makers that adaptation should begin as a matter of urgency. True, adaptation is important, and action is needed now. But this is not the same as saying actions to address all future risks need to be implemented in the next decade. Such hasty responses can (and do) create more problems than they solve. Though we cannot afford to delay adaptation, we also cannot afford to get it wrong through hasty action. There is a need then to think more carefully about the timing of adaptation so that what gets done is sustainable.