

A simple explanation for declining temperature sensitivity with warming

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Abstract

Temperature sensitivity—the magnitude of a biological response per °C—is a fundamental concept across scientific disciplines, especially biology, where temperature determines the rate of many plant, animal and ecosystem processes. Recently, a growing body of literature in global change biology has found temperature sensitivities decline as temperatures rise (Fu et al., 2015; Güsewell et al., 2017; Piao et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2019; Dai et al., 2019). Such observations have been used to suggest climate change is reshaping biological processes, with major implications for forecasts of future change. Here we present a simple alternative explanation for observed declining sensitivities: the use of linear models to estimate non-linear temperature responses. We show how linear estimates of sensitivities will appear to decline with warming for events that occur after a cumulative thermal threshold is met—a common model for many biological events. Corrections for the non-linearity of temperature response in simulated data and long-term phenological data from Europe remove the apparent decline. Our results show that rising temperatures combined with linear estimates based on calendar time produce observations of declining sensitivity—without any shift in the underlying biology. Current methods may thus undermine efforts to identify when and how warming will reshape biological processes.

Significance statement: Recently a growing body of literature has observed declining temperature sensitivities of plant leafout and other events with higher temperatures. Such results suggest that climate change is already reshaping fundamental biological processes. These temperature sensitivities are often estimated as the magnitude of a biological response per °C from linear regression. The underlying model for many events—that a critical threshold of warmth must be reached to trigger the event—however, is non-linear. We show that this mismatch between the statistical and biological models can produce the illusion of declining sensitivities with warming using current methods. We suggest simple alternative approaches that can better identify when and how warming will reshape biological processes.

1 Main text

2 Climate change has reshaped biological processes around the globe, with shifts in the timing of
3 major life history events (phenology), carbon dynamics and other ecosystem processes (IPCC,
4 2014). With rising temperatures, a growing body of literature has documented changes in tem-
5 perature sensitivity—the magnitude of a biological response scaled per °C. Many studies have
6 found declining responses to temperature in recent decades (Fu et al., 2015; Güsewell et al.,
7 2017; Piao et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2019) or lower sensitivities in warmer, urban areas (Meng
8 et al., 2020).

9
10 Most studies attribute changes in temperature sensitivity to shifts in underlying biological pro-
11 cesses. For example, researchers have suggested weaker temperature sensitivities are evidence of
12 increased light limitation in the tundra (Piao et al., 2017), or a decline in the relative importance
13 of warm spring temperatures for spring phenological events (e.g., leafout, insect emergence) in
14 the temperate zone (Fu et al., 2015; Meng et al., 2020), as other environmental triggers (e.g.,
15 winter temperatures that determine ‘chilling’) play a larger role. Yet, despite an increase in
16 studies reporting declining or shifting temperature sensitivities, none have provided strong evi-
17 dence of the biological mechanisms underlying these changes (e.g., Fu et al., 2015; Meng et al.,
18 2020). The missing mechanisms may be hidden in the data: environmental factors moderate
19 biological processes in complex ways (Chuine et al., 2016; Güsewell et al., 2017), are strongly
20 correlated in nature (e.g., Fu et al., 2015), and temperature variance shifts over time and space
21 (Keenan et al., 2020).

22
23 Here we propose a simpler alternative explanation: the use of linear models for non-linear re-
24 sponses to temperature. Researchers generally use methods with assumptions of linearity to
25 calculate temperature sensitivities, often relying on some form of linear regression to compute
26 a change in a quantity—days to leafout or carbon sequestered over a fixed time, for example—
27 per °C, thus ignoring that many biological responses to temperature are non-linear. We show,
28 theoretically then with simulated and empirical data, how the use of linear methods for non-
29 linear responses can produce an illusion that the mechanisms underlying biological processes are

30 changing.

31

32 Many observed biological responses are the result of continuous non-linear processes that depend
33 on temperature, which are discretized into temporal units for measurement. For example, a bio-
34 logical response, such as leafout, occurs when a certain thermal sum is reached (Dijkhuis, 1956;
35 Lindsey and Newman, 1956), and plants will reach this threshold more quickly—in calendar
36 time—when average daily temperatures are warmer (Valentine, 1983; Lechowicz, 1984; Kramer,
37 2012). Biologically, however, the plants may require the same temperature sum. Indeed any
38 process observed or measured as the time until reaching a threshold is inversely proportional to
39 the speed at which that threshold is approached. Temperature determines the speed of many
40 biological processes (Bonan and Sirois, 1992; Hinrichsen, 2009; Hofmann and Todgham, 2010).
41 Thus, at very low temperatures plants would never leaf out and at higher temperatures they
42 could leaf out in only a matter of days—yet sensitivities estimated from linear regression at
43 higher (warmer) temperatures would appear much lower than those observed at lower temper-
44 atures. Warming acts to step on the biological accelerator, producing shifts in estimates when
45 non-linear responses are modeled as linear.

46

47 We show this by deriving the relationship between a biological response and temperature using
48 a simple stochastic model, which describes the first time a random process hits a threshold (see
49 ‘A first-hitting-time model of leafout’ in Supplementary Information). Our model holds the
50 temperature threshold for leafout constant (Hunter and Lechowicz, 1992; Zohner et al., 2020).
51 Even though the mechanism by which temperature leads to leafout does not change, the model
52 produces declining sensitivity—as measured in days per °C—with warming. Indeed, under this
53 model constant temperature sensitivity would be evidence that the temperature threshold is not
54 constant and the mechanisms underlying the leafout process have changed.

55

56 Simulations show that correcting for non-linearity using the transformation for an inverse relationship—
57 log transformation—removes apparent declines in temperature sensitivity (Fig. 1, S2, code link).
58 In empirical long-term leafout data from Europe, correcting for non-linearity in responses pro-
59 duces little evidence for declining sensitivities with warming (Figs. 1, S6, S7). An apparent

60 decline in sensitivity for silver birch (*Betula pendula*) from -4.3 days/°C to -3.6 days/°C from
61 1950-1960 compared to 2000-2010 disappears using a log-log regression (-0.17 versus -0.22). We
62 see similar corrections using 20-year windows, and a potential increase in sensitivity for Euro-
63 pean beech (*Fagus sylvatica*, see Tables S1-S2). Moreover, the variance of the leafout dates of
64 both species declines as temperatures rise—(declines of roughly 50%, see Tables S1-S2), which
65 is expected under our model as warming accelerates towards the thermal threshold that triggers
66 leafout (and in contrast to predictions from changing mechanisms, see Ford et al., 2016).

67

68 Fundamentally rising temperature should alter many biological processes, making robust meth-
69 ods for identifying these changes critical. In spring plant phenology, where declining sensitivities
70 are often reported (Fu et al., 2015; Piao et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2019), warming may increase
71 the role of ‘chilling’ (determined mainly by winter temperatures) and daylength (Laube et al.,
72 2014; Zohner et al., 2016)—potentially increasing the thermal sum required for leafout at lower
73 values of these cues (Polgar et al., 2014; Zohner et al., 2017; Flynn and Wolkovich, 2018). Ad-
74 justing our simulations to match this model yielded shifts in sensitivities with warming. Unlike
75 a model with no underlying biological change, however, after correcting for non-linearity, the
76 shifts in sensitivities remained and they occurred in step with the biological change (Fig. S4a,
77 c). In contrast, sensitivities estimated from a linear model showed shifts across the entire range
78 of warming, well before the simulated biological change (Fig. S4a, c). Further, we found that
79 an increase in the thermal sum required for leafout should yield larger in magnitude tempera-
80 ture sensitivities, not smaller, as is often expected (e.g., Fu et al., 2015), thus highlighting the
81 complexity of identifying what trends to expect in sensitivities with warming (see ‘Simulations
82 of common hypotheses for declining sensitivity’ in Supplementary Information for an extended
83 discussion).

84

85 Our theoretical model and empirical results show that rising temperatures are sufficient to ex-
86 plain declining temperature sensitivity. It is not necessary to invoke changes to the mechanisms
87 that underlie the biological processes themselves. Our results provide a simpler explanation for
88 observations of declining temperature sensitivities, but do not rule out that important changes
89 in biological processes may underlie such declines. Instead, our results highlight how the use

90 of linear models may make identifying when—and why—warming alters underlying biology far
91 more difficult.

92

93 Inferring biological processes from statistical artifacts is not a new problem (e.g., Nee et al.,
94 2005), but climate change provides a new challenge in discerning mechanism from measure-
95 ments because it affects biological time, while researchers continue to use calendar time. Other
96 fields focused on temperature sensitivity often use approaches that acknowledge the non-linearity
97 of responses (e.g., Yuste et al., 2004). Researchers have called for greater use of process-based
98 models (Keenan et al., 2020), which often include non-linear responses to temperature, but
99 rely themselves on exploratory methods and descriptive analyses for progress (Chuine et al.,
100 2016). The challenge, then, is to interrogate the implicit and explicit models we use to interpret
101 data summaries, and to develop null expectations that apply across biological and calendar time.

102

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178

179 *Data & Code Availability:* Code for simulations, PEP 725 analysis, and plots is provided here.
180 For empirical examples, we used PEP 725 phenological data and E-OBS climate data, both of
181 which are freely available via the links.

182

183 *List of Supplementary Information:*

184 A first-hitting-time model of leafout

185 Simulations of common hypotheses for declining sensitivity

186 Methods & results using long-term empirical data (PEP725)

187 Table S1-S2

188 Fig S1-S7

189

190 **Figures**

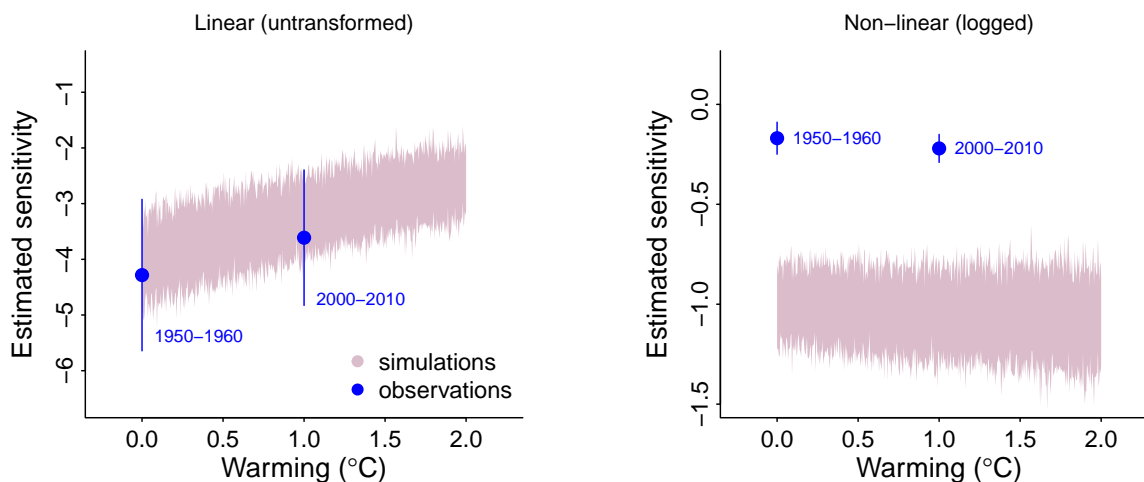


Figure 1: **Shifts in temperature sensitivities (response per °C) with warming occur when using linear models for non-linear processes.** Estimated sensitivities decline (in magnitude) with warming in simulations (shading, estimated across 45 sites with a base temperature of normal(6,4), variation comes from fluctuation in the Monte Carlo simulations) with no underlying change in the biological process when sensitivities were estimated with linear regression (left). This decline disappears when performing the regression on logged predictor and response variables (right). Such issues may underlie declining sensitivities calculated from observational data, including long-term observations of leafout across Europe (for *Betula pendula* from PEP725 from for the 45 sites that had complete data for 1950-1960 and 2000-2010), which show a lower sensitivity with warming when calculated on raw data, but no change in sensitivity using logged data. Shading, symbols and lines represent means \pm standard deviations of regressions across sites. See Supplementary Information for a discussion of why estimated sensitivities are -1 or lower in non-linear models.