Introduction to climate modelling

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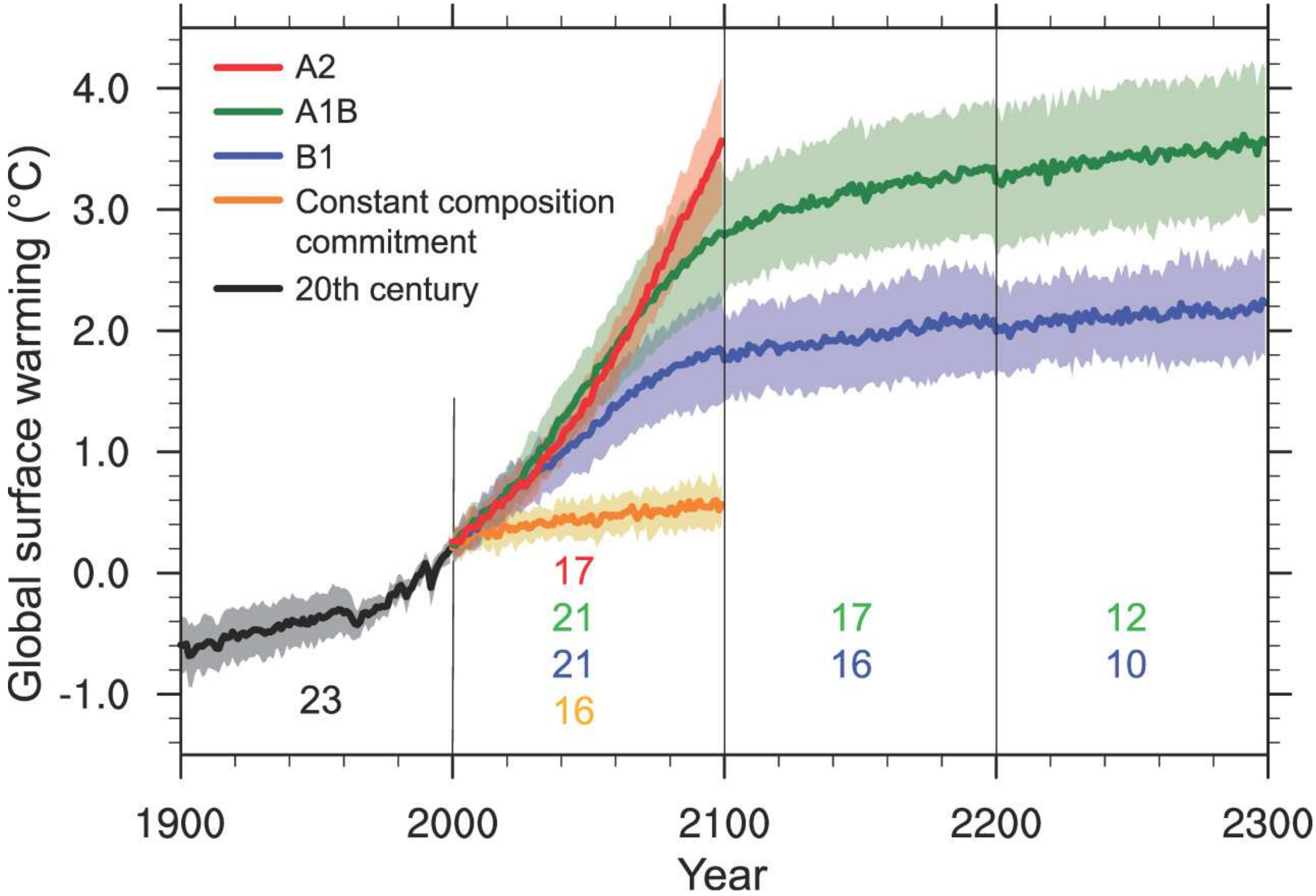
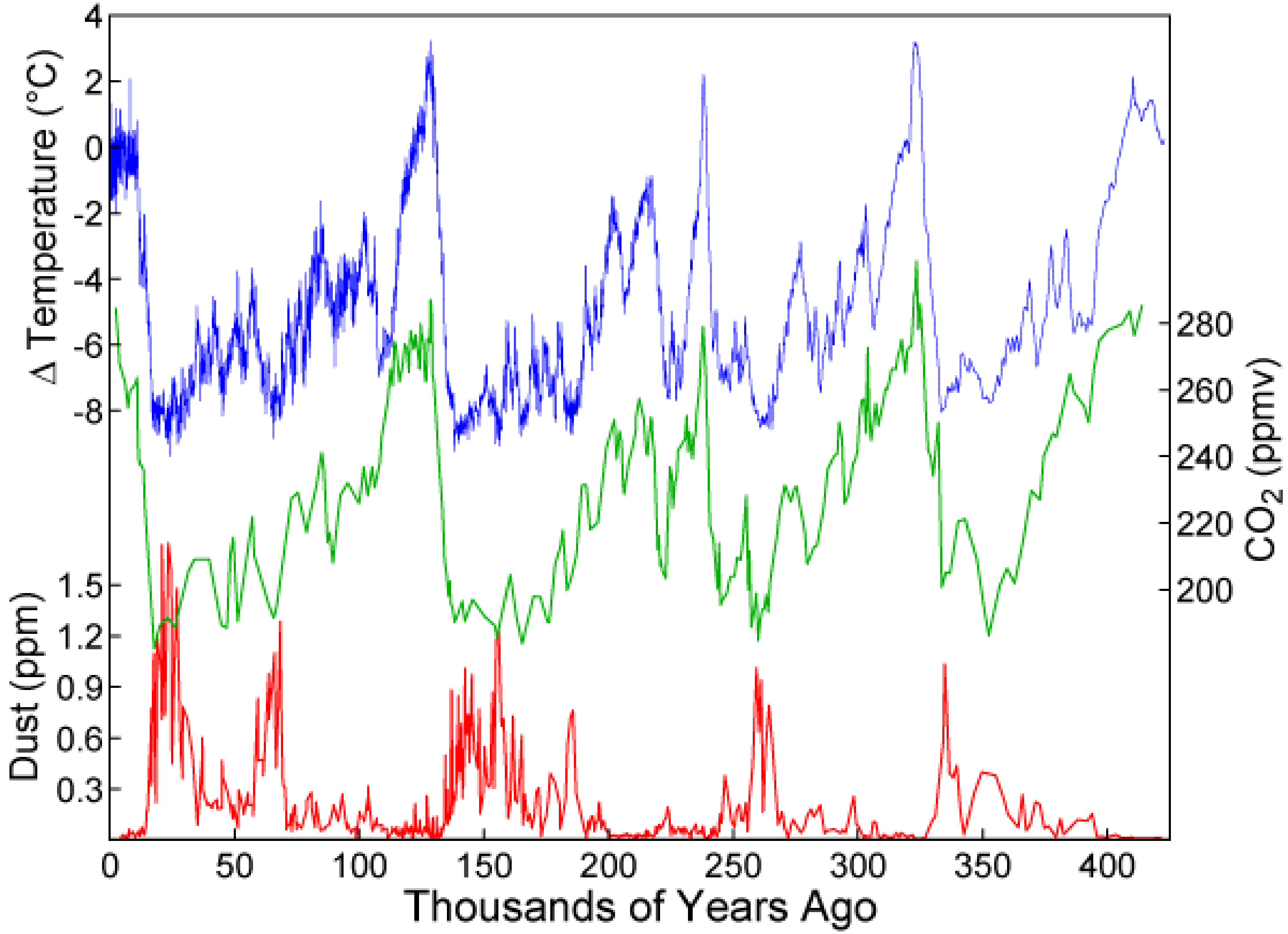
Overview

- Why do we need climate models?
- What is a climate model?
- How do you build a climate model?
- How do you use a climate model?
- Examples of climate modelling

Why do we need climate models?



Why do we need climate models?

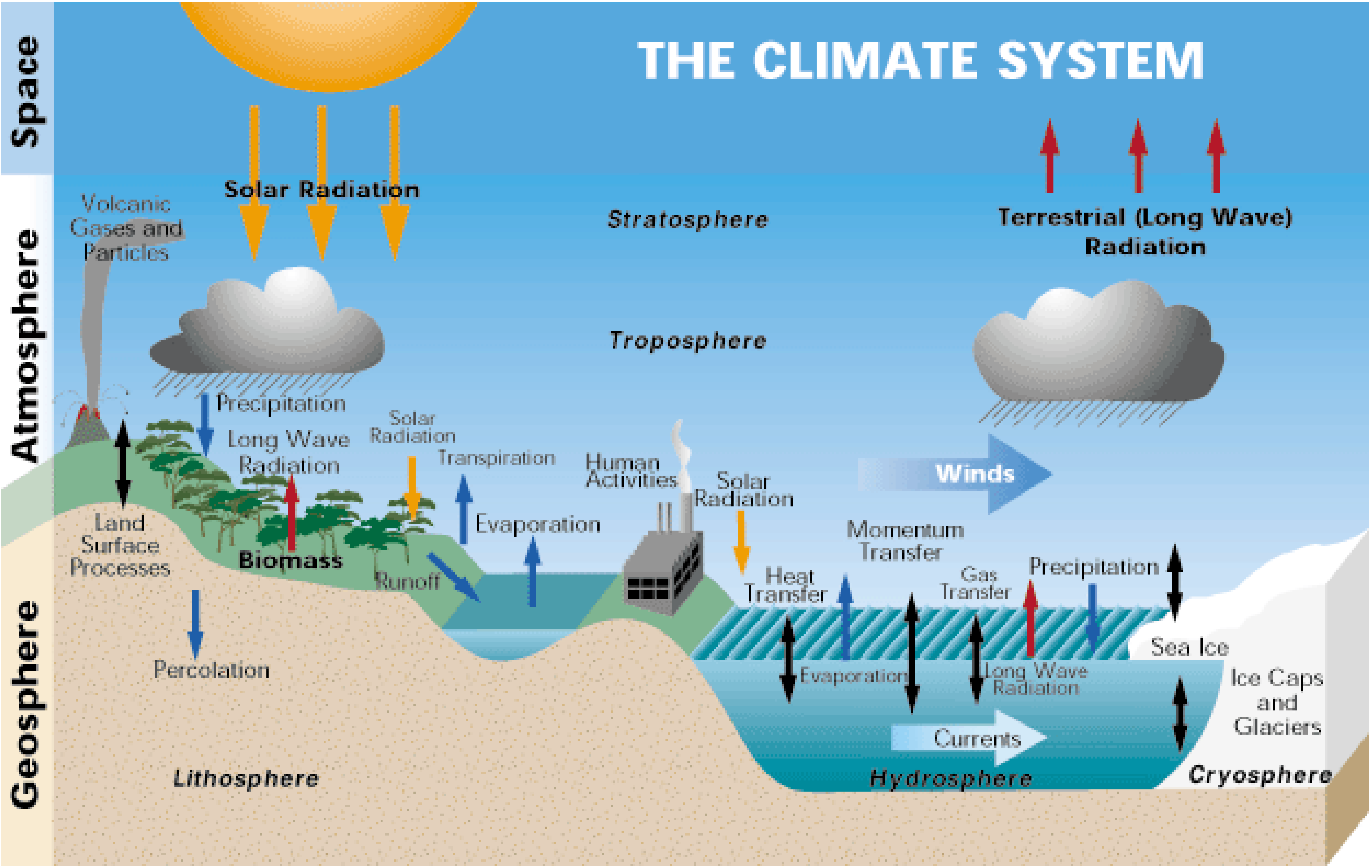


Why do we need climate models?

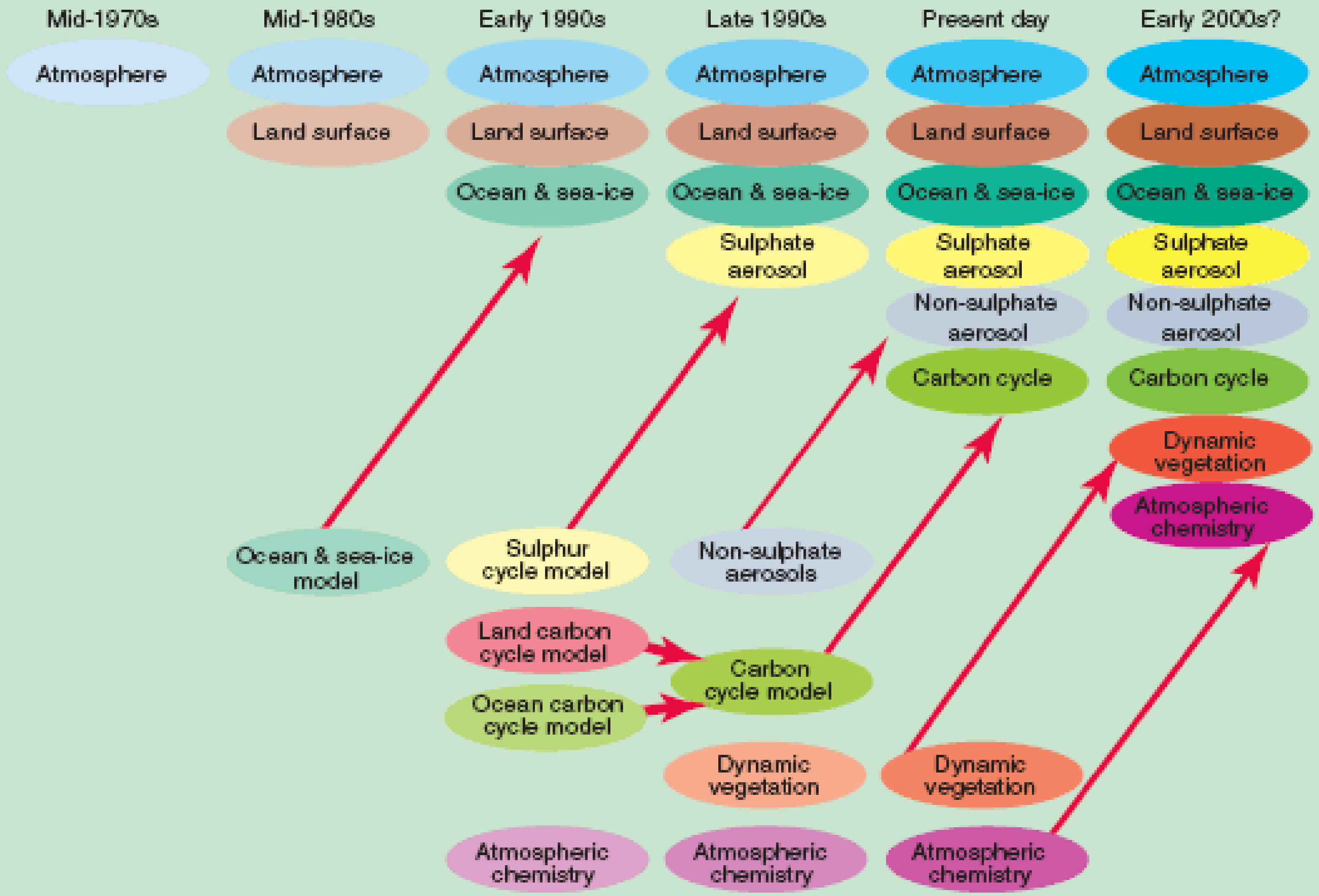
- There is only one Earth, and we can't (shouldn't) perform experiments on that
- We can't travel in time
- We want to predict possible future climate states
- We want to understand past climatic changes
- We want to explore properties of the climate system
- We want to answer *questions* - these can range from *scientific* questions to *policy* questions

What is a climate model?

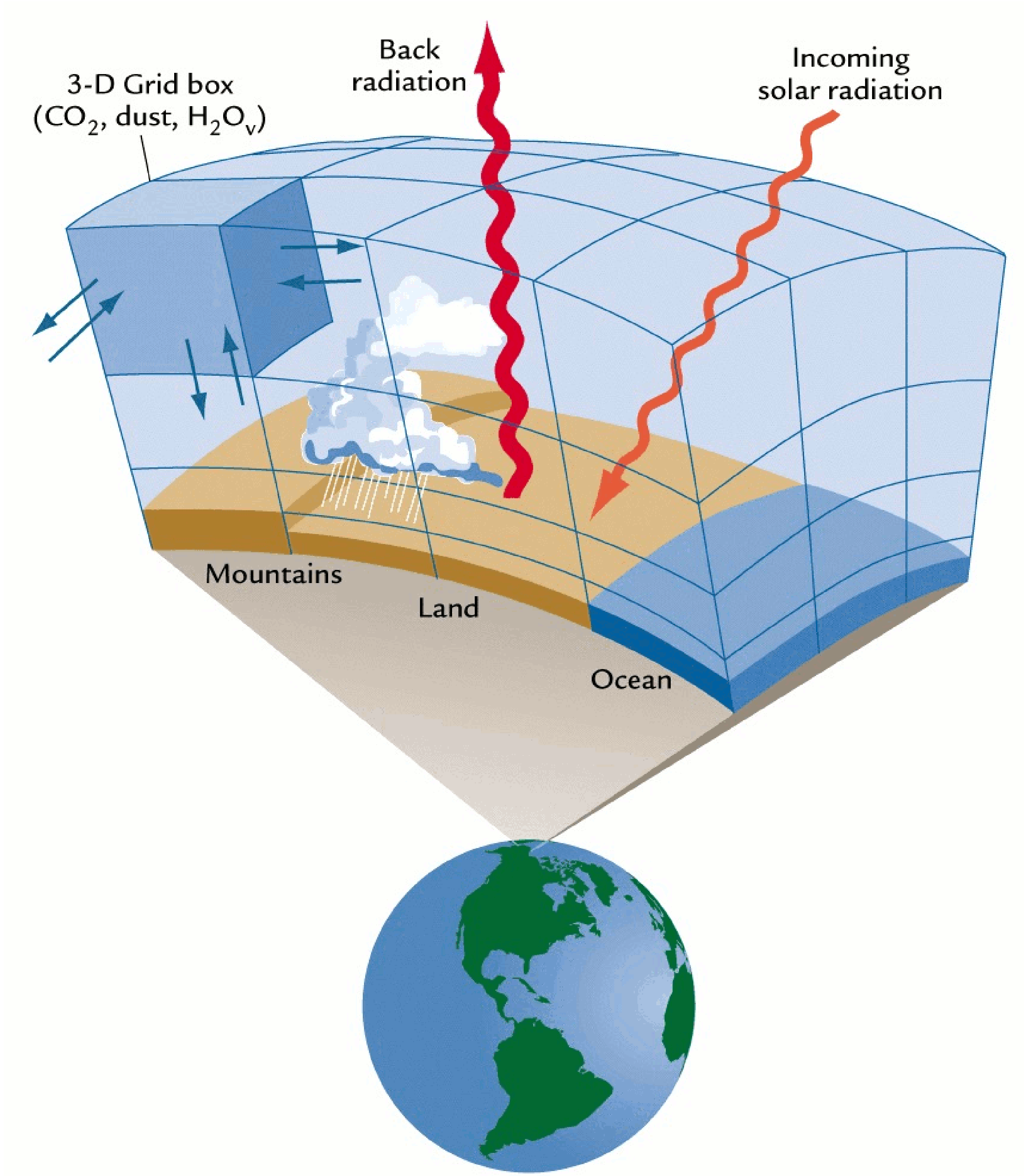
- A *virtual* Earth
- A computer program (usually very long and complex)
- Solves the fundamental physical equations that describe the evolution of the climate system
- Different types of models: simple vs. complex, low-resolution vs. high-resolution, regional vs. global
- A model is a *tool* - the type that you use depends upon the question that you want to answer
- *No* model is a perfect representation of the real world

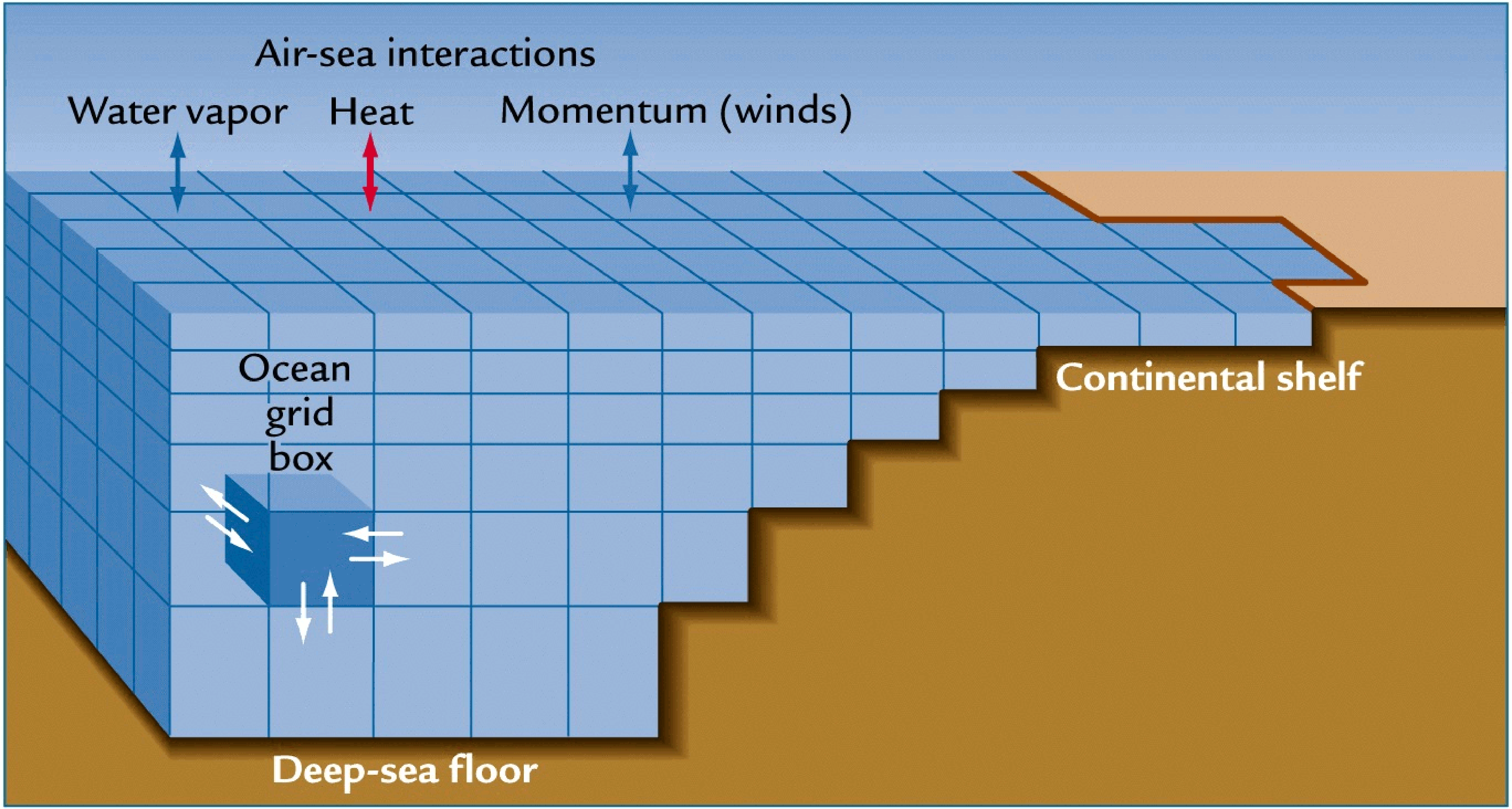

THE CLIMATE SYSTEM
Space
Atmosphere
Geosphere
Solar Radiation
Volcanic Gases and Particles
Stratosphere
Terrestrial (Long Wave) Radiation
Troposphere
Precipitation
Long Wave Radiation
Solar Radiation
Transpiration
Human Activities
Solar Radiation
Winds
Evaporation
Momentum Transfer
Land Surface Processes
Biomass
Runoff
Heat Transfer
Gas Transfer
Precipitation
Sea Ice
Percolation
Evaporation
Long Wave Radiation
Ice Caps and Glaciers
Currents
Lithosphere
Hydrosphere
Cryosphere

The Development of Climate models, Past, Present and Future

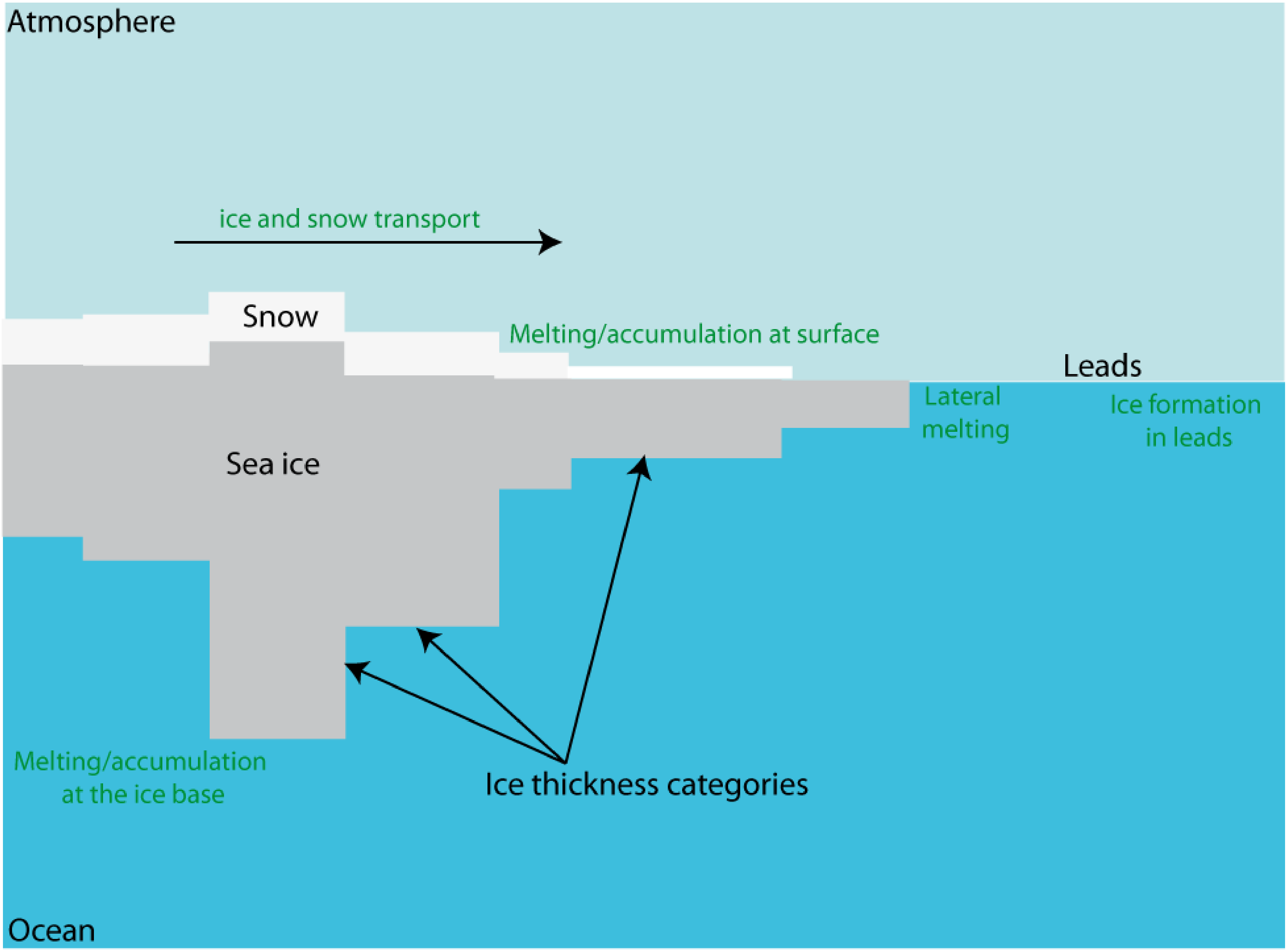


Box 3, Figure 1: The development of climate models over the last 25 years showing how the different components are first developed separately and later coupled into comprehensive climate models.


Back
radiation
Incoming
solar radiation
3-D Grid box
(CO_2, dust, H_2O_v)
Mountains
Land
Ocean



Air-sea interactions
Water vapor
Heat
Momentum (winds)
Ocean
grid
box
Continental shelf
Deep-sea floor



Atmosphere
ice and snow transport
Snow
Melting/accumulation at surface
Leads
Lateral melting
Ice formation in leads
Sea ice
Melting/accumulation at the ice base
Ice thickness categories
Ocean

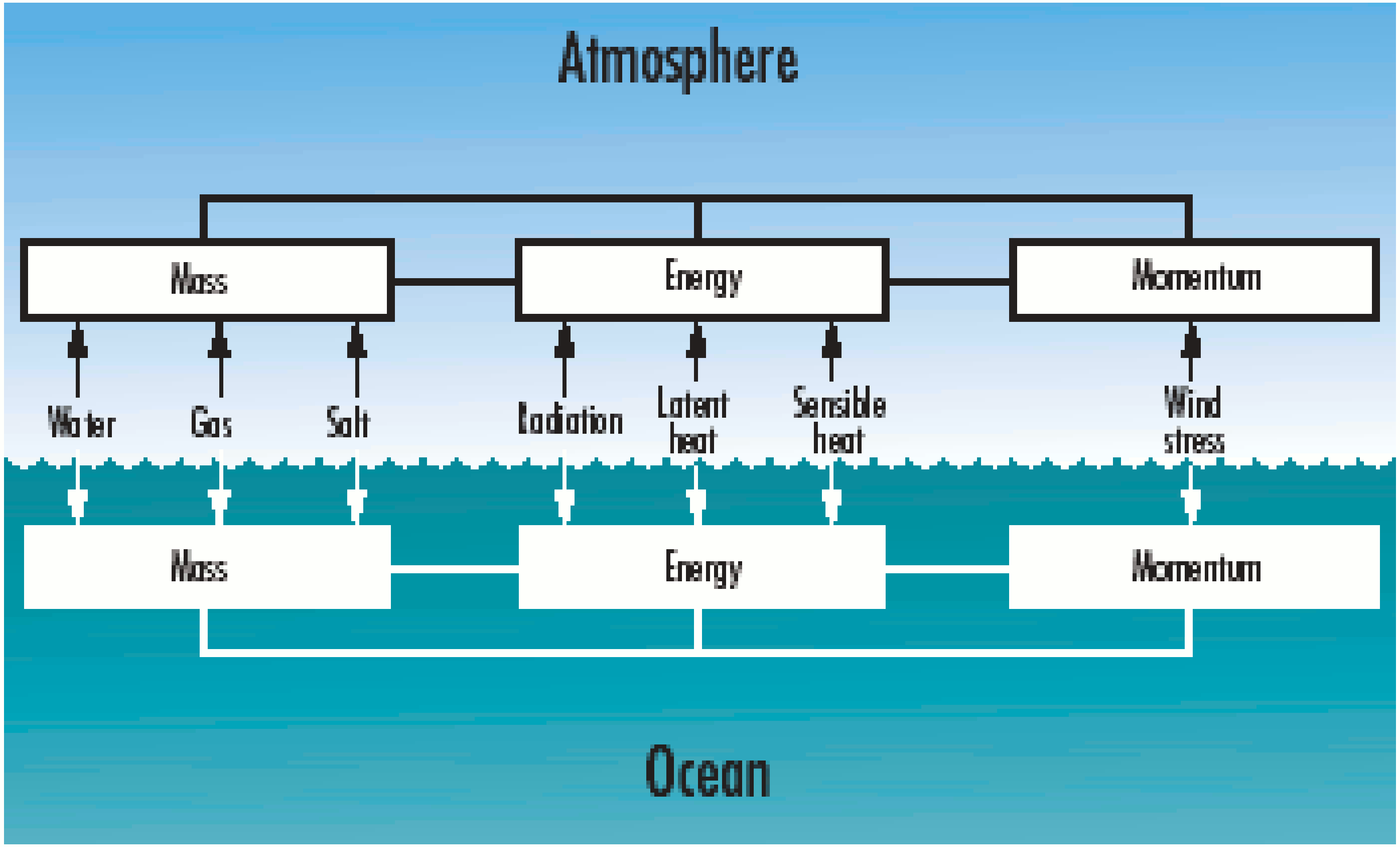
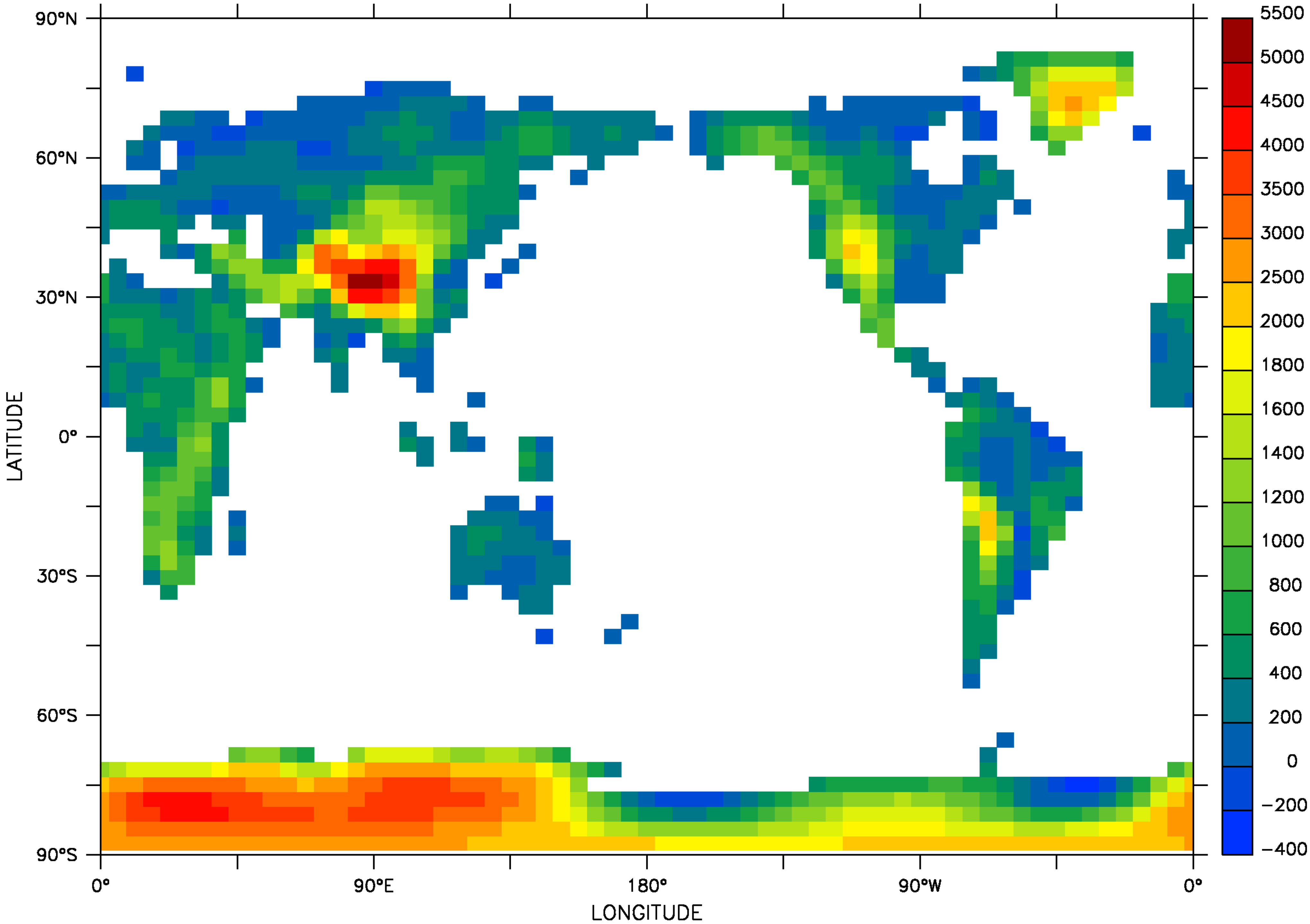


Figure 53. A schematic representation of the essential components of a fully coupled general circulation model, based on the conservation of mass, energy and momentum in the atmosphere and ocean, and the physical processes involved in the coupling between them.

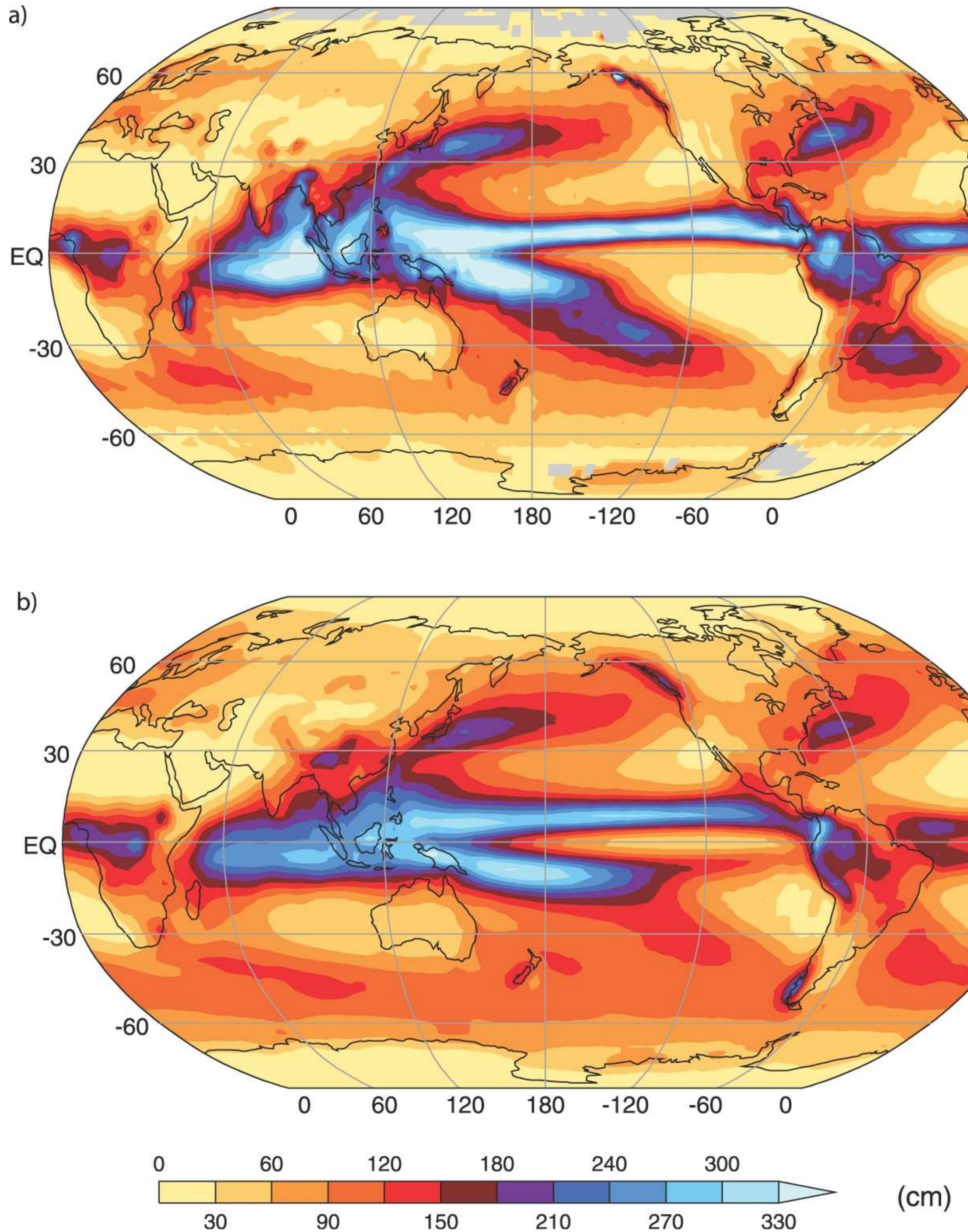
Limitations on the accuracy of climate models

- Lack of understanding of physical processes: if we don't understand a process, we can't describe it within a model
- Computational limitations:
  - It's impossible to include all physical processes in a single model, so some processes are always missing
  - Limited spatial resolution
- Essential to comprehensively evaluate a model before trusting the output


90°N
60°N
30°N
0°
30°S
60°S
90°S
LATITUDE
0°
90°E
180°
90°W
0°
LONGITUDE
5500
5000
4500
4000
3500
3000
2500
2000
1800
1600
1400
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
−200
−400

Models work!

- The figures on the right show annual rainfall
- Which is observed and which is modelled?



How do you build a climate model?

- Identify the processes to be modelled
- Identify the quantities to be modelled
- Identify the relationships between these quantities
- Express these relationships mathematically
- Write computer code to solve these equations

How do you build a climate model?

- Traditional approach:
  - Develop a computer program from scratch
- Modern approach:
  - Take existing components and combine them
- Test and debug
- Determine the optimal parameter settings ("tuning")
- Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate...

How do you build a climate model?

- *Very* specialised and time-consuming process
- The end result is a very large and complex computer program
- A typical state-of-the-art climate model:
  - represents *hundreds* of person-years of work
  - consists of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of lines of computer code
  - is very computationally expensive
  - generates enormous amounts of data

Case study: ACCESS

- Australian Community Climate and Earth System Simulator
- Atmosphere: Unified Model (UK)
- Ocean: MOM4 (USA)
- Sea ice: CICE (USA)
- Land surface: CABLE (Australia)
- Coupler: OASIS (France)
- Around one million lines of source code
- Can simulate around 2-3 years per day
- Generates up to 50 GB of data for each year

How do you use a climate model?

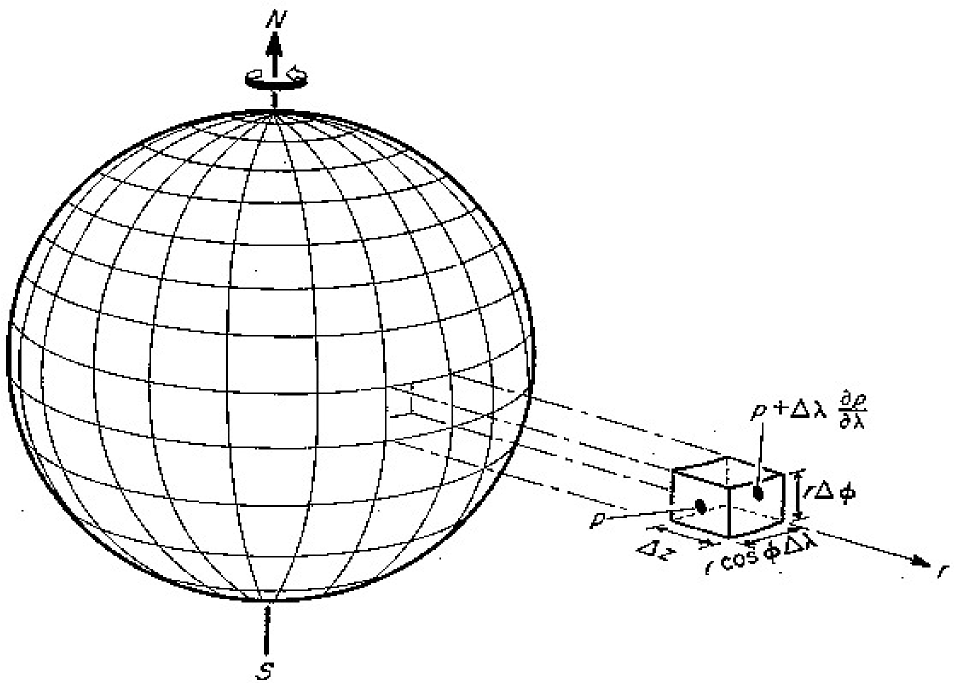
- Select the question that you want to answer
- Select an appropriate model
- Configure the model accordingly:
  - Initial conditions
  - Boundary conditions
- Find a big enough computer, and somewhere to store the data...

Climate Modelling

Governing equations

Boundary conditions

Initial conditions

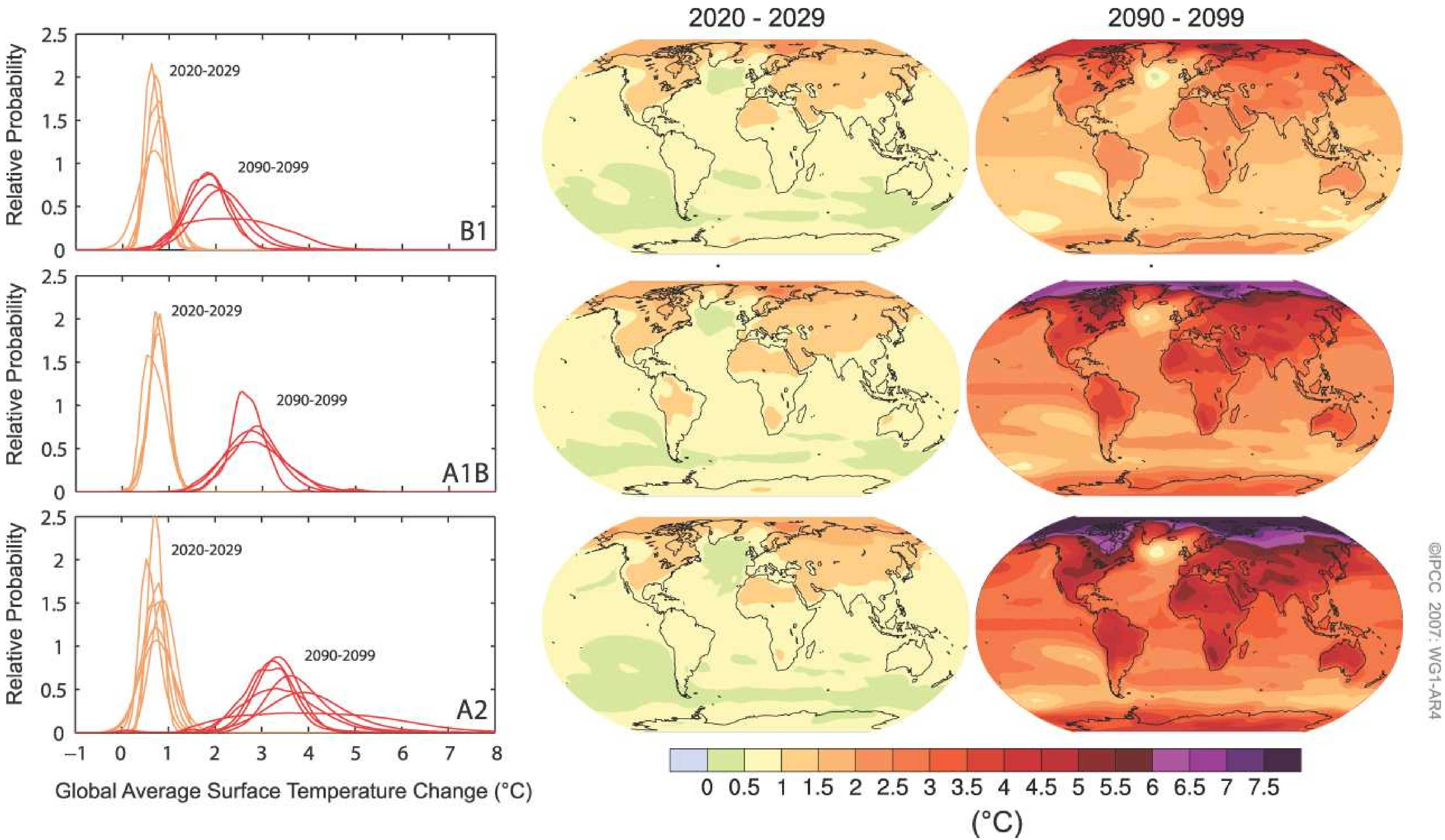


Output

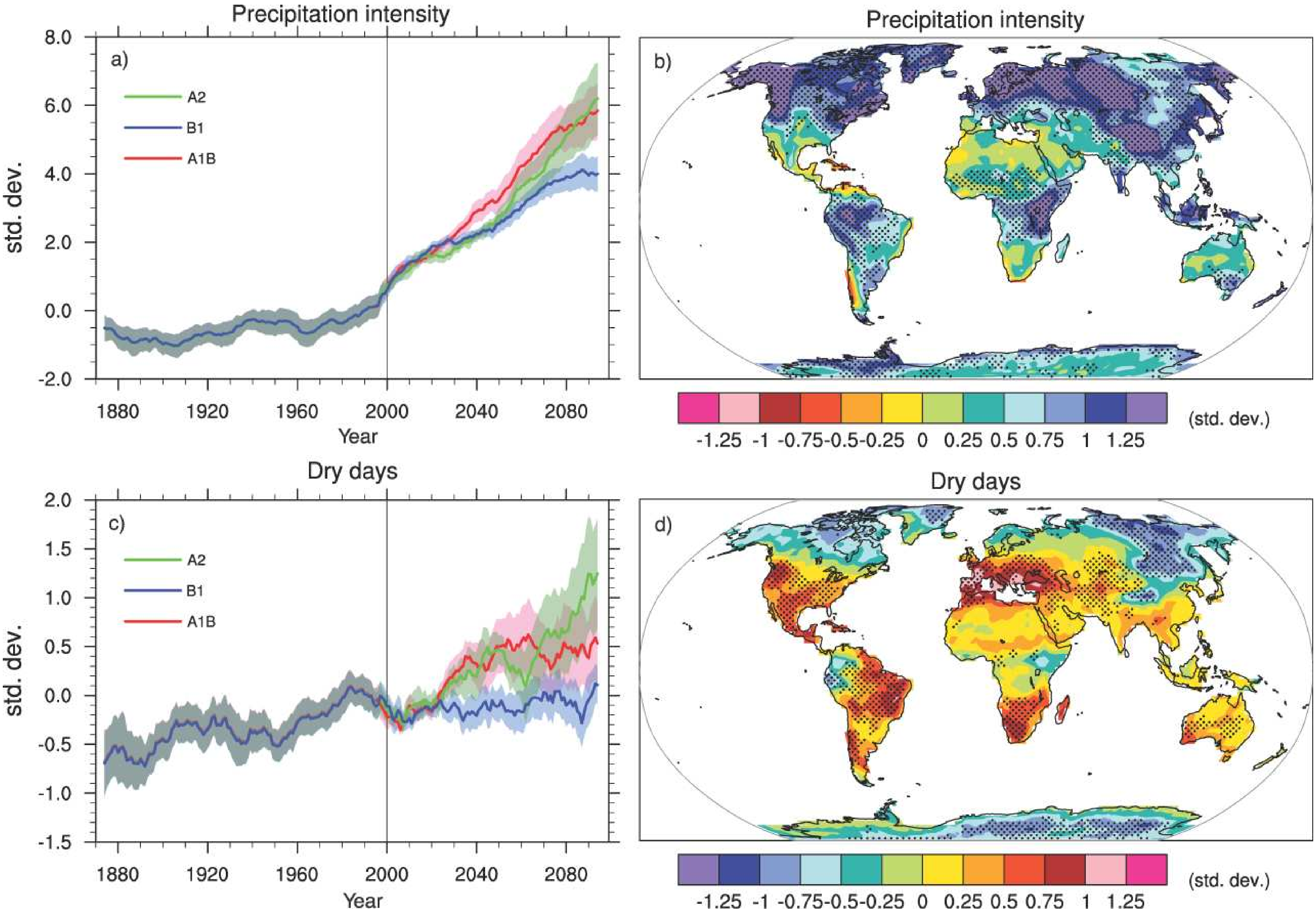
National Facility, Canberra

National Facility, Canberra

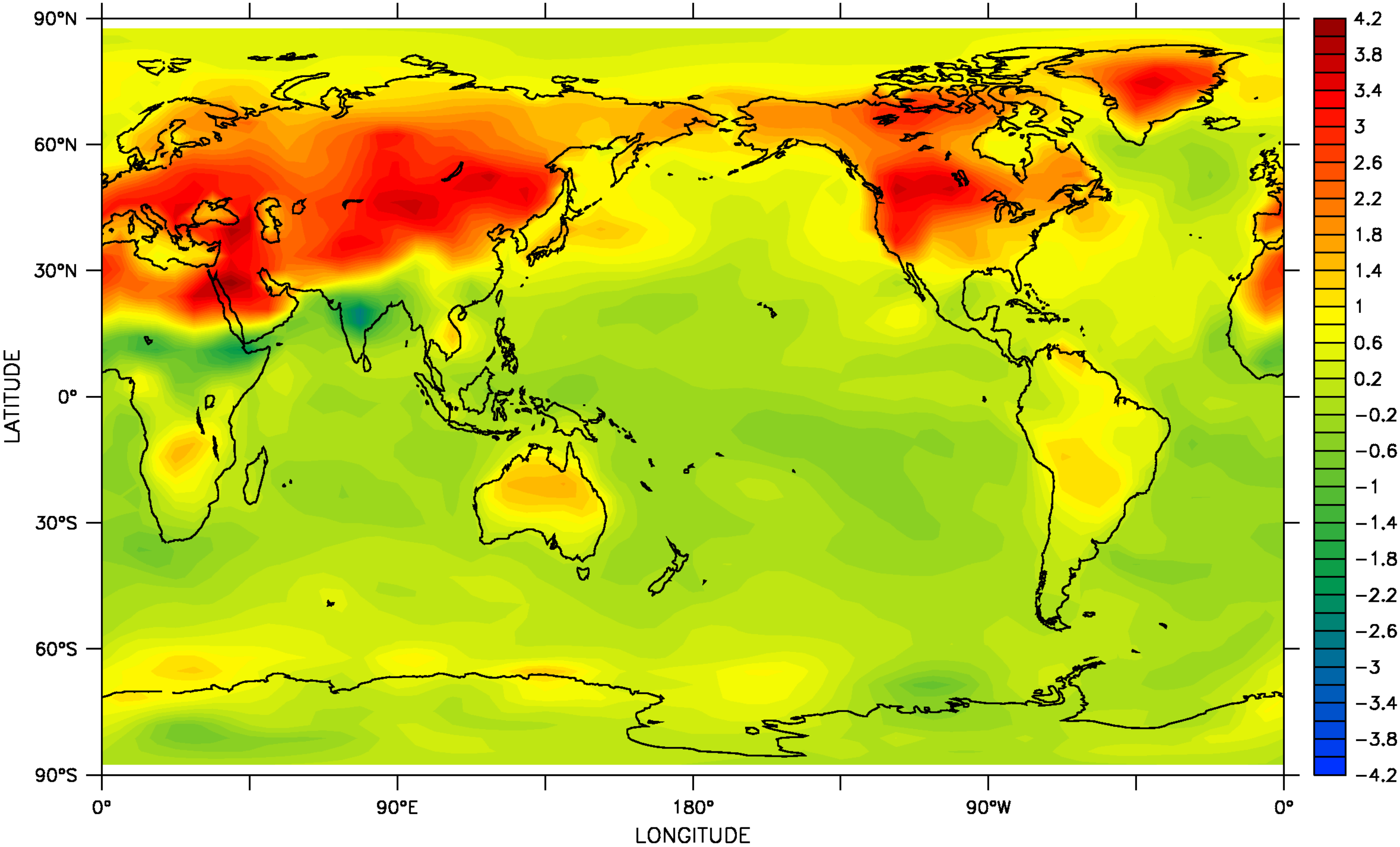
Examples of climate modelling



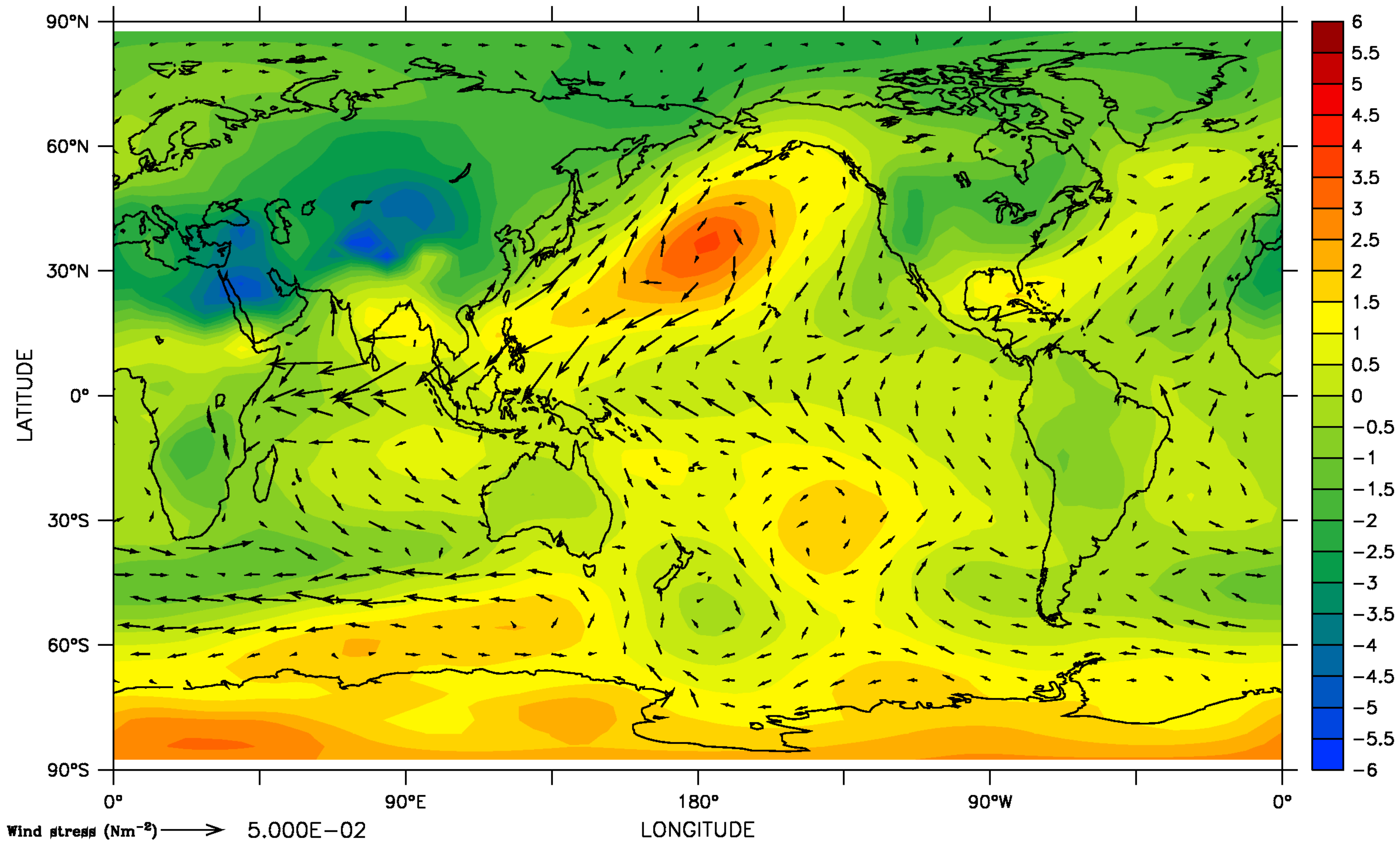
2020 - 2029
2090 - 2099
Relative Probability
2020-2029
2090-2099
B1
A1B
A2
−1 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Global Average Surface Temperature Change (°C)
0 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4 4.5 5 5.5 6 6.5 7 7.5
(°C)
©IPCC 2007: WG1-AR4



Precipitation intensity
a)
A2
B1
A1B
std. dev.
8.0
6.0
4.0
2.0
0.0
-2.0
1880
1920
1960
2000
2040
2080
Year
Precipitation intensity
b)
-1.25
-1
-0.75
-0.5
-0.25
0
0.25
0.5
0.75
1
1.25
(std. dev.)
Dry days
c)
A2
B1
A1B
std. dev.
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
-0.5
-1.0
-1.5
1880
1920
1960
2000
2040
2080
Year
Dry days
d)
-1.25
-1
-0.75
-0.5
-0.25
0
0.25
0.5
0.75
1
1.25
(std. dev.)



June−July−August surface air temperature, 8ka minus 0ka BP (°C)



June−July−August mean sea level pressure, 8ka minus 0ka BP (hPa)