

Picturing climate change

In their remarkable contribution "Climate change in perspective"¹, Hans von Storch and Nico Stehr draw a history of ideas about climate change brought forth by societies, scientific communities and policy makers. It seems that changes in the assessment of the consequences of climatic change and the perception of climate itself were shaping the debate on climate change stronger than scientific findings did. One explanation is that "age-old concerns about extremes of climate are part of the cultural background, for scientists as well as for the public."¹

The way scientists communicate their concept of climate change to the public reveals some of this cultural background. This becomes immediately obvious in illustrations. A very nice example is the motif of palm trees and glaciers, where palm trees symbolize warm and fertile climate and glaciers stand for coldness. The presence of two dichotomous symbols in one picture produces astonishment or puzzle. This motif has already been used nearly a century ago for communicating the scientific concept of climate change to the public (Fig. 1). And it is still in use today!

The motif of palm trees and glaciers belongs to a mountainous or alpine environment. Indeed, the concept of climate change has a long tradition in the Alps. The first, in a sense, "National research programme" in Switzerland in 1817-1821 was on recent climate change in the Alps.² Glacier movements were intensively studied in this context, eventually leading to the discovery of ice ages³. The awareness of the existence of ice ages in former times was not only a trigger for many climate change theories⁴, but also expressed itself in pictures and motifs such as the ones shown in Fig. 1. When looking at "Climate change in perspective", pictures can tell us a part of the story.

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1. von Storch, H. & Stehr, N. *Nature* **405**, 615 (2000).
2. Usteri, P., *Verh. Schweiz. Naturf. Ges.* **3** (1817).
3. Venetz, L., *Denkschriften (alte Serie)* **1** (1833).
4. Hann, J., *Handbuch der Klimatologie. Vol. 1: Allgemeine Klimatologie* (Stuttgart, 1897).

Figure 1: Title page of a booklet "Ice age and climate change", Jugendstil graphic, 1919 (left). Title page of a magazine, photo/collage, 1993 (right).



