

Environment

How we broke the water cycle and can no longer rely on rain to fall

We thought Earth's water cycle was resilient to human meddling, but new analysis shows our supplies of water in plants and soil that are critical to generating rainfall are dangerously low. Here is what we must do to repair the damage

By [Graham Lawton](#)

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It is easy to shrug at all this. After all, we already know climate change is disrupting the weather. And the rain will fall eventually because water is infinitely renewable. It falls from the sky as rain, variably but reliably. Doesn't it?

The answer, increasingly, is no. "We've allowed ourselves to think that water is simply something that comes back every year and there's a stable water cycle and we can trust it," says [Johan Rockström](#) at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany. But that is changing as a result of human activity. "We must recognise that – oh my God – we're actually not able to trust the source any more."

This isn't vague scaremongering. Rockström has just carried out a serious analysis of our water systems and concluded that they are broken. So how bad is the damage? And is there anything we can do as individuals or as a society? Broadly, the answers are that the damage runs deep, but it is still fixable – just.

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