



# Political feelings in ecological crises – an Introduction to the Theme Issue “Emotional society-nature-relations” [Emotionale Gesellschaft-Natur-Verhältnisse]

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Received: 22 July 2025 – Revised: 27 November 2025 – Accepted: 12 January 2026 – Published: 5 February 2026

**Abstract.** This editorial article introduces and contextualises the theme issue on socio-environmental emotionali-  
ties in the context of ecological crises. It highlights the political and academic relevance of analysing the emotional and affective registers of shifting society–environment relations in the broader context of the uncertainties, conflicts and multiple crises of a climate-changed world. Grounded in a political and spatial conceptualisation of emotions and affects, this introduction understands emotional and affective expressions as always indicative of contentious and shifting relations of power, knowledge, experience and identity. The editorial article draws on an expanding body of research to outline a series of key analytical perspectives on the political and epistemological role of emotions and affects in environmental politics, subjectivations and knowledge production. The article brings these perspectives in dialogue with the individual contributions to the theme issue, whose rich explorations of political feelings in the context of ecological crises are presented in the final section.

To “de-passion” knowledge does not give us a more objective world, it just gives us a world “without us”; and therefore, without “them” (Despret, 2004:131).

## 1 Emotional ecological crises

One of the credos of recent climate activism is that one must *feel* the crisis (see, for instance, XR, 2019). The highly emotionalised speeches of Fridays for Future’s founding figure Greta Thunberg – speeches in which fear and panic are articulated not only as appropriate emotional responses to the climate crisis but as the very pathways to truth – or the emotional and visceral performances of climate action groups such as Letzte Generation or Extinction Rebellion all show how climate activism constitutes a striking crystallisation of what could be termed the “affective Anthropocene” (Ginn et al., 2018:222). Given the increasing circulation of emotional intensities in the context of ecological and planetary crises (Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021), several questions arise. What

do these emotional intensities *do* (Ahmed, 2014) in relation to socio-political conflicts and transformations? To what extent are emotions and affective intensities becoming elements of the kind of political practices or strategies? To what extent do they open up new experiences or knowledge? Who is celebrating and arguing for the emotional, and who is criticising and rejecting it as a political strategy?<sup>1</sup>

This theme issue starts from the assumption that emotions shape the practices and politics through which the relations

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion on similarities and differences between the concepts of emotions and affects, see Sect. 3. For now, we want to stress that both concepts highlight the intensities of bodily (and spatially) mediated and expressed feelings. Geographical work on emotions and affects opened up questions of how certain modalities of feeling can become part of, shape or transform broader socio-discursive constellations of knowing, speaking and doing (Wetherell, 2012; Anderson, 2014; Ahmed, 2014). Both the debates on emotions and on affects stress that different relations of feeling – the ways that subjects feel and are felt (by others) – display contested and shifting relations of power and knowledge.

between subject, society and environment are perceived, appropriated and (re-)configured. A focus on the emotional dimension becomes relevant for several interrelated reasons. First, as indicated above, climate activist movements are heavily mobilising emotional categories and expressions (Johnston and Bonnett, 2023; Knops, 2021, 2024; Schlegel, 2022) which can also be linked to more general tendencies to perceive ecological dynamics through the affective modalities of “emergency”, “urgency” (Anderson, 2017; Madden, 2019) or “catastrophe” (see Hulme, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2011; Seagrave, 2023) – a tendency that can be traced deep into the histories of nature and environmental protection movements. Second, there is a general increase in a societal awareness and reflection of what could be termed *ecological* and *climate emotions* (Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021; for a discussion of the terms, see below). In the light of a growing perception of the severity of contemporary ecological crises (like climate change, biodiversity loss and the destruction of local environments), society–environment relations are shifting, which is accompanied by both political and emotional dynamics. In addition to the socio-political relevance of climate and ecological emotions, scholars are also identifying a more general resurgence of an overarching *emotionalisation of politics* that may further increase emotional approaches to environmental issues (Jupp et al., 2017; Helfritzsch and Müller-Hipper, 2021). Third, contemporary processes of socio-ecological transformation and the different strands of sustainable transitions (e.g. of the energy system, the transportation system) go hand in hand with often highly emotionalised conflicts over policy measures, knowledge claims, the legitimacy and pace of transformation, the distribution of costs and benefits, or different aspects of visible material change (e.g. landscape change due to renewable energy projects) (Martiskainen and Sovacool, 2021; Eversberg et al., 2024; Budnik et al., 2025). In particular, emotionally charged conflicts over knowledge and interpretive hegemony can be observed in relation to climate change. These conflicts unfold between scientific explanations and the often (still) limited “graspability” of such large-scale phenomena, and they are embedded within asymmetric power relations (concerning issues of climate justice or the attribution of responsibilities).

Here, the term *climate emotions* points to the significant and specific emotionality that is linked to perceptions, experiences and negotiations of climate change as a threat of “incomprehensible scale” (Rowe and Ormond, 2023:4) and with a “unique incomprehensibility of ecological loss” (Seagrave, 2023:62) – emotions like climate fear or climate grief (on this, see Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021). At the same time, the concept can also be extended so as to encompass, for example, the emotional dimension of climate policies and the conflicts surrounding them (Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021). While opening up similar perspectives, the terms *ecological emotions* and *environmental emotions* more broadly point to a range of different socio-environmental emotion-

alities: the intimate relationships between subjects and nature, and emotional experiences of environmental change or degradation (Cunsolo and Landman, 2017; Albrecht, 2020) but also the emotional dynamics of socio-ecological conflicts or sustainability transitions (Martiskainen and Sovacool, 2021).<sup>2</sup> Given the heterogeneous thematic fields and empirical cases addressed by the contributions to this theme issue, we primarily opt for the more general term “ecological emotions”, which in an encompassing way refers to different environment-, nature- and climate-related emotions and affects.

In the light of the developments mentioned above, this theme issue aims at strengthening a geographical reflection on the *productivity of ecological emotions* in the context of planetary socio-ecological crises. What do ecological emotions *do* (Ahmed, 2014) – that is, what are the political, social and epistemological potential and effect of the different forms of environment-, nature- and/or climate-related emotions and affect? In this sense, the contributions to the theme issue analyse the workings of political feelings in ecological crises: the significance of emotions for the transformation and negotiation of society–environment relations and the situated processes through which these relations – and their shifts – are made visible and tangible.

## 2 The political dimension of emotions in the context of shifting and precarious socio-environmental relations

We seek to investigate the conflicting processes through which society–nature relations and its transformations are interpreted, shaped and experienced. In doing so, we place particular emphasis on the emotional and affective dimensions of these processes. This resonates with recent shifts in political ecology (Becker and Otto, 2016; Bauriedl, 2016), for example, a turn towards an “embodied political ecology” (Doshi, 2017), which examines “biosocial materialisations” (Strüver, 2020; transl. by the authors), (urban) metabolisms (Heynen et al., 2005) and questions of corporeality. It has also expanded through engagements with new materialism and non-representational theory, exploring the significance of dynamic materialities – and their affects and aesthetics – for socio-ecological relations and politics, and more-than-human encounters (Bertram, 2016; Engelmann and McCormack, 2018; Howe, 2019; Wright et al., 2022; Tuitjer, 2023, in this volume). At the same time, efforts have been made to steer political-ecological research more explicitly towards an “emotional political ecology” (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020), which addresses the interrelations between emotions, power and environmental conflicts, and conceptualises the significance of emotional dynamics for the for-

<sup>2</sup>At the same time, many of these emotions are themselves climate emotions, insofar as they are often indirectly linked to climate change and its politics.

mation of political alliances. These studies ask how emotions shape environmental conflicts and interlinked processes of political subjectivation (Singh, 2013), and how subjects' intimate relations with local environments influence protest and resistance (Fotaki and Daskalaki, 2020; Winkler et al., 2025; Philipp, 2025). In line with this, theorisations of materiality, embodiment, emotion and affect have also generally been expanded in the diverse and interdisciplinary research on shifting society–environment relations (Neimanis and Walker, 2014; Nightingale et al., 2022; Tuitjer, 2023). Building on these and related debates, this issue brings together studies that examine how emotions and felt intensities (Gammerl et al., 2017) shape the practices and forms of knowledge production through which society–environment relations are (re-)configured and (newly) experienced.

Although the idea of this theme issue was not to define emotions too narrowly in advance, nor to limit the individual contributions too strictly to particular theoretical traditions, the individual contributions are all marked by a political and spatial understanding of emotions. Several aspects were and remain important to us in this context. We do not conceive of emotions as discretely isolable, fully delineable phenomena or separate domains (for instance, in contrast to “rationality”) but rather understand them as a fundamental dimension of both the social and the discursive (Wetherell, 2012; Ahmed, 2014). Emotions also point to a specific mode of (more-than-linguistic) interaction (Simonsen, 2010; Schurr and Strüver, 2016), one that can shape the dynamics and effects of socio-political negotiation processes. At the same time, emotions are mediated through practices (Scheer, 2016) and become materialised – in historically and contextually specific ways – in practice, whether in embodied activities or in the materiality of language and text. Emotions are relational; that is, they emerge through interactions between bodies, materialities and environments (Davidson et al., 2007) – even though, unlike the notion of affect, they are tied to embodied feeling subjects in and through whom they take effect (see below). By virtue of this relationality, emotions simultaneously possess a pronounced spatial dimension (Simonsen, 2010; Gammerl and Herrn, 2015). Finally, emotions are intrinsically linked to movement/motion, channel processes of change and can generate political potential (Gammerl et al., 2017). Regarding the interrelations and differences between the concept of emotion on the one hand and the concept of affect on the other – both of which are used in the contributions of the theme issue – we want to stress that, for us, finally *both terms* point to “intensities of feeling” (Thrift, 2004), and both terms highlight the fact that subjects are *moved* into action and thought by embodied engagements with the material world. However, we understand affects as intensive material forces that manifest as relations between different bodies and materialities, whereas emotions are generated within such relations and can be understood as embodiments of such relational intensities in and by the subject – in the form of more or less directed, channelled and articulated feelings. Thus,

emotions are expressed by embodied subjects, whereas the latter themselves are emotionally charged insofar as they are part of wider affective entanglements – that is, reciprocal, transactive and material relations between bodies constantly influencing each other. Furthermore, the concept of emotion points to embodied intensities that subjects have to make sense of, drawing on historical patterns of knowledge and interpretation (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Simonsen, 2010; Anderson, 2014; Schurr and Strüver, 2016).

These perspectives on emotions and affects open up a wide range of analytical questions for geographical research on the relations between subjects, society and environment. First, one can ask what significance emotions can have for (a) *nature- and environment-related politics*. This question directs attention towards analyses of the circulation of emotions in socio-political struggles over environment, nature and climate. How do emotional articulations influence the dynamics of political contestations and the associated moments of closure and opening, as well as processes of re- and depoliticisation (Bargetz and Sauer, 2010; González-Hidalgo and Zografas, 2020)? In addition, how do emotions articulate and mediate certain (b) *speaker positions and forms of political subjectivity*? One political dimension of emotions lies precisely in the fact that subjects can take a position in and through (the expression of) emotions, constituting themselves as political subjects in the performative articulation of emotional politics (Schurr, 2013). What significance do emotions hold, in the context of lived, experienced, contested or co-shaped society–environment relations, for (collective) identity politics on the one hand and for processes of subjectivation or (re-)becoming (Braidotti, 2011) at the level of individuals on the other (Singh, 2013)? How subjects feel and desire in relation to nature/the environment is a highly relevant question for understanding (future) politics and practices. Are new modes of feeling emerging that may be linked to forms of political activity and subjectivity? One might think, for example, of subjectivities of fear (of climate catastrophe) (Madden, 2019), of subjectivities of care in the Anthropocene (Block, 2020) or of “active mourning” (Fladvad and Hasenfratz, 2020:17; Cunsolo and Landman, 2017) in relation to the environment. Moreover, the political dimension of emotions also points to the socio-discursive “differentiatedness” of emotions: the ways that emotions are (or can be) felt and expressed are always tied to the ways that subjects are socially embedded and discursively marked (Gammerl et al., 2017; Ahmed, 2014). Regarding these perspectives on emotional (environmental) politics and political subjectivations, almost all authors of the theme issue offer insights – see, for instance, the contributions of Schlegel (2022), Boos and Jessen (2023), Schürkmann (2023), Kuhn (2023) and Philipp (2025).

Furthermore, a perspective on emotions opens up (c) *epistemological questions*: to what extent do emotions and affects shape, and contribute to, those kinds of processes through which ecological phenomena, dynamics and crises

(like climate change) become *tangible*, *localisable* and “*experiencable*” (Sørensen, 2023)? Scholars explored the epistemological significance of environmental emotions and affects by asking how affective–bodily relations, and the emotional experiences generated within, open up politically fruitful and novel perspectives on socio-ecological crises, its causes and possible solutions (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011; Popke, 2016; Verlie, 2019; Nightingale et al., 2022). Geographical research can examine the spatialities of the emotional–affective processes through which ecological relations and conflicts are made tangible and “feelable”. Moreover, emotions and affects provide an important analytical lens for understanding the lived intensities of ecological crises, and associated conflicts and vulnerabilities (Wright et al., 2022; Eriksen, 2022; Winkler et al., 2025; within this volume, see Tuitjer, 2023; Schlegel, 2022; Pohl and Helbrecht, 2022; Kuhn, 2023). Last but not least, analyses of emotions also lead to (d) the *temporalities* of society–subject–environment relations and ecological crises (Brace and Geoghegan, 2010). This brings into focus the question about how nature-, environment- and climate-related phenomena become visible and “feelable” at the intersection of the affective (micro-)politics of “emergency”, “urgency” (Anderson 2017) and “haste” (Haarstad et al., 2023) on the one hand, and the practices and politics of “waiting” (Olson, 2015), “delay” (Anderson, 2016) and long-term temporalities on the other. These perspectives immediately lead to the (emotional) tensions of what might be termed the “slow politics of climate emergency” (Haarstad et al., 2023). They also prompt reflection on the significance of temporal and future imaginaries in engagements with environmental (degradation) and climate change (Stephan and Wiemann, 2019; Adloff et al., 2020). Imaginations of time and the future are always also bodily internalised and felt, and they are intertwined with one’s own emotionally inflected temporality of being, acting and willing (Grosz, 2005). Analysing these temporalities can also yield insights into the articulations of environmental politics and ethics (Winkler, 2022). Under what conditions do sensations or atmospheres of urgency become operative in relation to climate change and environmental issues (“how much time is left to act”)? In what ways are existing routines and their inherent temporalities disrupted in the context of environment-related challenges? To what extent do changes evoke emotions, to what extent and in whom do they cause stress or fear, and to what extent and in whom do they generate hope? In the theme issue, the themes of temporality are reflected, for instance, in Schlegel’s (2022) discussion of (future-oriented) climate emotions, in Boos and Jessen’s (2023) reference to the use of temporal adverbs of urgency in environmental protests and in Schürkemann’s (2023) analysis of negotiations over how to manage the eternal burden of radioactive waste.

The diverse perspectives on the political and epistemological potentials of emotions outlined so far are all differently reflected and discussed in the rich contributions of this theme

issue. In the following, closing section, we briefly outline and summarise the main insights of the single contributions.

### 3 On the contributions in this theme issue

Several of the contributions address the epistemological dimensions of emotions and affects in the context of ecological crises and politics. In her contribution to this issue, Lilith Kuhn (2023) examines the affective atmospheres that arise in the epistemologically troubling encounter between scientific and artistic (knowledge) practices that are mobilised in the context of climate–political collaborations. Her starting point is a transdisciplinary theatre project on the climate crisis, which is being analysed using an autoethnographic approach. Kuhn focuses in particular on her own position within the relational interplay of powerful materialities and sensual bodies that fosters an instability of scientific identities in the rehearsal process. The analysis shows that scientific–artistic collaboration opens up spaces for reflection on scientific practice that question and overcome traditional dualisms such as subject/object, mind/body or reason/emotion. Kuhn explores how emotional intensities in the rehearsal of the play – linked to specific assemblages of bodies and things – indicate *epistemological disturbances* as different forms of knowing/experiencing (artistic, scientific) come together. Kuhn’s paper thus shows how emotions mediate the situatedness of knowledge and experience, and how they work on the differences between scientific and emotional insights. Thus, her contribution also makes visible the epistemological and political potential of emotions in climate discourse and activism. In line with this overarching interest in the epistemological dimension of ecological emotions, Pohl and Helbrecht (2022), in their contribution to this theme issue, examine how (especially in the face of the climate crisis and the collapse of ecosystems) ideas and imaginations of nature are linked to and generate ontological security. Based on their research in Canada, Germany and Singapore, their analysis shows that imaginations of nature not only trigger individual emotional reactions but can also shape social affiliation and identity-forming processes in the context of current environmental debates. The authors show that these emotionally charged images of nature become resources for subjective localisation (and a search for embeddedness), especially in the face of uncertainties and processes of change in socio-ecological habitats. Imaginations of nature thus act as emotional anchors that contribute to coping with and processing social and ecological challenges. Pohl and Helbrecht thus illustrate the significance of ecological emotions for the shaping of identity and agency (see also González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020).

How emotional experiences and affective embodiments of ecological dynamics shape capacities to perceive and act is also explored in Tuitjer’s contribution to “*Unruly waters*” (Tuitjer, 2023). Drawing on theories of affect, Tuitjer exam-

ines the embodiment and emotionality of urban flood experiences using the example of the 2011 flooding in Bangkok. Building on approaches from urban political ecology, she argues for the systematic inclusion of emotional-affective, bodily-sensual and material dimensions in the study of subject-nature relationships in urban contexts. Tuitjer shows that the agentic properties of urban materiality and the affective reactions of residents are closely intertwined and generate specific forms of knowledge, sensitivities, perceptions and dispositions to act. The analysis emphasises that different bodily and affective experiences make visible social positions, vulnerabilities and privileges. While privileged individuals have the opportunity for distancing and mobility, marginalised communities are forced to live permanently with exposure to poor water quality, unpleasant smells and environmental risks. The inclusion of visceral, bodily experiences and emotions not only expands the theoretical and methodological framework of urban political ecology but is also central to understanding social inequalities and urban environmental conflicts in the face of ecological crises. Tuitjer's contribution thus ties into a broader body of recent studies that illuminate how affective relations with the materialities of ecological ruination and disaster shape capacities to relate to, and to engage with, climate-changed worlds and its unevenly distributed harms and exposures (see also Ryan, 2016; Eriksen, 2022).

In addition to broader epistemological reflections, several contributions explicitly address the role of emotions and affect in environmental politics and activism. Schlegel (2022), for instance, focuses on the ambivalent functions of ecological emotions in the context of climate protests and wider social (in)action in addressing the climate crisis. Her contribution shows that unsettling and negative feelings in the face of climate change cannot only be stressful but also have a meaningful and politically mobilising effect and "altering capacity". Moreover, an engagement with Schlegel's contribution enables further reflections on how dominant climate emotions such as climate fear or grief facilitate the embodiment of certain *temporalities*. Ecological grief and loss are strongly linked to the past as the emotional object of mourning (see also Cunsolo and Landmann, 2017). Climate fear, for instance, may refer to a present that is threatened and must be secured – a rather "conservative" function – but also to a future (catastrophe) that may become the mobilising orientation of transformative actions in the present (see also Knops, 2023). Hence, among activists, "fear is valued for its alerting capacity" (Schlegel, 2022:425): a future-related affective temporality. Overall, Schlegel analyses how emotional dispositions such as fear, hope and grief shape not only the individual experience of the world but also collective reactions to socio-ecological challenges. Instead of attributing climate *inactivity* solely to a lack of knowledge, awareness, or emotions, Schlegel in particular proposes an understanding of it as an active social process in which emotions play a central role. From an interdisciplinary and re-

lational perspective, she argues that environmental inactivity should be understood as a more-than-human intra-action in which emotions play a significant role in shaping the relationship to others and to one's own environment. Schlegel thus illustrates how fear, grief and hope drive different aspects and dynamics of current social climate reactions in contradictory ways. Further broadening this issue's focus on the emotionality of environmental politics, in their contribution Boos and Jessen (2023) examine the emotional dimensions of environmental activism using the example of *bicycle activism and demonstrations in Berlin-Neukölln*. The focus is on the question of how shared and circulating experiences of ecological problems and associated emotions such as fear or anger unite people in protest and promote the formation of *affective protest communities*. By analysing flyers, posters, speeches and photographs, the authors show how concerns about safety and quality of life in relation to local car traffic are articulated in a "language of proximity". In this perspective, bicycle demonstrations function as experiences of transformation: while emotions such as fear and anger are initial catalysts for protest, feelings such as joy and a sense of community arise in the course of the demonstrations. Through collective actions, streets temporarily become experienced as self-determined spaces in which existing power relations in urban traffic are challenged. The experience of proximity is thus transformed into a sense of belonging and empowerment, helping to transform emotional perceptions of the environment and strengthening political identities and alliances in the context of urban conflicts. Moreover, the language of protest in the bicycle demonstrations for a climate-friendly transportation transition is strongly characterised by temporal adverbs: bike lanes *now*, transport transition *now*. This likewise illustrates the emotional-affective temporalities of environmental protest, which are closely linked to the affective modality of urgency associated with the climate crisis (see Anderson, 2017; McCann, 2023). In a different take on proximity, Philipp (2025) uses the example of resistance against a megaproject in Mexico – the Interoceanic Corridor at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca – to examine the role of emotional ties between bodies and land in environmental resistance movements. The focus is on the concept of *territorio*, which is frequently mobilised in Latin American protests around land and against extractivist infrastructure projects. Philip argues that emotional relations to *territorio* have so far been neglected in territorial debates, although they are fundamental to the formation of territorial identities and as a source of life. Based on interviews with women who see themselves as "defensoras de *territorio*", the strategy of politicising emotional ties in resistance is analysed, especially with reference to the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*. Philip shows how shared emotional attachment to local environments and affective relationships with an "ecological territory" facilitate the formation of alliances. The paper emphasises how emotional dimensions of environmental protests contribute to the articulation and strengthening of

political agendas and identities – and how they foster collective agency, new connections and resistance practices in local contexts (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020).

Finally, Schürmann (2023) examines the role of emotions in the context of disputes in the search for sites for the final disposal of highly radioactive waste in Germany – a material that embodies the costs of eternity, opening up the deep time of ecological crises. Based on ethnographic research at the interface of geography and environmental sociology, Schürmann analyses how, on the one hand, emotional concerns are formally marginalised in these processes – for example, through a focus on seemingly rational forms of communication – but, on the other, are repeatedly made effective both discursively and performatively. Emotions, she argues, function as resources with which actors articulate and plausibilise their positions in the participation process. They become discursive artefacts and enable specific forms of participation and engagement in controversial decision-making processes. An interesting vignette illustrates emotional interjections voiced by participants during public dialogues on nuclear waste disposal plans, in which they expressed concern that the radioactive material might not be buried deep enough underground. The call of “*Deeper!*” here reflects an emotional speaker position shaped by environmental anxiety, as well as by a concern for one’s own physical safety. The mobilisation of the emotional and elemental spatial imagination of toxic material being buried deep within the earth points to the emotional politics of environmental (in)security (reflecting perspectives discussed by Pohl and Helbrecht, albeit in a very different way). Overall, Schürmann shows that emotional concerns in such contexts do not merely appear as a disruption of hegemonic planning and decision-making processes but actively contribute to the production of emotional speaker positions and thus play a central role in the dynamics and quality of public debate on nuclear waste management issues.

All the different approaches developed in the individual contributions to this theme issue debate responses to the question of *what the emotionalities of ecological crises can be and do* – that is, in what ways ecological emotions and affects can be productive (Ahmed, 2014). In doing so, the contributions in this theme issue enhance our understanding of how emotions and affects contribute to the production or transformation of socio-spatial domains in and through which society–environment relations are re-negotiated and ecological crises are appropriated.

**Data availability.** There were no specific empirical data used for this editorial introduction.

**Author contributions.** JW was primarily responsible for the conceptualisation of this editorial paper and wrote most of it. Both JW and BM were equally responsible for the conceptualisation of the

broader perspectives of the theme issue (that is introduced by this paper). BM also provided support with formatting and proofreading.

**Competing interests.** The contact author has declared that neither of the authors has any competing interests.

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**Acknowledgements.** The authors wish to express their gratitude to the contributors to this theme issue and to the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

**Review statement.** This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by one anonymous referee.

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