

Transcript of 'Global Tipping Points 2026: An Introduction'

Season 3, Episode 44, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow Tipping Points from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability and Business, in association with the Centre for Planetary Health here at Sunway University in Malaysia.

We're back in Malaysia for the Global Tipping Points Conference 2026, and we're recording this special mini-series before we launch Season Four of Transforming Tomorrow itself.

I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

Paul: So Jan, we've arrived in Malaysia back here with our lovely colleagues at Sunway. Met some familiar faces already who've been here with us on the podcast in the past, and we're here for Tipping Points 2026.

What's that, Jan?

Jan: Well, it's a, it's a global conference and it's the third Global Tipping Points conference, with a preceding two having been at Exeter in the UK.

So as we'll come on to, Paul, it's really important that it's here in Asia. There's some special characteristics as to why it's here, and of course it's here in partnership with the Centre for Planetary Health.

And we know about the Centre for Planetary Health.

Paul: Mm-hmm. Yes. We spoke to Professor Jemilah Mahmood earlier in the year, all about planetary health, and she's the director of the Centre. And indeed she's the person who's in charge of this whole conference, making sure that we all behave ourselves.

[Pause]

Or is it just me that's behaving themselves?

Jan: [laughs] That we're both behaving ourselves. [laughs]

Paul: Yes. Uh, she's in charge of the whole conference. She's in large part responsible for it coming here to Asia. And this is really a meeting of minds and people from all around the world.

We've got people from the UK, people from here in Malaysia, but also already today we've had someone from Poland, South Africa, America. We'll be meeting people from all across the world as well over the coming days and weeks.

We've had, uh, a very interesting talk on the first morning, this morning, from someone from Indonesia all about how climate change is affecting them and how seeing a tipping point almost in action, and what that means when you see a tipping point occur.

Which I really guess brings us to the point of what is a 'tipping point', and discussing why we're here at an event that's about tipping points. It's got nothing to do with tipping cows. Um, I need to, uh, [Jan laughs] stress that.

Jan was most disappointed when it came to that. Weren't you, Jan?

Jan: Well, I, I had never thought about it being about tipping cows, but if it was, I would've been equally interested, I think.

Paul: But it has a lot to do with the climate...

Jan: ...it has indeed...

Paul: ...and tipping points related to the climate, and the planetary boundaries.

Jan: Yes.

Paul: So let's go through it, Jan. What are the tipping points...?

Jan: ...well...

Paul: ...well, I don't expect you to name all 19 of them, or 16, sorry.

Jan: I'm gonna, I'm gonna back up slightly though, and bring us to thinking about the Anthropocene, in the first instance. And we've had a podcast on the Anthropocene before, but that Anthropocene framing is where human actions are affecting the large scale operation of the planet.

The systems of the planet being affected by them, one of them being the climate system.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: So with that in play, then you say, well, how is the climate system operating? And this is where two things become really relevant to the thinking. And these are two scientific frameworks that sit behind everything that's happening at the conference.

The first one is the idea that there are planetary boundaries. There are safe operating spaces for us to live in as a planetary community, but those safe operating spaces might also need to be just as well. So you get the safe and just planetary boundaries framework.

But if these planetary boundaries are breached, then you get to the tipping points. And so that's where the Anthropocene to planetary boundaries to tipping points come in.

So tipping points is where something in the system, and it's really started in the climate system, changes such that the way it used to operate before no longer operates that way.

So you tip yourself into a new kind of steady state, or, you know, it might take it a while to be a steady state. But the fear is that that new place that you end up is not as liveable as the place you've been in before.

Paul: Yes.

Jan: So cumulative thresholds...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...is something we're quite interested in, but also the idea that once you tip over, coming back is much harder. So avoiding them is a great idea.

Paul: And the thing about tipping point as well is it's not a gradual change. 'Cause we, we've seen gradual changes. This is as we're working towards the various tipping points that exist, and we see the gradual changes, whether it be in terms of glacier melting, in terms of what's happening with coral reefs, in terms of what's happening in the Amazon rainforest, with the ice shelves and the Atlantic current, you see.

But then suddenly you reach a point where instead of, uh, say a steady slow decline, it's a really sudden fast decline to something that's so far away from where you started.

So it's not a tipping point where you've gone just a little bit away from where you started. You've gone a long way from where you started and you can't get back.

Jan: Indeed. And so it's a rapid change, which is what's really, um, exercising scientists, exercising policy makers, et cetera. But, I think one of the nice things about the conference is that it sort of says, okay, the language of tipping points can be a language of alarm. It's alarming to think about that change as it comes through.

But the conference is really trying to reinforce, and I think the, the, the organisers believe, that tipping points can also be tipping points to repair, or social tipping points...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...whereby new ways of living, new ways of organising our economies, new ways of doing business can also come into play as well.

Paul: Yeah, there's some great examples of this, that when it comes to positive tipping points about how one set of behaviours has been replaced by another set of behaviours, whether that be on a small local scale all the way up to a regional to national, international scale of people start making changes, and it starts to get a bit of acceleration, and then it suddenly reaches a point, whoosh, you're gone and the change is completely done.

The great example that we did here this morning, on the first morning of the conference, from Professor Tim Lenton from Exeter University, was Norwegian cars and the switchover from electric cars, and how from 2010 there was a slight increase in then around 2012, 2015 really big, and now electric cars, electric vehicles in Norway, make up more than 90% of all cars that are sold in that market. They just went right through that acceleration.

And there was some examples showing how other countries are starting to see that, even here in Malaysia. And I know one of the first uh, conversations we had when we arrived in the country this time, Jan, was with our taxi driver and he was very keen to stress - this was without any prompting from us that we were here for a conference related to tipping points or sustainability or the

environment - it was an electric taxi and he was really a big proponent of it and saying, oh, it's brilliant, and there's more and more people getting them. Asking us about the market there in the UK compared to the market there in Malaysia. And Malaysia being such an oil country producing, with the likes of Petronas and other companies here, you wouldn't necessarily think Malaysia was gonna be a big EV market, but it is.

And you can see that it's starting to grow and there were examples shown of Vietnam and Thailand, and they've really started to take off and, yeah, it's just, that's it. They're working towards the positive tipping point where, despite it being such an oil producing nation, Malaysia could well be a country in five, 10 years that the majority of vehicles that are sold here are electric.

Jan: And I did think it was pretty smart. Um, whoever's organising the taxi pickups and I, it seemed random, but there was somebody chatting to us about the very thing we're going to be talking about today. So, no, that was very, very pleasing.

But in behind that story, and in behind, again, the science of planetary, uh, boundaries, tipping points, et cetera, there's the idea of leverage. So there are some levers in the system that will cause these tipping points. And, particularly, we're kind of interested in the positive ones, I guess, more than the, the science, you know, the hard science, physical negative ones.

So, in the case of Norway, some of those leverage points were a change in vehicle taxation. So there were financial, fiscal incentives offered by, um, the government for people to purchase those cars.

But then what was also spoken about in the conference was ideas about, you know, you've, you've bought an electric vehicle and so you talk to your friends and your neighbours and your family and people then go see it can work, see it's really, you know, enjoyable to drive, et cetera, et cetera.

But then there's leverage points in terms of infrastructure...

Paul: ...yes...

Jan: ...being there for charging.

So you've got all of these elements, and this is why I guess it's a complex system, and indeed a complex adaptive system, that comes together to create that, that movement from one social system to another.

Paul: And during Transforming Tomorrow proper Season Four, we will have a full discussion on EV charging networks and such, with one of our guests.

But, also another point that was made was, you start using them more. Therefore, the companies who are responsible for producing them have more incentive to produce more of them more quickly, because the market is building, and they find ways of doing it cheaper. So the prices go down.

And not just for electric vehicles. The other example we've spoken about already today, uh, as part of the conference is solar panels and how the price of solar panels has fallen so, so much since the seventies when they first became a thing that were people recognised. And they just fall consistently so much because more and more people are using them.

And solar power is really taking off. And the benefits for that are manifold. Albeit we must recognise there are some drawbacks in terms of the rare earth metals and the...

Jan: ...mm-hmm...

Paul: ...the production processes. But in terms of clean energy, and energy reaching people who might not otherwise have been able to get energy in the past, there's benefits there. And that's a positive driver as well.

Jan: It is indeed.

Paul: As we've said, Jan, we are here at Sunway University, the Centre for Planetary Health here at Sunway, who is helping us so much with these podcast, is also the host. But why are we here in Malaysia? Why is it key to have this as the first tipping points, Global Tipping Points conference outside of the UK, in Asia?

Jan: Well, we're in Asia because there's a, a concentration of, of scholars here, but also a concentration of desire in order to be able to do something in response to tipping points, and to change the world.

So right at the opening of, of the whole, um, you know, conference, His Royal Highness Seri Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, the Sultan of Perak, spoke about, um, why Asia, and also why Malaysia.

And he was very clear that this is a place that has an enormous amount of resources, has enormous amount of, of biodiversity. He spoke very proudly of some of the conservation work going on in their region. But also it's a region

with, um, a lot of forests. Um, some of them still intact from, from, you know, centuries and, and centuries ago.

But also it's an area that has rapidly developed in recent years. So he, he said, somebody said, I think it was him, which I thought was quite smart, you know, this is not a region to be rescued, but it's a region where change is already underway...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...and particularly drew back from the massive, um, uh, economic change that has happened in, in this, this region, and particularly in Malaysia, to say that actually that rapid change can come again as well.

So it's not a place that he felt that was, you know, stuck in its ways.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: And so he said, you ought to understand Asia and the Asian leadership happening here in structural terms. It's not 'cause it's a place, it's because structurally there's that desire, the capability to change, but also the need to change.

So some of the impacts of changing monsoons, of, um, of floods, of, um, increasing severity of, of some weather storms, mean that there's a need to change here as well. And we've also heard some of those stories from delegates, where they take us through sort of almost like the, you know, the, the, the ecology of something dreadful happening, and then how is the recovery from that coming together.

So he was very clear that, you know, this is a place, also, that understands stewardship.

Paul: And he pointed out so many of the habitats that are here in Malaysia that tie in with what we're seeing when it comes to changes to the climate to nature too.

Anything on the planet, such as we, there's coral reefs here, there's tropical rainforest, there's the monsoon season, and the fact that the monsoons provide food for so many people because of the water they bring.

So there's, things are gonna be affected, but also at this precise moment in time, we've arrived in Malaysia at a time when there are wildfires taking place, not far away on the island of Borneo.

And as a result of those wildfires, there's an awful lot of smoke and bad air that has blown across towards Malaysia, Singapore. Anyone who's listening, who's a fan of the Formula One Grand Prix, may have known that the last two Grand Prix that have been held have been in Malaysia, and in Singapore, over the previous two weekends. And the air quality hasn't been great. There's issues with that.

And that's affecting everyone here in Kuala Lumpur at the minute. Our taxi driver, again, great man, he's, uh, coming, getting a lot of...

Jan: [laughs] ...does he know he was gonna feature on this podcast...?

Paul: ...I dare say that he, he'll be demanding royalties, uh, at some point, but he was telling us how they really want the monsoon season to start. Normally it starts early November, we're currently second, third week of October, but they're desperate for the monsoon season to start, because it'll clear the air out. And at the minute it's just harder to breathe.

And various things have been evident of that. For this big conference, there was an event, they were meant to have a tour yesterday, various places had to be cancelled because the air quality isn't good enough.

You've got warnings about being outside and how that might affect you. You'll have people here who'll have some kind of asthma issue, or something like that. They're going to be affected by it, and they're being affected, their health on their personal level in a way they can appreciate on a day-to-day basis, has been affected by something that's to do with climate change, and it's to do with what might happen when it comes to tipping points.

Jan: And I thought that, um, this is where the Centre for Planetary Health really comes into the frame as well. And that, um, planetary health, and we, we, again, have a, a podcast on that, which we will point you towards in the, in the show notes, is both the health of the planet, but then the health of people on the planet.

And there was, um, something really powerful said in, in this morning's session about health makes science personal. Because we know when we breathe it, or if you are having to work outside how hot you are and how difficult it is to stay hydrated. If you are working in, um, agriculture outside again, air quality and heat become really important.

So that health aspect of it, which is both personal health, population health, and then the health of the planet, all comes together in a, in a coherent hole.

Paul: And it really all ties in with the fact that there's becoming an increasing urgency. Jemilah, our host, said something really good this morning, she said the time for patience was some years ago. the time for urgency is now.

It's no longer any good just to be coming up with nice ideas and things like this that may or may not work, that might have some effect. It's now the time to start acting, start doing things that are gonna help us push towards the positive tipping points, and away from the negative tipping points, that you probably hear a lot more about than the positive tipping points.

Jan: And I think some of that, uh, hopefulness about, um, tipping points also came through, and will come through more in the following days, of the interrelationship between faith and science, which weren't seen as being, you know, in conflict with each other, but rather seen to be intertwined, whether it be, um, indigenous knowledge and people's prior faith or some of the faiths that are exercised within this region, but also all other faiths as well.

So it really seems to be a nice sort of interfaith community as part of the conference as well.

Paul: Yeah, there was very much an emphasis on faith and caring for the planet. And that ties back in, a long time ago on our podcast series, we spoke to Alan Discua Cruz, who's done research on justice with regards to Christianity.

But it wasn't just Christianity. The, the Sultan was saying, yes, we've got this on, uh, an Islamic basis. His Islamic faith, that he's grown up with, very much teaches you to have that love of the planet. And he then points out, but the same is true in Buddhism, the same is true in Hinduism. The same is true in Christianity, and all the religions that you'll find here in Malaysia, and indeed everywhere around the world.

And one of our guests this week, while we're here, we'll be speaking to a Buddhist monk. And that's not someone we'd normally have on, uh, this podcast, unless that Buddhist monk also happened to be running a company that was, uh, producing [Jan laughs] wind turbines or, or equivalent.

But it's that slightly different perspective that we'll get from tipping points, and from our collaboration with the Centre for Planetary Health on this miniseries, takes us a little bit beyond the boundaries of business at times.

And that'll be an interesting perspective to take in as well.

Jan: It is indeed. And I think in some ways maybe that's, uh, a contribution that we'll be able to make by being at this conference, is to talk about the notion of corporate biosphere stewardship.

That corporations can become stewards in the right conditions, and with the right incentives, and that they are part of this whole movement as well. So it's not down to, you know, governments making rules and everyone just following them, or civil society saying, I don't like what we've got, here is something better. But there's actually a middle bit in here where a lot of our work and a lot of our guest works, um, sits, is that that corporate biosphere stewardship piece.

Paul: Now, we've mentioned business, and I have to say the initial impression of business you'll have got from the first morning of the conference is not necessarily a positive one.

Um, people have been big upping on science. They've been really positively talking about society, positive talk in places about the potential for government and, uh, politics, religion we've talked about as well.

But if businesses being discussed this morning, it's really been, um, not in a good way, really not in a good way. The most common phrase that was used on day one of the conference here to describe business was 'vested interest'. And it was said with such a tone, by whoever was saying it, that that's not a good thing, having a vested interest, [Jan laughs] and the businesses are against it.

I think what has been missing so far, and we might see this change over the course of the next three days, while we're here, and while we're recording these episodes. There's no sign of people saying, oh yeah, businesses can help with this. There's good examples of business, business and it's been very much talked about on a scale of business that's really big businesses here.

Silicon Valley bigwigs were talked about, you know, the kind of people...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...we're talking about the, the oligarchs who want to save themselves and not necessarily the rest in the world, uh, was one example that was given.

And these are the kind of business people that are being considered, not necessarily the businesses that are out there specifically working in the sustainability sector, the climate change sector, or businesses that have got very positive attitudes and approaches towards making sure that their practices, where they don't necessarily tie directly into the environment, have a positive effect on the environment.

Jan: And that is why we are here. And not just, um, uh, myself and Paul, but other colleagues from the Pentland Centre, and also colleagues from Lancaster University as well.

But I think this is where, you know, the, it says on the label, the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I think that's where, um, I'm very pleased we're here and I hope that we will have a chance to speak to more people about our vision for how business can be part of the solution.

Um, and I hope that we might see some examples, hopefully in the next few days, but if not, then we know that there's a gap which we can productively contribute to in this, this conversation.

Paul: One area I am positive that they have been talking about is communication, and the importance of communication.

This is something we've talked about an awful lot, and it's something that has come up, uh, again this morning on in these opening discussions.

I wasn't quite certain when Jemilah actually said, you know, there's people who use disinformation and misinformation against climate change, we need to start borrowing their skills.

I know what she meant, [Jan laughs] but it came out as to a bit, a bit to me, as if say, all right, let's start lying to them. No, no, no. I know exactly what you mean. We need to start being really proactive in communication. But the communication, and there's been discussions about how to appeal to the human psyche and lots of stuff like this, there's lots of importance being placed in the messaging there.

And a recognition that whilst they may have been talking about big business and government and talking about the scientists, that if you haven't got the

people involved, then nothing's really gonna happen. You need to get the people behind it.

Jan: And I think I, some of those communication things, there was one gentleman who talked about uncovering, or re-covering, our sense of wonder, joy and gratitude about the, the world in which we lived in, which I really, I really liked those words. I really like the joy at which he delivered them.

But also there's gonna be, um, the film shown, How to Live on Earth by Open Planet Studios. Um, that's gonna be shown later on today as well. So I'm looking forward to seeing that and, and engaging with that message.

Paul: Yeah. And, and a phrase I never thought I would say, generally in life, one of the things I'm most looking forward to is Cat Stevens. Um...

[Jan laughs]

Paul: ...yeah, an unexpected, um, member of the, uh, schedule. But yes, Yusuf Cat Stevens will be here talking about how this all ties in with his faith, but also music and that, that kind of media as well. That's something I, I'm looking forward to.

And again, something I wouldn't necessarily be discussing normally on this podcast, but I am looking forward to that.

Jan: And you enjoyed A-ha? [laughs]

Paul: Yes, I did. A-ha. No, it's not like, um, Abba or indeed Alan Partridge. [In Alan Partridge voice] Aha.

No, it's A-ha, the, uh, the band from Norway in the 1980s. Yes, they appeared as part of a, an example of a 1989 push to get more electric cars in Norway. Um, this was before the big takeoff of electric cars in Norway but, yeah, A-ha were ahead of the curve.

And Morton Harket, the lead singer of A-ha, who lots of people remember his wonderful hair and also his cartoon visage that appeared in the video to Take On Me. There was a picture of him, there, and he's a big, um, climate activist, and activist around some of these issues now as well.

Jan: Was, indeed. And, um, in that context, there was another phrase. There's been so many good phrases, Paul, I'm having...

Paul: ...I've got, I've, I've got some left as well...

Jan: ...you have indeed. Well, in that, uh, the A-ha example was talking about activating amplifiers, which I really liked as well. I tell you, these people got the chat, really got the chat.

Paul: And we, we did comment that the King, uh, the Sultan rather, his Royal Highness, has a very good speech writer. I'm sure some of it was obviously from the heart, you could tell from his message, but yeah, they've got some, there's some great phrases there.

Uh, one of the ones I liked, which I felt, um, summed up what our job is as a podcast sometimes is being an island of coherence in a sea of chaos.

Jan: Oh, that's quite hopeful. [laughs]

Paul: [laughing] Or maybe we are an island of chaos in an otherwise coherent sea. Uh, one or the other, anyway...

Jan: ...I, I like your ambition there. I've always liked your ambition, Paul.

Paul: Yeah. So we will be here and there'll be a series that will be released throughout the week. The episodes normally come out weekly, but we'll have somewhere around six, seven episodes this week that will all be released, almost all of them featuring guests.

This is just an introduction from Jan and I, we'll be bringing in guests who bring in so many different perspectives on all areas of it, from AI to religion. As we've said, we'll be discussing nature, which is something we haven't heard much about so far, but hopefully hear a lot more about as the week goes on.

So, one last quote from today.

Jan: Okay. I'm ready for it...

Paul: ...and this is why, this is definitely why we're here, and what we're gonna be doing this year. It's all about the importance of the stories we tell.

Jan: Yeah, that's coming through really strongly.

Paul: We will be telling some important stories with our guests throughout the week.

So thank you very much for listening for this first of our special Transforming Tomorrow Tipping Points series, produced in conjunction with the Centre for Planetary Health here at Sunway University.

We'll be back throughout the week with various different episodes. I hope you enjoy them. Until the next time, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]