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What is an interglacial?

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Interglacials are of particular interest because (a) we live in one and (b) some past interglacials provide examples of periods when parts of the Earth were warmer than today, opening up the possibility of studying the impact of such warmth.

Most palaeoclimatologists use the word interglacial freely, assuming we all have a common understanding of its meaning. However, as soon as one attempts to define the strength and length of each interglacial, it becomes apparent that it is no trivial matter to define when one is in an interglacial, or even to count how many there have been in the last 800 ka!

Here I will discuss how interglacial has been defined, how we appear to be using it currently, and what are the characteristics we associate with interglacial periods. I will then present data on interglacial strength and length from a range of records, showing how ones location and criterion determines what one observes to be an interglacial. I will likely not answer the question in the title, but I hope at least to frame the question in an interesting way that may help us to think about the processes that lead to the occurrence and persistence of an interglacial state.

Although I have cast it as a single author poster, this work arises in part from the PAGES Past Interglacials Working Group, and owes some of its ideas to discussions with other members of that group.