

Further engagement

In the next stage of our work, we are encouraging members of these scientific professional institutions to write letters to their membership magazines regarding their financial links to the fossil fuel and arms industries. We already have volunteers; please do email me at lizk@sgr.org.uk if you would like to join them. We're also preparing further case study reports – especially on UK professional engineering bodies – regarding both their fossil fuel and arms investments.

And on 1st June 2021, we took the project international, thanks to generous funding from the ClimateWorks Foundation and we're looking at the fossil fuel industry connections of professional bodies in the US, Europe and elsewhere. Watch this space for reports on our progress.

So, in answer to my original questions on whether public scrutiny has made professional bodies change their ways, it seems that it has. The Royal Meteorological Society and the Geological Society have joined the British Psychological Society and seven medical professional organisations in not holding, or being in the process of divesting from, fossil fuel investments. Although the Geological Society may take a step backwards, pressure from the public and from members could prevent this. The IOM3 has also excluded the highest-carbon fossil fuel industry links. Meanwhile, three bodies no longer invest in the arms industry. Overall,

more than half of the professional science and engineering organisations in our original report now have some form of responsible investment policy with more on the way. The most prominent laggard is, however, the Royal Society. Clearly, we need to keep on pushing so that it and others turn away from the dangerous fossil fuel and arms industries.

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References

- 1 The Times (2019). <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/royal-society-urged-to-ditch-16m-fossil-fuel-investment-drw89t35f>
- 2 BBC (2019). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-50467317>
- 3 Indeed, a 2020 report by the campaign group ShareAction on investment managers cautions that signing up to initiatives such as the PRI or Climate Action 100+ does not always correspond with having a fit-for-purpose responsible investment approach. See: <https://shareaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ShareAction-Climate-Report-III-Final.pdf>
- 4 Royal Meteorological Society (2021). https://www.rmets.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/annual_report_annexes_2020_final_1.pdf
- 5 SGR (2021). https://www.sgr.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Royal_Society_progress_report.pdf
- 6 IOP (2022). <https://www.iop.org/strategy/physics-climate-change-sustainability>
- 7 <https://professionalsclimatecharter.org/>
- 8 The latest reports and responses can be found at the bottom of the page at: <https://www.sgr.org.uk/publications/irresponsible-science>



Scientists' warnings and adequate response

What would it take for humanity to hear and act on the scientists' warnings of a climate and nature emergency? **Alan Cottey** discusses 'adequate response' and how to achieve it. He recommends empathic dialogue with the 'hard-to-reach'.

In 2017 William Ripple and colleagues published the article *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice*.¹ The peg was the 25th anniversary of a leaflet, *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*,² from the Union of Concerned Scientists. The UCS warning, summarised by "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course", covers numerous environmental stresses, population growth, poverty, violence and war. The 'Second Notice' reviewed humanity's response to the UCS warning by presenting the trends, from 1960 to around 2015, of nine indicators of global ecological stress. In nearly every case a

strong adverse trend is roughly the same after 1992 as before. Thus, despite ample opportunity, humanity did not heed the UCS warning.

The Second Notice prompted further warnings from expert scientists on many specific subjects, notably climate.³ The warnings have spread awareness and acceptance of the reality of the climate and nature emergency but have so far failed in their overriding aim, for the emissions, etc, at the root of the problem generally continue to rise.

Responses

Some responses that ameliorate the climate and nature emergency have been achieved. Progress has been made towards an energy transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable sources. Yet global emissions continue to increase. The actors with most political power (nation-states, corporations and their leaders) find it possible to set targets but offer no realistic programmes for hitting them.

A major part of the difficulty is orthodox economics, with its commitment to the measurable and to growth. Alok Sharma, President of the COP26 conference, declares “green growth is the future”.⁴ But humanity’s pressure on the earth’s ecology still increases, apart from small decreases during economic recessions. There is almost universal fear – terror, even – of recessions of this kind, which do indeed inflict much pain. There is however a better way forward, although it does require a rethink of underlying economic values.

Aspirations

Instead of accepting the present extremes of inequality, moderated by grudging redistribution, economic thinking could start from two basic principles:⁵

1. **Liveable Global Habitat:** to maintain and enhance a civilised human society and a liveable global habitat for a rich variety of species;
2. **Necessities as of Right:** to accord to all people as of right, in practice and not merely in name, the basic necessities of a civilised life.

The main obstacle to realising these aspirations is lack of imagination. Intentional degrowth could be benign and not at all like the harsh conditions of earlier economic recessions. Reductions, year on year, of the externalisation of costs, of waste, of positional consumption and of human population are possible. Sacrifice is needed but mainly of the old growth-oriented culture. The transition required can and should in many ways improve the quality of life. Two examples demonstrate the depth of changes which might be part of an adequate response.

Examples

The current state of the cultural institution of property is dysfunctional. There is an abundance of shocking statistics about extreme and increasing economic inequality, yet the trend continues. But an economy based on the two aspirational principles stated above could include a general cultural will for limits to the assets and incomes of individuals.⁵

Another dysfunctional cultural institution is work – much of what now passes as work is directed at maintaining harmful kinds of economic growth. Yet a lot of what is useful (i.e. contributes to delivering the two above aspirations) could be done by machines and software. Caring for people, and resolving the climate and nature emergency, will still leave plenty for humans to do.⁶

Empathic dialogue

Even the concerned citizens who hear the warnings have, with few exceptions, balked at advocating radical change at the pace required. And leaders cannot go far ahead of the majority. In these circumstances, activists may be motivated to press the case harder. ‘Six behavioural psychology tips for effective campaigns’⁷ has practical advice for activists but the language

of campaigning, with its polarising and militaristic imagery, is problematic. A more fundamental issue is the controlling tone – “Changing people’s behaviour” assumes one-way influence.

Pressing harder in the wrong way merely provokes defensiveness. ‘They’ may then be thought of as hard-to-reach. But in this climate and nature emergency, ‘they’ are essentially the same as us. One-way communication of scientific knowledge is not enough. Listening to the reasons for resistance is vital. It is important to acknowledge the fear of change, the allure of consumerism and whatever else may be presented. Empathic dialogue about the climate and nature emergency may include vigorous non-violent direct action. It is not a quick fix but it might, if pursued with a sense of urgency, lead to adequate responses to the scientists’ warnings. “There is a place, somewhere beyond right and wrong. I’ll meet you there.” (Rumi)

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