

## Why are world leaders ignoring sustainability?

**Environmental sustainability provides a clear route to prosperity and well-being, and people in power need to take notice.**

**F**ifty years ago, the United Nations held its Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. This landmark event gave the concept of sustainable development its first international recognition. Sweden and the UN marked the occasion last week with a commemorative meeting, Stockholm+50.

In March 1972, a team of researchers and policymakers published *The Limits to Growth*, one of the first reports to forecast catastrophic consequences if humans kept exploiting Earth's limited supply of natural resources. The conference in Stockholm followed a few months later and led to the establishment of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), based in Nairobi. UNEP went on to facilitate a new international law – the 1987 Montreal Protocol to phase out ozone-depleting substances – and co-founded the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It assisted in establishing the first action plans for sustainable development through landmark international agreements on biodiversity, climate and desertification.

But there were mistakes and missed opportunities. The establishment of multiple agencies and policy instruments created a disjointed governance system. Newly created environment ministers wielded little power. In national budgets, environmental protection was siloed away from economic development and social concerns.

And so, 50 years after that momentous conference, the world remains in crisis. With impending climate and biodiversity crises, the warnings issued by visionaries now hit even closer.

Stockholm+50 promised “clear and concrete recommendations and messages for action at all levels”. More than 90 ministers attended, but only around 10 heads of government. That was a missed opportunity for high-level action. World leaders are needed because their presence signals that sustainability remains at the top of their agendas.

Ahead of the 1972 conference, 2,200 environmental scientists signed a letter – called the Menton Message – to then UN secretary-general U Thant. The signatories had a sense that the world was moving towards multiple crises. They urged “massive research into the problems that threaten the survival of mankind”, such as hunger, wars, environmental degradation and natural-resource depletion.

Researchers can now join a successor to the Menton Message that has been organized by the International

 **Researchers can now join a successor to the Menton Message.”**

Science Council, the global science network Future Earth and the Stockholm Environment Institute. In an open letter addressed to world citizens, the authors write: “After 50 years, pro-environmental action seems like one step forward and two back. The world produces more food than needed, yet many people still go hungry. We continue to subsidize and invest in fossil fuels, even though renewable energy is increasingly cost-effective. We extract resources where the price is lowest, often in direct disregard of local rights and values” (see <https://science4stockholm50.world>).

World leaders must listen to the research community, and accept the evidence and narrative offered to help them to navigate meaningful change. Environmental sustainability does not impede prosperity and well-being – in fact, it is crucial to them. People in power need to sit up and take notice.

## Science must overcome its racist legacy

**Melissa Nobles, Chad Womack, Ambrose Wonkam & Elizabeth Wathuti**

**As guest editors, we are leading *Nature* on a journey to help decolonize research and forge a path towards restorative justice and reconciliation.**

**S**cience is a human endeavour that is fuelled by curiosity and a drive to better understand and shape our natural and material world. Science is also a shared experience, subject both to the best of what creativity and imagination have to offer and to humankind's worst excesses. For centuries, European governments supported the enslavement of African populations and the subjugation of Indigenous people around the world. During that period, a scientific enterprise emerged that reinforced racist beliefs and cultures. Apartheid, colonization, forced labour, imperialism and slavery have left an indelible mark on science.

Although valiant and painful freedom struggles eventually led to decolonization, the impacts of those original racist beliefs continue to reverberate and have been reified in the institutional policies and attitudes that govern the ‘who’ and ‘how’ of individuals’ participation in the modern, global scientific enterprise. In our opinion, racist beliefs have contributed to a lack of diversity, equity and inclusion, and the marginalization of Indigenous and African diasporic communities in science on a national and global scale.

Science and racism share a history because scientists, science's institutions and influential supporters of science either directly or indirectly supported core racist beliefs: