

Correspondence

Enforce ban on plastic exports or it could backfire

Bans on the export of plastic waste could have unintended consequences: stockpiling, illegal dumping and incineration, and more plastics being sent to landfill. It is therefore essential that export bans on plastics are strictly monitored and enforced, and that financial incentives such as rebates or levies are introduced to encourage businesses to recycle more.

Such bans are now in effect in the European Union, and are due to take effect in Australia next year. The bans are in response to an amendment to the Basel Convention, signed by more than 180 United Nations member states in 2019, to introduce a system of informed consent before shipping any plastics that are low quality or difficult to recycle. The UN hopes the bans will encourage sustainable disposal, persuade businesses and communities to use more recycled plastic and help countries in the global south to refuse to accept any waste they cannot process.

Environmentalists welcome these bans as a way to reduce pollution, improve recycling facilities and protect the oceans. But many warn that without strict enforcement, the bans will not have the desired effects. Many exporting countries lack the facilities they need to recycle plastics and are slow to build new ones, so could turn to more environmentally damaging solutions instead.

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Pandemic: public feeling more positive about science

Research into people's attitudes points to a pleasing shift: science and scientists in several countries are viewed more positively now than before the pandemic. This uptick in trust and interest should galvanize efforts to make research as open as possible and to ensure that scientists engage with emerging societal needs globally.

Three studies done after COVID-19 struck, but before vaccines were approved, showed similar trends. In the United Kingdom, people are more keen to hear directly from scientists about their research (this metric jumped by 19 percentage points from 2015 in the United Kingdom to April 2020 in Great Britain), according to the research funder Wellcome (see go.nature.com/2zcszre). Meanwhile, the number of people in the United States and Canada who agree with the view "I am sceptical of science" dropped by 8% from mid-2019 to late 2020, according to the State of Science study commissioned by US corporation 3M (see go.nature.com/3qg8vhm). Similarly, the 2020 German science barometer survey showed levels of trust in science and research between 73% in April and 60% in November, compared with 46% in 2019 (see go.nature.com/3rg54cc).

In our age of misinformation, this is rare good news for those of us who are in the evidence business.

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'Climate neutral' is a lie – abandon it as a goal

When I was an adviser to the German government almost 15 years ago, I advocated that the nation become climate neutral as a transitional stage on the way towards a sustainable world. With that world ever further off, I have changed my mind. We must cut carbon emissions to zero in absolute terms, not merely to net zero.

Climate neutrality, in which emissions are offset by other measures, has led to oxymorons such as 'clean diesel' and 'clean coal'. It is used to 'greenwash' environmentally damaging policies. The capture and storage of carbon dioxide and the manufacture of 'blue hydrogen' from natural gas can increase the use of fossil fuels, for example (see A. Brown *Nature Clim. Change* 2, 644; 2012). The use of biofuels and biomass can increase the consumption of energy, water and pesticides, and worsen air pollution (see go.nature.com/3bdcz7x).

To eliminate all carbon emissions, we must phase out coal and natural gas, as well as, in my view, nuclear power (see go.nature.com/3bdcv7x). We must switch to sources that are 100% renewable, such as wind, solar, hydro and geothermal – something that will hopefully start to happen in Germany after September's elections. Crucially, the climate conference COP26, to be held in November, in Glasgow, UK, must end the greenwashing and launch a new era of real climate protection.

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Disabled scientists' networks call for more support

On behalf of two networks of disabled academics, we call on universities, funding bodies and conference organizers to provide more effective support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funders should include specific provisions for disabled researchers, online conferences and the ability to work from home need to continue.

Disabled academics have experienced disproportionate disruption to their work. We should be granted funding extensions of at least six months to cover any loss in productivity. The requirement for medical evidence to support an extension should be dropped. Non-urgent medical appointments are hard to get – and seeing a doctor poses a risk of infection. If we are less productive during this time, it should not affect our future applications. Funders recognize that the pandemic is causing havoc for some (H. O. Witteman *et al. Nature* 587, 197; 2020).

During the pandemic, the right to work from home, have rolling deadlines and attend remote events has been essential. We have seen that these changes can be implemented if necessary (see, for example, A. Shew *Nature* 581, 9; 2020). It is crucial that more changes are made as soon as possible and continue beyond the easing of lockdowns and social-distancing measures.

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