



Perspective

The planetary climate and environment crisis: It's time for emergency action

Stephen A. Matlin

We are living on this planet as if we had another one to go to.

[Terri Swearingen](#)

At a [High-Level Event](#) in London on the 31st July 2019, where Emergency Response mechanisms to address the climate and environmental crisis were explored, the [InterAction Council](#), in collaboration with others, launched a [Manifesto to Secure a Healthy Planet for All – A Call for Emergency Action](#). The Manifesto was developed in response to the increasing international and United Nations evidence of the severity of our global climate and environmental [crisis and emergency](#). It is based on an overarching [vision](#) of the need to secure a healthy planet now and for the well-being of future generations; and [principles](#) of (a) placing the health of the planet and the well-being of current and future generations at the heart of decision making; and (b) acting with speed and scale, with the urgent establishment of an Emergency Response mechanism at global, national and community levels.

The Manifesto is yet another signal of the growing alarm with which the present condition of the planet is viewed by those who have been studying trends in recent years. The impacts of human activity are all too visible everywhere on the planet, with climate change, biodiversity loss and increases in the frequency and intensity of adverse weather events among the prominent symptoms. As Will Steffen and his colleagues have [written](#):

The second half of the twentieth century is unique in the entire history of human existence on Earth. Many human activities reached take-off points sometime in the twentieth century and have accelerated sharply towards the end of the century. The last 50 years have without doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind.

Johan Rockström, who with Steffen and others has led the assessment of the nature of [planetary boundaries](#) and of the extent to which human activity is exceeding them, has [emphasised](#) the urgency of dealing with the challenge now:

In 50 years we tipped from the Holocene of the last 10,000 years to the Anthropocene. What we do in the next 50 years will determine the next 10,000 years.

The UN Climate Action Summit on 23 September 2019 aims to boost ambition and accelerate actions to implement the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#). The [UN Secretary General](#) and [General Assembly President](#) have cautioned that “*we are the last generation that can prevent irreparable damage to our planet*” and that inspiration must be drawn from the thousands of students worldwide [demanding](#) tangible action. This message has been echoed by the [OECD Secretary-General](#): “Our life support systems are at risk of failing... It is our collective future that is at stake.” He has urged that the time for action is now:

Some people say it is already too late, they think that power is deeply entrenched, that fossil fuel owners will not bend their game and our economic system will never change. I yearn

to prove them wrong. The OECD is ready to join the world's youth and all those fighting to save our planet. For this radical transformation demands a profound systemic change and we are all part of this system.

The diagnosis summarised in the Manifesto is that, if the Earth were a patient in hospital it would be regarded as gravely ill and in need of emergency life-support treatment. The Manifesto provides a prescription for action, including:

- ensuring security by establishing a Critical Care Response for the planet's health: with the declaration of a Climate And Environmental Crisis and the urgent establishment of an Emergency Response mechanism to ensure the rapid reversal of carbon emissions, the stabilisation of risks from runaway climate change and the protection of vulnerable populations;
- enabling recovery by rehabilitation and building resilience: to enhance the recovery of the planet's biodiversity and eco-systems, creating healthy air, water, land and food systems, scaled up through universal health systems for planet, place and people;
- promoting a flourishing planet for all: combatting denial and eco-anxiety by promoting sustainable wellbeing by maximising multiple health and environmental benefits, including healthy eco-systems, and multi-sector, systems based urban planning and 'One Health for One Planet Education' approaches across the life-course, to create connected communities and cyclical economies, for a flourishing planet for all;
- exercising guardianship for a healthy planet: every organisation and community to establish a 'Guardian for the Planet's Health' responsible for: planetary first aid, emergency responses, guardianship, advocacy, solutions, unifying action and sustaining a flourishing planet, enabled by a Healthy Planet Index;
- collaborative community and health professional action: everyone can become a community 'Guardian for the Planet's Health' to: protect and strengthen resilience by greening communities; reduce consumption and waste, recycle and use clean energy and transport; walk, cycle and communicate digitally and shift to healthy, planet friendly food. Community members, including health professionals can lead by example with quality services and promote healthy green communities with resilient families.

In line with its organizational [vision and mission](#), to reposition chemistry as a science for the benefit of society and to promote the role of the chemical sciences in sustainable development, IOCD endorses the Manifesto. IOCD's action group [Chemists for Sustainability](#) (C4S) has developed the '[one-world chemistry](#)' approach which recognises the close inter-dependence of human, animal and planetary health and is working for the adoption of systems thinking in chemistry education, research and practice to enable the chemical sciences to play their optimal role in achieving sustainability. Current work of the C4S group includes a focus on [the challenge of waste](#) and the roles that the chemical sciences can play in reducing waste to an absolute minimum and ensuring the sustainable use and recycling of all materials.

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