

The Stockholm Seminars: Frontiers in Sustainability Science and Policy

This lecture is a part of a seminar series that cover a broad range of perspectives on sustainability issues, particularly focusing on the need for a sound scientific basis for sustainable development policy.

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Surviving the Anthropocene: The Great Challenges of the 21st Century (an Update)

Prof. Will Steffen

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Friday, September 19, 2008, 11.00–12.00

Linné Hall, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences,
Lilla Frescativägen 4, Stockholm

This talk will update last year's Stockholm seminar on the same topic. Much has happened in the last year. Climate change continues to head the list of global change issues with an escalating interest in Arctic sea ice, the big polar ice sheets and sea-level rise. The Caribbean/Gulf of Mexico region has seen a very active tropical cyclone season. But many other aspects of global change are in the news. The price of oil has hit record highs with reverberations through the economic and political systems. Food prices have also risen sharply with a rapid (and perhaps misguided?) assessment that biofuels are to blame. Political systems are under increasing pressure to respond, with changes of government in some countries and an imminent one in the USA.

This presentation will explore many of the same issues that were raised last year, especially fundamental questions or tensions that permeate the debate on achieving a transition to sustainability. Can technology alone solve the seemingly intractable global environmental and socio-economic problems we now face, or are more fundamental shifts in societal values required? What role can or should Western scientific approaches play in the sustainability challenge? Indeed, what roles should the researchers play – “objective” observers and commentators or activists for change. The presentation will not attempt to answer these deep-seated questions, but will rather point the way towards to types of research, education and attitudes needed to meet the great challenges of the 21st century.

Will Steffen is the Executive Director of the ANU Climate Change Institute. His research interests span a broad range within the field of Earth System science, with a special emphasis on terrestrial ecosystem interactions with global change, the global carbon cycle, incorporation of human processes in Earth System modeling and analysis, and sustainability and the Earth System. He is a visiting researcher at the Stockholm Resilience Centre. From 1998 to 2004 he was executive director of International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP).

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