
UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES COALITION SUPPORT FOR INCREASED INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN SUSTAINABILITY SCIENCE: RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE FIVE-YEAR MARK FROM A POLICY RELEVANCE PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations Programme (MOST) launched a global research coalition in 2021 called BRIDGES – Building Resilience in Defence of Global Environments and Society. BRIDGES aims to foster the broadening and deepening of the field of sustainability science (SS) to include opening it to more research inputs from the humanities and social sciences. BRIDGES aims to help catalyze a “paradigm shift that fundamentally reshapes the research ecosystem of universities” vis-à-vis SS, leading to more interdisciplinary sustainability knowledge which does a better job of fully reflecting “what it will mean for societies to adapt in the face of environmental changes”ⁱ. Yet SS is also an applied field, and MOST pursues research-policy confluence in all its programs. BRIDGES thus also aims to support humanistic SS which can be “fed to policy”ⁱⁱ across a number of policy areas linked with countries' efforts to advance toward reaching their UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)ⁱⁱⁱ. The overall mission of BRIDGES is to provide a “mechanism to inspire and deliver humanities-driven sustainability science initiatives and their findings”, promoting “a renewed and integrated approach to sustainability science” while also relaying relevant “information to the Member States to inform policy, empower populations, and avoid the short-termism that creates new problems.”^{iv}

Five years on from the BRIDGES Coalition's founding, BRIDGES-supported research (and research akin to it taking place outside the Coalition proper) has succeeded in helping expand the disciplinary scope of SS in the academic context. But it remains a more elusive goal to get SS – whether humanistically informed or not – to take on a directly policy-relevant shape, undergo sharing with government decisionmakers, and finally become part of not just nominally or fleetingly embraced government positions or even laws passed on paper, but of concretely and permanently enacted sustainability policies and trajectories. Today policymakers operate in a crowded and chaotic knowledge environment; even as brief a time span as five years has seen this problem intensify greatly. Natural science-centered sustainability knowledge is also facing decreasing success being “fed to policy” where this policy is then really implemented and committed to for the long term. More exchange and lessons-learned dialogue on SS's policy traction problem is needed among academic disciplines, as well as between academia and government decisionmakers, if BRIDGES' humanities-based SS is to fare any better. This paper offers a few brief further reflections on the contemporary context of, and initial outcomes from, BRIDGES' and others' efforts to support policy-relevant humanistic SS, including looking at environmental history as an example. It then

offers a few concrete recommendations for UNESCO-MOST and the BRIDGES Governing Council to consider. These recommendations are initially noted in the executive summary below and then returned to in more detail in the remaining portions of the paper.

Executive Summary:

Recommendations for UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES Coalition Governing Council and Deputy Executive Director

Five years since BRIDGES' founding, humanities-led sustainability science (SS) of the type BRIDGES supports has not yet reached its potential for robust policy relevance. To enhance progress toward policy relevance for BRIDGES research, the BRIDGES Coalition's Governing Council and Deputy Executive Director should consider supporting and implementing the following three activities.

- 1) Convene a small high-level colloquium with equal numbers of national-level policymakers and BRIDGES Coalition (and similarly focused) sustainability academics, to foster an exchange of views on where and how humanities-centered SS and policymaker interests and needs converge and diverge; on potential pathways for increasing sustained communication between researchers and policymakers including under MOST auspices; and on how physical BRIDGES research sites might in some instances form an avenue, under existing or additive UNESCO procedures, for enhanced public meaning-creation and, from there, enhanced policy impact and relevance.
- 2) Support additional research into the contemporary global sustainability policy landscape itself, including such topics as:
 - a. the growing distinctions among a) sheerly nominal and tangibly nonbinding, b) mostly future-directed, and c) present-tense, tangible environmental practices and sustainability policies;
 - b. the need to count BAU policies as [negative] acts of environmental and sustainability policymaking; and
 - c. whether rebranding sustainability policy as security policy might favorably change outcomes and better reflect the urgency of the global sustainability policy challenge; and potential UN-enabled pathways for addressing national, regional, and global security issues within SDG and other sustainability and environmental framework agreements.
- 3) Support a meta-SS study of whether, how, and on what basis SS researchers tend to assume policy will, or normatively should, mirror and/or implement their research methods, research questions, and/or research findings. This study could also look at a) whether these mirroring assumptions have contributed to the creation of an idealized or largely performative "policy" realm in parallel to the actual one; and b) how this realm may act as a pressure valve lessening demands on the still BAU-dominated domain of actual policy with respect to the environment.

Scene-Setter:

Broadening academic sustainability science as concretely implemented sustainability policy recedes

The BRIDGES Coalition’s support for the further disciplinary expansion of SS, including with an eye toward policy relevance, comes at a time when sustainability policymaking as a whole is arguably proliferating in nominal commitments but diminishing in terms of real and adequate effects^v. Progress toward actioning Paris Agreement, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or other global agreement targets, is well below what is required, and/or deferred too far into the future to be even considered real and testable policy. According to the UN’s own review processes, most SDGs are off-target globally for achievement by 2030^{vi}. In a few areas, some more ambitious commitments have been made pertaining to the present day, for example in designating additional Protected Areas, or pursuing other regional, national and local legal instruments bearing on nature protections, restrictions on harmful contaminants and chemicals, and so forth; but here, implementation on the ground is markedly lacking, as it has been for decades^{vii viii ix}. In 2023 the UN General Assembly acknowledged that “the achievement of the SDGs is in peril. ... we are alarmed that the progress on most of the SDGs is either moving much too slowly or has regressed below the 2015 baseline. Our world is currently facing numerous crises.”^x Moreover some research suggests the SDGs themselves, even in a full implementation scenario, vastly underestimate what is needed from an ecological perspective^{xi}. Adding to the difficulties, events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and subsequent ongoing war, new cycles of extreme violence in the Middle East and West Asia since late 2023, and the 2024 election of a wing of one US political party to power which vehemently opposes any talk of environmental protection or climate policy means that policymaker attention has become even more distracted from sustainability questions by military, political, and economic competition pressures – especially because policymakers still fail to integrate thinking about the environment with their understanding of security issues. One recent analysis found a growing tendency toward informal or ad hoc attitudes toward environmental issues; regarding recent (2025) backtracking by European policymakers on pledged decarbonization aims, the analyst noted that “cutting legislation [on net zero pledges] is often justified by little more than vague claims”^{xii}. The explosion of information technology, now augmented by AI, across academia, policy, and daily life, is leading to “information inflation” overall^{xiii} and attention fatigue among policymakers and the publics who are supposed to hold them accountable, while disinformation and deliberate manipulation of the information sphere to advance political polarization and other short-term political and economic agendas also flourish. Most importantly, sustainability relies on deep changes being made to existing economic and development policy worldwide, and the persistence of Business As Usual (BAU) in these realms is often neglected in discussions of the sustainability policy state of play.

What it means to claim policy relevance for SS must be carefully and continually evaluated in this overall context. Assessing academic knowledge as policy relevant because it touches on some cross-section of facts linked with one or more issues which policymakers normatively should, and/or nominally claim to, care about, was always a debatable position. Such assessments are now diverging ever-farther from the

truth on the ground. In such a problematic and increasingly chaotic context, researchers in SS may see their sustainability policy relevance raised up one level of abstraction, to apply to more “meta-SS” questions such as the perception of academic research on sustainability by policymakers, or the perception and idealization of policymaking by researchers. One area in particular which bears further examination is whether there has been a bias or baseline assumption drift over the past decade(s) toward assuming that even if it does not in fact at any one time, the natural default or “resting” position is for policymaking bearing on sustainability issues to somehow resemble academic research and expert knowledge, and for such knowledge to *necessarily* be in essence useful to policymakers because it deals with some set of questions related to human survival. One recent article inadvertently points to this issue when the authors propose naming sustainability-related research more grandly as part of a new “transcendental futures” subdiscipline; the interesting questions this raises as to the realism of such a subdiscipline aside, at the very least it reaffirms the gap between such a lofty type of discourse and the policy realm in which decisionmakers currently operate day to day^{xiv}.

Yet the policy relevance assumption seems, to some extent, to simply be baked in to academic approaches to SS globally, including but by no means limited to BRIDGES’ own, which are also then increasingly seeking to expand what is considered SS and which disciplines should consider themselves qualified professionally to take part in SS knowledge production. BRIDGES joins many other academic institutions and programs globally which for years have cultivated an image of SS as a nexus or prism through which almost any field (as long as it contains knowledge somehow relevant to human survival over the long-term) can and normatively should be lensed in order to produce knowledge which contributes to SS and thus to humanity’s survival prospects globally. The question remains whether BRIDGES and other related approaches are trying to, in some sense, expand an academic production line for which there is an increasingly small actual policy market, and whether in the absence of such, an idealized and partly performative “policy” realm is inadvertently being enacted which in various ways actually ends up removing pressure from national and local decisionmakers to truly even question, let away concretely begin to move away from, BAU.

The expansion of academic SS has not been limited to describing or seeking sustainability “solutions” but now also encompasses ever more ways of outlining the sustainability “problem.” The sustainability problem or challenge is now claimed to encompass such mega-scale issues as the arrival of a new quasi-geological era, the “Anthropocene,” in which human-environment dynamics reveal themselves as radically unsustainable at a global and epochal scale; the advent of novel risks deriving from rapidly developing scientific and technological fields such as advanced weapons of mass destruction or AI; a seemingly bottomless or endlessly self-reinforcing and circular “polycrisis”, which scientists must try to muster a new kind of “mega-expertise” to address; a literally un-tame-able and unstoppable progress and growth paradigm which will, simply put, absolutely never acquiesce to a circular economy or steady-state economy unless and until it collapses; and so forth^{xv}.

This ballooning way of describing the global sustainability crisis, usually heavy on approaches from the natural sciences, complexity science, economics, AI studies, advanced earth modeling, “earth systems” science, and so forth, means that SS’s expansion in methodology on the “solutions” side finds plentiful

targets for inquiry, including in increasingly interdisciplinary ways. Yet, again, the question remains very much open whether and how it is even conceivable for the world of concrete policy to easily connect with these large-scale diagnoses and the explosion of the quantity and types of data and research findings they bring. And in terms of the interdisciplinary approaches which engage with these mega-scale diagnoses of the sustainability crisis, while they may be welcomed as pure research, garnering funding, expanding departments, and supporting the hiring of new personnel, this is more a reflection of how contemporary academia is built for the proliferation of both research “problems” and research “solutions” to these problems, than any guarantee of policy relevance for the “solutions” being designed. The link between the realm of real experience and the design of research questions may be weakening in SS just as it is in the rest of academia^{xvi}. Meanwhile, actual policymakers continue with their own activities which diverge widely from academic research, though not devoid of their own idealization or excessive anthropocentrism foibles. According to some researchers policymaking is more about seeking temporary simplicity or a temporary “way out” of what the policymaker experiences as a chaotic flow of events forcing some choice despite the lack of clarity – the view from inside the “polycrisis”, we might say, being quite different from efforts to characterize the polycrisis as such, or to rationalize our current moment in environmental history according to any other chosen model^{xvii}.

Environmental history as sustainability research: An overview of some recent confluences and obstacles

Environmental history, and history as a whole discipline, is one of the humanistic (and social scientific) disciplines of interest to MOST as a potential source of policy-relevant SS. On the theoretical side, both within and outside BRIDGES Coalition research initiatives, the past five years have seen a continued expansion of environmental history as an interdisciplinary field^{xviii}, accompanied by sustained expressions of hope by professional historians that environmental history has already proven relevant for sustainability policy and that this relevance can continue to increase^{xix}.

Yet regarding the nexus with real, concretely implemented sustainability policies, while there have been some cases of environmental history potentially identifying cases where it could inform which crop types from the past are considered for reintroduction, remind policymakers of old water management and farming methods, or help reset shifting baselines used in environmental policy benchmarks^{xx}, fitting history into some part of the policy conversation is not the same as seeing these policies lastingly implemented; and the question remains open what role environmental history can and should play in informing lasting, larger-scale, sustainability strategies and policy-enabled courses of action. Again, there is a real distinction between sustainability policy enacted on the ground, especially beyond the single-project level, and the way “sustainability policy” is constructed within research settings, so care must be taken to gauge policy relevance against the former and not the latter. One way to help ensure this is done, is to begin from the real world of sustainability policies and then 1) query the presence or absence of, in this case, environmental history knowledge (or other humanistic or social scientific SS) inputs, and 2) identify any environmental history-shaped gaps in really existing policies. Care must be taken to look at policies as they

are, oftentimes as they are informally and on the ground in contravention of formal policy implements, and not as they should be, or ideally will be some time in the future, according to sustainability experts. This leads back into the problem of speaking about the construction of an idealized, future-tense realm of sustainability policy instead of dealing with the one we have (which, again, currently largely consists of making negative, BAU-aligned sustainability policy). While this issue needs further study, some indications suggest, as noted earlier, that rather than engage with policy as it is, SS tends to construct idealized worlds in which sustainability, not BAU, would be the norm and rule. In this case, SS may have its policy relevance blunted by the gap between this world and the actual one, quite apart from any potential policy relevance of any particular piece of research. Expending effort in lobbying for this frame of reference to become reality first, so that their research can then be incorporated into policy, they are also outstripped in any such effort by far stronger and more pragmatically-directed BAU-aligned entities, whose resources dwarf those of academia or aligned nonprofits. SS academic research on the past also can here fall into believing that because research on the past uncovers facts, and suggests future trajectories, pertaining to long-term societal survival dynamics, these will automatically bear policy relevance, when in fact policymakers do not utilize academic standards for which ideas they put weight behind.

When we consider three of the biggest sustainability policy areas – climate policy, biodiversity policy, and national-scale adherence to or pursuit of the SDGs – we can find many “calls” for more inclusion of all disciplinary approaches into policy formation, and this by definition includes history. But in addition to the scarcity of meaningful sustainability policy being implemented on the ground in these three areas as discussed above, which means such calls are thus far merely performative or aspirational, environmental history in particular faces additional obstacles in informing concrete sustainability policies given the real historical novelty of some aspects of global 21st century environmental and social conditions. This even includes the unprecedented fact itself that the West, and global society as a whole, both possesses unprecedented technological and industrial prowess, and is simultaneously now being told by experts in sustainability – including environmental historians possessed of the long view of how the earth system, both human and ecological, has changed over the past many millennia – that it has, in effect, oversucceeded, and is biophysically beginning to fail.

Global climate policy and environmental history

The climate policy landscape is complex. Oxford annually summarizes and roughly overviews key climate policies (and these only in the world’s major economies, not in every country) only through the assistance of a network of over 200 law firms and a compiling team on the Oxford side of over half a dozen researchers, and this only suffices to outline these policies as they exist on the books, with only a limited coverage of their actual implementation on the ground; further, per below, most of the policies thus captured are future-oriented or speak to things like reporting standards^{xxi}. There is in a real sense no way of canvassing extant climate policy in its entirety because most of the world’s climate policy is embedded throughout its entire BAU structure, which is what shapes emissions. Geographically-based study of a single country or region might help simplify the rubric somewhat, but even here, one would end up having to reconstruct the entire BAU economy and social fabric which upholds it, in order to properly gauge the complexity of the contemporary climate policy landscape in any level of detail. This, again, would be the

work of years and many individuals, if not impossible – again pointing to the artificiality of much of what is constructed as the policy realm in academic research settings.

Stepping back to at least consider some of the more macro-scale dynamics between environmental history and climate policy in the single case of the Paris Agreement, since the 2015 signing of the Agreement academia has been a recognized observer party stakeholder. The Paris Agreement has generated an ongoing nearly-global effort to design and implement Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and National Adaptation Plan (NAP) positions in line with the goal of staying below 1.5 (or, now, 2) degrees Celsius global mean temperature rise beyond pre-industrial levels. Environmental historians are free to provide direct input at the conferences of parties (COPs), or to present whichever evidence, analysis, resources, or methodological tools they feel relevant to the appropriate national focal points overseeing the NAPs and NDCs for the countries in which the historian is expert. The primary way in which environmental history is already featured in the Paris Agreement is in the historical earth sciences. The earth's past climatic conditions, shifts, and the historically-known patterns of its Ice Ages and other variations in its temperature due to its orbital cycles and axis "wobbles," are the backbone of scientific extrapolations of where the earth's climate is headed now, what will affect its trajectory, and so forth. In terms of more humanistic environmental history, while there is broad scientific consensus on how CO₂ and other greenhouse gasses have fluctuated throughout Earth's history and why, there remains room to use humanistic environmental history to both further develop the models' accuracy, and broaden their interpretive depth and human meaning.

A secondary way in which environmental history has already become intertwined with the Agreement deliberations and political processes is in the recurring issue of the need for "fairness" in distinguishing, when setting targets, between historically low CO₂ emitters, usually those in the global South, and historically high emitters, particularly the US and China but also including most global North nations. Paris Agreement discussions sometimes segue into discussing the history of colonial exploitation and periphery-focused extractivism, and disputes arise over which temporal frames deserve to be applied to which regions and states in this context. Environmental historians seem to have a great deal they might contribute to such discussions and deliberations, though they would have to be prepared for their work to be immediately interpreted in a way which differed from the safe objectivity of a purely academic setting. In this sense, collaborating with other disciplines such as geography and sociology when bringing additional inputs to the question of historical fairness might be beneficial.

One area where environmental historians could potentially beneficially do more to inform Paris Agreement discussions is applying some of their expertise to unpack and perhaps challenge some of the ways in which the future seems to be treated in most NAPs and NDCs (which plan out to 2050 or 2060 in most cases). While the differences between how we reason about the past, the present, and the future, constitutes an ongoing debate in historical methodology and epistemology, environmental history might still be able to contribute some valuable perspectives on possible problems which can arise if we operate without at least acknowledging the distinction, and try instead to lump past, present, and future together seamlessly in our cognitive understanding and reasoning patterns. This is particularly pressing since many quarters have

critiqued the Paris Agreement framework and its signatories for pushing out the target dates for carbon neutrality decades into the future, equating this with dissembling and nonaction.

At the regional and national scales, and outside the Paris Agreement proper, there have been some other significant policy efforts to achieve net zero CO₂ emissions such as the European Green Deal, though this is growing progressively weaker especially since 2024, and the US Green New Deal, which was never passed into law.

Again, the climate policy context needs to be emphasized as one where concrete policy implementation is continually overwhelmed by BAU commitments. The 2025 Oxford review of climate policy across the G20 plus 15 other top emitters identified and tracked the existence of 6 types of climate policy, 5 of the 6 of which are arguably mostly future-oriented (transition planning), non-concrete (carbon credits, financial risk appraisal, climate-related disclosure rules) or small scale (public procurement). What appears to be the most concrete policy realm, methane abatement, was found to be characterized by increased ambition on paper, but the study notes that “evidence of practical enforcement and monitoring remains limited and institutional capacity to implement policies appears weak in many jurisdictions.”^{xxii} And even if all current Paris Agreement commitments were upheld, the world would be on track to 2.8 degrees Celsius warming^{xxiii}.

Biodiversity policy and environmental history

Global biodiversity decline is stark as of the early 21st century, and without its recovery little other sustainability policy has a chance at success. The WWF 2024 Living Planet report called for “nothing less than a transformation of our food, energy and finance systems.”^{xxiv} The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has for many years sought to incorporate knowledge of the humanistic and social scientific type into its policy aims and frameworks which are directed toward grappling with the biodiversity crisis, thus including history. IPBES emphasized in its landmark 2019 report that when it discusses the

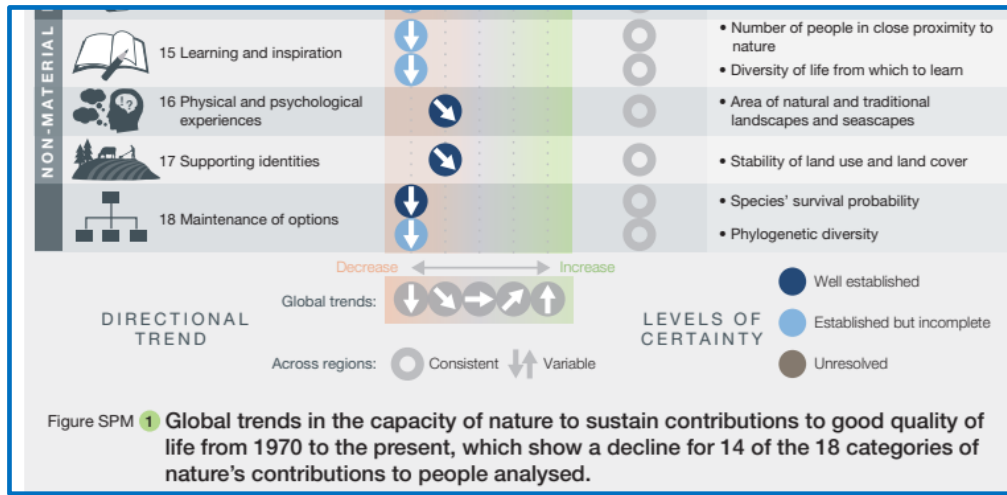
concept of nature’s contributions to people ... [this] embraces a wide range of descriptions of human-nature interactions, including through the concept of ecosystem services and other descriptions, which range from strongly utilitarian to strongly relational,

and that this concept

was developed to embrace a fuller and more symmetric consideration of diverse stakeholders and world views, and a richer evidence base for action, i.e., the knowledge base offered by the natural and social sciences, the humanities, and the knowledge of practitioners and indigenous and local communities.^{xxv}

IPBES’ “nature’s contributions to people approach ... builds on the existing approaches, descriptors and metrics used by different communities of practice in the search for understanding and solutions^{xxvi}” and includes values-based and cultural beliefs-based appraisals of what nature “does” for people. This leads to a further subdivision of 18 ways nature makes contributions to people. Among these 18 are 3 “non-material” categories, all of which seem relevant to gathering inputs from historians on how these

contributions were both experienced and protected (or not protected) in the past across different times and places, and why (the 3 in question being shown below as nos. 15 - 17)^{xxvii}.



Source: IPBES Summary for Policymakers. 2019. P. 23.

Since IPBES is currently (as of April 2026) compiling its second global assessment report, environmental historians could potentially try to provide input into the next report, and in so doing increase history's representation in the small proportion of social scientists and other non-natural scientists who made up the core group of experts behind the 2019 report, the majority of whom in this small sub-group, moreover, were economists^{xxviii}. Environmental historians could distill ways in which the entire history of the human species is intertwined with that of all the other species with which it significantly shared daily life in most places and societies. It could help identify key and charismatic species with cultural meanings dating deep into the past, which could in turn provide messaging openings for IPBES' next round of findings. Historians might also seek to distill past cultural meanings or key settlements associated with various landscapes, including those which are either already protected, or which would make good candidates for Protected Areas. However, as historians acknowledge professionally on a routine basis, belief and cultural envaluing must be organic and present-tense, and inherent to a society, in order to directly shape how a society treats a space or another species. Teaching the history of an environmental dynamic or space is useful and meaningful in an academic setting, but re-embedding it as a living, and impactful, belief in a new context seems outside the scope of environmental history.

Furthermore, as in the climate policy case, the fact that biodiversity policy, in line with the CBD or otherwise, is facing significant implementation challenges in real life further narrows the pathway for environmental history to flow into actual decision-making. While some more ambitious biodiversity policies have recently been passed such as the (oceans-focused) Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdictions (BBNJ) Agreement, and while many countries do continue to work on their CBD-required National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans (NBSAPs), overall, positive biodiversity policy tends to be stalled, deferred to the future, or implemented on paper only, while negative, actually implemented biodiversity policy continues apace, in line with BAU (and its concomitant near-total lack of protections for,

or concern with, biodiversity). In the case of the EU Nature Restoration Law of 2024, it remains to be seen if countries will implement their stated objectives, and what if any input from historians could aid in crafting these plans. Most EU countries are still working on drafting their National Restoration Plans (NRPs) in line with this Law, but are exhibiting insufficient ambition and rapidity in so doing^{xxix}. Similarly with the CBD-related and Paris Agreement-related national action plans, environmental historians should be able to collaborate with the natural scientists leading the NRP for the region with which they are familiar and offer expertise, inputs, offer to serve as a reviewer, and so forth. Still, the implementation barrier remains largely uncrossed; plans remain slow-moving and it may be another case of slow-walking implementation into a future which is permanently five to ten years distant.

The case of the United States' Endangered Species Act (ESA) is another nexus where environmental history might be relevant, but only if historians engage with the reality on the ground, i.e., the challenges currently being put to the law and how these are poised to cause a departure from US environmental history, both biophysical and cultural. The landmark ESA is one of the only significant pieces of pro-environmental legislation that is on the books in the United States at the national level, and it is currently being challenged by House Resolution 1897, which will significantly weaken several of its provisions^{xxx}, after a federal court struck down a previous 2019 effort to weaken the law^{xxxi}.

One further macro-level policy intervention point for environmental history is suggested by the recent UK government report on the links between biodiversity and national security^{xxxii} which highlights from a government interest standpoint some of the types of linkages which academic researchers have been discussing for some time^{xxxiii xxxiv}. If biodiversity policy in future could in future harness more of this national and global security linkage, highlighting the need for more primary consideration of biodiversity and nature in security strategies and global geopolitics, this might move biodiversity policy inputs into a slightly more porous area of BAU more receptive to change, since status quo national and global security postures and assumptions are at least slightly less wedded to continuing to maximally exploit nature than BAU global market economy practices built on a growth paradigm and maximizing energy throughput^{xxxv}. If and when the security policy realm begins to open itself more deeply and fully to questions of environmental preservation as the cornerstone of state preservation, environmental history could be well-positioned to add its perspectives on numerous past cultures' recognitions, both tacit and recorded, of the natural basis of state security, stability, and long-term viability.

The SDGs and environmental history

Because the SDGs are so broad and encompass almost every area of domestic and global policy, they are one step removed from actual policy instruments and serve more as an intended policy framework.

Environmental history can inform some aspects of this framework, but one initial conflict may be that the methodology used by professional academic historians tends not to embrace the linear "progress" and "development" narratives baked into the SDGs. Placing that barrier to one side, environmental history could conceivably help individual countries gain perspective on past scenarios in their own countries and globally with respect to each goal, but again, these goals are so broadly defined that historians would have

to pick and choose where they found their research applied – whether at the same macro-scale of the SDGs or even at a higher, meta-SS, level of abstraction. For example, rather than trying to directly shape the SDGs for life below water, or life on land, through comparative or other instructive cases from the history of the region, the professional historian might prefer to engage with policymakers on the history of how the concept of sustainability had evolved in the local culture through time, how colonial or postcolonial history affected perception of sustainability and development issues, and so forth.

Applying academic environmental history to policy efforts linked with countries' efforts to define and pursue appropriate versions of the UN SDGs for their nations is possible, but again, would have to address several problems. As emphasized earlier in this paper, the implementation gap with SDGs is significant, and raises the issue whether informing a sustainability “policy” or framework which is largely performative or nominal, or future-directed, should count as policy relevance. Additionally, the framing of the SDGs is – outside the assertion of linear development and progress in human history they embed – interestingly almost ahistorical, premising the possibility and the desirability of something like a permanent elevation of humankind to universalized standards of human health, happiness, and equality. Environmental historians would have to offer research both supporting (periods of sustained elevated standards of living and basic freedoms) and challenging (periods of the absence of such standards and freedoms, including in societies where they had previously been present) the viability of pursuing such permanent elevations in each country or region, in order to inform realistic policy expectations and debates. In either case, the exceptional character of some aspects of the 21st century would still then also have to be taken into consideration. In the case of land and water management, for example, demographic changes and an increasingly globalized economy and trade system must change the policy realities and options available to decisionmakers on the ground.

Potential pathways toward enhancing policy relevance for humanistic SS:

Researcher-policymaker colloquium, and further research

UNESCO should consider convening a small workshop in 2027 to which UNESCO member states send government representatives of adequate seniority (across all policymaking fields – economic, trade, development, education, defense, and environment) to meet for one day and exchange views with academic experts in sustainability science, to include environmental historians, climate and other natural scientists, social scientists, philosophers, and complexity theorists and earth systems scientists. This small high-level colloquium with equal numbers of national-level policymakers and BRIDGES Coalition (and similarly focused) sustainability academics could include discussion of where and how humanities-centered SS and policymaker interests and needs converge and diverge; potential pathways for increasing sustained communication between researchers and policymakers including under MOST auspices; and how physical BRIDGES research sites might in some instances form an avenue, under existing or additive

UNESCO procedures, for enhanced public meaning-creation and, from there, enhanced policy impact and relevance.

In order to further enhance the potential policy relevance of the humanistic SS it supports, MOST and BRIDGES should also consider supporting additional research into the contemporary global sustainability policy landscape itself, including such topics as:

- 1) the growing distinctions among a) sheerly nominal and tangibly nonbinding, b) mostly future-directed, and c) present-tense, tangible environmental practices and sustainability policies;
 - a. the need to count BAU policies as [negative] acts of environmental and sustainability policymaking; and
 - b. whether rebranding sustainability policy as security policy might favorably change outcomes and better reflect the urgency of the global sustainability policy challenge; and potential UN-enabled pathways for addressing national, regional, and global security issues within SDG and other sustainability and environmental framework agreements.
- 2) Support a meta-SS study of whether, how, and on what basis SS researchers tend to assume policy will, or normatively should, mirror and/or implement their research methods, research questions, and/or research findings. This study could also look at a) whether these mirroring assumptions have contributed to the creation of an idealized or largely performative “policy” realm in parallel to the actual one; and b) how this realm may act as a pressure valve lessening demands on the still BAU-dominated domain of real and concrete actions by states in the present.

The colloquium and the additional research can continue to expand and enhance MOST and BRIDGES’ thoughtful leading-edge explorations of policy relevant research on human sustainability outcomes.

Conclusion

Sustainability policy faces major obstacles as of 2026. Since the problem does not appear to be a lack of information, it would be extraordinary if adding inputs from the humanities and social sciences automatically provided the missing stepping-stone to achieving sustainability policy breakthroughs. The breakthroughs likely need to be political and power-related in character, rather than research-based. In the meantime, environmental history and the rest of the humanities and social sciences can leverage some of their meta-SS and long-view perspectives on human societies’ past ideas of sustainability, and of the environment as a source of security, to help sharpen the debates, and inform change at the macro-scale. Humanistic and social scientific approaches to SS can also provide locally relevant inputs to existing, albethey weakly implemented, policy efforts in domains such as climate policy, biodiversity policy, and the SDGs. Researchers will be best served by actively acknowledging the real policy realm, which does not resemble the world of academic research or frame its activities in the same way or relative to the same types of standards or questions. Researchers can along these same lines seek to broaden future surveys of environmental or sustainability policy, including policies toward which they are targeting their policy impact, to more adequately reflect the extent to which the actual sustainability policy realm is currently

dominated by BAU [negative] policy. The colloquium and additional areas for research just noted constitute additional useful possibilities for follow-up in the immediate term.



ⁱ <https://bridges.earth/about>

ⁱⁱ <https://bridges.earth/about>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.unesco.org/en/management-social-transformations-most-programme>

^{iv} <https://bridges.earth/about>

^v For example regarding the climate policy domain, see the discussions, especially discussions of the implementation gap, in Lecavalier et al. 2025. Oxford Climate Policy Monitor Annual Review. Oxford Climate Policy Hub, University of Oxford.

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