

Thinking outside sustainability's box at the intersection of art and science

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Science is about facts, but the science of sustainability also involves questions underpinned by values.

With this in mind, a Michigan State University environmental sociologist will ask scientists to consider how art can provoke people to consider their perceptions of sustainability at this year's annual meeting of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#).

"Good decisions about the complex issues of sustainability have to be grounded in science, but science alone isn't sufficient to make decisions that also involve our values and [ethical concerns](#)," said Thomas Dietz, MSU assistant vice president for environmental research. "We have to think about things that aren't usually part of our everyday routines, and challenging routine thinking has been one of the roles of art in our society."

Dietz, a member of MSU's Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability, and Eugene Rosa, Boeing Distinguished Professor of Environmental Sociology and affiliated professor of fine arts at Washington State University, have organized a symposium, "Science, Sustainability and the Arts" at 8 a.m. on Feb. 17.

Symposium speakers are Joe Zammit-Lucia, fine art photographer, Sacha Kagan, sociologist at Leuphana University who studies how art affects people's understanding of sustainability, and David Maggs, classical concert pianist.

Zammit-Lucia's large-format portraits of apes, tigers and elephants have changed perceptions of the animals, helping people see them as more familiar and less alien. Kagan's installations, films and performance art focus on the culture of sustainability and how art can help achieve sustainability. Maggs is keenly interested in how his art can further his environmental concerns and helped create Earth To Human, an eco-travel project in Newfoundland that he also hosts.

"All the speakers are working artists who also are studying [sustainability science](#)," Dietz said. "We're hoping people come away from the session realizing that art doesn't have only aesthetic worth. Art can provoke thinking and actually change people's perceptions of the complex issues associated with [sustainability science](#). When we're considering questions about preserving biodiversity versus creating jobs, art can help us examine our values and have a discussion that's broader than just scientific facts."

Provided by Michigan State University

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