

Net zero policies are 'emperor's new clothes,' academics warn

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Net zero targets are a "fantasy" that often just protect "business as usual," a leading expert in environment and sustainability has said.

Dr. James Dyke, Assistant Director of the Global Systems Institute at the University of Exeter, criticized net zero targets as a "great idea in principle" but which "help perpetuate a belief in technological salvation and diminish the sense of urgency surrounding the need to curb emissions now."

The excoriating critique is published in "[Negotiating Climate Change in Crisis](#)," a new essay volume on the [climate crisis](#) featuring prominent social scientists and humanities scholars from around the world, co-edited by the University of Exeter Business School's Professor Steffen Boehm.

In a chapter titled "Why net zero policies do more harm than good," Dr. Dyke and his co-authors Dr. Wolfgang Knorr and Professor Sir Robert Watson argue that the discourse around net zero hinges on deploying potentially dangerous 'fairytale' technologies such as carbon capture.

Their essay looks at how projecting a future with more trees was first used by the US to "in effect offset the burning of coal, oil and gas now."

They go on to argue that the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degree Celsius emissions target allowed "untested carbon dioxide removal mechanisms" to be included in climate-economic modeling.

They describe Bioenergy Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) as a "savior technology," saying "the mere prospect of [carbon capture](#) and storage gave policy makers a way out of making the much-needed immediate cuts to greenhouse gas emissions."

The authors say: "It has been estimated that BECCS could demand an area of land approaching twice the size of India. How will that be achieved at the same time as feeding eight to 10 billion people around the middle of the century, or without destroying native vegetation and

biodiversity?

"The argument appears to be that net zero technologies will work because they have to work," they add. "But beyond fine words and glossy brochures there is nothing there. The emperor has no clothes."

"Negotiating Climate Change in Crisis," published by Open Book Publishers as an Open Access book and available as a free download, is intended to fill a gap in a [climate change debate](#) dominated by environmental, climate and natural science perspectives.

Other essays look at the extent of the US military's carbon 'bootprint,' how an emphasis on corporate self-regulation ignores the need for government regulation of carbon emissions, and why it would be more accurate to label industrial scale renewable energy as "fossil fuel plus."

An entire section of the book comprises essays on Namibia, a country on the frontline of climate change, and other sections focus on governance, finance and action—with this final section reviewing the impact of social and direct-action movements such as Extinction Rebellion as well as analyzing how the 2019 climate strike actions were covered by the UK media.

There is also a chapter by Dr. Rebecca Sandover, Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter, entitled "Sustainable Foodscapes: Hybrid food networks creating food change" in which she connects food supply chain practices with climate change governance, and explores the potential of place-based community groups to fill the vacuum in food policy in England, using Devon as a case study.

The chapter draws on Dr. Sandover's collaborative research with Devon food policy partners, which was funded by the University of Exeter's Wellcome Centre for the Cultures and Environments of Health.

Prof Steffen Boehm, Professor in Organisation and Sustainability at the University of Exeter Business School, writes in the book's introduction: "For three decades now, there has been talk and action on climate change at the highest possible levels—in politics, business, finance and civil society.

"All this newly found commitment to tackle climate change as well as the wider environmental malaise we find ourselves in should be welcomed and celebrated. However, a heavy dose of skepticism and critical interrogation is also needed, precisely because we have been here many times before.

"Despite more than 30 years of high-level, global talks on [climate change](#), we are still seeing emissions rising dramatically around the world. Whatever we have done on this planet in terms of [climate](#) mitigation over the past thirty plus years has not worked. We are asking what has gone wrong and what now needs to be done, and I hope this book will help us move more radically and urgently in the direction needed."

Provided by University of Exeter

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