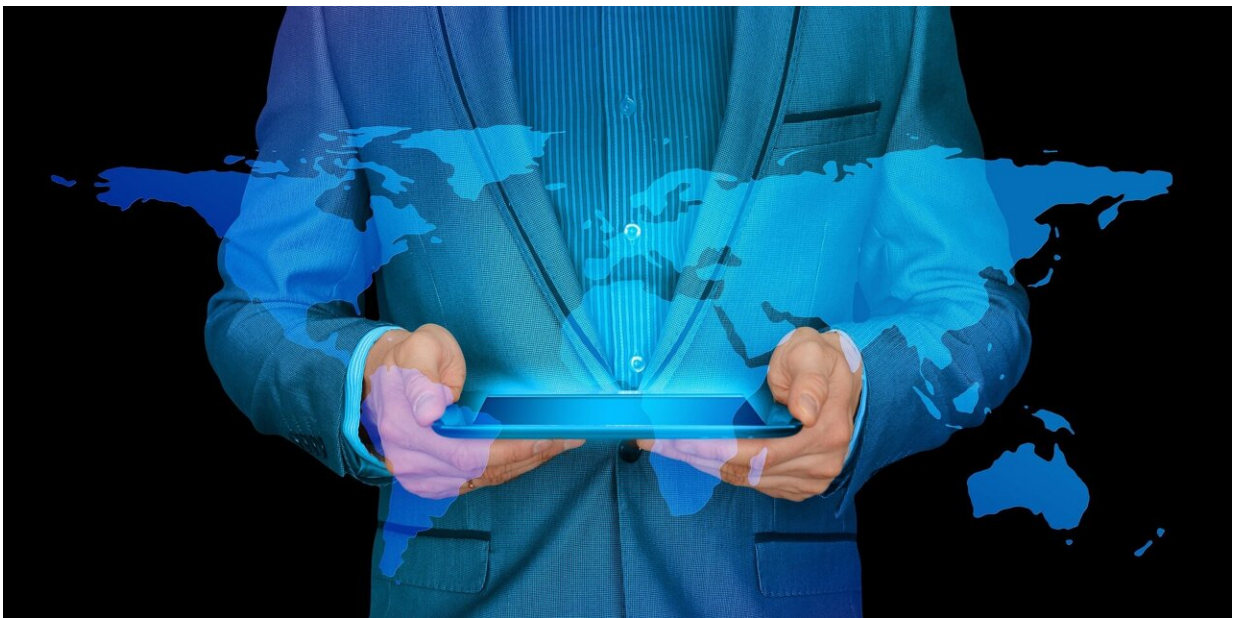


International community has fallen short of Stockholm Conference environmentalism goals, law professor writes

June 13 2023, by Mike Krings



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Just over half a century ago, world leaders gathered for the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, one of the first international efforts to protect the Earth and develop policies for sustainability and to reduce environmental degradation. A University of Kansas law professor has published a new scholarly article arguing that while the goals were noble, the international community has fallen short of meeting the aims

of the Stockholm Conference.

The 1972 conference established both the Stockholm Declaration and the United Nations Environment Program. John Head, Robert W. Wagstaff Distinguished Professor of Law at KU, argues that the goals and initiatives were the right thing to do, especially in the dawning of the era of environmental protection. But anthropocentrism, conceptual shallowness and global institutional timidity have prevented them from being fully realized or effective.

"That 1972 meeting was basically the first big international environmental conference and was pretty heated in its debates," Head said. "The Global North, as we call it now, was wanting to push for the idea of environmental protection through sustainable development. The Global South, as we now call it, essentially said, 'We want to develop as well, but you've gotten rich on development methods that are not sustainable and now you argue we can't use those methods.'"

"In looking at the state of international environmental law 50 years later, sadly we've fallen short of the vision of Stockholm."

Head's article, published in the London-based *LEAD Journal*, highlights three main structural deficiencies in reaching the goals. First, anthropocentrism has been the guiding philosophy. In other words, the proffered solutions and goals only focused on preserving the Earth and environment for the benefit of humans. After all, the 1972 meeting was called the Stockholm Conference for the Human Environment, reflecting the idea of preserving the Earth primarily for humans.

Head asserts that this is extremely short-sighted, and he argues that the approach should now be viewed in a similar way to how European nations embarked on a global campaign for colonization from the 17th century on. While major efforts have recently been made at

decolonization in the political world, he argues for an analogous campaign for "species decolonization," or focusing on sustainability for plants and non-human animals as well.

"In looking at international environmental law of the last 50 years, it only focuses on 'of what value is the environment to humans.'" Head said.

"It's all about how do we protect the environment for humans. We condemn European colonization from the 1600s on. Shouldn't we also look back at the idea of protecting the environment only for humans in a similar negative light as well?"

The second primary problem concerns conceptual shallowness. The Stockholm Conference and resulting international environmental law has not thought deeply enough about solutions to [environmental degradation](#). The notion of sustainable development took hold in the 1970s and was the dominant force in environmental law, placing outsized importance on development and the economy at the expense of preservation and restoration of ecological systems.

"I say we ought to rethink that and focus not on sustainable development, but at this stage on ecological restoration," Head said. "The idea of [sustainable development](#) is no longer viable, if it ever was, for conceptualizing our own species' relationship to the natural world. We need to restore ecosystems we've so badly degraded or destroyed."

Finally, global institutional timidity has prevented the goals set forth at Stockholm from being realized. There were high hopes for effective environmental treaties and cooperative institutional arrangements between nations, as legal responses to environmental crises and the need for ecological restoration. But far too little has emerged from those cooperative international efforts.

"And while the United Nations Environmental Program has done good

work, it has not gone far enough," Head argues. Other international responses—both in the form of treaties and in terms of institution-building—have thus far been inadequate as well, he writes.

To address those shortcomings, a radical reimagining of international environmental governance regimes is necessary, Head writes. That could include establishment of ecostates, which would be international organizations dedicated to overseeing and preserving ecosystems that stretch across national borders.

The environmental efforts of those ecostates would be coordinated by a new international body to oversee legal and structural reforms in ecological governance. Such a body could handle world ecological policy in a way similar to the World Bank's approach to international finance, but with a profoundly different governance structure and representation than any existing international institutions.

An expert in comparative law, international business law and global institutions, Head has written extensively on approaches to establishing such bodies and the challenges necessary to overcome for the organizations to exist and thrive. His books "A Global Corporate Trust for Agroecological Integrity: New Agriculture in a World of Legitimate Eco-States" and "International Law and Agroecological Husbandry: Building Legal Foundations for a New Agriculture" cover those topics, as well as sustainable agriculture in depth.

While not a book-length project, Head said the *LEAD Journal* invitation to reflect on 50 years of international environmental law since the Stockholm Conference appealed to him for several reasons. Namely it was a chance for a career retrospective of sorts, as his first published law review article written as a law student was about the then-recently completed Stockholm Conference. Also, it provided an effective opportunity to reflect on both the shortcomings and opportunities now

present half a century after the landmark gathering.

"We did the right thing as we saw it at the time, but we have so much more to do," he said.

More information: John W Head, Reflections on Stockholm, Decolonization, Restoration, and Global Ecological Governance, *LEAD Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.25501/soas.00039176](https://doi.org/10.25501/soas.00039176)

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