

William Beveridge's sixth giant: environmental sustainability



Today, William Beveridge would worry about the environment, writes [Sam Fankhauser](#). He reflects on the LSE's Beveridge Festival and explains why environmental sustainability needs to be prioritised with the determination, leadership, and strong government commitment that Beveridge envisaged in 1942 – only this time at a global scale.

Squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease. These are the five “giant evils” that economist and social reformer William Beveridge identified in his famous 1942 report. Recently, participants in the LSE Festival on [Rethinking Beveridge for the 21st century](#) voted for environmental sustainability – or environmental degradation – as a [6th giant evil](#) that Beveridge had missed.

Beveridge's five giants remain urgent societal problems today. Colleagues from LSE were putting forward arguments for equity, isolation, security and extremism as other giant evils on a par with Beveridge's original five. Human welfare depends crucially on our ability to find a solution for all of these problems. But environmental sustainability stands apart as a deeper, more fundamental challenge. Without a functioning environment and the ecosystem services it provides – food, water, clean air, a stable climate – the other problems become impossible to solve.

We live in the [Anthropocene](#), the geological epoch where our planet is shaped not just by natural processes but by human action. In and of itself this may not be a problem. But earth scientists have identified several instances where human interference is pushing hard against “[planetary boundaries](#)”; thresholds beyond which there is a risk of irreversible and abrupt environmental change. In several cases our global environmental footprint is approaching, or already beyond, these safe limits. This is a massive concern.

Climate change is perhaps the most prominent example. Unless we drastically curtail our greenhouse gas emissions, we risk [creating climatic conditions](#) that the planet has not experienced for several million years.

In the field of biodiversity, biologists are talking about the [6th global mass extinction](#), the first since the demise of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. The rate at which we are losing species is now 1000 times higher than it was before the industrial revolution. Other areas where we are approaching planetary boundaries include the nitrogen cycle, ocean acidification, freshwater use, land conversion, chemical pollution and atmospheric aerosol loading. Ozone layer depletion, which we thought we had reversed, is making an [unwanted comeback](#). The problems interact. Ocean acidification combines with climate change to put unsustainable stress on the world's [coral reefs](#), putting at risk the habitat of 25% of marine biodiversity.

None of this is inevitable. Human ingenuity has always been good at overcoming environmental constraints. In the 1860s, [William Stanley Jevons](#) wondered how Britain's booming industries would continue to grow given dwindling coal reserves. Today, global fossil fuel reserves are [three times larger](#) than what planetary boundaries will permit us to use. Renewable energy is becoming [so cheap](#) that it is no longer unthinkable that we will be able to leave these reserves in the ground.

The [water quality](#) in Europe's rivers is infinitely better than it was a generation ago. Under the [Montreal Protocol](#), ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons have been phased out. Sulphur emissions are down. Leaded petrol is a thing of the past. Environmental progress of this kind does not have to come at the expense of economic prosperity. It is possible to protect the environment and grow the economy at the same time. Indeed, many would argue that this is [the only way](#) to ensure sustainable growth in the long run. In the UK, [greenhouse gas emissions](#) have fallen by over 40 % since 1990. Over the same period GDP has grown by 60%.

Unfortunately, none of this happens automatically. There are well known market, policy, and behavioural failures that prevent us from managing our natural environment in a sustainable way. The environment [does not have a price](#), which means it gets ignored in private decision-making. There are [barriers to clean innovation](#). People are reluctant to adopt more [energy efficient technologies](#).

Correcting these failures needs determination, leadership and strong government commitment – exactly as Beveridge envisaged in 1942. Only this time at a global scale.

Note: the podcast and video of the LSE event this article draws on is available [here](#).

About the Author



Sam Fankhauser is Director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, and Deputy Director of the ESRC-funded Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy (CCCEP), both at the London School of Economics.

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