

1 A horizon scan of emerging issues for global conservation in 2019

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50 **Abstract**

51

52 We present the results of our tenth annual horizon scan. We identified 15 emerging priority topics
53 that may have major positive or negative effects on the future conservation of global biodiversity,
54 but which at present, have low awareness within the conservation community. We thus hope to
55 focus increased research and policy attention on these areas, improving the capacity of the
56 community to mitigate impacts of issues likely to have negative effects, and maximise the benefits
57 of issues that provide opportunities. The topics include advances in crop breeding, which may affect
58 insects and land use; manipulations of natural water flows and weather systems on the Tibetan
59 Plateau; release of carbon and mercury from melting polar ice and thawing permafrost; new
60 funding schemes and regulations; and land-use changes across Indo-Malaysia.

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65 **Aims of horizon scanning**

66 We present the 15 topics identified in our tenth annual horizon scan of emerging issues that are likely
67 to be relevant to global conservation. These are issues that could have significant impacts on society's
68 ability to conserve regional or global biodiversity, but for which the conservation community
69 currently has generally low awareness. These topics were identified by a group of 28 participants,
70 including experts in futures research and horizon scanning, advisors to policy-makers, researchers,
71 and practitioners of conservation and other aspects of environmental science. The areas highlighted
72 are highly varied, ranging from major infrastructure projects and new technological developments,
73 to new funding schemes and regulations that are likely to transform food production and land use.
74 We aim to draw the attention of the global conservation community to the potential opportunities
75 and risks associated with these issues. We hope that by raising awareness, we will encourage
76 research, discussion, and allocation of funds, in addition to management and policy change, resulting
77 in improved understanding and greater preparedness. This could facilitate the global conservation
78 community and wider society to respond effectively to the development of these issues. Our work
79 therefore may inform researchers, funding bodies, policy makers, regulatory bodies, conservation
80 organisations and practitioners.

81

82 Our approach is supported by the maturing of many issues from previous scans. For example, over-
83 exploitation of sand resources was highlighted by Sutherland *et al.* [1], and subsequent evidence has
84 demonstrated that sand extraction has negative effects on seagrass meadows, nesting terrapins, and
85 migratory waterbirds [2]. In another example, WWF, in partnership with fisheries and technology
86 companies, has implemented a pilot project that uses blockchain technology (identified in [1]) to
87 trace tuna from capture to distribution in an attempt to reduce illegal and unregulated fishing[3].
88 Discussions continue about extending the application of blockchain to a wide range of other supply

89 chains (e.g., timber [4]). In January 2018, the European Parliament voted to ban the use of electric
90 currents for commercial fishing (electric pulse trawling) [5], a topic raised by Sutherland *et al.* [6].
91 Although in practice electric pulse trawling is continuing much as it did before the vote, the swift
92 political action may imply that awareness of the practice and its environmental effects was relatively
93 high in the research and European policy arenas. By increasing recognition of the issues described in
94 this paper, we aim to encourage dialogue about their potential negative and positive impacts on
95 conservation, in order to guide proactive solutions and harness future opportunities.

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97

98 **Identification of Issues**

99 Our methods for this horizon scan were consistent with those used in our previous nine annual scans
100 (for example see [7, 8], Figure 1). The 28 core participants (the authors) used a modified version of
101 the Delphi technique that is repeatable, inclusive, and transparent [9, 10]. Participants' expertise
102 covered diverse conservation-related disciplines, including marine, freshwater and terrestrial
103 ecology; agriculture and land use; microbiology; conservation practice and technology; sustainability;
104 environmental management; policy; economics; research programming; science communication;
105 and professional horizon scanning. The participants were affiliated with academia, government, and
106 non-governmental organisations.

107

108 Participants consulted their professional networks one-on-one, via wider conversations and requests
109 at meetings, and through targeted social media and group email requests. We consulted
110 approximately 495 people during the initial stage of issue identification, leading to the submission of
111 91 issues. The criteria used for considering the suitability of topics for submission to the exercise
112 were: novelty (or, for better-known issues, a marked change in the intensity or nature of their impact

113 that was considered novel or poorly known); the potential for major positive or negative effects on
114 the conservation of global or regional biological diversity in the future; and a reasonable likelihood
115 that the importance of the topic would increase.

116

117 We grouped submissions that addressed a similar issue together and scored variations of the same
118 issue collectively. The long list of 91 issues was circulated to participants, who scored each issue from
119 0-1000 on the basis of both its novelty and the potential magnitude of its effects; they also recorded
120 whether they had previously been aware of each issue. Participants were given the option of adding
121 comments on each topic related to the criteria. For example, frequent comments from participants
122 included issues already being too well known, issues being similar to or linked to each other, or issues
123 being too far from realisation to be plausible. To counter possible scoring fatigue, or unconscious
124 differences in scoring of issues near the start and end of a long list [11], the order in which issues
125 were presented differed among the participants. Each individual's scores were used to rank the
126 issues. The 35 issues with the highest median ranks, along with any comments, were retained for
127 round-table discussion in Cambridge (United Kingdom) in September 2018. After this initial scoring,
128 participants were given the opportunity to retain any issues that they thought had been undervalued;
129 one issue was retained during this process. A new issue that had emerged in the global news media
130 during this period also was presented, giving a total of 37 issues for consideration during the meeting
131 (Figure 1).

132

133 Prior to the round-table discussion, two participants were assigned to each of the 37 topics (three to
134 the newly-suggested topic) to further investigate its novelty, likelihood of occurrence or
135 implementation, and likely magnitude of positive or negative effects. During the meeting, each topic
136 in turn was discussed in relation to the criteria for inclusion. The rank from the initial round of scoring

137 and the proportion of participants that were aware of the topic were considered in the discussion.
138 During the discussion of some topics, the emphasis was adjusted, or additional points and sources of
139 information were included. Following discussion of each topic, all participants independently and
140 confidentially rescored the topic. The 15 issues with the highest median ranks at the end of the
141 meeting are presented here, grouped thematically rather than in rank order.

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143

144 **The 2019 Issues**

145

146 ***Change in the capacity of Antarctic benthos to store carbon as climate changes***

147 The Antarctic is losing ice faster than previously projected. Gigatonnes of ice sheet are being lost
148 every year, with rates increasing over time [12], leading to large freshwater outflows and rapid
149 changes in nearshore salinity. This melting could also lead to increases in sedimentation, greater in
150 extent than anything seen previously, smothering benthic communities in bays and fjords around the
151 continent. Additionally, rapid loss of sea ice may mediate increases in phytoplankton and heighten
152 the potential for iceberg-seabed collisions (or ice scour), associated with high zoobenthos mortality
153 [13]. The seabed on the polar continental shelves is among the largest sinks of oceanic, or blue,
154 carbon on Earth [14], and the functioning of its ecosystems could substantially shape the global
155 carbon cycle and rate of climate change. The two opposing factors acting on oceanic carbon could
156 result in different outcomes, and the balance between the two is unpredictable. The current
157 expectation is that an increase in organisms on the vast, warming sub-Antarctic shelves likely will
158 increase oceanic carbon storage, which could become the single largest negative feedback on climate
159 change. However, opposing this is a likely loss of carbon in regions of scouring where of giant icebergs
160 are frequently grounded, emphasizing the complexity and uncertainty surrounding this issue [14].

161

162 ***Extensive release of mercury by thawing permafrost***

163 Mercury is a highly toxic element that is released from both natural and anthropogenic sources. It
164 accumulates in aquatic and terrestrial food chains, and negative effects have been demonstrated on
165 animal neurology and reproduction, plant growth and soil microbial function (e.g. [15, 16]). Although
166 the potential for release of mercury from thawing permafrost is known [17], two recent studies
167 concluded that the magnitude of the release could be far greater than was previously thought. Olson
168 *et al.* [18] estimated that 408 000 tonnes of mercury is stored in the active layer of the northern
169 hemisphere permafrost while Schuster *et al.* [19] estimated approximately double this quantity, 863
170 000 tonnes, with an additional 793 000 tonnes in the permanently frozen layers. The latter total of 1
171 656 000 tonnes is roughly twice that of the global aggregate across all other soils, oceans, and the
172 atmosphere. Given that climate change could cause much of the permafrost to thaw over the next
173 century, most of this accumulation of mercury will be transported from soil, via streams and rivers,
174 to the oceans. This could have potentially far-reaching impacts on terrestrial and aquatic organisms
175 that could be acute, through chronic bioaccumulation or microbial conversion to the highly toxic
176 methyl mercury. Already, mercury concentrations in the Yukon River are some 3-32 times higher than
177 reported for eight other major northern hemisphere rivers [20].

178

179 ***Ecological effects of options for reducing plastic pollution***

180 Public concern over plastic pollution and its effects on wildlife have dramatically increased. This has
181 resulted in widespread interest by the public, governments and businesses in options for reducing
182 the volume of plastics used and discarded. Novel ongoing research into reducing impacts of
183 conventional plastic waste is developing improvements to recycling technology [21] and the use of
184 newly discovered microbes or enzymes to biodegrade conventional plastics [22]. Other approaches,

185 such as the production of novel materials including biomass-derived plastic, may have unintended
186 impacts. For example, substitutes such as polylactide (PLA) use maize (*Zea mays*) or switchgrass
187 (*Panicum spp.*) as a feedstock, and, if produced on a large scale, could affect food and water security,
188 as well as the available area of habitat for native species. Biodegradation of PLA under natural
189 environmental conditions is also very slow, taking between 100 and 1000 years [23]. Life-cycle
190 assessments have not been applied to many of these new materials to evaluate the trade-offs of
191 switching from conventional plastics. Furthermore, seeking substitutes for plastics may prevent
192 public awareness of the benefits of reducing overall consumption.

193

194 ***Effects of shinorine sunscreens on corals and other marine species***

195 The amino acid shinorine, which strongly absorbs ultraviolet light and hence has potential for use in
196 sunscreens, has recently been produced using a synthetic biology approach [24]. Shinorine is
197 currently produced from wild-harvested algae (*Porphyra umbilicalis*), but the new process has
198 inserted a gene cluster from the filamentous cyanobacterium *Fischerella* into the freshwater
199 cyanobacteria *Synechocystis*, yielding titres commensurate with commercial use [24]. Many
200 conventional sunscreens currently contain oxybenzone and octinoxate, which are thought to
201 contribute to coral reef bleaching through direct toxicity and increased risk of viral infection in coral
202 [25]. As a result, there is considerable interest in developing new sunscreens that do not have
203 negative effects on corals. However, shinorine has wider biological effects, such as stimulating
204 inflammatory responses in humans [26]. The potential effects on marine organisms of extensive
205 adoption of shinorine in sunscreen products are unknown.

206

207 ***A new irrigation canal in northwest China supplied by water from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau***

208 A newly proposed canal, the Hongqi River, has gained traction as a mechanism to irrigate
209 agriculturally unproductive semi-desert in northern China [27]. The planned 6,188 km canal would
210 divert freshwater from the Yarlung-Zangbo River, and travel along the eastern edge of the Qinghai-
211 Tibetan plateau to Xinjiang. The annual water flow could be 60 billion m³, equivalent to the annual
212 runoff of the Yellow River, which would irrigate an area of approximately 200 000 km². To date,
213 environmental impact assessments have not been published, yet this project could have substantial
214 ecological effects. First, there may be direct impacts on native species and ecosystems [28] through
215 irrigation and conversion to agriculture. Second, changing patterns of river connectivity and
216 hydrological regimes may impact in-stream and riparian ecology and affect regional land cover by
217 reducing water flow over huge areas. Third, water extraction on this scale is likely to affect the
218 downstream ecology of the Yarlung-Zangbo River in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Such changes
219 could have dramatic impacts on biodiversity [28] and regional climate, including precipitation
220 patterns. They could also cause a major shift in human settlement patterns, with up to 100 000
221 people directly displaced. Furthermore, changes in hydrology may increase the probability of
222 earthquakes [29]. Although the canal is still conceptual, proposals have been announced publicly,
223 and further development seems plausible [29].

224

225

226 ***Modification of weather in the Tibetan Plateau by cloud seeding***

227 China's state-run Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation has announced plans to build an
228 extensive network of cloud-seeding devices on the mountain ridges lining the Tibetan Plateau [30].
229 The project has been made possible through the application of military rocket technology, controlled
230 by a satellite network. These rockets can burn high-density fuel in low-oxygen, high-elevation
231 environments and release silver iodide particles into the atmosphere [31]. These particles act as

232 condensation nuclei that crystallize cloud vapour to induce precipitation. With plans to cover 1.6
233 million km², this could add 10 billion m³ of water each year to the current annual rainfall of 200-500
234 mm, with the potential to alter substantially the weather over large areas. If implemented, cloud
235 seeding could have considerable effects on the semi-arid alpine ecosystems of the region, increasing
236 loss of the current alpine cold steppe and meadow habitats and threatening many endemic species
237 in the region. Additionally, there are concerns that altering current weather patterns could affect
238 water availability from some of Asia's major rivers, on which 1.4 billion people currently depend.

239

240

241 ***Salt-tolerant strains of rice***

242 Rising sea-levels and irrigation have driven the salinization of both coastal and inland agricultural
243 soils, leading agronomists to seek to develop salt-tolerant strains of staple crops. This has included a
244 recent intensive drive to use genetic technology to develop salt-tolerant rice (*Oryza sativa*) in China
245 (for example, [32]), and a recent collaboration between China and Dubai may have increased the
246 likelihood of its commercial cultivation in halophytic regions. New strains of rice have yielded over
247 6.0 t/ha [33] when irrigated with dilute seawater; this is comparable to commercial yields in many
248 rice-growing regions of the world [34]. If these yields are transferable to larger areas, rice production
249 could become feasible on saline and alkaline soils that currently cannot support this cereal. According
250 to the Agriculture Department of China there were approximately 34 million ha of saline-alkali land
251 in China at the end of 2015 [35]. If large-scale cultivation is undertaken, appropriation of additional
252 freshwater will still be necessary as the salinity of water used in the Dubai experiments was a tenth
253 that of seawater. Salinization and other ecological effects of conversion of natural ecosystems to
254 commercial cultivation of salt-tolerant rice, especially in coastal areas and continental inland salt
255 steppe, have not been fully explored.

256

257

258 ***US government decision not to regulate gene-edited plants***

259 Gene editing using novel techniques such as clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic
260 repeats (CRISPR) can introduce plant traits more quickly and precisely than traditional methods,
261 potentially increasing crop productivity. For example, a team in China recently developed a variety
262 of rice that yielded 25-31% more grain than non-edited rice in field tests [36]. It may also be used to
263 transform species that have not formerly been utilised by humans into new crops via targeted
264 changes to plant toxicity, fruit size, nutritional content or growth conditions [37]. In March 2018, the
265 US Department of Agriculture announced that it had no plans to regulate gene editing of plants that
266 otherwise could be developed via traditional breeding techniques [38]. By contrast, the European
267 Court of Justice stated in July 2018 that gene-edited crops should be subject to the same stringent
268 regulations that apply to genetically modified organisms [39]. Despite the European Union ruling, the
269 absence of US regulation is likely to catalyse innovation in gene-editing, and research is currently
270 underway to improve efficiency, without introducing other genomic changes that have unintended
271 and undesirable consequences. Depending on the specifics of the gene-edited plants and associated
272 production systems, effects on biodiversity could be positive or negative. These could range from
273 reductions in agro-chemicals usage and the area needed for crop production, to further
274 intensification of cropping and forestry systems and unforeseen effects on native species, and
275 increases in use of various agro-chemicals if resistant crop varieties are developed.

276

277

278 ***Effect on insects of transgenic oilseed crops that produce omega 3 fatty acids***

279 Oilseed varieties have recently been genetically engineered to produce the omega-3 fatty acids
280 eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosapentaenoic acid (DHA), which do not usually occur in
281 terrestrial plants [40]. The technology enhances the nutritional value of the oilseeds for humans, and
282 could also substantially reduce demand for fatty acids from wild-caught fisheries, which currently
283 supply EPA and DHA in fishmeal and fish oil for the aquaculture industry and human dietary
284 supplements. However, fatty acids are involved in key physiological functions in invertebrates and
285 vertebrates. The inclusion of EPA and DHA in the fat profile of oilseeds proportionally reduces the
286 availability of alpha-linolenic acid, which is essential for health, growth, cognition, and survival in
287 terrestrial insects [41]. In cropping systems, these highly bioactive fatty acids would add a novel
288 component to the diets of primary consumers, with potentially major impacts across food webs. For
289 instance, butterfly larvae feeding on these crops develop into heavier adults but have smaller wings
290 that are more likely to be deformed [42]. It is unclear whether regulatory agencies worldwide have
291 examined the potential for these novel crops to have unintended consequences on animals,
292 especially insects, in agricultural areas.

293

294

295 ***Harnessing plant microbiomes for agricultural production and ecosystem restoration***

296 Plants host a diverse community of tightly associated microbes – their microbiome – which facilitates
297 tolerance of stress such as drought and enhances their growth and disease resistance [43].
298 Manipulation of plant microbiomes has considerable potential to increase the success of ecosystem
299 restoration actions [44] and improve agricultural yields and disease resistance [45]. To date, most
300 biome manipulations have inoculated plants with a few beneficial microbial strains, whereas
301 manipulating complex microbial communities largely has not been feasible [45]. Technological
302 advances have recently reinvigorated this field. Several start-up companies are actively exploiting the

303 plant microbiome, aided by increasingly cheap DNA sequencing and developments in analytical
304 techniques such as machine learning. For example, Indigo Agriculture identified the microbiome of
305 healthy cotton plants under drought conditions, and sells microbe-coated cotton seeds that have 11-
306 15% greater yield during drought. AgBiome has altered crop microbiomes to combat fungal diseases,
307 reducing the need for fungicides. Given demand for sustainable agricultural systems and mistrust of
308 genetically modified organisms, elucidating the rules of functionally programmable plant microbiome
309 assembly may lead to another revolution in agriculture. Effects on biological diversity may be both
310 positive and negative, from reduced pesticide and fertiliser use, to agricultural expansion into areas
311 formerly marginal for agriculture but rich in wildlife.

312

313

314 ***Expansion of plantations and infrastructure into Indo-Malay islands***

315 Many Indo-Malay islands have high species richness and exceptional levels of endemism. However,
316 only 2% of land in the region is formally protected, and annual rates of deforestation are increasing.
317 The average size of a palm oil plantation across the whole Indo-Malay Archipelago is currently
318 approximately 1 km², compared with 10 km² in Borneo and 6 km² in Papua New Guinea, where palm
319 oil plantations are well-established [46]. However, there are signs of expanding infrastructure and
320 industrialization of plantations across the region. For example, in Halmahera in Indonesia, industrial
321 housing complexes accounted for 37% of major deforestation in 2014, and deforestation increased
322 by 250% in 2015 as industrial scale palm oil cultivation commenced. Across southeast Asia,
323 commodity-driven deforestation accounts for 61% of tree cover loss [47], and former estimates of
324 annual forest loss across the region were biased downwards. Although the damaging consequences
325 of the expansion of palm oil plantations in the region are well-known, with global annual production
326 increasing from 4.5 million tonnes to 70 million tonnes between 1980 and 2014, and demand

327 predicted to grow by 1.7% each year until 2050 [48], the impacts of their spread into small, highly
328 biodiverse and fragile island systems have not been fully considered. The high levels of endemism in
329 this region, especially on the small islands of Nusa Tenggara and Maluku, suggest that further palm
330 oil plantation expansion could cause a substantial number of extinctions across the region.

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332

333 ***Development of fisheries in the mesopelagic zone***

334 The mesopelagic zone of the ocean extends from depths of 200 to 1000 m, and this largely
335 unexplored biome is biologically rich [49]. To date, technological limitations and high costs have
336 constrained exploitation of this zone by commercial fisheries. However, recent estimates of an
337 abundant and virtually untapped biomass of mesopelagic fishes (as much as 10^9 tonnes), coupled
338 with growing demand for raw feed for the aquaculture sector, emerging markets for food
339 supplements, and changing policy contexts for traditional fisheries, have reignited interests in
340 commercial exploitation [50]. Although the economic viability remains unclear, several countries,
341 including Norway and Pakistan, have issued experimental licences for commercial harvesting [51, 52].
342 Mesopelagic fish species connect primary consumers and predators in oceanic food webs, and their
343 slow growth and reproductive rates make them highly vulnerable to depletion. Furthermore these
344 species play a critical role in transporting organic carbon to the deep sea; the effects of harvesting
345 this biomass on marine carbon cycles are unknown. The potential for extensive extraction of
346 mesopelagic communities and the absence of effective regulations for fishing the high seas [8]
347 suggest that effects on marine life, food webs, and the global climate may be substantial [52].

348

349

350 ***Industrial microbial feed production***

351 Expanding human population and changing diets [53] are increasing demand for high-quality protein
352 from livestock, with associated environmental effects such as land-use change, loss of biodiversity,
353 nutrient enrichment, and emissions of greenhouse gases [54]. Novel livestock feed sources could
354 mitigate these environmental effects. One proposal is the use of industrially-produced microbial
355 protein to feed animals. Replacing 2% of livestock feed with microbial protein could decrease
356 cropland area, nitrogen losses, and agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by more than 5% [55]. The
357 particular microbial protein production system used determines whether emissions and land-use
358 change offsets are positive or negative. Microbial protein produced from natural gas or hydrogen
359 could decouple production from cropland, reducing negative effects of cultivation but requiring
360 considerable amounts of energy. Vegetable-based feedstocks such as sugar or biogas have fewer
361 environmental benefits, requiring agricultural land to produce, and potentially increasing emissions
362 of nitrogen and greenhouse gases. The global effects of production system displacement on human
363 livelihoods also are unclear.

364

365

366 ***Innovative insurance products to share costs and benefits of protecting natural assets***

367 Through sustainable management, ecosystems can provide major services to people [56]. There is an
368 effort to develop insurance products to cover valuable natural assets, analogous to the use of other
369 insurance schemes that protect assets, avoid financial loss, and provide funds for repairs [57]. This is
370 a novel development, as it is the natural assets themselves that are being insured against loss or
371 damage. In Mexico, such a scheme is being used to share the costs and benefits of protecting a
372 stretch of the Mesoamerican Reef. The Mexican government, along with local hotel owners, the
373 insurance industry, and The Nature Conservancy have developed an insurance product through a
374 trust fund called the Coastal Zone Management Trust. The Trust has two roles: to buy an insurance

375 policy on a stretch of the reef, and to maintain the reef and local beaches. On the basis of a parametric
376 policy, where payment is triggered when a specified wind-speed is reached, the Trust will make funds
377 available to restore the reef and beach after a severe storm [58]. This type of innovative insurance
378 product could help protect and improve the health of other natural systems to the continued benefit
379 of people.

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381

382 ***Effects of noncompliance with the Montreal Protocol on global environmental governance***

383 Stratospheric levels of chlorofluorocarbon 11 (CFC-11), one of the most potent ozone-depleting
384 compounds, have been declining much more slowly than expected [59]. This could slow the rate of
385 reversal of the ozone hole, resulting in an increase in the amount of ultraviolet radiation reaching
386 Earth, with negative effects on humans and other species. In 1987, the globally ratified Montreal
387 Protocol on Substances that deplete the Ozone Layer introduced stepped limits on CFC production
388 and use, culminating in a global ban by 2010. The recent trend in CFC levels raised concerns that CFCs
389 may again be in illicit production. Further investigation provided evidence that CFC-11 is being used
390 illegally in parts of China for the manufacture of foam insulation for the construction industry [60].
391 The Montreal Protocol has long been heralded as a rare success among international environmental
392 treaties, and is the most successful example to date. The recent developments raise questions about
393 the feasibility of enforcing multilateral agreements in general. Failure to resolve this apparent
394 compliance challenge is likely to have profound effects on the future credibility of global
395 environmental governance.

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399 **Discussion**

400

401 Each annual horizon scan for global conservation issues identifies a diverse set of topics. Of the fifteen
402 topics identified this year, many focus on advances or applications in technology or step changes in
403 the demand for commodities, and the potential effects on the ecosystems supplying those resources.
404 Most of the issues we identified this year, as in previous years, are new developments that could
405 have direct or unintended environmental effects. Nevertheless, six of the developments could have
406 either positive or negative consequences (or both): the capacity of Antarctic benthos to store carbon,
407 options for addressing plastic pollution, regulation of gene-edited plants, harnessing plant
408 microbiomes for agricultural production, industrial microbial feed production, and shinorine
409 sunscreens. A number of these issues highlight the challenges of devising solutions to many
410 conservation challenges. If the implementation of solutions, such as alternatives to plastics or
411 sunscreens, are associated with unforeseen or uncertain negative consequences this can be a difficult
412 message to communicate effectively to innovation funders, policy makers, and the general public.
413 Only one issue (innovative insurance products) could be considered entirely positive for the
414 conservation of biological diversity.

415

416 A recurring theme in our horizon scans over the last five years is the ability of the governments of
417 influential countries, such as China and the United States of America, to make policy or economic
418 decisions regarding infrastructure, trade, or agriculture that can result in global environmental
419 impacts. Such governmental decisions, for which the reasoning and timing can be opaque and
420 unpredictable, can have considerable influence over whether a new approach or technology is widely
421 adopted. Topics that fall into this area include cloud seeding and irrigation on the Tibetan Plateau,
422 the US government's decision not to regulate gene-edited plants, and, potentially, the planting of

423 salt-tolerant rice, if international collaboration or state-backing drives spatially-extensive
424 deployment. Similar issues identified in previous horizon scans included ecological civilisation policies
425 in China, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the erection of fences along national borders [1, 6, 61].
426 The effects of these phenomena may increase if intergovernmental institutions become less
427 important. Indeed, decisions by the governments of influential countries will also determine the
428 effectiveness of global environmental governance or agreements, such as the Montreal Protocol
429 (1987) and the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
430 (2015).

431

432 Another striking aspect of the topics raised here is that many are associated with novel agricultural
433 technologies (gene-edited plants, new irrigation methods or infrastructure). This surely reflects a
434 perceived urgency in meeting food demands for growing and enriching global populations, coinciding
435 with a maturing biotechnology revolution. Past examples where agricultural innovation rapidly
436 threatened wild animals have included the effects of diclofenac on vultures [62] and neonicotinoids
437 on bees [63], with agricultural intensification responsible for continent-wide losses of species (e.g.
438 [64]. We previously identified the rapidly growing field of biotechnology as an area to watch [1], and
439 these developments appear now to be increasingly likely, as gene editing technologies become more
440 effective and widely used, their products become more marketable, and reduced regulation makes
441 their large-scale deployment, maybe without adequate checks, more likely [65].

442

443 A challenge in our horizon-scanning process is deciding where on the spectrum from novel-uncertain
444 to established-certain we should target identification of issues. We aim to avoid both topics that are
445 so speculative that they are unlikely to materialize, as well as those that are widely known or are
446 unlikely to have major effects. We thus seek topics for which awareness is currently low, but evidence

447 is sufficient to suggest that realization is plausible. Topics that were submitted this year, but
448 considered too uncertain included the use of sunscreen layers at the sea surface to protect coral
449 reefs, the impacts of neo-protectionist trade policies, the effects of ocean acidification on
450 phytotransferrin in diatoms [66], and the effects of daisy-chain gene drives on wildlife [67]. Because
451 these issues were based solely on a single scientific publication or press release, there was a low level
452 of evidence and high uncertainty as to whether substantial effects may result. However, we plan to
453 revisit these topics in the future if more evidence emerges with which to evaluate them. Conversely,
454 other submitted topics, such as the use of common species as substitutes for rare species in
455 traditional medicine, the use of portable DNA tests to detect trade in illegal wildlife products, or the
456 ban on sunscreens to protect reefs in Hawaii, were considered by the group to be too well-known for
457 retention.

458

459 More than 70 experts from 46 organisations have participated in our annual horizon scans over the
460 last ten years. Of the 150 topics identified from 2010 to 2019, 30 were related to effects of changes
461 in energy production and resource use; 21 to social, political and economic changes; 16 to effects of
462 climate change; 16 to changes in agriculture; 15 to changes in pollutants and toxicants (including
463 greenhouse gases); and 12 to biotechnology and other technological advances. We classified topics
464 as new technologies if they were new developments, but their potential effects are not yet clear or
465 may be extensive, such as artificial life (2010, [7]) or the 3D printing revolution (2013, [68]). Other
466 recurring topics included impacts on marine conservation (11 issues) or terrestrial conservation
467 (nine issues), effects of emerging or re-emerging diseases (nine issues) and non-native invasive
468 species (seven issues), and novel approaches to monitoring (four issues). Where feasible, we
469 classified topics on the basis of their potential effects. For example, we included both methane

470 venting from the ocean floor (2011, [69]) and rapid transformation of the Arctic benthos (2018, [8])
471 as effects of climate change.

472

473 We believe that these annual scans continue to identify emerging issues that are relevant to global
474 conservation and should be considered by researchers, policy makers and practitioners. In a
475 companion paper, we assess the issues identified in the first horizon scan [7], and investigate the
476 degree to which the issues have been realized or become greater priorities in the scientific and
477 policy agenda (Sutherland *et al.* in review).

478

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491

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504 [room/20180112IPR91630/new-fisheries-rules-add-a-ban-on-electric-pulse-fishing-say-meps](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180112IPR91630/new-fisheries-rules-add-a-ban-on-electric-pulse-fishing-say-meps)
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647 **Figure 1.** The stages of the horizon scanning procedure used to identify the topics presented in this
648 paper.