



Global environmental change research: Science without borders

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The UN Millennium Development Goals are an inspiring and formidable challenge for society: within the next decade we must aim to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat deadly diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and construct a global partnership for development. At the same time, society is faced with other challenges such as global climate change, air pollution, decreases in global biodiversity, food resources and how all of these issues tie into global security.

Some have argued that it is not feasible to address all of these issues at once, and that we should simply use a sort of cost-benefit analysis to choose one on which to concentrate. This view may be appealing, but it is fundamentally misguided. It would be a tragedy if, for instance, we were able to completely eradicate HIV/AIDS only to discover that by ignoring global environmental change issues, malaria had become even more widespread or fresh water resources even more scarce. We do not have the luxury of solving these problems one at a time; they need to be tackled together. Understanding how the natural Earth System works, and how we humans influence (and are influenced by) it is at the very heart of addressing these issues, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

We now know that human activities now match (and often exceed) the natural forces that regulate the Earth System. Recent ice core data show that current levels of carbon dioxide and methane are well outside the range of natural variability over the last 800,000 years. Roughly half of the world's ice-free land surface has been altered by human actions. Humans now fix more nitrogen than nature does. Particles emitted by human activities alter the energy balance of the planet, as well as have adverse

effects on human health. These may seem to be unrelated issues; however, over the last decades, we have gained a deeper understanding of the degree to which all of these separate issues are linked. The Earth System is a very complex system with myriad feedbacks, and it has and presumably can still exhibit rapid, global-scale responses to changes in environmental conditions.

The global change research community faces an increasing challenge to present research results in more accessible and informative ways to stakeholders - particularly those concerned with sustainable development. We are frequently expected to answer questions on the effects of global change on regional- and even local scales: stakeholders seek strategies to deal with future environmental change.

The need to understand how the natural world works has not diminished, but in fact underpins the answers to questions of sustainable development. We still must concentrate on first class science involving the interactions and feedbacks between biological, chemical and physical processes and human systems. However, scientists, resource managers and policy makers require a common understanding in order for their interactions to be mutually beneficial. The European perspective and approach to creating and fostering these linkages has been one of the more successful ones, but there is still considerable room for improvement.

In my presentation, I will attempt to give an overview of the current landscape of Earth System Science, give an example (or two) of planetary-scale feedback systems that may impact sustainable development strategies, discuss some of the current structural challenges we have in addressing the interdisciplinary questions with which we are faced, and provide some perspectives on the larger global roles European research collaboration can play.