

TRANSCRIPT

The Major Sustainability Milestones

Rohan Hazell:

Sustainability is much more than a buzzword. From shaping government agendas to influencing business models and guiding international civil society initiatives, sustainability is fast becoming a driving force in our world, one that impacts you, your community, country, and organisation.

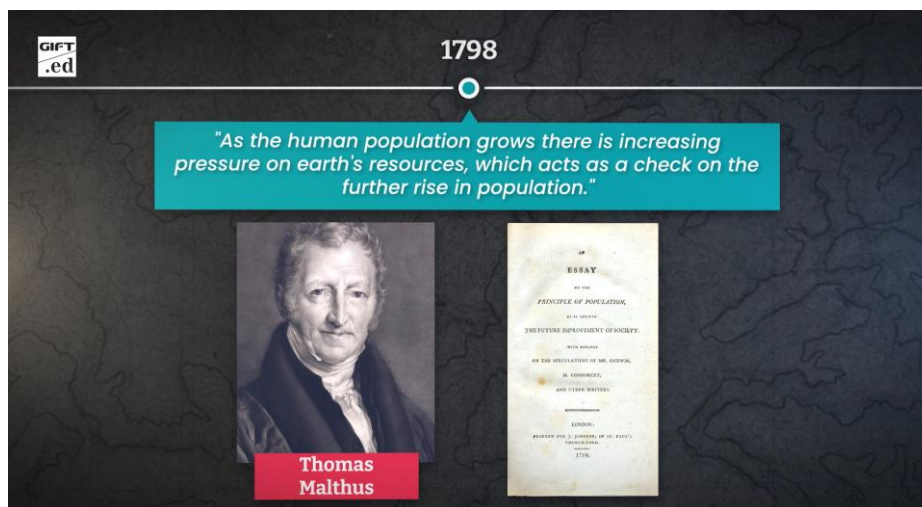
But the reality is, sustainability means different things to different people. That's why it is incumbent on all of us to have a good understanding of it and how it's shaping our future.

In this series, you will go on a journey of deconstructing and reimagining sustainability from a fresh perspective.

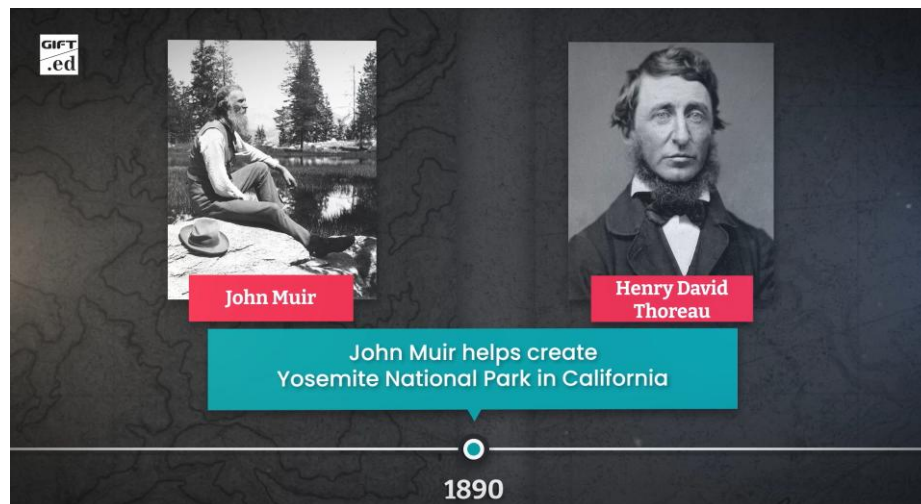
You'll hear from leading global experts on what our greatest sustainability challenges are. We'll also examine some of the greatest myths about sustainability and help you to come to your own conclusions about the challenges we face and how to overcome them.

To start, we'll lay the foundation by looking at a timeline of the origins of sustainability and how it has been influenced by different cultures, philosophies and organisations.

The underpinnings of modern sustainability can be traced as far back as the 17th century, with the philosophies of key thinkers like Thomas Malthus, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill, who discussed the importance of balance between human development and nature.



Malthus is best known for his work, "An Essay on the Principle of Population," first published in 1798, which proposed the idea that population growth would eventually outstrip available resources, leading to widespread famine, poverty, and suffering. This outcome, termed a Malthusian Trap, still influences sustainability discussions today.

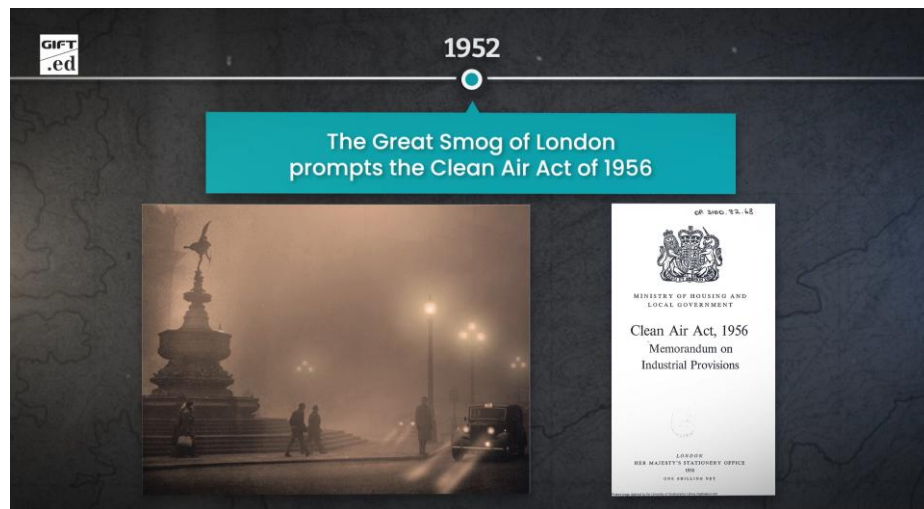


In America in the 19th century, concerns for protecting natural resources were arising, with thinkers like John Muir and Henry David Thoreau making key philosophical contributions. Muir in particular successfully lobbied the American government in 1890 to form Yosemite National Park in California, the first large-scale conservation effort of its kind. These conservationist principles, as well as the belief in the rights of nature, became the bedrock of modern environmentalism.



In the 20th century, disparate movements came together to form sustainability as we know it today. In 1948, the International Union for the Protection of Nature was founded. It aimed to promote a unique partnership of government and nongovernmental organisations to protect the environment. It exists to this day, but you may know it as the International Union

for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, the organisation that produces the endangered animals list. It now has a membership of over 1,400 organisations. and a network of 15,000 scientists and experts that work in IUCN commissions.



In 1952, the Great Smog of London caused by industrial air pollution led to the deaths of 12 thousand people, prompting the Clean Air Act of 1956, a milestone in what would become modern environmental regulation.



And in the mid-20th century, numerous writers tackled the relationship between humans and the environment. One of the most significant was Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist, who wrote "Silent Spring" in 1962, which highlighted how pesticides can spread up the food chain and decimate bird populations. Her book became a global success, sparking the modern environmental movement as we know it today.



1972

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is founded, and the "The Limit of Growth" is published by the Club of Rome



United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 5-16 June 1972, Stockholm

Background

The first world conference on the environment

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm was the first world conference to make the environment a major issue. The participants adopted a series of principles for sound management of the environment including the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment¹⁷ and several resolutions.

The Stockholm Declaration, which contained 26 principles, placed environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns and marked the start of a dialogue between industrialized and developing countries on the link between economic growth, the pollution of the air, water and oceans and the well-being of

Documents

- 1968: Resolutions
- 1968: Resolutions
- 1972: Parties
- 1972: Report

[See all official documents](#)

Articles

- 2012: History
- 2013: The 1972

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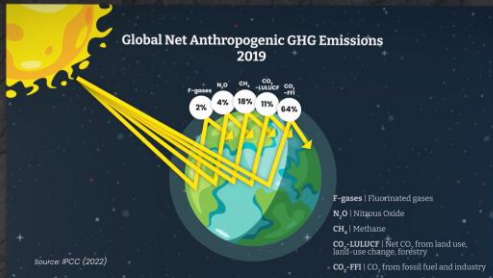
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Ten years later, the international community began organising regular conferences that deal with sustainability. In 1972, the United Nations ran the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Many believe this marked the first global attempt to address environmental sustainability. Importantly, it led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Programme, or UNEP. This set the tone for international efforts to steward environmental resources, which ran in parallel to governments setting national environmental regulations for the very first time. For example, America's Environmental Protection Agency, set up in 1970, was the first national agency dedicated to the environment.

Different research efforts also played an important role during this time. For example, also in 1972, the global scientific think tank the Club of Rome published the seminal report, "The Limits to Growth," which was the first major attempt at modelling the consequences of uncontrolled resource consumption, and ultimately called for a state of global equilibrium in our economic models. It was controversial at the time but is now seen as being ahead of its time.



1979



Global Net Anthropogenic GHG Emissions 2019

Source: IPCC (2022)

World Climate Conference urges international action on the green house effect

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Then in 1979, the World Climate Conference concluded that the "greenhouse effect" from increased buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere demanded urgent international action.



Ultimately, these different strands of research and international institutional efforts came together in 1980, when the IUCN published the "World Conservation Strategy," which identified the main agents of habitat destruction as poverty, population pressure, social inequity, and trading regimes. The strategy called for a new development strategy to address inequities as a core driver of sustainability. It was also the first time the term "sustainable development" was brought to the global stage.



At this point, sustainable development began to appear in international discussions, which brings us to the World Commission on Environment and Development of 1987, also known as the Brundtland Commission. It expanded on the concept of sustainable development in the report "Our Common Future", defining it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

This is a pivotal moment because it confirmed what we know today: sustainability is not just as an environmental movement, but an effort to transform how our economic systems, governance mechanisms, and societies operate.

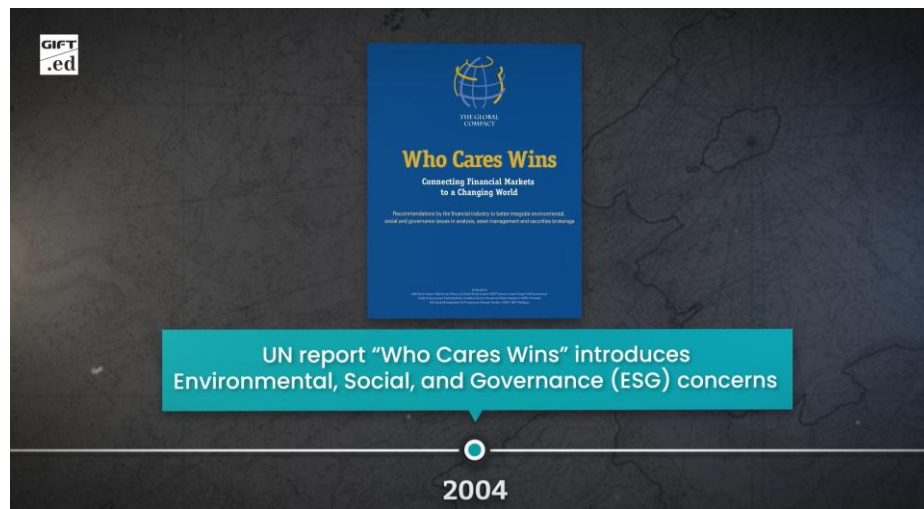


After the term sustainable development was coined, national and international initiatives began to accelerate. In 1992, the Earth Summit and the famous Kyoto Protocol took place, formally bringing the climate change challenge into government agendas across the world.



In 1996, the International Organization for Standardization introduced ISO 14001, which required businesses to ensure their activities have minimal environmental impact. This is followed by the Dow Jones Sustainability Group Index which tracks leading corporate sustainability practices worldwide, to facilitate global flows of capital into sustainable businesses. This is an important step in formalising the rise of socially responsible investing, which remains as one of the most widely discussed elements of sustainability to this day.

And in 2002, the Global Reporting Initiative formulated guidelines on how organisations should report on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of their business activities - the first of its kind.



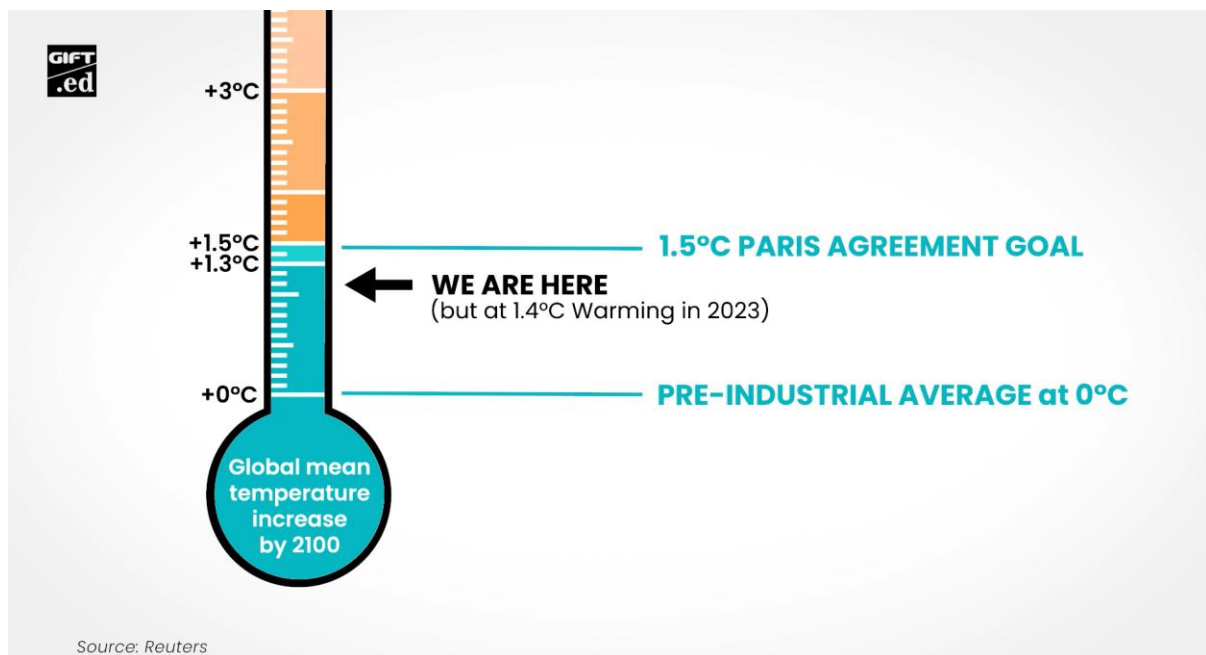
After this, efforts to move businesses toward being more socially and environmentally responsible became more intense, and the UN published a report in 2004 entitled “Who Cares Wins,” which is widely considered to be the first mainstream mention of Environmental, Social, and Governance concerns, or ESG.

As a result of this rising trend, companies around the world began releasing products and services that are supposedly “green”, or less destructive to the environment and societies. This ranges from cars to fertiliser and consulting services.



Then in 2015, the world saw the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, in which 193 countries reinforced the global commitment to sustainability. These goals cover a broad range of sustainability issues, from ending global poverty to

guaranteeing food security and providing universal education. Also, nearly every country signed the Paris Agreement, a legally binding successor to the Kyoto protocol, to try and limit global warming to 1.5°C.



Since the 2015 turning point, global efforts are now being made to enact sustainable development at a scale never before seen. These initiatives have had varying levels of success, but whatever your opinion of it, sustainability is here to stay.

In the next chapter we will revisit the sustainability timeline with a critical eye to see some of the important factors commonly missed, starting with non-Western contributions to sustainable development.