Science Policy Newsletter – a weekly round-up of policy headlines and stories

6 May 2020

This newsletter provides links to published news articles, preserving the original title and summary line. Views or opinions presented are those of the original author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Royal Society of Biology.

News

Top stories

Coronavirus: World leaders pledge billions for vaccine fight

One billion people will live in insufferable heat within 50 years – study
Human cost of climate crisis will hit harder and sooner than previously believed, research reveals.

Royal Society of Biology news

Celebrate RSB membership and get three months’ free throughout Membership May
The RSB is launching its first ever #MembershipMay campaign across social media, as part of the 10 year anniversary celebrations.

New Q&A series on bioscience’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic
The Biologist has launched a new COVID Q&A series exploring how life scientists around the world have sprung into action to help understand, track, and treat COVID-19.

COVID-19 Bulletin
For further detail on COVID-19 research, news and updates, RSB has developed a periodic bulletin collating some of the bioscience behind the outbreak and response, see our webpages to read previous editions and subscribe to the next.
Main RSB webpage on COVID-19
The RSB is working to adapt and ensure our services are delivered to the greatest extent possible whilst also taking into account Public Health England and Government advice during the pandemic. We regularly update this webpage with relevant information about our activities, initiatives and community support.

Health and biomedicine

COVID-19 treatments could be fast-tracked through new national clinical trial initiative
COVID-19 treatments could be fast-tracked through a new national clinical trial initiative involving UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and partners in industry and the government.

Whose coronavirus strategy worked best? Scientists hunt most effective policies
Researchers sift through data to compare nations’ vastly different containment measures.

COVID-19: Complex reasons for different country responses
There are many complex reasons why countries have reacted differently to the COVID-19 outbreak and these should be fully understood before any judgment is passed about a certain response.

Coronavirus: Millions of children risk missing vaccines, says UN

Malaria 'completely stopped' by microbe

Food and drink

Coronavirus: Food supply chains 'need a rethink'

Agriculture and fisheries

LED lights halve unwanted fish in nets, research finds
Study shows lit escape holes allow non-target species to get away, protecting populations.

Climate change could wreck traditional sheep farming in Wales

Alarm over deaths of bees from rapidly spreading viral disease
Researchers study whether new strain of chronic bee paralysis virus is responsible.
Forestry
Forests ‘can take cover to resist alien invaders’

Environment and ecology

Environmental controls key to coronavirus recovery, chancellor told
Cross-party group of MPs ask for funds to encourage better agriculture, halt deforestation and avoid another pandemic.

Coronavirus lockdown: Can nature help improve our mood?

Water and air

Clean air in Europe during lockdown ‘leads to 11,000 fewer deaths’
Study into effects of coronavirus curbs also finds less asthma and preterm births.

Tyre pollution: lowering car emissions with new EU tyre labels
More fuel-efficient tyres mean lower emissions. Proposed new EU tyre labels will help you choose based on fuel efficiency, wet grip and noise level.

As lockdowns lift, new hazards lurk in the water
Stagnant water in unused buildings can harbour infectious bacteria and heavy metals. Scientists point out that guidance on reopening is limited.

Chairman warns parts of UK could run out of water

Climate and energy

Covid-19 crisis will wipe out demand for fossil fuels, says IEA
Renewable electricity may be only source to withstand biggest shock in 70 years.

Britain breaks record for coal-free power generation
Coal-fired plants have not contributed to electricity grid for 18 consecutive days.

UN chief: don’t use taxpayer money to save polluting industries
António Guterres calls for coronavirus aid to be directed at firms with green credentials.
Waste

Microplastics found in greater quantities than ever before on seabed
Currents act as conveyor belts that concentrate microplastics in hotspots, study suggests.

Microplastics disrupt hermit crabs’ ability to choose shell, study suggests
Fears pollution affecting cognition as crabs exposed to polyethylene struggle to select good homes.

Coronavirus: Recycling targets 'challenging' during pandemic

Government and Parliament

Creation of Covid-19 Committee recommended by Lords Liaison Committee
The Lords Liaison Committee has today [1 May] recommended to the House the creation of a Covid-19 Committee which will look at the long-term implications of Covid-19.

Giving scientific advice to government during a crisis
Science policy researcher Kieron Flanagan and former Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies member Brian Collins explain how the UK government seeks and uses scientific advice during an emergency.

Research funding and higher education policy

Government support package for universities and students
The Government has announced a range of measures to protect students and the higher education sector from the impact of coronavirus.

Government refuses multi-billion pound bailout for universities
Institutions instead allowed to charge full tuition fees during lockdown and £2.6bn to be paid early.

UK's international students need 'urgent' action on visas
Experts say UK government has made good start but must address further uncertainties and Visa Application Centre closures.

No campus lectures and shut student bars: UK universities’ £1bn struggle to move online
A potential £1bn bill now faces the sector, but the real problem will be maintaining quality for students in a radically altered world this September.
Schools education policy

Scottish education review delayed ‘due to coronavirus’

Teachers urge changes to 2021 exams as schools plan pupils’ return
One-way corridors, meals outside and a different curriculum are all in the mix.

‘The gap will be bigger than ever’: grammar school exams still going ahead
Heads say the Covid-19 lockdown means this year’s 11-plus cannot be fair, as many poorer children are unable to revise online.

Diversity and inclusion

We cannot let Covid-19 derail progress on closing the BAME attainment gap
One year on from the Closing the Gap report, Amatey Doku reflects on progress - and the mountain yet to be climbed.

Outreach and engagement

‘Not just weeds’: how rebel botanists are using graffiti to name forgotten flora
Pavement chalking to draw attention to wild flowers and plants in urban areas has gone viral across Europe – but UK chalkers could face legal action.

Digital technologies

New free online learning platform to boost workplace skills
Online platform ‘The Skills Toolkit’ will help people to build their skills during the coronavirus outbreak and beyond.

International news

Climate action under duress: how Dutch were forced into emissions cuts
Measures taken in response to court ruling have yet to face much dissent, partly owing to coronavirus.

‘Murder hornets’ in Washington state threaten bees and whip up media swarm
Asian giant hornet, which became more active in the state in April, is the world’s largest and can kill humans with multiple stings.

Five ways that Trump is undermining environmental protections under the cover of coronavirus
While the world focuses on the pandemic, the United States is adopting controversial policies at the Environmental Protection Agency.
Opinion

To solve the problems of this pandemic, we need more than just 'the science'
The government will unveil some of its strategy for ending lockdown this week. It must consult academics across disciplines.

There's no such thing as just 'following the science' – coronavirus advice is political
As we're seeing in this pandemic, politicians tend to favour the evidence that supports their argument.

Other

£14 million financial support for England’s zoos unveiled
Support fund for licensed zoos and aquariums affected by coronavirus.

People

Lord May of Oxford obituary
Influential chief scientific adviser to the government who made politicians and scientists think about the public they served.

Opportunities

How you can help with COVID-19
An RSB webpage collating routes through which individuals and businesses can offer their help to support the national effort to respond to the spread of COVID-19.

Intermediate Biology Olympiad 2020
The Intermediate Biology Olympiad 2020 (2nd – 9th June) for students aged 16-17 is now open for registrations. The competition challenges students' bioscience knowledge and encourages them to continue studying the biosciences beyond school/college. Students can enter free of charge. Please contact Raghav Selvam with any enquiries. Closes: 22 May 2020

RSB Outreach and Engagement Award 2020
Are you a bioscience researcher involved in science communication? If you work in any sector of UK biosciences, apply for the Royal Society of Biology Outreach and Engagement Award 2020 and win up to £1500. Closes: 26 June 2020

Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition 2020
‘Our changing world’ is the theme of this year’s Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition. Life on Earth is dynamic and we invite you to capture these transformations. The competition has two age categories each with a cash prize: 18 and over (£1000) and under 18s (£500). Closes: 24 July 2020
The Nancy Rothwell Award 2020
The Nancy Rothwell Award 2020 specimen drawing competition for 7–18 year olds is now open for submissions. Prizes include an experience day at the Royal Veterinary College for students, and their school can also win £100. Visit the Royal Society of Biology website for more information.
Closes: 31 July 2020

COVID-19 Rapid Response Rolling Call
A rolling call for proposals for rapid research into COVID-19, with the aim to review complete proposals within 4 weeks of submission. This opportunity is targeted at UK-led academic, SME and wider industry research that will address a wide range of COVID-19 knowledge gaps and needs.

Consultations

[Scottish] Government’s approach to coronavirus testing to be examined by Scottish Parliament Committee
The Parliament Committee is seeking views to find out what role testing should play in helping to tackle the pandemic, and what infrastructure is required to deliver the Government’s test, trace and isolate strategy it aims to introduce by the end of May.
Closes: 18 May 2020

UKRI Open Access Review Consultation
UKRI is reviewing its open access policies for peer-reviewed research articles and academic books that result from research supported by UKRI. The RSB response to this consultation is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute.
Closes: 29 May 2020

Impact of Covid-19 disruptions on schools and higher education institutions
An inquiry by the education select committee is open until end of May, considering the implementation of the critical workers policy, fairness of qualification arrangements and progression to next stages of education, and financial implications of closures for Higher Education Institutions. If you plan to submit evidence, please let us know by emailing consultation@rsb.org.uk.
Closes: 31 May 2020

A new UK research funding agency
The Government has declared it intends to create a new agency to be “broadly modelled” on the US ARPA, which will provide long term funding to support visionary high-risk, high-pay off scientific, engineering, and technology ideas. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee will inquire formally into the nature and purpose of this new UK research funding agency and invites written submissions. The RSB response to this consultation is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute.
Closes: 30 June 2020
UK Science, Research and Technology Capability and Influence in Global Disease Outbreaks
The Science and Technology Committee will inquire formally into the place of UK research, science and technology in the national and global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what lessons should be learned for the future. If you plan to submit evidence, please let us know by emailing consultation@rsb.org.uk.
Closes: 31 July 2020

Plastic Packaging Tax: policy design
This consultation seeks views on areas of the Plastic Packaging Tax which have been further refined as we move closer to the implementation date of April 2022.
Closes: 20 August 2020

River basin planning: Challenges and Choices
The Environment Agency is holding a consultation to gather views on the challenges our waters face and the choices we all need to make to help tackle those challenges.
Closes: 24 September 2020

RSB Policy Resource Library now online
The RSB has created a searchable, digital library of more than 800 statements, responses, briefings and other policy resources produced by the RSB and our Member Organisations across the biosciences. This collection is freely and openly accessible to everyone, including members and non-members, through the mySociety portal (no registration necessary).

Events

The Economics of Biodiversity
Humanity has prospered immensely in recent decades, but this has been coupled with profound impacts on biodiversity. This presents significant risks to our economies and way of life, as well as those of future generations. Partha Dasgupta is leading an independent, global review on the Economics of Biodiversity, commissioned by HM Treasury. Minouche Shafik will discuss and explore with Professor Dasgupta the sustainability of humanity’s engagement with nature.
Online Public Event Hosted by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.
Thursday 07 May 2020, 13:00 to 14:00

The RSB has postponed all in person events due to take place before 1st September 2020. We will aim to reschedule, or hold virtually, all cancelled events where possible, and updated information will be made available on the RSB events pages. These events will hopefully run later in year or in 2021.
We are aware that a number of events previously advertised in the Science Policy Newsletter have been cancelled owing to the novel coronavirus Covid-19. We recommend also checking other external event webpages for updates and continuing to monitor and follow official advice.
And finally...

'Crazy beast' lived among last of dinosaurs

Royal Society of Biology
Science Policy Team
1 Naoroji Street
London
WC1X 0GB
policy@rsb.org.uk

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1 Naoroji Street, London, WC1X 0GB