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PlantSci Newsletter – a monthly round-up of plant science policy headlines and stories

December 2020

This newsletter provides links to published news articles from a range of sources. 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 and debate

RSB news

[RSB seeking nominations for a new President of Council President](#)

The RSB is committed to promoting and advancing biology and being inclusive and progressive. Please consider the opportunity for RSB President if you share our ambition or know of someone who does. You may nominate yourself, or someone else without involving them. Further details and the brief nomination form are available [online](#), with nominations to be submitted via SurveyMonkey.

Closes: 31 January 2021

[RSB seeking applications for a new Chair of Education & Science Policy \(ESP\) Committee](#)

Our ESP Committee is one of the two main advisory committees to RSB Council. Full details, including the job description & personnel specification and the online application form are available via [mySociety](#).

Closes: 31 January 2021

Plant health and biosecurity

[International Year of Plant Health 2020, the year in review](#)

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) reviews the International Year of Plant Health (IYPH) and its activities in support of the initiative.

For more on the International Year of Plant Health, [read about and engage](#) with the RSB's work with partners to facilitate an ongoing national conversation and Plant Health Summit for Future Leaders.

Plant breeding

[Why a new potato variety could be a game-changer for farmers in East Africa](#)

Researchers from the National Agricultural Research Organisation Uganda and the International Potato Center have developed a new variety of potato which is resistant to late blight. Here they present their work and expert opinion on its potential application..

[Japan set to approve 1st genome-edited food for market](#)

A tomato variety developed by a Tokyo-based start-up is likely to become the first genome-edited food on supermarket shelves in Japan, reports Japan News.

Agriculture

[Global food industry on course to drive rapid habitat loss – research](#)

Study shows the world faces huge wildlife losses by 2050 unless what and how food is produced changes.

[How can we stop using soya linked to deforestation?](#)

The Guardian summarises a range of options aiming to curb the appetite for soya that harms the environment.

[Beer and crisps used to help tackle climate change](#)

The much-loved combination of beer and crisps is being harnessed for the first time to tackle climate change, reports BBC News.

Food security

[East Africa fears second wave - of locust swarms](#)

New swarms of desert locusts are threatening the livelihoods of millions of people in the Horn of Africa and Yemen despite a year of control efforts, the United Nations has warned.

[Building back better: How can we increase the resilience of the UK food system?](#)

The Global Food Security Programme summarises its latest report, asking how we can increase the resilience of the UK food system to future shocks and 'build back better' after COVID-19.

Biodiversity and conservation

['World's ugliest orchid' tops list of new discoveries](#)

The "ugliest orchid in the world" and British mushrooms are among a list of new species named by scientists at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and their collaborators in 2020.

[A palm oil alternative could help save rainforests](#)

A synthetic alternative could eventually replace natural palm oil in everything from shampoos, soaps, detergents and lipsticks, to food products like packaged bread, biscuits, margarine, ice cream and chocolate, BBC News reports.

[New chair to lead Government task force on sustainable farming of peatlands](#)

Lowland peatlands provide some of the country's most fertile soils, which play a vital role in producing food for our nation.

[Wildflower meadows to line England's new roads in boost for biodiversity](#)

Native wildflower meadows will line the verges of all new large-scale road projects under an initiative by Highways England, the Guardian reveals.

[Scotland's natural habitats at risk due to intolerable nitrogen levels](#)

Many of Scotland's iconic landscapes and natural habitats have intolerable nitrogen levels according to a report released by Plantlife Scotland.

Forestry

[Yorkshire Dales: Thousands of trees to be planted in national park](#)

Thousands of trees are to be planted across an area spanning more than 11,000 football pitches in the Yorkshire Dales, reports BBC News.

[800,000 trees set to be planted as Green Recovery Challenge Fund projects announced](#)

68 projects to receive a multi-million pound boost for green jobs and nature recovery.

[Restore UK woodland by letting trees plant themselves, says report](#)

Rewilding Britain charity says natural dispersal of seeds is cost-effective and boosts biodiversity.

[Climate crisis making autumn leaves fall earlier, study finds](#)

Global heating appears to be making trees drop their leaves earlier, according to new research, confounding the idea that warmer temperatures delay the onset of autumn.

Sustainability

[Global soils underpin life but future looks 'bleak', warns UN report](#)

It takes thousands of years for soils to form, meaning protection is needed urgently, say scientists.

[Carbon dioxide feeds plants, but are earth's plants getting full?](#)

A new study, described in The Conversation, suggests plants will draw less carbon dioxide from future atmospheres than projected.

[Glyphosate: Calls to ban cancer-linked weedkiller in Wales](#)

Campaigners are calling for the use of certain weedkillers near schools and play areas to be banned across Wales after their use was linked to cancer, BBC News reports.

Other news

[New sites to test how connecting people with nature can improve mental health](#)

Environment Minister announces seven sites will receive a share of over £5.5m pot to research how nature can be used to improve mental health and wellbeing.

For more on the biology of mental health and wellbeing, and the link to exercise and interaction with nature, read about and watch a recording of our [RSB Policy Lates event](#) on the subject, held in 2017.

People

[Dame Glenys Stacey selected as preferred Chair for Office for Environmental Protection](#)

Acting Chief Regulator at Ofqual selected as the preferred candidate to Chair the new independent body.

Opinion

[There is no point planting trees if we don't look after them](#)

Millions are being spent on tree planting initiatives, but far less cash and far fewer column inches are devoted to their aftercare, writes independent tree consultant, Paul Wood for the Green Alliance blog.

[UK Agriculture Bill: how farming and forestry could co-exist happily](#)

Alternative farming models, like wood pasture grazing, would allow the UK government to maintain food production while regenerating ecosystems, argues an article in The Conversation.

[An equitable 'Agricultural Transition'](#)

The Royal Society's Zoe Davies explains Environment Secretary George Eustice's 'Agriculture Transition Plan', its implications for English land managers, and how it relates to the Royal Society's Living Landscapes Programme.

[Plant scientists need to urgently reconcile their open access needs with the benefit-sharing rights associated with plant material](#)

International moves to extend Access and Benefits Sharing agreements to include associated data such as digital DNA sequence information (DSI) may impact directly on the activities of plant scientists, explains a post on the Global Plant Council blog.

Opportunities

RSB Gopher Science Lab free online training for primary teachers

The Royal Society of Biology is offering 40 state-funded primary schools in the UK the opportunity for four teachers to have free access to RSB's Gopher Science Lab [online training course](#). With thanks to generous support from [The Worshipful Company of Horners](#) enabling RSB to offer this opportunity. Primary school teachers working in UK based, state-funded, primary schools can email [Amanda Hardy](#) to apply on behalf of their school to access the paid-for online training places on a first come first served basis.

RSB's Science at Home festival resources online

RSB and some of our science friends have worked together to run our first ever virtual science festival - [RSB's Science at Home](#) - with activities and resources available online, so you can now take part in the festival any time that suits you. With a range of videos, activities, games and more straight to your computer screen to entertain and engage you and your family. Take part today and tell your friends via [#RSBScienceAtHome](#).

[SMEs transforming food production: series A investor partnership](#)

UK registered small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are transforming food production towards net zero can apply for a share of up to £5 million in grant support. The grant funding is from the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund.

Closes: 13 January 2021

[RSB School Biology Teacher of the Year Award](#)

Do you know an amazing biology teacher? Students, parents and carers can now [suggest a teacher](#) who they think is outstanding for the Royal Society of Biology's School Biology Teacher of the Year Award. Visit the Society's [website](#) for further information.

Closes: 29 January 2021

Consultations

Consultation on RSB's 11-19 Biology Curriculum Framework

This month, the Royal Society of Biology's [Biology Curriculum Committee](#) are pleased to be opening a closed consultation on our 11-19 biology curriculum framework. The committee would like to seek clarity on the overall organisation, presentation and message of the framework document. We are keen to receive feedback from a wide range of committee members and member organisations. Please do check our [webpage](#) for further details on when the consultation will open. If you have any direct questions, please contact helen.mitchell@rsb.org.uk.

[Reducing ammonia emissions from urea fertilisers](#)

As ammonia emissions are predominantly from agriculture (87%) and around 8% are from the use of solid urea fertilisers, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seeks your views on three policy options that give us the greatest ammonia emission reductions from regulating the use or sale of solid urea fertilisers.

Closes: 26 January 2021

[Equity in the STEM workforce](#)

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Diversity and Inclusion in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) has launched its inquiry into equity in the UK STEM workforce and is currently inviting submissions of evidence. Full details of the inquiry and call for evidence can be found on the [APPG website](#). The RSB response to this inquiry is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute.

Closes: 29 January 2021

[Sustainable use of pesticides](#)

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Devolved Administrations have produced a revised draft National Action Plan for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides. This consultation allows you to give your views on the plan that covers the next five years and aims to minimise the risks and impacts of pesticides to human health and the environment while ensuring pests and pesticide resistance are managed effectively.

Closes: 26 February 2021

[RSB Policy Resource Library 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

[Enhancing Teaching and Learning Through Learning Partnerships](#)

07 January 2021

10:00 – 14:00 GMT

A workshop from the RSB Heads of University Biosciences (HUBS) focused on engaging students as partners in teaching and learning. This event will explore pedagogies associated with learning partnerships in HE from different perspectives. By the end, participants will have a better understanding of how partnerships function and the challenges and benefits of partnerships within biosciences education.

[Natural capital priorities for coping with change](#)

14 January 2021

11:00 – 12:30 GMT

A Natural Capital Initiative panel discussion with thought leaders from science, policy and business. The panellists will share short proposals on their priorities for natural capital research, policy and practice required to underpin a green recovery. This will be followed by a chaired panel discussion with questions from participants. The discussion and distilled priorities will be communicated widely to act as a springboard for future dialogue and collaboration.

[RSB Policy Lates series](#)

Our Policy Lates series continued through 2020, with four online events bringing panels of interdisciplinary experts together to discuss pressing challenges, including antimicrobial resistance, discovery research in the era of COVID-19, healthy ageing, and the climate emergency. Hundreds of people from all over the UK, and all over the world, tuned in to join the debate. Recordings of each event are free to watch on our YouTube channel, [visit our Policy Lates page for details](#). The series resumes in 2021. Thank you to our series supporters the Biochemical Society, the British Pharmacological Society, the Society for Applied Microbiology, the Society for Experimental Biology, and The Physiological Society.

[Sanger Seminar Series](#)

The Wellcome Sanger Institute is pleased to launch a series of virtual seminars, showcasing the diversity of genomic research at the Institute aimed at tackling some of the biggest challenges in human health and disease. The virtual seminar series will take place monthly and is freely available and open to all who wish to attend.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all in person RSB events due to take place in 2020 have been cancelled, postponed or moved to an online format. Updated information will be made available on the [RSB events pages](#). Postponed events will hopefully run in late 2021. We recommend also checking other external event webpages for updates and continuing to monitor and follow official advice.

And finally...

[A video game garden: the delights of virtual botany](#)

Can rich video game worlds introduce us to nature? A forager, a programmer and a botany professor discuss the educational possibilities of simulated plantlife, in this article in the Guardian.

[Growing the future – a report from the UK Plant Sciences Federation \(UKPSF\)](#)

Growing the future highlights to policymakers and others the excellence of plant science in the UK, and its importance to the biosciences, the economy, and society both at home and around the world. The report is available to download [here](#).

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