

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

4 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

Royal Society of Biology news

[COVID-19 Bulletin](#)

For further detail on COVID-19 research, news and updates, RSB has developed a monthly bulletin collating some of the bioscience behind the outbreak and response. The latest edition, published on the 23rd of November 2020, includes updates on vaccine development and immunological memory, lessons learned from coronavirus vaccines in veterinary medicine, SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink, EU Recovery and Resilience, data visualisation, at risk groups, switching research funding, researching long-term COVID-19 effects, business investment for recovery, digital environmental solutions, and wellbeing. See [our webpages](#) to read previous editions and subscribe to the next.

[Education during COVID-19](#)

An RSB webpage listing advice, resources and announcements for schools, students and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[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

[NHS to trial blood test to detect more than 50 forms of cancer](#)

The NHS is to trial a simple blood test that may help identify more than 50 forms of cancer years before diagnosis, in what it hailed as a potential ‘gamechanger’, writes Denis Campbell, Health Policy Editor for the Guardian.

[Coronavirus has changed how we support people with failing lungs – a doctor explains why](#)

Writing for the Conversation, Michael Steiner, Professor of Respiratory Medicine, University of Leicester, addresses how the pandemic has transformed the use of non-invasive breathing support techniques.

[Improving the health and wellbeing of older people during the pandemic](#)

The Physiological Society met with Dr Alison Giles from the Centre for Ageing Better and Professor Paul Greenhaff from the University of Nottingham to discuss the launch of the recent report titled ‘A National Covid-19 Resilience Programme: Improving the health and wellbeing of older people during the pandemic’.

Food and drink

[The FSA's Food Hygiene Rating Scheme is 10 years old](#)

This article commemorates the launch of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme by the Food Standards Agency. The national scheme which runs across England, Wales and Northern Ireland provides the public with information about food hygiene standards in businesses.

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

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

[New insights will help the world protect future wheat supplies](#)

An international team has sequenced the genomes for 16 wheat varieties from around the world. The results, published in Nature, provide the most comprehensive atlas of wheat genome sequences ever reported, says the Natural History Museum.

Agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries

[Brexit: Ministers unveil next steps in England's farming policy](#)

The BBC reports on how the Government has confirmed England's countryside will radically change after the Brexit transition period.

[1% of farms operate 70% of world's farmland](#)

One per cent of the world's farms operate 70% of crop fields, ranches and orchards, according to a report that highlights the impact of land inequality on the climate and nature crises, writes Jonathan Watts, Global Environment Editor for the Guardian.

[Thousands of sheep 'stuck in limbo' over Brexit regulations](#)

Thousands of sheep bound for Northern Ireland are stuck 'in limbo' in Great Britain due to Brexit complexities, reports the BBC.

Forestry

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

Damian Carrington, Environment Editor for the Guardian, describes how 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.

Environment and ecology

[Overlooked and unloved: how a global project could unlock the world of parasites](#)

The Guardian covers how new research suggests parasites are crucial in shaping ecosystems.

[Surprise discovery of rare plant at Norfolk 'ghost pond'](#)

The BBC covers how a rare plant has reappeared after more than a century in hiding.

[Invasive species: biggest threat may be the most uncertain – disease](#)

This opinion article in the Conversation covers the potential environmental and health impacts of invasive species.

Water and air

[Flooding can help resurrect wetlands and slow climate change – here's how](#)

An article in the Conversation argues why targeted flooding, to create or restore floodplain wetlands, could be part of the solution to climate change.

Climate and energy

[UK government to subsidise onshore renewable energy projects](#)

The Guardian describes how the Government plans to double the amount of renewable energy it will subsidise next year after agreeing to include onshore wind and solar power projects for the first time since 2015.

[Black carbon and other pollution seeds clouds. We're just starting to understand the climate implications](#)

Horizon investigates how tiny particles swirling around our atmosphere add to climate change by summarising a range of studies that have analysed the particles using a range of measurements.

Waste

[Farmers and waste companies urged to check waste management processes or face enforcement action](#)

The Government has announced the Environment Agency has intercepted increasing amounts of contaminated plastic waste which were bound for illegal export.

Animal research

[University of Bristol leads scarring research project](#)

The BBC covers how a £1.5 million research programme to improve the lives of those affected by scarring is being led by the University of Bristol.

[The world's newest monkey species was found in a lab, not on an expedition](#)

Writing for the Conversation, Tracie McKinney, Senior Lecturer in Human Biology, University of South Wales, describes how the newly identified *Popa langur* was discovered through a phylogenetic study which sought to better understand the evolutionary relationships among the 20 known species of the genus *Trachypithecus*.

Government and Parliament

[Prime Minister announces £20m to grow medicines manufacturing in the UK](#)

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced the UK's ability to respond to future pandemics will be strengthened thanks to a new £20 million fund to expand medicines manufacturing.

Research funding and higher education policy

[University rankings need a rethink](#)

In this opinion article written for Nature, Elizabeth Gadd, Research-Policy Manager, Loughborough University, argues why the use of rankings to assess universities needs a rethink.

[New data highlights equality gaps for estranged students](#)

Students who are estranged from their parents are considerably less likely to be awarded a first or 2:1 and more likely to drop out in their first year of studies, according to new experimental data released by the Office for Students.

Schools education policy

[Contributing to a robust and fair system for 2021 examinations](#)

The Government describes how the Social Mobility Commission has made a series of recommendations towards plans for next year's exams in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Summer 2020 outcomes did not systemically disadvantage students](#)

The Government has announced Ofqual has published two reports evaluating summer 2020 qualification results by student group. The research suggests that students were not systemically disadvantaged in 2020 on the basis of their protected characteristics or socioeconomic status.

Open access and publication policy

[Nature journals reveal terms of landmark open-access option](#)

Publisher Springer Nature has announced how scientists can make their papers in its most selective titles free to read as soon as they are published.

Diversity and inclusion

[UN chief calls for greater inclusion of persons with disabilities](#)

The United Nations' News describes how UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in society, including in COVID-19 response and recovery.

[First Person: 'people with disabilities are the greatest untapped resource on the planet'](#)

In this opinion piece, ahead of International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Mike Hess, US-based entrepreneur and founder of the Blind Institute of Technology, spoke to the United Nations' News as part of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) photography project 'Dignity at Work: The American Experience'.

Outreach and engagement

[Engaging with the public about vaccines](#)

With the emergence of COVID-19, the crucial role that vaccines play in protecting our health has come into sharp focus. The British Society of Immunology has answered common vaccine immunology questions with the aim to provide evidence-based information to help everyone make informed decisions about vaccines and their health.

[The Ideas Fund - new Funding for Public Engagement](#)

This November the British Science Association has launched a new fund for public engagement with health research, funded by Wellcome. The Ideas Fund supports ideas that focus on mental health and will give £3.2 million in support over the next two years.

Digital technologies

['It will change everything': DeepMind's AI makes gigantic leap in solving protein structures](#)

An artificial intelligence (AI) network developed by Google AI offshoot DeepMind has made a gargantuan leap in solving one of biology's grandest challenges — determining a protein's 3D shape from its amino-acid sequence, reports Nature News.

[AI 'doctor's assistant' among projects given £20m](#)

The BBC covers how a computerised system, that advises doctors on the best treatment to give a patient, is among the artificial intelligence projects that have been awarded £20m by the British Government.

[Pill camera procedure launched in fight against bowel cancer](#)

The BBC covers how a new procedure using tiny cameras inside a pill to help detect bowel cancer has been launched in Tayside.

International news

[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) Situation Dashboard](#)

The World Health Organisation summarises the reported number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths.

[Brazil's Amazon: Deforestation 'surges to 12-year high'](#)

Deforestation of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil has surged to its highest level since 2008, reports the BBC.

['Evolving' malaria mosquitoes getting harder to control](#)

SciDev.Net covers how studies in both Africa and Latin America have found *Anopheles* malaria mosquitoes re-evolving in response to human activity.

[Africa becomes first continent to chart soil fertility in every single field](#)

A group of international scientists has developed a landmark map charting soil fertility every 30 metres across the whole of Africa, reports Rothamsted Research.

People

[Dame Jocelyn Bell-Burnell: Portrait honour for 'trailblazing' NI scientist](#)

This BBC article describes how a leading astrophysicist, who was once overlooked for a Nobel prize in favour of her male collaborators, has now taken her 'rightful place' among the world's most distinguished scientists.

[Angelika Amon, 1967-2020](#)

Times Higher Education pays tribute to the life of Professor Amon, an expert in the life cycle of cells, whose work is crucial to understanding conditions ranging from cancer to Down's syndrome.

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](#).

[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.

[Draft Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research 2022-2027](#)

The Scottish government funds a multi-million-pound portfolio of research on the environment, natural resources and agriculture. This consultation allows you to give your views on the priorities for future research, and to ensure that the strategy is setting the right direction and approach for the future research portfolio.

Closes: 14 December 2020

[Future PM2.5 concentrations in England](#)

The Air Quality Expert Group (AQEG), together with the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP), are providing independent technical advice to Defra throughout the development of the air quality targets. At the request of Defra, AQEG are seeking input from the wider research community on future PM2.5 concentrations in England.

Closes: 17 December 2020

[Total restriction of online advertising for products high in fat, sugar and salt \(HFSS\)](#)

In 2019 the Government consulted on restricting advertising of HFSS for TV and online. It asked for views on whether to extend current advertising restrictions on broadcast TV and online media, including consulting on watershed restrictions. This new consultation goes further and looks at how a total HFSS advertising restriction could be implemented online.

Closes: 22 December 2020

[Consultation on regulating quality and standards in higher education](#)

The Office for Students is consulting on its approach to regulating quality and standards in higher education. Since 2018, the focus has been on assessing providers seeking registration and they are considering whether and how it should develop its approach now that most providers are registered.

Closes: 12 January 2021

[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

[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.

Closes: 29 January 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 Heads of University Biosciences (HUBS) and the RSB 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.

[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...

[Beavers build first dam in Exmoor in more than 400 years](#)

The Guardian describes how beavers have built their first dam in Exmoor in more than 400 years after river restoration work by the National Trust.

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