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Professor Bert Bolin

Climate scientist who was one of the first to alert policymakers to the dangers of global warming



Bert Bolin was a pioneer in climate research, playing a crucial role in the international development of the field. As far back as the 1950s Bolin was doing research about the circulation of carbon in nature (the so-called carbon cycle), work that is still relevant to today's debates about climate change.

Most importantly, he was a particularly successful broker between climate science and national and international policy, playing a key role in communicating the dangers of climate change to government leaders and other decision makers. He was one of a rare breed of very effective "scientific statesmen".

Bolin was the founding chairman of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), serving as its chairman between 1988 and 1997. His efforts were internationally recognised on December 10, 2007, when the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC. Bolin was initially supposed to travel to Oslo to accept the prize on behalf of the IPCC but was unable to do so because of his poor health.

The IPCC shared the prize with the former US Vice-President Al Gore "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change".

Bolin was one of the small group of climate scientists who were responsible for raising public and government awareness early on about the risks of global climate change and the role of human activity in bringing it about, in particular by increasing the concentration of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere.

The efforts of Bolin and his colleagues led to a broad understanding of the social, political and security consequences of climate change brought about by global warming. They often had to overcome a great deal of scepticism about the mechanisms of climate change. Critics argued that, although it cannot be doubted that the Earth is warming, climate scientists do not know how much of the warming is due to human activity and how much is due to natural variability.

In spite of such initial scepticism, the IPCC is now generally regarded as the most authoritative source of information about climate change and its effects. Formed by the UN Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation as a response to a 1987 UN resolution, the IPCC produced its first assessment report of the scientific understanding of the climate change in 1990. Other assessments followed in 1995, 2001 and 2007. They are widely used by policymakers and experts.

The IPCC is a scientific body, providing objective information about climate change; it does not conduct

research itself but assesses “on a comprehensive, objective, open and transparent basis the latest scientific, technical and socioeconomic literature produced worldwide relevant to the understanding of the risk of human-induced climate change, its observed and projected impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation”. Many hundreds of scientists in all regions of the world contribute to the work of the IPCC as authors, contributors and reviewers.

Bert Richard Johannes Bolin was born in Nyköping, Sweden, in 1925. He graduated from Uppsala University in 1946. He received his master’s degree in 1949 and his doctorate in 1956, both in meteorology, at Stockholm University.

He was appointed an associate professor at Stockholm University and, in 1961, Professor of Meteorology. He held this post until 1990 when he became Professor Emeritus, remaining active until just before he died. He also served as the scientific director of the European Space Research Organisation (now known as the European Space Agency).

Bolin was the co-founder of the Stockholm Environment Institute in 1988 and played a leading role in the development of the International Geosphere Biosphere Programme, a study of global change, launched in 1986.

Between 1968 and 1971 he was the chairman of the Global Atmospheric Research Program (GARP) and, in this post, made a fundamental contribution to development of climate research and policy. GARP was established by the International Council for Science and the World Meteorological Organisation to organise the world’s weather and climate research.

Bolin used his talents in scientific diplomacy to set up a network for international co-ordination of climate research that led to the Global Weather Experiment in 1978, the World Climate Research Programme in 1979, the Villach meetings (on climate change) along with the UN Environment Programme in the 1980s, which led to the Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases in 1986 and ultimately the IPCC two years later.

Bolin published about 170 scientific papers and books. His last book, *A History of the Science and Politics of Climate Change: The Role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, was published in November 2007.

He was a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences as well as eight other academies around the world. He received many awards, among them the International Meteorological Organisation Medal; the Rossby Medal, the highest honour of the American Meteorological Society; the Tyler Prize from the University of Southern California; the Celsius Medal from the Royal Society of Sciences in Uppsala, Sweden; the Rossby Prize from the Swedish Geophysical Society; the Blue Planet Prize and the Zayed International Prize for the Environment.

Bolin was known to friends and colleagues for his enduring optimism and for his generosity. A brilliant and inspirational scientist, he was also an extraordinarily modest man — a rather rare combination.

Bolin’s marriage ended in divorce in 1979. His three children survive him.

Professor Bert Bolin, climate scientist and scientific policy adviser, was born on May 15, 1925. He died on December 30, 2007, aged 82

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