

2020/12/PR

IPCC PRESS RELEASE

1 May 2020

IPCC to dedicate new report to former Co-Chair Sir John Houghton

GENEVA, May 1 – The Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will be dedicated to the memory of leading climate scientist Sir John Houghton.

Sir John, who died of complications from COVID-19 on 15 April 2020 aged 88, was one of the key figures in the creation of the IPCC in 1988, and served as Chair and Co-Chair of Working Group I, which assesses the physical science basis of climate change, for the IPCC's first three assessment reports from 1988 to 2002.

The Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, will assess large-scale climate changes, climate processes and feedback and regional climate information. It is being prepared by 233 authors from 62 countries.

“Sir John Houghton played a fundamental role as Working Group I's Chair and Co-Chair in the IPCC's first, second and third assessments. He had deep insights into both basic climate knowledge, and societal relevance. In addition, he deliberated very carefully on how to communicate to society with rigour, humility and clarity the state of knowledge,” said Working Group I Co-Chairs Valérie Masson-Delmotte and Panmao Zhai in a joint statement.

“The co-chairs and vice-chairs of Working Group I – the Working Group I Bureau – unanimously agreed to dedicate the Sixth Assessment Report to Sir John to acknowledge his legacy,” they said.

Sir John's work was a major factor in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC in 2007, shared with former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore.

He contributed to the development of climate science and building international cooperation based upon climate research. Sir John played a key role in ensuring a robust science-policy interface, used in the IPCC process, but his role in international scientific research extended beyond the IPCC, for instance in contributing to the establishment of the World Climate Research Programme, which he chaired from 1982 to 1984.

At the outset of the IPCC, Sir John understood that the Panel needed an inclusive approach in terms of disciplines and participation.

His legacy can be seen in the current Sixth Assessment Report cycle, in which three innovative special reports were prepared across the Working Groups. The current Sixth Assessment Report Working Group I report builds on a broad network of climate scientists worldwide, including contributions from scientists from all regions of the world. Dedicating this assessment report to him is a testament to the significant role Sir John made to the IPCC and beyond.

“Sir John Houghton was an outstanding scientist and human being. His contributions to science and his leadership of IPCC Working Group I were remarkable. The credibility of IPCC is in no small

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measure due to Sir John co-chairing the first three Working Group I assessments where he earned and enjoyed the confidence and respect of both the scientific community and government officials,” said Sir Robert (“Bob”) Watson, who chaired the IPCC for its Third Assessment Report.

“His intellectual leadership and interpersonal skills led to three assessments reports that provided the evidence needed for international action to address the challenge of human-induced climate change,” he said.

The first IPCC Working Group I report (1990) concluded that “emissions resulting from human activities... will enhance the greenhouse effect, resulting on average in an additional warming of the Earth's surface”. Global mean surface temperature in 2010-2019 was on average approximately 0.7°C higher than the 1960-1990 average. Two years after the release of the report, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established.

The second IPCC Working Group I report (1995) highlighted that greenhouse gas concentrations had continued to increase; the emission of aerosols has a global cooling effect; the climate had changed over the past century and the balance of evidence suggested a discernible human influence on global climate; and that the climate was expected to continue to change in the future. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol of the UNFCCC was adopted and entered into force in 2005.

The third IPCC Working Group I report (2001) stressed that northern hemisphere warming in the 20th century had been unprecedented over the last one thousand years, and it concluded based on new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years was attributable to human activities.

Building on increased confidence in the ability of climate models to project future climate, the report concluded that global average temperature and sea level were projected to rise under all scenarios of emissions, affecting the water cycle and enhancing the severity of extreme events such as heat waves, heavy rainfall events and droughts, and that anthropogenic climate change would persist for many centuries. In 1990 the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was around 354 parts per million (ppm). It is currently (April 2020) at 416 ppm.

“Sir John Houghton made distinctive and landmark contributions to international science and policy on climate change. He was highly respected by scientists and policymakers alike, a rare accomplishment. He was an individual with deep personal integrity, huge brainpower, and unshakable conviction, as well as the selflessness to dedicate more than two decades of his life to leading the IPCC scientific assessments that provided the basis for a series of important policy advances,” said Susan Solomon, who was Co-Chair for Working Group I for the Fourth Assessment Report.

“His contributions to the planet and to society are beyond compare. It’s fitting that the IPCC dedicates the AR6 to this great statesman and leader,” she said.

Sir John was Director-General of the U.K. Meteorological Office from 1983 to 1991 and in 1990 established the Met Office Hadley Centre for Climate Change, now one of the world’s foremost research organizations in climate science, especially climate modelling and the detection and attribution of climate change using climate models and climate observations.

Sir John was a brilliant communicator among scientific colleagues, policymakers and the public at large, explaining the fact and threat of climate change with clarity and directness.

“As a climate scientist who has worked on this issue for several decades, first as head of the Met Office, and then as co-chair of scientific assessment for the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the impacts of global warming are such that I have no hesitation in describing it as a ‘weapon of mass destruction’,” he wrote in an article for the Guardian newspaper in 2003.

John Houghton was born on 30 December 1931 in North Wales, where he was raised. According to his granddaughter, Hannah Malcolm, he excelled in at physics and at the age of 16 he won a scholarship to study mathematics and physics at Oxford University, and was awarded a lectureship in 1958. He subsequently became chair of the World Climate Research Programme.

In 1972 Sir John was elected a fellow of the Royal Society, the world's oldest continuous scientific society. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1991.

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Notes for editors

About the IPCC

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change. It was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (now UN Environment) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1988 to provide policymakers with regular scientific assessments concerning climate change, its implications and potential future risks, and to put forward adaptation and mitigation strategies. In the same year the UN General Assembly endorsed the action by the WMO and UNEP in jointly establishing the IPCC. It has 195 member states.

IPCC assessments provide governments, at all levels, with scientific information that they can use to develop climate policies. IPCC assessments are a key input into the international negotiations to tackle climate change. IPCC reports are drafted and reviewed in several stages, thus guaranteeing objectivity and transparency.

The IPCC assesses the thousands of scientific papers published each year to inform policymakers about the state of knowledge on climate change. The IPCC identifies where there is agreement in the scientific community, where there are differences and where further research is needed. It does not conduct its own research.

To produce its reports, the IPCC mobilizes hundreds of scientists. These scientists and officials are drawn from diverse backgrounds. Only a dozen permanent staff work in the IPCC's Secretariat.

The IPCC has three working groups: Working Group I (the physical science basis of climate change); Working Group II (impacts, adaptation and vulnerability); and Working Group III (mitigation of climate change). It also has a Task Force on National Greenhouse Gas Inventories that develops methodologies for estimating anthropogenic emissions and removals of greenhouse gases. All of these are supported by Technical Support Units guiding the production of IPCC assessment reports and other products.

IPCC Assessment Reports consist of contributions from each of the three working groups and a Synthesis Report. Special Reports undertake a shorter assessment of specific cross-disciplinary issues that usually span more than one working group.

About the Sixth Assessment Cycle

At its 41st Session in February 2015, the IPCC decided to produce a Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). At its 42nd Session in October 2015 it elected a new Bureau that would oversee the work on this report and Special Reports to be produced in the assessment cycle.

The Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C was released in October 2018, the 2019 Refinement to the 2006 IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories in May 2019, the Special Report on Climate Change and Land in August 2019, and the Special Report on The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate in September 2019.

The three working group contributions to the Sixth Assessment Report were originally due to be released in 2021, and the Synthesis Report, integrating all the products in this assessment cycle, in the first half of 2022. These previously announced release dates are likely to shift because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information go to www.ipcc.ch