

DELIVERED BY:

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Distinguished guests, faculty and students, friends,

It's an honour to participate in this lecture series, and a pleasure to be with you today.

The Tanner Lectures on Human Values are a beacon of learning, intellectual exchange, and diverse views – a microcosm of everything we value about a university education.

No one has yet found a better way of collecting and debating ideas than a university.

Universities are the natural home of creativity, discussion, and dialogue around policy making.

It is thanks to the research done by universities, including Oxford, that governments can model climate policy options and their impact; that we can predict how ice sheets respond to warming; and we have secured incredible breakthroughs in renewable energy technology.

Oxford, with its linked courtyards and dreaming spires, takes us back to the medieval roots of western learning, while remaining at the cutting edge of scientific research.

Human values and human rights have always been at the centre of Oxford's mission, and I look forward to our joint project for World Environment Day on Thursday, the Right Here Right Now Global Climate Summit.

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

I have always felt a deep bond with nature.

Growing up, I remember haunting discussions around the dinner table with family members who were biologists, about our environment and our changing climate. Even then, in the 1970s, the implications of burning fossil fuels were clear, and troubled me deeply.

Somehow, more than fifty years later, we are still in denial about a fundamental fact: our wellbeing and survival as a species are inseparable from the health of our planet and our environment.

We are part of nature, and our fate is inextricably bound up with nature.

The very oxygen we breathe is constantly recycled between the land, the oceans and the atmosphere.

Our food and water depend on plants and animals, birds and insects, rivers and seas.

We have a responsibility to treat our planet with respect; to protect its glaciers and forests; to support the diversity of species on land and in the sea; to keep our rivers and lakes clean; to preserve nature, including ourselves.

The widespread misconception that nature is a hierarchy, with homo sapiens at its apex, is at the root of the planetary crises wreaking havoc across our world.

The evidence is everywhere. Each year, we consume some 1.7 times more resources than our planet can regenerate.

The extraction and burning of fossil fuels is trapping humanity in a furnace. Climate impacts are already hitting every country – with huge human and economic costs.

Almost half of humanity live in climate hotspots where people are 15 times more likely to die of climate-related causes.

According to Oxfam, the world's richest 1 percent are responsible for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66 percent.

Meanwhile, our global food systems – which allow massive waste while millions go hungry – are driving an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. One million of the world's estimated 8 million plant and animal species are threatened with extinction.

And by 2050, there could be more plastic in the ocean than fish. Exposure to pesticides, heavy metals, and radioactive waste are severely impacting people's wellbeing and violating their rights.

Not only have we created a false separation from nature, we are deluded enough to believe we can make nature bend to our will.

Attempts to subjugate and exploit our fragile ecosystems have resulted in unpredictable and dangerous consequences.

From disrupting water cycles to remaking landscapes, from forever chemicals to the introduction of invasive species, there is a long list of attempted solutions that turned out to be problems.

And yet, there are powerful forces working to portray new, untested and risky approaches to environmental crises as logical and inevitable. They are not.

The facts on the climate emergency speak for themselves.

For decades, those most responsible for our overheating planet have wilfully ignored and obscured the science, blocked change, and churned out profit with subsidies in one hand, and impunity in the other.

We are already suffering the consequences.

And without a radical change of course, future generations will inherit a far hotter, more polluted, more unpredictable and more dangerous world.

These same approaches of supremacy and subjugation are also causing terrible harm within human societies.

White supremacy, male supremacy, racial supremacy, religious supremacy – everywhere, we see an attitude that could be summarized as: me first; my community first; my group first; and I don't care about anyone else.

We enslave; we colonize; we exploit for domination and profit.

We see this in the atrocity crimes being committed from Myanmar to Ukraine to Sudan to Gaza, with little accountability. International human rights law and humanitarian law are blatantly disregarded, while corporate interests profit from so-called Forever Wars.

As we see on our screens every day, many of the most powerful in our world are deeply invested in a hierarchy of human lives.

We see this in sky-rocketing levels of inequality within and between countries, and in a lack of support for economies that are in, or at high risk of, debt distress – many of them disproportionately affected by the climate crisis.

We see it in record numbers of people living in inadequate housing, or without shelter.

We see it in new technologies that are being weaponized to oppress and marginalize.

We see it in the continued efforts of fossil fuel companies to undermine solutions to the climate crisis to preserve their profits at the cost of our climate and our rights.

We see it in the violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, whose lands and territories are being exploited and destroyed without their consent.

And we see it in the culture wars against the fundamental principles of inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination.

Distinguished guests,

Nature itself has a long-term strategy. What is ours?

Let me set out four fundamental tenets.

First, our strategy needs to embrace human rights as the compass for a sustainable future.

Our rights call for all people, now and in the future, to live in safety, security and opportunity, on a healthy planet.

When people have enough to eat; when they have access to clean water and education; when their right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is fulfilled; when people can express their opinions without fear; when the media can hold power to account, our societies are more peaceful, stable and resilient.

Our human rights frame compassionate governance.

The human rights ecosystem has roots that run in all directions, from peace and sustainable development to social cohesion, equality and justice.

And in the 76 years since the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was adopted, it has become clear that our rights are also deeply intertwined.

Like a natural ecosystem, human rights find their own equilibrium.

I am fascinated by the fact that trees communicate with each other. They send distress signals about drought and disease that lead other trees to alter their behaviour. And they share nutrients to keep each other healthy.

Science continues to develop a deeper understanding of how natural systems connect and communicate.

We should find inspiration here for our own societies.

What if humanity's unity with nature determined our politics?

And what if we recognized that nature has rights, too?

The rights of certain species are already widely recognized in many legal systems; cruel treatment is illegal while there are restrictions on animal testing and laws to protect wildlife.

What about an ocean? A glacier? A tree?

Remember the outcry when the Sycamore Gap tree was cut down?

Two men were recently found guilty of this crime. At some level, people accept that a tree has a right to exist and grow. So too, nature as a whole.

And authorities around the world increasingly recognise aspects of the rights of nature – even at the international level.

The Kunming-Montreal agreement on biodiversity, adopted in 2022, acknowledges that the rights of nature are vital to successful implementation.

The United Nations General Assembly has adopted a series of resolutions on Harmony with Nature, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has issued an advisory opinion stating that environmental components are legal interests in and of themselves.

Following the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand, certain rivers have been granted legal identity and designated guardians. And they can be defended in court against environmental damage.

Likewise, certain mountains and land of significance to Indigenous Peoples in various countries have been endowed with rights of their own. In South Asia too, some rivers have specific legal recognition.

Ecuador was the first country to recognize the rights of nature in its national constitution. These rights are also recognized at different levels of governance in Bolivia, India, Spain, Uganda, and the United States of America, and beyond.

It is no coincidence that countries at the forefront of recognizing the rights of nature, have strong and active Indigenous Peoples.

For many Indigenous Peoples, the rights of nature are a given, part of their worldview, cultural practices, religions, and traditional laws.

They understand that protecting nature necessarily reinforces human rights – particularly the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Rather than viewing themselves as apart from nature, many Indigenous Peoples view human beings as part of nature, as embodied in the Māori proverb: “I am the river, and the river is me.”

Ecuador's Constitutional Court ruled in 2021 that issuing mining permits that would harm the biodiversity of the Los Cedros Protected Forest violated the rights of nature. This ruling prevented continued harm against the forest while also protecting the human rights of people living in affected areas.

One of the greatest challenges we face in the world today is developing models of governance that integrate different worldviews and perspectives, including those that recognize the rights of nature.

I invite academics and legal scholars to build on current laws, traditions and practices and consider what such models might look like in the future.

For example, they could involve constitutional recognition of legal standing for nature and its defenders; stronger protection against environmental harm; and recognition of the crime of ecocide, including under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

They could mean new and stronger laws, regulations and enforcement mechanisms to ensure corporations are no longer able to treat our planet as an inexhaustible resource to be exploited. Businesses would be held accountable not only for harming people, but for harming nature, recognizing ultimately that all are part of the same web of life.

Indeed, we need a society-wide conversation that reimagines the corporate sector's goals and its responsibilities to people and planet.

Distinguished guests, dear students,

Second, we need bold action, based on human rights, to cool our burning planet.

Full implementation of the Paris Agreement is our only hope. Without it, humanity would be headed to over 4 degrees of heating – a death sentence for most.

That figure is now 3 degrees, so we are making progress. But far more is needed.

This is why support is growing for a proposed fossil fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty that would aim to end the expansion of new oil, coal and gas projects, and accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

I am impressed by the number of States that have welcomed this idea, including Colombia – despite its long history of fossil fuel dependency.

Where there is political will, even countries with much at stake can find a way.

Take the Montreal Protocol, agreed in 1987 to protect the ozone layer. This is widely regarded as one of the greatest environmental success stories.

When it was negotiated, critics argued that it would harm economies and people, by restricting chemicals used in refrigeration.

The reality was quite the opposite. Markets did not crash, and the ozone layer is on track for a near-complete recovery. This has important lessons for current negotiations, including on a Global Plastics Treaty.

It shows that even though we may not have all the answers, we need to move forward with creativity, courage and confidence.

Climate action is already spurring ideas and action to improve lives around the world. We must build on this.

How can we expand electric transport systems, green spaces, walkable neighbourhoods, and low emissions zones?

The capacity for innovation is at an all-time high, and the transition away from fossil fuel dependency is a laboratory for new ideas.

Renewable energy is already the [cheapest power option](#) in most parts of the world. The cost of electricity from solar power fell by 85 percent between 2010 and 2020.

Last year, renewables made up over 90 percent of new power capacity built around the world.

And the signals from almost all G20 economies are clear: they are scaling up the transition to renewables. It needs to be fast and equitable.

Just two percent of clean energy investments go to the African continent.

A systemic shift towards sustainable economies and societies has concrete implications across many economic sectors - from training workers to the extraction of critical energy transition minerals and tax policy.

We must make sure all these changes – from transport, to supply chains, to healthcare, to finance – are coherent, and founded in human rights.

Fossil fuel companies and their supporters are desperate to portray the just transition as unrealistic and unachievable.

A new generation of economists, including many women economists, are proving them wrong.

My Office strongly advocates for the human rights economy, where all policies – from taxation to climate action – keep a clear focus on advancing human rights and protecting the planet.

For example, in a human rights economy, States would equitably phase out fossil fuel subsidies and regulate environmentally destructive activities. They would instead invest in renewable energy sources, sustainable food systems, and social safety nets to help people adapt and adjust.

Investors and businesses would transparently disclose and divest from sectors that are doing irreparable harm to our climate and our environment – including fossil fuels.

Digital technologies can help to turbocharge the transition to renewables and to sustainability more broadly.

Artificial Intelligence tools can optimize wind and solar power, predict natural disasters, track pollution, and help monitor illegal fishing, logging, and other environmental crimes.

States and others are already using AI for these purposes, which is encouraging. The shift needs to be deeper, more transformative, more equitable.

Because while they have unprecedented power for good, today's technologies also have massive potential to cause harm to individuals and to society as a whole.

The concentration of AI in the hands of a few billionaires is cause for serious concern, particularly when some have authoritarian tendencies and cultish spiritual aspirations.

The business model of social media platforms is fueling polarization and even extremism, including climate denial and disinformation.

Meanwhile, AI data centres suck up massive amounts of energy and water, and AI tools are exacerbating inequalities and digital divides.

The United Nations Pact for the Future, adopted last September, includes an agreement on the need for global guidelines on the development of Artificial Intelligence. States need to prioritize and implement this agreement.

This would help to create a safer and stronger information ecosystem, respecting the right to privacy, and protecting spaces for exchange and dialogue.

Distinguished guests, faculty and students,

Third, we must deliver climate justice.



The countries that did least to cause the climate crisis are paying the highest price, which is completely unacceptable. Some are even under an existential threat.

The world has made some progress. In Egypt, all countries agreed to an historic Loss and Damage fund that must be adequately funded and implemented. In the United Arab Emirates, countries agreed to transition away from all fossil fuels in a just and equitable manner, leaving no one behind.

And in Baku, developed countries agreed to triple climate finance to 300 billion dollars by 2035, and all parties agreed to work together to increase finance to developing countries from public and private sources to at least 1.3 trillion dollars per year by 2035.

Yet we need far more ambition and cooperation – and solutions that bring governments together with the private sector and investors, Multilateral Development Banks, and local communities.

Some projections estimate financial needs of over 10 trillion dollars per year between 2030 and 2050.

Human rights were a casualty of the Baku negotiations on finance. Earlier draft texts recognised the need to respect, protect, promote and fulfill human rights – but this language was removed at a very late stage.

This was not just a missed opportunity – it is a continuation of the policies that created today's unsustainable, unequal world.

Those responsible for the climate crisis must pay up. Climate finance must be accessible to the people most affected, including women, young people and children, and Indigenous Peoples.

State subsidies for fossil fuels, which amount to hundreds of billions of dollars per year, must be redirected towards creating a safer future. Imagine what that money could do if invested in sustainable technologies.

We need to find new, creative sources to fund climate action – from green bond markets to windfall taxes on fossil fuel companies – and a serious reform of the financial architecture.

I fully support the proposal by Brazil's G20 Presidency for a billionaire tax to go towards reducing inequality and climate finance. I hope the South African leadership will continue dialogue around this idea.

Many developing economies are on the frontlines of the climate crisis, while they continue to struggle with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World

Bank reported recently that 2020-30 could be a lost decade for development, with the poorest and least developed countries bearing the brunt.

The Pact for the Future is a global commitment to address these inequalities, first and foremost through more representative multilateral governance and reform of the global financial architecture.

The United Nations system is pushing for these reforms, but they must be backed by action. Words are not enough. There must be real commitment to work together at the Fourth Conference on Financing for Development later this month in Spain.

Distinguished guests, dear students,

Climate justice is broader than finance.

We need to learn from history here.

Inequality and injustice give rise to deep grievances that can erupt in cycles of violence.

Our current unsustainable economic model is creating such grievances, and they need to be addressed.

It is crucial that countries and fossil fuel companies are held accountable.

Courts at all levels are now signaling that States have an obligation to protect their people from the impact of the climate crisis.

The European Court of Human Rights affirmed in a landmark decision last year that States have enforceable human rights obligations to address climate change. The case was brought by a group of Swiss women – people power at work.

National courts around the world are demonstrating greater willingness to hold those responsible for climate harm accountable. Last week, a court in Germany accepted, in principle, the link between emitters there, and damage caused by melting glaciers in Peru.

Later this year, both the International Court of Justice and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights are expected to issue keenly anticipated advisory opinions on States' human rights obligations around climate change.

The ICJ case was sparked by students from the University of the South Pacific, who were deeply concerned by the existential threat posed by rising seas to their countries and cultures. They succeeded in persuading the government of Vanuatu to bring the issue to the international level.

The United Nations committees that monitor compliance with international human rights treaties also have a role. Three years ago, one of those Committees concluded that Australia had failed to protect Indigenous Torres Straits Islanders against the adverse impacts of climate change.

Universities and civil society need to build on these successes and press the legal case for States to act on the climate crisis.

Distinguished guests, dear students,

Climate justice must also involve righting past wrongs, healing, and reconciliation.

Transitional justice is a rights-based framework that was developed to help societies move forward from authoritarianism and conflict. I believe it offers ways to address the profound injustices related to climate.

For example, truth-telling encourages broad and open acknowledgement that harm has been done. We need an accurate, science-based account of exactly what the fossil fuel industry knew about climate change, when – and how it kept that knowledge from the public.

International commissions of inquiry have helped many countries to move from conflict to peace by investigating serious human rights violations and making recommendations for the future.

Why not, for example, a commission of inquiry into the climate and environmental crisis? It would be composed of scientists, environmental lawyers, Indigenous Peoples' representatives, as well as human rights experts, and would explain how human action has contributed to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and where responsibility lies.

Remedy and reparation are also central to transitional justice. In the climate context, some damage may be irreversible, and those affected are entitled to compensation and rehabilitation.

Corporate accountability initiatives are essential to repair such damage and ensure it is not repeated.

I welcome support from the European Union, Brazil, Thailand and others, for binding regulations to prevent human rights abuses in the extraction of critical minerals. The Secretary-General's recent panel on these minerals makes important recommendations to ground the renewables revolution in justice and equity.

Above all, transitional justice is centred on the voices and needs of people who have been most affected – often very marginalized people.

When it comes to our climate, that means Indigenous Peoples, women and girls, people with disabilities, local communities, and minorities of all kinds.

The rights of young people, children and of future generations must be paramount. They will be most affected by our overheating planet, and they had no input into the decisions that got us here.

There is also an important gender dimension to this crisis that calls for women's full participation and leadership in every stage of the response.

Distinguished guests, faculty and students,

Fourth, our strategy requires strong political leadership and social mobilization.

Many Governments are not meeting the urgency of this moment.

On climate, they are out of step with their people.

Recent studies show that 89 percent of the world's people want stronger action to fight the climate crisis.

Research also suggests that citizens of rich nations strongly back financial support for poorer countries that are on the front lines.

In both cases, people with these views mistakenly believe they are in a minority, and that there is little they can do to change things.

In other words, disinformation and division are having a deadly impact.

We must amplify the voices of the silent majority. We need to join forces to apply maximum pressure and push leaders into action.

In a world torn apart by conflict, the existential threat of climate change has fallen off the radar. We need to put it right back at the top.

The Brazilian Presidency of COP30 has called for a global mobilization, the Mutirão, to build momentum for climate action. Locally, nationally, regionally, we need people everywhere to push for change, within their own communities and beyond.

Many people are already active – across all ages, across all regions.

I'm thinking of people like the marine biologist in the Bahamas, who lost her home to hurricanes three times, and is now helping to restore mangroves.

The public policy researcher in Egypt, who's empowering young women to pursue careers in renewable energy.

And schoolchildren around the world, who often lead local efforts on climate and the environment.

Never underestimate your own contribution and influence.

Businesses and universities also need to step up. It is clear that many Governments will not move without consistent, widespread public pressure.

With science under attack in several countries around the world, supporting independent climate research within universities and other centres of excellence is more important than ever.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights makes clear that, quote, "Everyone has the right ... to share in scientific advancement and its benefits".

Never has that right been so crucial, or in such danger.

Distinguished guests, students, friends,

The climate crisis is not just about the weather, or about renewable energy – or even fossil fuels.

Beyond renewable energy – beyond subsidies – beyond the just transition – it calls on us to shape new ways of living.

It is a clarion call for a new kind of politics, and new approaches to leadership.

A more honest politics that doesn't hide behind concepts of me against you; us against them; humanity against nature.

A fact-based politics that takes science seriously, accepts the realities of climate-and environment-related harms, and deals with them effectively and urgently.

A more relevant politics that tackles today's problems rather than distracting people with culture wars.

A practical politics that recognizes the inherent contradictions in all of us, without rejection or division.

A politics for the 21st century that is not based on outdated concepts from the 19th.

The emotional outpouring after the death of Pope Francis, which reverberated across all faiths, signaled a thirst for leadership through compassion, humility and service.

There is a craving for a new kind of leadership anchored in dignity – not dehumanisation.

In dialogue – not conflict.

In inclusion – not division.

A desire to connect with people and with nature, to listen, and to understand.

Like a three-eyed chameleon, we need one eye on the past, to learn from history; one eye on the present, to act with reason and compassion; and one eye on the future and our responsibilities to our children and future generations.

In short, we need governance that is guided by the fundamental values and principles that unite us all.

Governance that truly serves all its people and reflects their hopes and aspirations.

Governance that tackles the difficult, long-term problems, for the benefit of all.

I challenge everyone here, and everyone listening, to think about how you can contribute to a new era of politics.

We need a global movement for change, founded on human rights and human dignity, to transform our governance for the common good, and build a more sustainable future for all life on our shared planet.

Thank you.