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GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY SUMMIT ACKNOWLEDGES UN DEVELOPMENT TARGETS ARE BEING MISSED

By Helen Gavaghan

At the end of September Heads of State met to consider urgent action on biodiversity for sustainable development and the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). The SDGs are the UN's plan to reduce inequality of opportunity among the world's peoples and to achieve the goals in a way which does not wreck the planet. They cover energy provision, poverty reduction, fighting hunger, education and they are all interconnected. So far, the world has missed all its SDG targets, and the hope is that adopting a more friendly attitude to maintaining biodiversity might turn matters around.

September's summit paves the way for next year's fifteenth conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which will take place in Kunming, China in May 2021. The event was scheduled initially for October 2020 but postponed because of the risks the meeting would pose to the spread of SARS-CoV2 and Covid-19. The convention has protocols on biosafety (Cartagena) and on "access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their utilization" (Nagoya).

The summit - global biodiversity day - was organised under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. It had two "break out" sessions. One asked how science, technology, innovation, capacity building, access and benefit sharing, and finance could be deployed in support of biodiversity. The second looked at making biodiversity central to sustainable development, and considered biodiversity loss. Covid-19 meant that government heads, ministers, intergovernmental organisations participated by pre-recorded statements, livestream as well as in-person presentations.

A theme was the need for political will to meet the UN's sustainable development goals by 2030 and to do so given the reality that biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are among humanity's most serious threats. The UN meeting and its future agenda is to realign humanity's relationship with nature such that zoonotic diseases and pandemics like Covid-19 are less likely to emerge. Destruction of animal habitats, for example, brings humans and non-human animals into contact in new ways, posing risks to the health of both.

As the world recovers from Covid-19 the UN's agenda is to embed nature in economic, social life and development. The point being that "Gross national product and *per capita* income do not reflect the value of nature or natural capital", declare the UN in their conference summary. The future envisaged builds so-called circular economies in which waste and pollution are designed out by economic models.

Governments will next focus globally on biodiversity in May 2021 in China for the CBD's fifteenth meeting of the parties, when delegates representing the Convention's participating State parties

hammer out goals and means to achieve goals. September's summit hoped the meeting in Kunming will do for biodiversity what the Paris Agreement did for Climate Change, and set internationally agreed concrete goals which can be self-monitored.

During statements made to a plenary session speakers from various countries noted that conflict and a lack of resources makes it hard to implement biodiversity strategies. Others announced international finance plans and legislative agendas setting biodiversity targets. For example, nations reported laws in existence for conserving endangered species and the environment. Others demonstrated awareness of the dangers facing mangroves and corals. In general, there was awareness of the need to fight land degradation and to preserve marine ecosystems.

Risks to biodiversity - not all of which humans can live without - include industrial expansion and agriculture. Other risks, such as pollution and climate change, would not be missed by humans. Many familiar mantras were heard. No one denies now that rises in ocean temperature impact coral reefs, which are home to many aquatic species, or that deforestation and burning fossil fuels drive climate change. In a brutal cascade effect climate change leads to extinction of species which cannot adapt quickly enough to new environmental conditions. With the loss of species nature's resilience to changing conditions on Earth is reduced, leading to an unvirtuous circle of events.

Not surprisingly the negative impact of oil spills on marine ecosystems was raised, while small island developing states (SIDS) pointed out their dependence on the ocean. Clearly, the message that land, water and coastal systems are intimately connected had been heard by member states.

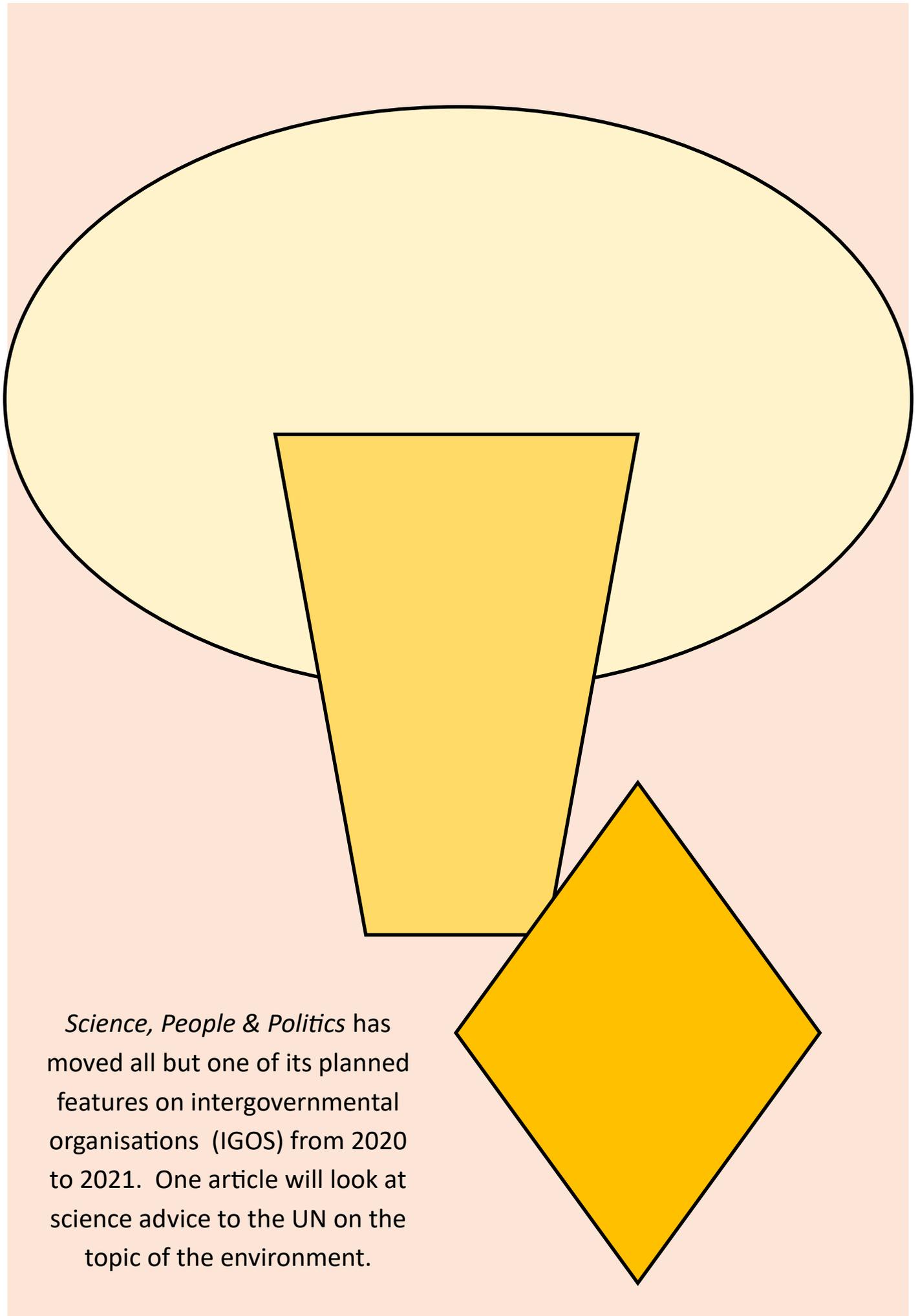
It augurs well for the fifteenth meeting on the Conference on Biodiversity next year that some delegates were open to the idea of environmentally friendly measures such as banning single-use plastics and exploring how countries could avoid rampant wastage of resources.

The summit recognised that fighting biodiversity loss is linked with the fight against human-caused climate change and desertification. The impacts of Covid-19 have, reported member states, impacted financial capacity to deal with the environmental challenges and undone attainments in development work. On the plus side, quarantine measures in some cases have enabled environmental recovery.

Countries reported creation of biodiversity units within their ministries of environment, commitments to expanding protected areas for ecosystems, creation of ecological sites for ecosystem restoration and strategies switching to carbon neutral economies. The need to examine how sectors such as mining, agriculture, infrastructure development, forestry and fishing can be made more sustainable was acknowledged. More than 30 percent of fish stock have been fished as unsustainable levels, the summit was told. Illegal wildlife trade additionally remains a threat to biodiversity, and threats to biodiversity undermine ecosystem services which generate tax revenue. Examples of ecosystem services include insect, bee and butterfly pollination of crops or sustainable tourism generated by an ecosystem. The summit noted over-exploitation of Earth is preventable, leaving only the question of whether there is the political will and the necessary muscle to implement laws and policies needed to save the planet.

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Science, People & Politics has moved all but one of its planned features on intergovernmental organisations (IGOS) from 2020 to 2021. One article will look at science advice to the UN on the topic of the environment.