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ALEXANDER KING 1909-2007



Keith Suter's Obituary for Alexander King (published in [The Guardian](#), London, May 2 2007):

Alexander King, who has died aged 98, was a pioneering scientist, who warned about the dangers to the environment from extensive industrial development. He was one of the people who commissioned the 1972 [Limits to Growth](#) report, which triggered the first wave of international concern about the environment. This remains the world's largest selling book on the environment. He then became one of the founders of the international think tank The Club of Rome, which the Duke of Edinburgh has called the "conscience of the world".

[Limits to Growth](#) (now in its third edition) touched a raw nerve in the body politic. Its warnings resonated with the fears of others that there was an emerging environmental crisis. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established a few months after it appeared.

The word "environment" does not even appear in the 1945 UN Charter and Alexander King helped expand the UN's role into environmental protection. Since 1972 the UN has not only created UNEP but also other UN environmental bodies and it has adopted many policies and international treaties. The need to protect the environment is now also recognised as a major political issue at national and local levels. As the debate evolved over the years, so the focus became more nuanced, with the balancing of environmental considerations with the continued need for economic growth – hence the phrase "sustainable development".

Ironically, Alexander King's new career as an environmental evangelist began virtually as he was "retiring" from public service. He remained active in the environmental cause right up to his death. His long-awaited memoirs, [Let the Cat Turn Round: One Man's Traverse of the Twentieth Century](#) was published last year.

Alexander King was born in Glasgow on January 26 1909 - and he remained proud of his Scottish roots. His family moved to London in 1921 and King attended Highgate School. His father became a director of ICI; and King himself developed an aptitude for science. He studied chemistry at the Royal College of Science, University of London. In October 1929 he went on a chemical research post graduate fellowship to the University of Munich. Germany was then the

world's leading country in scientific research. He was there for the rise of Hitler and he got back to Britain in September 1931 fearing that war was inevitable.

He returned to London University as a lecturer in physical chemistry and he also became a successful writer of scientific books. He looked set for a distinguished career in chemistry. But with the onset of World War II, he was recruited to work for the British government. His first task was to devise explosives to sabotage German vehicles in the event of an invasion.

When Japan entered the war, it would be necessary to fight in tropical environments, where a major problem would be malaria-bearing mosquitoes. (Malaria was often more of a hazard to Allied soldiers in the Pacific war than the Japanese.) The best insecticide was made in Japan and so it would no longer be available. His research team came across another chemical but its name was too long to use in ordinary conversations. King coined the name "DDT".

With the US's entry into the war, the government transferred King to Washington DC to help coordinate joint Anglo-American military research. He continued in this field of science policy after the war. Science had been an important factor in winning the war and so it was necessary to mobilise it for peace. He became a pioneer in employing science for the betterment of humankind.

The application of science to business created some interesting results. The British used to think that they knew best how to operate factories (after all, they had invented them in the 18th century industrial revolution) but a post-war scientific study showed that the productivity of US firms was often better than the British ones. Scientists were needed to help British factories become more productive. King was part of that process, not least as chief scientist at the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (1950-56). King was also involved in what is now called management training and education.

In 1956 he became director of the European Productivity Agency in Paris. In 1960 he became director-general of education and science at the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). He retired, aged 65, in 1974. He received a CBE in 1948 and CMG in 1975.

Nearing the time of his formal retirement, he began another hectic career, which lasted for the rest of his life. With the 1972 publication of Limits to Growth, he helped create an organisation to explore how the world would need to change as per the book's analysis. This was the international think tank The Club of Rome.

King was intrigued by the way in which a small group of people created the first industrial revolution in the 18th century. They met together informally each month in the north of England to discuss their industrial projects. He envisaged that a small informal group of people



from a variety of backgrounds (never more than 100 in total) would discuss reconciling economic growth and environmental protection.

It was called The Club of Rome simply because the co-founder Aurelio Peccei was an Italian business person with offices in Rome. Well into his 70s and 80s he travelled extensively, meeting political leaders and environmental activists to discuss how best to create what is now known as sustainable development. He was the Club's president from 1984-90.

King married Sally Thompson, who died in 1999, in 1933. They had three daughters.

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