

Planetary scientist wins ‘Nobel for the environment’

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A pioneer in the field of sustainability has earned a major honor.

Johan Rockström is this year’s winner of the Tyler Prize, known colloquially as the “Nobel Prize for the environment.”

Rockström, the director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and chief scientist for Conservation International, was recognized for his work developing the planetary boundaries framework, which gauges Earth’s ability to sustain humanity.

Rockström and his team introduced the concept in 2009 and have since provided several updates; the latest research, released in 2023, carried grim news: It showed that six of the nine boundaries had already transgressed beyond a “safe operating space.” As a result, Rockström has warned that breaching tipping points risks “irreversibly shifting” life on Earth.

“We have transformed irreversibly too much of planet Earth, but we still see evidence that we can keep the planet in a close enough state to the Holocene to continue supporting humanity,” he said, referring to the current geologic epoch dating back to the end of the ice age. “And that’s what the planet boundaries are about, setting that playing field for a planet to remain in a Holocene-like state to support humanity.”

“The planetary boundaries science is a critical measurement framework for the world to ensure we protect our life support systems,” said Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and one of the Planetary Guardians, a group of leaders who elevate climate science in an effort to bolster collective action. “I’m thrilled that Johan Rockström is receiving this prestigious prize.”

In all, Rockström has published over 100 research articles and four books, in addition to TED Talks, a Netflix film, and other media acclaim. Previously, he received the German Environmental Award and the Zoological Society of London Award for Conservation Innovation.

“Johan is one of the most-cited scientists in the world, and for good reason,” said Conservation International CEO M. Sanjayan. “His research around planetary boundaries has transformed how we talk about Earth’s life-sustaining systems and humanity’s impact on them.”

The Tyler Prize was created in 1973 by dedicated conservationists and philanthropists John and Alice Tyler — and inaugurated by then-governor of California Ronald Reagan. The award aims to recognize and inspire those working to preserve our natural world, and it includes a \$250,000 prize. The Tyler Prize Executive Committee said Rockström was chosen for his “science-based approach to sustainable development for people on a stable and resilient planet.”

“Professor Rockström’s work embodies the spirit of the Tyler Prize,” said Tyler Prize Chair Julia Marton-Lefèvre. “His scientific achievements, coupled with his ability to influence policy and engage with the public, have made an invaluable contribution to our planet’s welfare.”

Conservation International vice chair Harrison Ford called Rockström “a trailblazer, a brilliant mind, a remarkable person,” adding: “We need to listen to scientists like Johan Rockström.”

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- In new film, top scientists urge action to avoid Earth’s ‘tipping point’

Max Marcovitch is a staff writer at Conservation International. Want to read more stories like this? Sign up for email updates here. Donate to Conservation International here.