## 10 MAY, 2023 Scientific research papers, recommendations gathering dust



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N a lecture in Kuala Lumpur N a lecture in Kuala Lumpur on March 9, distinguished professor Rita Colwell un-derlined the need for Malaysia's scientific community to "step up and speak truth to power", in particular with re-spect to climate change, biodi-versity loss and plastic pollution. Speaking at UCSI University's International Institute of Science Diplomacy and Sustainability.

Diplomacy and Sustainability, she stressed those issues as the most profound among the many identified among the 17 Sustain-

able Development Goals. She called on Malaysian scien-tists to stand up for what's right, respectfully but clearly telling people in charge what's what

based on evidence-based knowl-

edge. Colwell recalled her own ser-vice to the United States White vice to the United States White House through an infamous in-cident: British Petroleum's (BP) Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill of 2010. An explosion on the Deep-water Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico that year resulted in the largest spill in the history of marine oil drilling operations. Eleven workers were killed, and over the next three months. an

Eleven workers were killed, and over the next three months, an estimated 134 million barrels of oil flowed from the damaged well. As science envoy, Colwell recalled conveying an over-whelming volume of information to then US president Barack Oba-ma, who acted swiftly, focusing on the government's all-out re-sponse to the immediate crisis, the steps to avoid another such the steps to avoid another such crisis and the longer-term crisis of America's fossil fuel reliance. Science played a key role in that situation. Remote imaging of the

failed blowout preventer, stress testing containment devices and other high-tech tasks helped halt the disaster.

A subsequent three-year sur-vey catalogued the harm to an-imals, beaches, coral, fish and marshes, and estimated that as much as US\$17.2 billion in damages were inflicted on the Gulf. Scientific information was key to understanding the disaster's origin, and the many postdisaster steps needed to prevent a recurrence

And BP paid a steep price for the Gulf oil spill's damage, as documented by scientists: more than US\$60 billion were levied in criminal and civil penalties, nat-ural resource damages, economic claims and clean-up costs.

claims and clean-up costs. "Speaking truth to power" is just another manifestation of the science-policy nexus. We try to promote a dialogue between the knowledge generators (re-searchers and academics) and political leaders and decision-makers in the civil service and the corporate sector to encourage the latter group to make sound the latter group to make sound decisions grounded in evidence-based knowledge provided by the former group. Sadly, this happens all too in-

frequently. Academics are still content to confine themselves in the ivory tower. Many well-re-searched reports and recommendations developed by august bod-ies like the Academy of Sciences are left to get dusty on the racks of libraries and archives. In recent times, bodies have been established to provide this bridging rale. The International

been established to provide this bridging role. The International Network on Government Science Advice, founded by Sir Peter Gluckman of New Zealand in 2014, is an early example. On a larger scale, the newly constituted International Sci-ence Council (ISC), comprising 230 organisations resulted from

230 organisations, resulted from the 2018 merger of the Interna-tional Council for Science and the International Social Science Council.

The Academy of Sciences The Academy of Sciences Malaysia is a member of the ISC. The vision of the ISC is to advance science as a global public good. Two effective global plat-forms for science-policy dia-logues are the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Intergovernmental Pan-el on Climate Change and the No-

bel Peace Prize-nominated Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

It is encouraging these days too to learn of the recent creation of a "Group of Friends on Science for Action" at the United Nations headquarters in New York to help member states use science to

solve sustainability problems. There has been criticism that such an initiative within a huge bureaucracy like the UN may just be a drop in the ocean, especially if it is led by the president of the General Assembly, who holds of-fice on an annual basis. Nevertheless, it is worth a try.

theless, it is worth a try. We need to develop a robust mechanism like the running of a successful airline: pilots can come and go, but a well-oiled air-craft would ensure that the business keeps on flying.

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