

Hail and farewell

Sir John Lawton and Alan Thorpe – outgoing and incoming Chief Executives.



This is my last contribution to Planet Earth. I retire on 31 March, and hand on the baton to Alan Thorpe. It has been a wonderful five-and-a-half years at least for me! There have been huge changes in the organisation, not least the creation of three new ways of working: the NERC Executive Board (bringing the Directors of NERC's major centres into the management of the organisation); the Peer Review College (to make scientific peer review more responsive to present-day needs); and the Science and Innovation Strategy Board (to allow investment decisions to be made across the whole NERC portfolio). We were the first Research Council to open the meetings of our governing Council and to strive to put openness and transparency at the heart of all we do. Also we have recently set out on a path to 'green' NERC.

None of this makes any sense, of course, if the science we support is not world class. But we know that the impacts of most areas of environmental science in the UK rank second only to the US in the world, and in crucial areas (such as climate change) we are world-leaders. Of course, NERC does not fund all of this work, but we support a great deal of it. Planet Earth reflects the breadth, depth, excitement and importance of the work we support. It has been a privilege to help guide these activities.

Last, but by no means least, I have enjoyed interacting with the people who make it all happen, in universities, in Swindon Office and our own centres, in government, and with the wide range of 'stakeholders' who have an interest in NERC science. I won't say that everybody I have come into contact with is wonderful, but the vast majority most certainly are.

Good luck Alan, and enjoy it.



On 1st April I take over from John as NERC's Chief Executive. I'm a physicist with an academic career at Imperial College and Reading, latterly as a Professor of Meteorology. I was also director of the Met Office's Hadley Centre. My research involves observations, theory and modelling of weather systems and climate, recently focusing on predictability. Outside work, art – particularly modern art – is a major interest of mine. Currently I'm director of the NERC Centres for Atmospheric Science, a NERC collaborative centre distributed over 15 universities.

Every incoming chief executive is probably seen as a specialist – an atmospheric scientist, an ecologist or whatever – and it can be tricky to persuade people that you have the (essential) broad outlook across the whole of environmental science. All I can say is that I'm committed to developing John's vision of Earth system science with an holistic multidisciplinary approach, but I can't pretend to be an instant expert in everything. I'm a team player by nature and will strive to promote inclusiveness.

I've been involved with a couple of interesting developments recently. The UK-Japan climate change project using the Japanese Earth Simulator supercomputer is attracting much attention, including Jack Straw's attendance at the project launch in Tokyo and my humble appearance, fleetingly, on Channel 4 news. It's exactly the kind of international collaboration NERC needs to pursue. Interestingly, through it NERC and the Hadley Centre have developed an even closer partnership.

Also, I'm a member of an informal Natural Hazards Working Group chaired by Sir David King. The Prime Minister wants this group to consider scientific issues following the tragic tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Natural disasters are core NERC business and we have an important national, and international, scientific role to play in improving early warnings of natural hazards.