

Obituary

# Alexander King

Pioneering scientist at the forefront of the environmental cause

Keith Suter

The Guardian, Tuesday 1 May 2007

Alexander King, who has died aged 98, was a pioneering scientist who warned of 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 one of the world's largest selling books on the environment. He then became one of the founders of the international thinktank, 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 was established a few months after it appeared. The word "environment" does not even appear in the 1945 UN Charter, and King helped expand the UN's role into environmental protection.

Ironically, his new career as an environmental evangelist began virtually as he was "retiring" from public service. He remained active in the environmental cause 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.

King was born in Glasgow and remained proud of his Scottish roots. His family moved to London in 1921 and he 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 postgraduate chemical research fellowship to the University of Munich. Germany was then the world's leading country in scientific research. He returned to Britain in 1931.

Back in London, he became a lecturer in physical chemistry at Imperial College, London University. He also became a successful writer of scientific books. He looked set for a distinguished career in chemistry, but with the onset of war, he was recruited to work

for the government. His first task was to devise explosives to sabotage German vehicles in the event of an invasion.

When Japan entered the war, it became 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 far east than the Japanese.) By then King was assistant director of scientific research at the Ministry of Supply and read an intercepted letter from Geigy, the Swiss company. Geigy was patenting the mothballing properties of what King soon labelled DDT - and he realised its significance as an insecticide.

With the US entry into the war, the government transferred King to Washington DC to help coordinate Anglo-American military research. He continued in this field 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 the employment of 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, but a post-war scientific study showed that the productivity of US firms was often better than that of 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). He 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 Cooperation and Development. He retired in 1974, 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 to fit in with the book's analysis. This was the international thinktank the Club of Rome.

King was intrigued by the way a small group of people had 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 businessman with offices in Rome. Well into his 70s and 80s, King 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 to 1990. King married Sarah Thompson, who died in 1999, in 1933. He is survived by two daughters, a third having died in a climbing accident in the Alps.

- Alexander King, scientist, civil servant and environmentalist, born January 26 1909; died February 28 2007

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