



May 12, 2021

Dear President Randhawa and Members of the Board of Trustees:

We are writing to provide our thoughts regarding whether Western Washington University should remove the name of Thomas Henry Huxley from the College of Environmental Studies. The undersigned are members of Huxley College's Dean's Advisory Board and are writing as a group of individuals. We convened a special (video) meeting of the Advisory Board to discuss this subject and the following represents the thinking of those able to be present at the meeting. Because so many Board members were unable to attend the meeting on short notice, it would not be appropriate to interpret this as the opinion of the Advisory Board.

First, we applaud your establishment of the Legacy Review Task Force to evaluate the continued appropriateness of the names associated with programs and buildings and we greatly appreciate the thoughtful letters of those scholars that responded to the Task Force's request for input on Mr. Huxley's scholarship, writing and advocacy.

We offer below our thoughts on whether Mr. Huxley's name should be removed; how Western Washington University can capture the moment to continue the important social conversation regarding science, race, and equity; the nature of a new name for the College, if it is determined to change the name; and the importance of an expeditious process that does not divert attention to the important work of the College and the University.

Should Western Remove Thomas Henry Huxley's name from the College of Environmental Studies?

We are not of a single mind on this question. Like others, we discussed the 19th Century social and scientific context within which Huxley worked and the perspective that he was the, or one of the, "least bad" of those who were considering how race fit into those early efforts to understand evolution and define how humans and other primates related in the early days of zoology.

Some believe that Huxley's groundbreaking work to promote evolutionary theory, emancipation, equal access to education and incorporate laboratory science into school curricula – as well as the social and political context of the mid-19th Century – argues that we should retain the Huxley name.

Others make the case that, no matter the good he did, it is incumbent on Western (and all formal and informal institutions) to avoid making excuses for prejudice and bigotry in all its forms. They make a compelling case that American society has far too long made those excuses and that has contributed to the tragedy of inequity that exists today.

Other Board members expressed confidence that the Legacy Review Task Force would have the broadest possible information on this key question and indicated they would defer to the Task Force's judgment and recommendations.

No matter on what side of the "Name" question Board members fell, however, there was strong and widespread recognition that Western and the College of the Environment must do everything possible to attract and support a more diverse student population which, upon graduation, move into environmental professions. Several Board members expressed their concern that, should the retention of the Huxley name for the College discourage interest in the College and Western by Black, Indigenous and People of Color, that was reason enough to change the name.

Continuing the Conversation about Science, the Environment, Equity and Inclusivity

Whether Huxley's name is removed or retained, Western Washington University must use the process to continue this important conversation. When several cities and states recently removed statues and monuments honoring Confederate civil war heroes, many of whom were slaveholders, there was often stated that the monuments would not be melted down but would be retained so the full story of their legacy and that time could be told. So far, there has been little, if any, movement in that direction.

Western cannot follow that path. No matter the outcome of the renaming question, Western and the College must find the means of using this conversation to discuss the controversy. What unquestioned contributions did Huxley make to science education and the broadening of access to science? How did his scholarship, words and advocacy push science and understanding forward or, conversely, contribute to the inequities we face today? Why has the environmental field been so "white" and elitist as it grew out of the late 19th and early 20th century American conservation movement? What should be the College of the Environment's role in promoting environmental justice?

Western should consider how to incorporate these issues into the environmental curriculum, the College's branding and in and around the College's building(s).

If the Huxley Name is Removed, How is It Replaced?

While the Board members did not spend a lot of time debating new names and strongly believe that is a separate process if it is required, there was significant sentiment expressed that it should reflect the broadest possible conception of the mandate of the College. This might prompt some consideration of greater integration of related disciplines at Western which collectively are so critical to address the massive threats to the earth.



HUXLEY
COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

One concept was the College of the Environment, Energy and the Earth, allowing the combination of the Energy Studies, Geology and Climate Science and Environmental disciplines into one college. The University of Washington recently combined multiple disciplines – some of which (e.g., the School of Forestry) had a long history as a separate entity into its College of the Environment. Perhaps it is time to consider such a change at Western and, thereby, forego the challenges of interpreting Huxley’s words and writings 150+ years later.

Another proposal was that Western need not rename the College after another person but, instead, should ensure the College’s name reflects the purpose and values of its work (e.g., College of the Environment and Sustainability).

Process

However the Board of Trustees chooses to proceed, we plead that the process not get in the way of the critical work of the College, its faculty and students. The world is facing an existential climate change crisis, which requires an intersectional approach with all hands on deck. Any renaming process should be strategic, effective and resolved swiftly. It should not be a multi-year process.

Thank you for considering our thoughts.

Sincerely,

Molly Adolfson, ‘75
Martha Bean, ‘78
Mike Bussell, ‘79
Michael Cox, ‘81
Brenna Davis, ‘98
Sandra Davis, ‘88

Emily Hurn, ‘10
Ken Johnsen, ‘75
Mike McDowell, ‘78
Matt Moroney, ‘11
Kirsi Longley, ‘20
Kevin Raymond, ‘80

Mark Reis, ‘75
Clare Ryan, ‘83
Mike Town, ‘84
Rachel Vasak, ‘07

