

# Environment Analyst Business Summit 2019: Extinction or rebellion - Leadership in Environmental Consultancy

In his keynote speech to the 90+ CEOs, MDs and other senior figures in the environmental consulting and the wider environmental industry sector at the 2019 Environment Analyst Business Summit, RPS chief executive officer (UK & Ireland), John Chubb, explored the megatrends impacting the sector and how environmental consultants should be leading the climate and sustainability agenda.

Hear what John has to say 12 months on from his keynote at this year's **2020 Business Summit**, which is taking place virtually from 30 June - 15 July.

[Full keynote speech transcript]

**W**hat am I going to talk about today? Two themes and one challenge. The first theme is extinction - are environmental consultancies going to be extinct in a few years time? And the second is can we rebel; can we set the agenda?

And the challenge is: are we prepared, are we able, are we capable of showing leadership in this sector?

As an electrical engineer by trade am I qualified to talk about this - well for the last ten years I have run environmental consultancies in Sweden and Denmark, as well as the UK, so I have a bit of a European perspective.

In the early days talking to one of my technical directors, I did make a bit of a school boy error...I asked if all environmental consultants are environmentalists. She said

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What are the existential threats which could mean we will no longer be here?



some are, some are not so much, some most definitely are, but ALL are environmentally conscious...and that's important for what I am going to say next.

One caveat - these are not necessarily the views of RPS, some are not even my views, but they are a genuine bona fide challenge to the sector.

So, we're not going to be here in few years time, why? What are the events, forces and pressures (both internal and external) which mean we will no longer be here? What are those extinction events...

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There's a void of leadership in this particular debate and I think maybe it's our time as environmental consultants

### First, climate change is real

Well the first one is that we're all going to die because the planet is going to catch on fire or ice caps will melt and flood and we just won't be able to keep habitating where we currently are. As a non climate change scientist, I see there are a lot of theories out there and some of them are competing and I have understand some of them, but as an engineer I look at all of them and I would say that the overwhelming evidence is this is real and if we get to that 2 degrees too quickly then we're not going to be here anymore. So that is the backdrop.

You can be a climate change denier (there's no problem with that) and you can be in a position of power (there's no problem in that), but if you're both then there is quite a serious problem that we're facing.

### Second, regulatory oblivion

That we disappear into oblivion in a regulatory framework, both legal, non-legal and commercial, that is incredibly hard to navigate. These [points to slide] are just a few of the rules/standards out there but there are local, regional, national, trans-national and global. I don't understand them all, and I contend that no-one in this room understands them all, and things pop up all of the time: regulatory pressures are real. And sometimes we see this pop up when we're trying to do things with clients, and clients put their CSR policy onto you and you have to comply, and some of this stuff isn't even regulatory led, it is commercially led.

Now my contention is that as this gets more and more and more complex and bound up in red tape the lawyers roll in with their tanks because they can cut through red tape. They'll cost a fortune, but they will do it. And when they do it the role of this organisation, the role of environmental consultancies, will be then the role of assessor, of verification.

### Third, next generation consultants

The third threat is what are we going to do with our people?

Who wants to work here in what I call a brain factory? We live in a connected world but when I get to any meeting there are a bunch of senior execs with a screen and a laptop who disprove that theory very, very quickly, because we can't get one to speak to the other. But we do live in a connected world - it might not be relevant scanning this room with the age profile that's here, but my kids are in their playground from about 8am in the morning to 9pm at night, when their playground is in their bedroom. Very occasionally they come out of it for food etc., but their lives are in a virtual world where they do not have to have face to face contact for social discourse; therefore they can work without faces. The offices, the bricks, the mortar, the desks, the screens, the mouses...it's no longer relevant. Even a bean bag and table football doesn't cut it...it's still

not there, it's still not relevant.

### Fourth, beware the robots!

So what's the next one? We are all going to be taken over by robots! When I was little I was told we'd be taking pills for food and going to work on hoverboards. Well we're doing both of those now but for recreational purposes. But what is really significant is artificial intelligence. Here's an ecological characterisation of a part of Northern Ireland, wetlands. Now to get this level of detail on the various habitats it would take an eight-person team of ecologists between six and eight months. That's really good business if you can get it guys by the way. But in this case it was done by using two drones and multispectral analysis, but primarily in the visual and near infra-red, and then pushing it through a convolutional neural network model using a training algorithm by something called younet and that's trained it to analyse and recognise and come up with the goods.



So that's one thousand man days of ecologists or twelve man days? Which one do you think our customers are going to go for? And we've had this model verified and it's 99.5% accurate. Beware the robots...

### Fifth, consolidation

And then of course we're going to get eaten. Consolidation is real. It is a megatrend. And actually I'm sounding a bit hypocritical because RPS has clearly benefited from that in the past. However, my contention here is that when you are a smaller subset of a larger, multidisciplinary organisation you have a smaller voice and therefore your ability to execute leadership is somewhat less. But you can also argue that being part of a larger organisation gives you greater clout. You will have all seen the oil companies repositioning themselves to become energy companies. However, when you are owners, shareholders, private equity, then there's a demand in value, a demand in growth. It is quite difficult to exercise that leadership into our client base. So what do we do? Possibly we rebel.

So rebellions are usually against something... e.g. no poll tax, no war in Iraq, no war in Vietnam. But rebellion is changing and something has happened which is seismically different...like the 'do more now' sign from Extinction Rebellion which I think encapsulates this. Do more - what sort of rebellion is this and who is it? Is it the leftwingers? Is it the kids? Is it the celebrities? Is it the rightwingers? Is it the old? Is it the young? It's really about everyone. And they are all saying the same thing encapsulated

in that one banner: do more now. And it's real and it's gaining traction..and we can see this in the action of the Welsh government pretty soon after these events bringing the streets of London to a standstill in declaring a climate emergency...and then we see our outgoing prime minister making demands as well, maybe searching for a legacy. So that's how you rebel against something that hasn't happened yet but is real.

### Who's going to lead?

Clearly it's the politicians who set the regulatory framework but that appears a little slow and a little bit high bound by people's ambitions (and the short termism often of actually being in office). Is it the youth? I bloody hope it is, as they have a damn sight more invested than I have and we should be listening. So there's a lobby void here. There's no way that Greta can do this on her own. The politicians have woken up and they're lumbering through with their regulatory responses. So there's a void of leadership in this particular debate and I think maybe, just maybe, it's our time.

I believe that as environmental consultants we have an awareness of the issues, we have the skills, we have the competence, we have the insights to be able to understand what those problems are and propose solutions to our clients.

But how, where and who, what would we do? If we get it right, we do lead the sector, we do win and we're here for a sustainable future for ourselves. But how do we do that? Maybe we choose where we work - oil

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What if we chose who we work for, the impact of the projects we are prepared to work on and lead our customers?

companies; reading the financial press the consensus seems to be that oil companies will be uninvestible in ten years time. What does that mean? It means they are rebranding and moving their interests from hydrocarbons to renewable energy and we can see them doing that. But they need help in doing that, they need help in how to position, they need help in how to select the right projects and help to understand the impacts of the things they do as they make that transition.

We can help them, but we can also make demands, and this is where we can really show leadership. We can demand that we're not going to be involved in a project that has a negative impact on the environment. Now I know planning regs [or those soon to be in place] say that there has to be a net positive biodiversity impact in the UK. That's not enough for me, maybe we should be demanding that it's three times better to unwind the many, many years of neglect that we've implemented.

Can we make these choices, is it possible? Yes it is. We are uniquely equipped to be able to put those demands onto our clients and explain to them the long-term benefits. Your business becomes investable because you've raised the bar above the regulatory norms, the regulatory 'do-the-minimum'. As you've raised that bar you are a ten times better investment option for the future. We can do this because we have the knowledge, skills, insight: the competence to be able to do it.

Or do we just say no to this work (to oil firms/the aviation sector) and someone else comes along and picks it up? Because guaranteed that someone in this room would be prepared to do that.



Credit: nbcnews.com

Can we attract the workforce of the future (and maybe the great outdoors/anywhere is the office of the future)? No more brain factories, no more offices. We need to work flexibly, agnostic of location, maybe we use hub spaces if we have to have face-to-face discussion.

And how do we show leadership within environmental consultancy? Do we live and breathe what we're trying to achieve? Can we cope with that? Can we cope with no company cars, no flying (that's the most poisonous thing you can do), technology allows you not to do that by the way, but are we prepared to take that leadership position?

Are we prepared to take personal carbon targets? We've all got personal financial targets no doubt, but personal carbon targets are what it takes to reduce your impact and collectively as a company. Can we measure those and limit them and see it as a success when you absolutely beat them. Are we prepared to not eat environmentally damaging foods? Those are things you have to live and breathe if you want to take a leadership position; or be accused of being hypocrites.

So we chose where we work, we make these demands of our clients, we have no offices, we're transportless, and we have our corporate and individual impact as being primary within our organisation. What happens next? Those firms listed, our share price goes mental, we lose customers, we lose investors, we lose confidence, we lose our workforce. And it's a one way ticket to extinction. Maybe...but maybe not.

What does this mean...nobody got fired for

buying IBM (they probably should have been fired for buying this piece of crap)...It means that if you had a problem - a few years ago admittedly - you went to the organisation that had the knowledge, experience skills, and you trusted them to deliver the solution. Well I would contend that is us. You could go to the lawyers and act as verifiers I suppose, but that's the us of the future. To get to that leadership position we have to live it and I believe that the organisations that live it, that hold this and get to this leadership position first will go through some short term pain first, but will then win through and become the environmental consultancy IBM of the future. This is possible.

Then we come to the thorny issue of ownership structures and what allows you to succeed. What ever happened to the ethical investment vehicles of the early to mid noughties? There were loads of these funds, then they got bought (why?) because it became mainstream. Ethical investment is mainstream and investors are more and more looking to the future and looking at the impact of the organisations they run.

### Are we prepared to take the long-term view?

So I don't know what the answer is to all this, but who is prepared to take the long-term view? What type of ownership model do we need to take the long-term view. Is it a foundation ownership, employee-owned trust, benefit trusts, or is it plc? Someone is going to have to take a little bit of pain here,

but we take the short-term pain for long-term leadership and long-term value.

We could just say sod it let's just carry on as we are, let's just wait and see what happens; we're sure the government is going to wake up sometime and put some really slick regulation out which is good for us (and for our business) and that is going to heal the planet. That is one strategy and that is one which we are absolutely sleepwalking into. That's possible, if you believe this guy Donald Trump it ain't going to work. So maybe waiting is not the right strategy. So extinction or rebellion - you get to choose!

We'll be extinct because we're living on a very hot, wet planet, because the lawyers have rolled their tanks in and stolen our business so we'll become an assessor/verifier. We'll be extinct because people won't want to join us; because we're not showing the values in leadership that we need to and we insist they come to brain factories in the future; because AI can do the job of some of our people in an absolute fraction of the time; also, because we'll get eaten up by the competition and our voice will be that much smaller.

Or we can rebel. We chose where we work, we chose the impact of the projects we are prepared to work on, we lead our customers. We create the workplace which is value driven: no offices, no air travel, using public transport and proving our value set is shared with our employees and we can take that leadership position. Is it possible. I don't know if you're prepared to do it, I have no idea, but if you do it we'll be here in 20 years time.

**Hear what John has to say twelve months on from his impactful keynote at last year's Environment Analyst Business Summit, at this year's virtual event, which is taking place from 30 June - 15 July.**

#### JOHN CHUBB

CEO, Consulting UK and Ireland, RPS

John has over 25 years' experience in a broad range of engineering management roles, and for the past nine years has held leadership positions, including with Grontmij UK and Sweco Denmark, also serving on their Executive Committees, whilst concurrently holding roles of Executive Chairman for Grontmij Sweden, and Grontmij UK. Chartered Engineer John is a former Royal Naval Commander and has further senior leadership experience in the nuclear, ICT, waste and energy sectors. He joined RPS in 2018 as CEO of Consulting UK and Ireland.



# ENVIRONMENT ANALYST BUSINESS SUMMIT 2020

## LEADING THE TRANSITION

June - July

This year's Environment Analyst Business Summit is a large virtual event, consisting of online expert talks, virtual panel discussions and digital networking. The event will take place over five main sessions including expert presentations and debate focused on:

- **Reviewing the State of the Global Environmental Consulting Market and Outlook**

Environment Analyst and EFCG share their latest findings on the global environmental consultancy services market dynamics; leading players, M&A trends, sector specific insight, regional hot spots, emerging trends, opportunities, and risks including the impact of COVID-19.

Liz Trew, Co-Founder and Research & Editorial Director, **Environment Analyst**  
Andreas Georgoulis, Director of Risk Management, **EFCG**  
Jessica Barclay, Managing Partner, **EFCG**

- **The Industry Response**

Industry panellists will then offer their perspective on current and future market outlook and the business response, sharing insight into how their companies are responding to different threats and opportunities.

Dr Hisham Mahmoud, Global President & CEO, **Golder Associates**  
Peter Skinner, Chief Operating Officer, **SLR**  
Stuart McLachlan, Chief Executive, **Anthesis Consulting Group**  
Michael Charge, CEO, **Senversa**

- **Strategies for Taking the Lead on the Climate Change, ESG & Net Zero Agenda**

Our expert panel will discuss their perspectives on leading the transition to net zero, mainstreaming ESG, and also how this fits with the drive to 'build back better' post-COVID.

John Chubb, CEO, Consulting UK and Ireland, **RPS**  
Beth Burks, ESG Associate Director, **S&P Global Ratings**  
Paul Munday, Associate Director, Climate Adaptation & Resilience, **S&P Global Ratings**

### At a glance

-  Virtual conference
-  30 June - 15 July
-  Prices start from £350. Discounts available for Corporate Members.

### Who should attend?

-  Senior environmental and sustainability consulting executives (CEOs, MDs, E&S Leads/Directors), those within other environmental management and service firms, as well as business leaders and investors in the wider green economy

### For sponsorship enquires:

Tel: +44 (0) 1225 667 508

