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Climate crisis

Our climate solutions are failing - and Big Oil's fingerprints are all over them Amy Westervelt

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**505** 

For the first time, a IPCC report has acknowledged the role of misinformation. But it still doesn't name the culprits



Activists outside the supreme court in NYC during their 2019 court case accusing big oil producers of concealing harms linked to their industry. Photograph: Angela Weiss/AFP/Getty

eople who do not spend their days reading climate reports or scouring the archives of oil companies are often surprised to hear that the fossil-fuel industry has been part of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) since its inception. And it's not just the IPCC. Oil companies have been involved in the entire international effort on climate change since it began in the late 1980s - and here's a pro tip: they're there for a reason, and it's not decarbonisation.

The second part of the IPCC's most recent report was published last week,

climate space thus far: misinformation. This was followed closely by another

new-to-the-IPCC topic: maladaptation, which refers to measures ostensibly

and it finally acknowledged the oil industry's biggest contribution to the

geared towards warding off climate change, but which "may lead to increased risk of adverse climate-related outcomes, including via increased greenhouse gas emissions, increased or shifted vulnerability to climate change, more inequitable outcomes, or diminished welfare", according to the IPCC. to a neighbourhood, which can increase property value and push low-

The report points to "green gentrification" - the introduction of green spaces income residents out - as an example of a measure that "offers nature-based solutions to the few". Whether an action is maladapted can depend on context, the report's authors add, for instance, air conditioning can reduce risk for the individual but is maladaptive at a societal level.

The report's authors did not draw a connection between misinformation and

Q&A: Has the IPCC's bleak warning of climate breakdown

been heard? Read more maladaptation, opting instead to assert that maladaptation is often unintended. Yet an increasing number of peer-reviewed studies point to the fossil-fuel industry's fingerprints on that particular problem as well, thanks to the role it plays as a primary funder of university research on not only climate science, but also policy and economics, as well as its penchant for greenwashing solutions that don't work, or that work only for the few. IPCC authors were more direct when Advertisement

it came to misinformation. The North America summary notes that "misinformation about climate science ... has sowed uncertainty, and impeded [the public's] recognition of risk". A few paragraphs later, it adds that both misinformation and "politicisation" of the science are "delaying urgent adaptation planning and implementation". But the closest it



and misinformation that undermines climate science and disregards risk and urgency". This is the first time the IPCC has mentioned misinformation in its reports. Why? Maybe it's because the panel has finally included social scientists, who have the receipts on those "vested interests" and may be more willing to

companies - is to vaguely note that "vested interests have generated rhetoric

push back against them. If you're wondering why they've included oil company staffers since 1988, but only recently let social scientists in ... good question. To answer it, we have to go back in time a bit. The year 1972 was a big one for international

environmental affairs, thanks to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), which produced the Stockholm declaration. This groundbreaking document made environmental issues global, emphasising conservation, the redistribution of resources, and state responsibility for environmental damage both within and beyond borders. It also contained little to no consideration of business interests. "To the extent that industry was included at all in the UNCHE negotiations, it was as a culprit and a threat," Melissa Aronczyk and Maria Espinoza write in

their recent book, A Strategic Nature. Combined with an explosion in environmental regulations all over the world (from 1970 to 1972 alone, the US created the Environmental Protection Agency and passed the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act) the Stockholm declaration was a huge wake-up call to industry that the world was taking this environmental stuff seriously. They were caught a bit flat-footed - but not for long. By 1988, a handful of oil companies and trade groups were involved in the

IPCC process. Their numbers grew every year, as did their prominence, and they moved from being observers and reviewers to authors. By 1998, Brian Flannery, a former climate modeller and then manager at ExxonMobil and a key part of the company's shift from researching climate change to casting doubt on climate science, was lead author of the "Working Group III" assessment in the IPCC's third report. The group works on mitigation actually reducing CO2 emissions - definitely not something you want an Exxon guy in charge of, especially during the company's peak climate-denial years. Flannery took the lead on Working Group III for the fourth report, too, which was published in 2007. In the 20 years between the UNCHE and the 1992 Rio Earth summit, which

was the precursor to what we now call the Conference of Parties or COP events, the business community fully infiltrated international discussions on environmental issues and successfully moved the goalposts. Gone was the emphasis on government regulation, replaced by a sort of big-tent approach that included business interests and prioritised compromise. "Some enlightened leaders of enterprises are already implementing 'responsible care' and product stewardship policies and programmes," Agenda 21, one of the defining documents to come out of the 1992 Rio summit, noted approvingly. "A positive contribution of business and industry, including transnational corporations, to sustainable development can increasingly be

achieved by using economic instruments such as free market mechanisms." That shift in tone, from regulation in 1972 to compromise in 1992, is a crucial one, because the Rio Earth summit also produced the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC), which informed the creation of the IPCC and its reports, as well as every international climate agreement since. In contrast to the 1972 convening, the UN encouraged business-community participation in 1992 - and industry groups were happy

to comply. They drafted their own "sustainable development charter" to bring to Rio. "And as you can imagine, this charter did not contain anything that would have really transformed how companies did business," Aronczyk says. "It

was a very business-as-usual document, but it paid a lot of lip service to the idea of going green, of being sustainable, being very concerned about the environment. And because they got out in front of the actual conference, they were really able to put that document forward and stave off other kinds of more binding legislation or more draconian regulations that would have caused problems for these companies' profits." Social scientists have been arguing for decades that the biggest obstacle to

climate action is not a lack of scientific understanding or data, but a lack of

reviewed literature, and convincing many atmospheric scientists of their

political will. It was only after producing a growing mountain of peer-

value as well, that they were finally included and, it seems, listened to. So it is that we would go another nearly 30 years before the IPCC would warn the world about climate change with the kind of urgency that accompanied its 2018 report, or point to industry-fuelled efforts like misinformation and maladaptation today. Many are now eagerly awaiting the Working Group III

producer of the Critical Frequency podcast network You've read 10 articles in the last year Article count on

Amy Westervelt is a climate journalist and the founder and executive

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## report, which is due out in April and includes the most input from social scientist authors ... but was reviewed by a Chevron staffer, naturally.

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**IPCC** expert

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