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Anthropocene: be wary of social impact

Holmes G, Barber J, Lundershausen J

As social scientists studying the work of the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, we believe that the expertise of social scientist goes beyond developing a ‘better’ stratigraphic definition of the Anthropocene (E. Ellis et al. *Nature* 540, 192–193; 2016). Such knowledge should also be used to understand the likely consequences of any definition, particularly those given the weight of scientific credibility. However it is defined, the Anthropocene could alter people’s concepts of how humans interact with the natural world (see also N. Castree *Nature* 541, 289; 2017). Labels matter — a formal stratigraphic description might normalize human impacts on the planet and undermine efforts to minimize them, or lead people to ignore responsibilities for creating and managing the Anthropocene, which are unevenly spread around the world. Alternatively, it could inspire positive change and have a bigger impact on society than on stratigraphy. Social science can be used to develop concepts and a language for explaining the Anthropocene in both stratigraphic and political terms.