

## **Statement on Huxley Name Change**

TO: Board of Trustees, Western Washington University

FROM: WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

DATE: November XX, 2021

SUBJECT: Board Response to Legacy Review Task Force Recommendation

Dear Members of the Board,

Concerning the unanimous recommendation made by the Legacy Review Task Force to remove T.H. Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, the WWU Student Government offers this statement of support.

The fact that Thomas Huxley was racist is irrefutable. He openly endorsed theories that are now classified as scientific racism, stating that Black people were more similar to apes than they were to white people, in addition to other anthropological works that refer to "lesser races", "uncivilized", or "primitive" peoples (Brantlinger, 2003). Huxley established a taxonomy of 11 different "stocks" or races, and viewed European or white stocks as "superior" to others. He supported imperialism and white supremacy, and believed that people of color, otherwise known to him as "barbarians" and "native savages," were unfit to become civilized and contribute to society (Brantlinger, 2003). These claims have done irreparable damage to communities of color and fanned the flames of racism worldwide. They continue to hurt people of color within our university, with many students — particularly Black students — feeling degraded attending an institution named after a prominent supporter of hurtful, racist sentiments. This alone provides enough justification to remove Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, and is just one of several demands (number six of 19) by the University's Black Student Organization to make WWU more inclusive to Black students at our predominantly white institution (Black Student Organization, 2020).

However, there are additional reasons for renaming the college. As recognized by the Legacy Review Task Force, not only does Huxley's glorification hurt people of color, but it also does significant damage to the reputation of Western Washington University. An institution which prides itself on inclusivity and acceptance cannot afford to be degraded by ideologies which entrench racism in a country built by racism and colonization. Removing Huxley's name from the College of the Environment will demonstrate that the University is committed to fostering inclusive learning environments and social justice in education. Given the fact that Thomas Huxley and his descendants never had any connection financially or otherwise to Western Washington University or Washington State, the removal of the name from the college, acknowledging valid alumni-related sentimental connection, is a more than reasonable request to fulfill (WWU Legacy Review Task Force, 2021).

In addition to the reasons outlined above, the renaming of the College of the Environment (CoE) is supported by both faculty and students. Former College of the Environment senators Laura Wagner and Francis Neff held a virtual public forum Jan. 25 to discuss the removal and renaming of Huxley College. They were joined by former AS Senate Pro-Tempore Sargun Handa, who's supported the name change since 2020, and other Western students and faculty members. The senators said the College of Environment should be named after a person of color who's made advancements in the field of environmentalism and sustainability. Gene Meyers, an environmental studies professor who attended the forum, said, "This is the time to do it, if there ever was one" (Angulo, 2021). Then, on May 19, several CoE faculty members participated in writing an op-ed published in the Western Front backing the name change. The op-ed refuted those who wish to retain Huxley's legacy as a scientific hero, and recognized him as an ethically flawed scientist of his era. Faculty proposed the idea of not naming the CoE after one specific person, in order to "better support our commitment to creating a more inclusive college culture" (Environmental Studies Faculty, et al., 2021). In addition, last spring all three candidates that ran to represent the College of the Environment supported the renaming of the college, proving that the pro-Huxley faction had virtually no support from the student body in the Student Senate elections. Western students and the Legacy Review Task Force have demonstrated support also, with the Task Force sending its unanimous recommendation for the Huxley name change to President Sabah Randhawa on June 14 (WWU Legacy Review Taskforce, 2021).

However, we cannot write this letter without acknowledging the arguments of those who wish to keep the name. Some within the University argue that removing Huxley's name will discredit the positive scientific contributions he made during his lifetime, and preserve the narratives of creationists who deny the biological theory of evolution. We believe this argument lacks credibility. If one considers Darwin and the Theory of Evolution, historical evidence proves that Darwin was racist and that his work contributed to scientific racism (Rose, 2009). Therefore, this demonstrates that Darwin held views which are rightfully regarded as indefensible and unscrupulous in modern society. While the vast majority of people, scientists included, still respect Darwin's Theory of Evolution and his other evolutionary science writings despite these views, many still acknowledge the harmful impacts of Social Darwinism on the development of scientific racism (Rose, 2009). Therefore, we believe that the argument against removing the name is unfounded, if not in bad faith. Regardless, whatever positive contributions Thomas Huxley made to science cannot undo the damage his ethnological work has done to people of color, meriting the removal of his name from the college.

Huxley's name is a detriment not only to the College of the Environment, but Western Washington University as a whole. To be fully in support of racial justice and people of color, we must fight back against the wishes of a few who are willing to undermine a process decided upon by the President and Board of Trustees in order to maintain the status quo. Removing the name is a moral decision, and will act as a symbolic step for further efforts in the CoE to heal the racial divides and discrimination within our community. We humbly request that you, the Board of Trustees, remove Huxley's name from the College of the Environment, and rename it with a

title that is respectful to all people regardless of race, class, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, ethnicity and other identities.

Thank you,

WWU Executive Board and Student Senate

References:

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