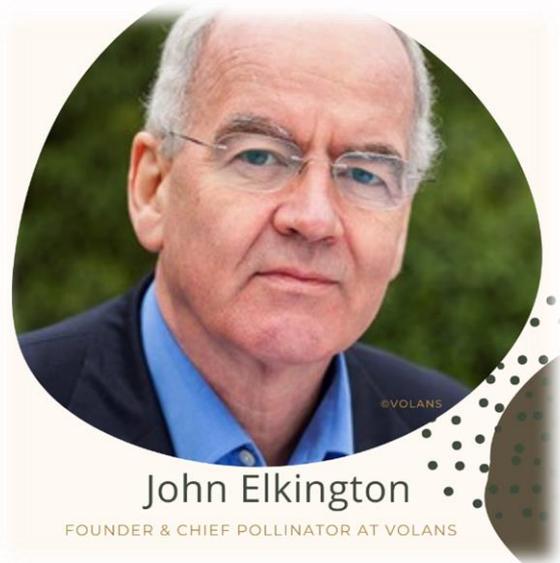


## Interview with John Elkington

*Entrevista com John Elkington*

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John Elkington, Founder & Chief Pollinator at Volans, is one of the founders of the global sustainability movement, an experienced advisor to business, and a highly regarded keynote speaker and contributor, from conferences to boards and advisory boards. John tackles some of the world's most challenging problems, helping key actors move from the responsibility agenda through resilience to regeneration. He has inspired a number of Volans' inquiries, including Project Breakthrough, Tomorrow's Capitalism Inquiry

and the Green Swans Observatory. He has worked with an A-to-Z of businesses worldwide, now helping the Volans team guide multinational companies to transform towards a regenerative future.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** Firstly, I would like to say that it is a great pleasure and honor to interview you considering your important contribution to sustainability studies. Thank you very much Mr. Elkington. To begin with, I would like to ask what were the main advances and lessons covered in the journey of more than 25 years since your proposal of the Triple Bottom Line?

**John Elkington:** That's a huge question! When I first started working in this space, back in the 1970s, few business people accepted that their responsibilities to society and the environment went much beyond compliance – and many major companies were ending up in court after

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disasters, suggesting that even compliance was often overlooked.

Nowadays, business leaders in many countries accept a beyond-compliance agenda, signing up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Market-defining companies like Walmart, Pepsico and Unilever are even committing themselves to “regeneration”. At the same time, there are millions of businesses around the world that continue to damage Human health and wellbeing, the climate and biodiversity. That’s why I did the first-ever product recall of a major management concept (as the *Harvard Business Review* editors who published it described the article which appeared in 2018 and available at <https://hbr.org/2018/06/25-years-ago-i-coined-the-phrase-triple-bottom-line-heres-why-im-giving-up-on-it>).

**Diego de Melo Conti:** Given these advances and lessons in your studies, what are the main actions that continue to compromise our planetary system? And how can we mitigate or avoid these issues from happening?

**John Elkington:** Nature is under immense pressure: globally, monitored population sizes of mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians declined an average of 68% between 1970 and 2016, according to World Wildlife Fund’s (WWF) Living Planet Report 2020 (see <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-us/>).

Human numbers are massive part of the problem, of course, though countries like China are beginning to project dramatic declines in their population by 2100. Overall, however, human population numbers will continue to grow – and, when linked with modern diets and lifestyles, the result will be deeply problematic for the natural world and for the climate. New technology and careful design will help, but the most powerful levers are often political and behavioral. The private, public and citizen sectors must increasingly work together to drive change. We also need to regain our respect for science and for facts, particularly our politicians.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** Considering your experience of many decades studying these subjects, what paths to sustainability do you consider necessary, given the context of the climate crisis we are experiencing?

**John Elkington:** This is a story I have told in 20 books to date, the latest of which is called *Green Swans: The Coming Boom in Regenerative Capitalism* published by Fast Company Press in 2020 (available at [Green Swans | Volans – The Business of Business is Change](https://www.fastcompany.com/2020/06/16/green-swans-volans-the-business-of-business-is-change)). On theme in this latest book is the continuing struggle among businesses to address an ever-expanding Responsibility agenda.

Even during the COVID-19 crisis, the agenda continued to evolve, embracing issues like wealth divides, access to public healthcare and vaccines, and tax avoidance and evasion. But many of the biggest challenges now link to resilience problems, whether that involves our

economies, societies, politics or natural environment. And the only way to ensure genuine long-term resilience in such systems is by regenerating them.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** What in your opinion needs to be done so that societies know more about sustainability to improve social-environmental actions and awareness?

**John Elkington:** The educational system has evolved significantly since I began working in this area, but much more needs to be done. We have worked with a growing number of universities and business schools – and found that students at the masters and MBA levels, can be immensely creative, if given the opportunity to work on solutions. Policy and regulation are also central. After a period of de-regulation in many countries, we must now re-regulate. We need increased transparency and accountability, with businesses increasingly incentivised to do the right thing – with rewards and punishments.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** How do you evaluate the progress and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda? Has the COVID-19 pandemic compromised the achievement of the goals?

**John Elkington:** Of course, such a pandemic will have slowed and even stalled many important initiatives, but COVID-19 has also reawakened many people to the natural world – and set them thinking about other systemic crises that governments may be mismanaging, including the climate and biodiversity emergencies. Whatever we may think of the Bolsonaro administration, or it would be hard to argue that it has managed to pandemic well – or that its actions in relation to natural capital assets like Amazonia show real intelligence and wisdom.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** When it comes to sustainability in business, we see in Brazil a great wave of diffusion of ESG in the financial market and in companies. Do you believe this is an impactful movement to face the planet's environmental and social problems? Or is it still a limited path?

**John Elkington:** Many people continue to see ESG as the end goal, the end state, when it isn't anything of the sort. At best, ESG frameworks and tools represent stepping-stones to a better – or less bad – world. At best, most current ESG strategies nibble at the edges of much bigger challenges, like circularity, resilience and regeneration, and sustainability.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** Lastly if you could leave a brief message for future generations. What would it be?

**John Elkington:** I would start by saying sorry. The 20<sup>th</sup> century didn't really know what it was doing with sustainability issues like climate change and, in Brazil, the destruction of Amazonia. Even if we were told. With some exceptions, we failed to rise to the systemic consequences of what we were doing. We hoped that someone else would do what needed to be done. We hoped things would get better somehow.

By the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, most people knew what was happening – but failed to act quickly or effectively enough. We should blame them, of course, but we should spend more time holding to account those who actively denied the science, the truth, and punish those who knowingly committed what the future will know as eco-crimes. Just as genocide became an international crime as a result of the 20th century, so ecocide will be an international crime.

Finally, I am 72 – and fell that I am only just getting started. I am not expecting to be around for all of the time, but I see the next 15-20 years as the most exciting, challenging and dangerous time if my working life.

**Diego de Melo Conti:** Thank you very much for this great interview!

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