

# Gaia's warrior

In the 1960s James Lovelock was an eco-pioneer; today he's a firm advocate of nuclear power. Meet the independent thinker who is never far from the intellectual fray.

**A**s green heroes go, Jim Lovelock is a real oddity. He is fervently pro-nuclear, hates wind farms, once worked for the British secret service and is an admirer of the right-wing former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher. On top of that, Lovelock, who will turn 88 in July this year, is a member of a generation many now blame for our planet's mounting ecological woes. This is no lantern-jawed hero on a Greenpeace anti-whaling mission nor a glamorous young lawyer exposing the iniquities of a mining company. This is an octogenarian — with attitude.

And it is this uncompromising outlook that holds the green movement in Lovelock's thrall, such is his passion for his planet and the quiet independence of his thinking.

Indeed, many observers believe he is one of only a handful of individuals who fully understands our planet's peril. "He is simply the most important and original scientific thinker in the world today," says John Gray, the distinguished London School of Economics philosopher. "He has changed the way we look at the Earth — and in a fundamental manner."

Lovelock is best known as the creator of Gaia theory, which states that our planet's living forms control their environment. "Life regulates the Earth's atmosphere and climate to keep it habitable," he says. "It is as simple as that."

**"We are at the end of our tether and the rope, whose weave defines our fate, is about to break."**

And from this perspective Lovelock has come to fear for our world with a stark intensity. The billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide now being pumped into the atmosphere by our cars and power stations are so distorting Gaia, that Earth will abruptly switch to a searing hot climate that will turn our forests and grasslands into scorched scrub.

"The intolerably hot world soon to come can support only a remnant of today's burgeoning humanity and the survivors will

be driven to the cooler regions of the Arctic and to a few continental oases and islands," he says.

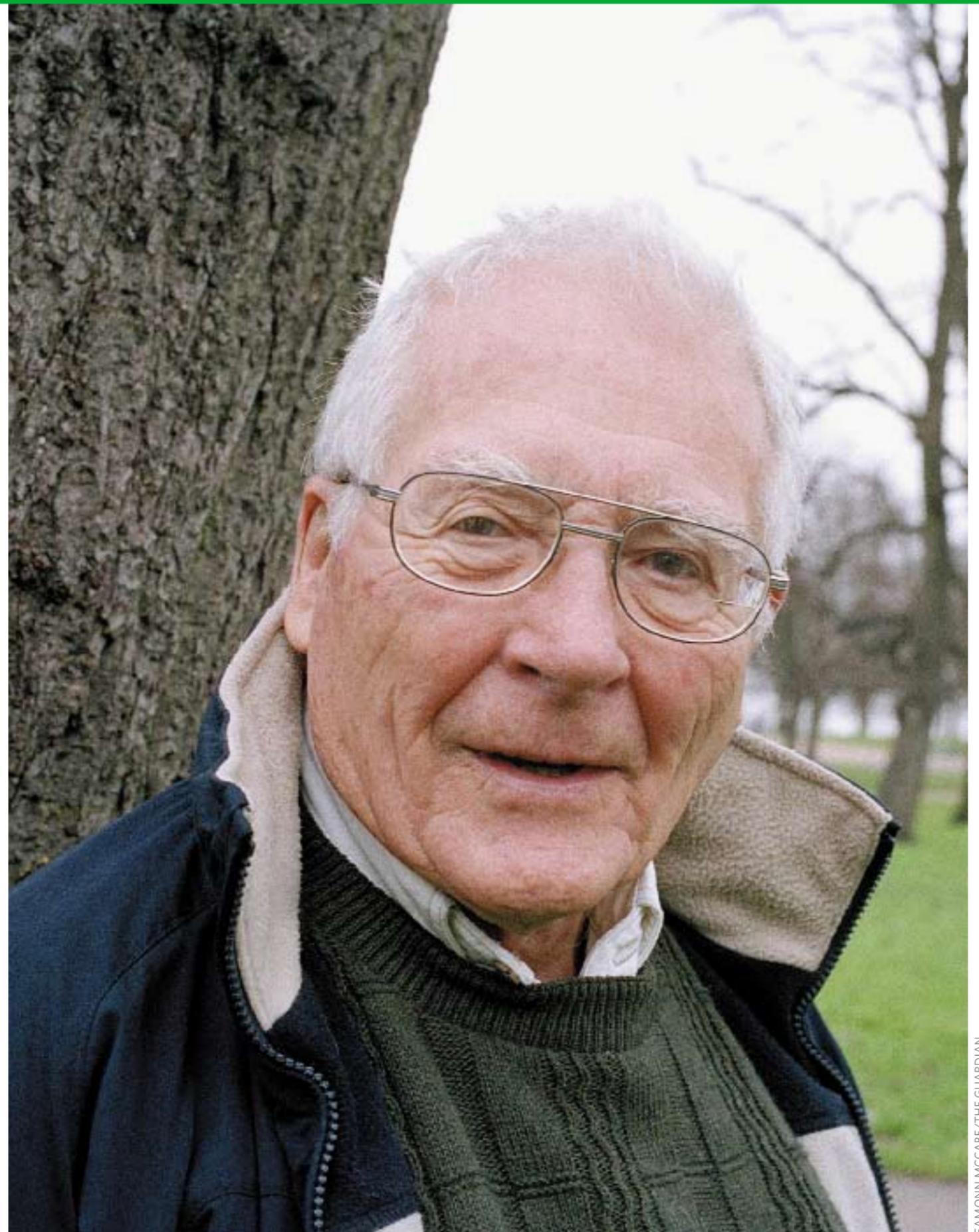
Accepting the UK's John Collier award at the Savoy Place in London recently, Lovelock announced: "The catastrophe threatened by global heating is far worse than any war, famine, or plague in living memory; worse even than global nuclear war. Much of the lush and comfortable Earth we now enjoy is about to become a hot and barren desert."

As pronouncements of doom go, it's hard to beat. Such a cataclysmic vision also explains Lovelock's support for nuclear power. Never mind the costs of constructing reactors or the radioactive waste they produce, we have to cut emissions and only a proven, carbon-free source can save us, is his rationale. "Green concepts of sustainable development and renewable energy are far too late to have any value," he added, during his speech. Given that his lecture was sponsored by the nuclear industry, the suggestion went down well.

Not surprisingly the environment movement is less happy. Indeed, to Lovelock's legion of green admirers, his recent espousal of nuclear energy has caused some unrest. "I think Jim is a hero, but he is wrong on this one," said climate campaigner Jonathon Porritt, head of Britain's Sustainable Development Commission. "He is backing nuclear power out of desperation,

not because it is a rational option." For his part, Lovelock remains unrepentant. His critics, he says, are talking "liberal nonsense". This, in short, is a scientist who is unafraid to ruffle feathers.

James Ephraim Lovelock was born in July 1919, the only son of Tom and Nellie Lovelock, and raised in Brixton, a working-class area of south London. His love of science began with trips to the city's science and natural history museums and by reading stories by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Then, in 1932, the family »



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