

Anthropocene Working Group (AWG)
Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy
International Commission on Stratigraphy
International Union of Geological Sciences

July 12, 2023

Dear Jan, Colin, Simon, Martin and membership of the Anthropocene Working Group,

It is with mixed emotions that I am sending this letter to resign from the Anthropocene Working Group. I've been a member since AWG began in 2009 and many of my most treasured experiences as a scholar have unfolded with AWG. Over most of the past 14 years, AWG has exemplified the kind of scholarly community that encourages exploration of new ideas and evidence and the spirit of open collegial debate needed to build strong science. Even though, as an ecologist, my professional perspectives and contributions have often differed from the core views of the group, I've generally found these to be welcome and productive. For all of these reasons, I feel sadness in resigning.

Nevertheless I must resign, for two reasons. The first is that things have changed within the group, as exemplified by the increasingly corrosive nature of discussions surrounding two recent resignations. AWG has become so focused on promoting a single narrow definition of the Anthropocene that there is no longer room for dissent or for a broader perspective within the group. This narrowing of perspective began to emerge years ago, with the 2016 vote deciding that only evidence supporting a mid-20th century start date would be considered in Anthropocene definition. Looking back, I probably should have resigned at that time. But recent efforts to promote the group's final GSSP and site proposal have now established beyond doubt that there is no longer any place for broader perspectives on Anthropocene definition within AWG. The group exists only to promote one single narrow perspective, and differing views are no longer acceptable. I clearly no longer have any useful role in the group.

Second, it is no longer possible to avoid the reality that narrowly defining the Anthropocene in the way AWG has chosen to do has become more than a scholarly concern. The AWG's choice to systematically ignore overwhelming evidence of Earth's long-term anthropogenic transformation is not just bad science, it's bad for public understanding and action on global change. This, at a time when broader cooperation to address these grave societal challenges is more critical than ever.

To define the Anthropocene as a shallow band of sediment in a single lake is an esoteric academic matter. But dividing Earth's human transformation into two parts, pre- and post- 1950, does real damage by denying the deeper history and the ultimate causes of Earth's unfolding social-environmental crisis. Are the planetary changes wrought by industrial and colonial nations before 1950 not significant enough to transform the planet? The political ramifications of such a misleading and scientifically inaccurate portrayal are clearly profound and regressive. Perhaps AWG's break in Earth history will simply be ignored outside stratigraphy. But this is undoubtedly neither AWG's goal, nor is it the way AWG's narrative is being interpreted across the public media.

I was first inspired to work on the Anthropocene as a geological concept in 2008, in response to the *GSA Today* article led by Jan and the exciting scientific and societal discussions surrounding it. Soon after, Jan and I organized a session together and met in person at the American Geophysical Union meeting in San Francisco in December 2008. I was then asked to join AWG and gladly accepted. Many good years of scientific collaboration followed.

As a scholar who has actively worked within a group now promoting a misleading and regressive perspective on Earth's transformation by human societies, I feel obligated to respond. First, by formally ending my association with the group, and in the long term, by doing my best to counteract the damage created by this misleading perspective based on the best available science.

I have many fond memories and I retain my respect and admiration for all my colleagues in AWG. I remain hopeful that the Anthropocene as a concept will continue to inspire efforts to understand and more effectively guide societal interactions with our only planet. I no longer believe that the AWG is helping to achieve this and is increasingly actively accomplishing the opposite.

I therefore wish to formally resign from the Anthropocene Working Group.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erle C. Ellis'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Erle' being more prominent than the last name 'Ellis'.

Erle C. Ellis, Ph.D.

Professor, Geography & Environmental Systems