

Apart from a few remarkable personalities, research was in deep darkness during the decades preceding the first edition of *Nature, use or abuse* (1976). With the same spirit of transformation that imbued that book and the whole of society, a rapidly growing research system was progressively developed in the following decades. The number of contributions to international journals has not ceased to grow. However, the sustained increase in investment suddenly declined at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The economic crisis highlighted all the weaknesses of the political, economic and social valuation of science. Today the system is richer in human capital than in resources. Global change should become the centre of gravity of environmental research that could foster the social recognition necessary to improve research centre organisation, to renew staff, to correct infrastructure dysfunctions and to facilitate the transfer between the academic and professional worlds.