

G&B Festival: Michael Oppenheimer: "The World Is in Trouble, but We Can Fix It."

[Sandro Iannaccone](#) 19 May 2026



I protagonisti



Michael Oppenheimer, Professor of Geosciences and International Affairs at Princeton University, at the Green&Blue Festival.

The Princeton climatologist opens the Green&Blue Festival: "The 1987 ban on CFCs shows that we can unite to avert global threats."

Updated June 4, 2026, at 12:53 p.m. | 3-minute read

1987. For several decades, a serious environmental crisis had been threatening the balance of the planet. In response, the international community came together to sign a landmark agreement: the **Montreal Protocol**. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)—industrial gases widely used in aerosol sprays and refrigerators—were literally destroying the Earth's ozone layer, the shield that protects life from harmful ultraviolet radiation. The agreement, signed in Canada and later ratified by every country in the world, banned the use of CFCs and mandated their gradual phase-out.

Today, we know that this decision was both timely and effective. The ozone hole is slowly recovering and is expected to become almost imperceptible by the end of this century. It is precisely this historical precedent—a rare instance in which science and global politics successfully worked together and acted at the right moment—that **Michael Oppenheimer**, Professor of Geosciences and International Affairs at Princeton University and one of the keynote speakers at the Green&Blue Festival, invokes.

Long before the Montreal Protocol was signed—at a time when global warming was still a topic discussed mainly within a handful of university classrooms—Oppenheimer was already at the forefront of climate advocacy as Chief Scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, now one of the

largest and most influential non-profit environmental organizations in the United States. During his years there, he worked to translate scientific evidence into policy advocacy, playing a pivotal role, for example, in the development of regulations to combat acid rain in the United States. For decades, he also served as a leading author for the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the scientific body awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

In Oppenheimer's view, the story of the ozone hole is a powerful example of the strength of the concept of "we"—the central theme of this year's festival—understood as collective action in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

"The world has always been in trouble," he says. "This particular historical moment is marked by fragmentation. Ongoing wars, deep geopolitical divisions, and the stark imbalance of responsibilities between wealthy and developing countries seem to paralyze any real prospect of coordinated climate action. Yet history teaches us that, amid this cacophony of disorder, we are sometimes able to come together to solve specific problems. And that can never be accomplished by a single individual or by a single country."

This is where the idea of "we" becomes essential. To reinforce his point, Oppenheimer offers another tangible example of international cooperation—this time based on deterrence and common sense. Although that balance is currently fragile, as reflected by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which this year moved the hands of its **Doomsday Clock** to just **85 seconds to midnight**, the closest they have ever been, the fact remains that:

"For the past 75 years, humanity has managed not to destroy itself with nuclear weapons."

Looking ahead, Oppenheimer turns to one of the most pressing challenges of today's climate crisis: the resistance of our economies and our lifestyles to moving away from fossil fuels. Our dependence on coal, oil, and natural gas is deeply embedded in the way our societies function, but it should not be viewed as an untouchable monolith or as something "too big to dismantle," to borrow the well-known expression *too big to fail*.

"We don't need miracles," Oppenheimer explains. "There are certainly obstacles, but they can be dismantled, piece by piece. The key is to understand the deeper motivations that drive people and governments to act, and to build on the forms of cooperation that are already proving successful today."

Oppenheimer's pragmatic approach—shaped by decades of research on the dynamics of ice sheets and on scenarios for the planned retreat of coastal communities in response to sea-level rise—suggests that society should pursue two parallel tracks.

The first is **mitigation**: drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions by looking at the evidence with clarity and realism, without giving in to eco-anxiety.

"A profound energy transition is already underway around the world, and we should draw courage and inspiration from it. These complex challenges can be solved—the alternative is already here."

The second track is **rapid adaptation**. Realism requires us to recognize that even if global emissions were somehow to fall to zero overnight, the greenhouse gases already accumulated in the atmosphere, together with the inertia of the climate system, would continue to produce the effects of climate change—rising temperatures, droughts, and extreme weather events—for decades to come.

"We must honestly acknowledge the scale of the crisis. We cannot afford to stand still. It is imperative to act now by investing in resilient infrastructure and better land management to protect lives and resources today."

The answer is not miraculous solutions, but determined collective action—just as it was in the case of the ozone hole.