



## THE ESSENCE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

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### Abstract

Since the second half of the 20th century, the issue of sustainable development has been the subject of intense research and debate within the scientific community. Despite a precise definition, publications on sustainable development have presented divergent interpretations. This phenomenon results from the widespread adoption of sustainable development in scientific and social discourse, leading to numerous misinterpretations by its proponents and opponents. Sustainable development is composed of distinct terms, and their combined meaning is more than the sum of the meanings of the individual components. The subject of this work is sustainable development, and the goal is to analyze and assess sustainable development in the context of its importance for future generations. The main research question is: How can sustainable development impact future generations?

The article employs a literature review of both domestic and international literature and legal acts. Based on the collected material, it was concluded that sustainable development is crucial for the creation of future generations, as it allows access to natural resources and protects against environmental degradation and social and economic crises, ensuring the possibility of continued life and growth. The role of sustainable development is to strike a balance between economic, social, and environmental needs to ensure that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

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Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, zrównoważona przyszłość, koncepcja zrównoważonego rozwoju, społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu.

### Abstrakt

Problematyka zrównoważonego rozwoju od drugiej połowy XX wieku stanowi przedmiot intensywnych badań i debat w środowisku naukowym. Pomimo jasnej definicji, w publikacjach poświęconych tematowi zrównoważonego rozwoju pojawiały się rozbieżne interpretacje. Zjawisko to stanowi rezultat upowszechnienia koncepcji zrównoważonego rozwoju w dyskursie naukowym i społecznym, która doprowadziła do licznych błędnych interpretacji zarówno ze strony jego zwolenników, jak i przeciwników. Zrównoważony rozwój składa się z odrębnych terminów, a ich łączne znaczenie jest czymś więcej niż sumą znaczeń poszczególnych elementów. Przedmiotem pracy jest zrównoważony rozwój, a celem jest analiza i ocena zrównoważonego rozwoju w kontekście znaczenia dla przyszłych pokoleń. Głównym problemem badawczym jest pytanie: W jaki sposób zrównoważony rozwój może wpływać na przyszłe pokolenia?

W artykule zastosowano metodę przeglądu literatury zarówno krajowej jak i zagranicznej, a także aktów prawnych. W oparciu o zebrany materiał uznano, że znaczenie zrównoważonego rozwoju jest kluczowe dla zapewnienia rozwoju przyszłym pokoleniom, gdyż pozwala on na dostęp nie tylko do zasobów naturalnych, lecz również chroni przed degradacją środowiska oraz kryzysów o charakterze społecznym i gospodarczym, zapewniając możliwość dalszego życia i rozwoju. Rola zrównoważonego rozwoju polega na znalezieniu równowagi między potrzebami gospodarczymi, społecznymi i środowiskowymi, aby zapewnić zaspokojenie potrzeb obecnego pokolenia bez umniejszania możliwości przyszłych pokoleń do zaspokojenia własnych potrzeb.

## Introduction

The concept of sustainable development is a response to the modern world's problems. It is seen as a compromise between "having" and "being," thus creating a modern definition of quality of life. The history of this concept and the diverse ways in which it is understood and interpreted complicate its contemporary acceptance. Sustainable development is often defined as development that meets the needs of present and future generations. One of the main goals of sustainable development is improving the quality of life, which is interpreted in various ways and is often treated as a set of factors defining both objective living conditions and the subjective perception of well-being. At the same time, it is essential to establish a hierarchy of needs that determines the quality of life of an individual or group in a specific place (region) and time. Therefore, interpreting the concepts of quality

of life and sustainable development and understanding their interdependence has become a key research topic (Tuziak, 2022).

Sustainability is defined in the Gro Harlem report, “Our Common Future,” as development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Its goal is to ensure economic growth while maintaining socio-cultural and environmental sustainability. This concept assumes that desired progress will encompass three economic, social, and ecological areas. Mohan Munasinghe first proposed this concept at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Each perspective corresponds to a different domain (system) with its goals and means. The economic domain focuses on improving human well-being, primarily through increased consumption of goods and services. The environmental domain focuses on protecting the integrity and resilience of ecosystems. The social domain emphasizes enriching interpersonal relationships, fulfilling individual and collective aspirations, and strengthening values (Kalinowski, 2018).

## **The development of the idea of sustainable development – a historical and scientific perspective**

The concept of sustainable development emerged and developed at a specific time. Its origins can be traced to the 1960s, when public awareness of environmental protection increased, coinciding with the development of the media. Media coverage of environmental disasters heightened awareness of global responsibility for local ecological changes. This increased awareness within the international community led to cooperation in environmental protection. The concept of sustainable development arose as a response to growing concerns about the nature of the relationship between humans and the environment and its consequences at the time (Kenig-Witkowska, 2011).

U'Thant, among others, addressed the issue of the environmental impact of current resource management standards and the threat of resource deficits for future generations. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, he announced the report prepared by the UN Economic and Social Commission entitled “Man and the Environment.” This document was released on May 26, 1969, during the UN General Assembly. The document under review highlighted several important issues concerning the environmental consequences of development. Attention was drawn to the growing pressure on the environment, which manifests itself, among other things, in the intensification of land development at the expense of green spaces. Furthermore, the issue of environmental quality was discussed in the context of the quality of agricultural production space, as well as the effects of uncontrolled urban growth and the transformation of their hinterlands.

This publication is considered a turning point in the perception of environmental problems (Namieśnik, 1999).

In his speeches, however, U'Thant did not limit himself to highlighting the problem of human misuse of resources. He also emphasized the need to change the approach to environmental protection and foster a sense of global responsibility. Within the UN, he established structures that still function today for ecological research and implementing projects to support environmental protection. These include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Their responsibilities include monitoring the implementation of sustainable development objectives on a global scale. In 1968, the Club of Rome, known as a "global think tank," was established in response to the desire of scientists, businesspeople, and politicians to engage in discussions on global responsibility. The report "The Limits to Growth," prepared by the Club of Rome (Meadows, 1973), presented downright catastrophic visions of the planet's future, linked to resource constraints. It highlighted the threats generated by accelerating industrialization and the demographic explosion, connecting them to the problems of hunger and poverty and negative environmental changes, such as a decline in quality and the rapid depletion of resources. The report was consistent with Malthus's concept, which, in the 19th century, predicted the occurrence of a tipping point. According to his theory, the Earth's resources are limited, leading to a growth limit and a reduction in production capacity. This state of affairs could result in a decline in the global population. To prevent this situation, the report's authors proposed the so-called zero growth postulate, i.e., freezing economic growth at the achieved level as a strategy for human survival. This postulate sparked considerable controversy (Ciażela, 2007). It was interpreted primarily as an argument for maintaining the differences in socioeconomic development worldwide in a given period. Regardless of one's assessment of the zero growth concept, it cannot be denied that the Club of Rome report played a key role in initiating international discussion on development issues (Forrester, 1971, 1995).

Following the publication of the famous Club of Rome report, a series of studies was initiated to assess how human activities have led to a critical juncture, characterized by the maximum level of human pressure on Earth's ecological systems exceeding their tolerance limits. These studies demonstrated that humanity has already exceeded growth limits, i.e., the permissible, safe level of economic activity and Earth's population (Michnowski, 2008).

The term "sustainable development" began to be used in literature as early as the mid-1970s. Barbara Ward is credited with pioneering this concept, eventually becoming a central element of the entire concept (Satterthwaite, 2006). In her work, she frequently addressed resource constraints, including those affecting developing countries. She divided them into two groups of limiting factors. The first category consisted of internal factors, stemming from human needs and aspirations to achieve a certain standard of living. The second category,

the external limit, was linked to the physical limitations of the planet's resources. She saw the rationalization of resource management as humanity's only chance for survival (Ward & Dubos, 1972).

She often emphasized that proper management of Earth's resources is closely linked to Christian values. Her work inspired numerous discussions at the Stockholm conference. The reports mentioned earlier drew the international community's attention to the dangers associated with the current environmental approach, which focused primarily on exploiting raw materials (Murphy, 2012).

In the early 1970s, a need arose beyond merely signalling the need for change and attempting to develop a proposed recovery program. From June 5 to 16, 1972, a conference devoted to environmental problems, "We Have Only One Earth," was held in Stockholm under the auspices of the United Nations. This was the first meeting of this magnitude. The primary outcome of the deliberations was the declaration adopted on June 14. It contained 26 principles that addressed, among other things, the need to implement environmental policy, with the clear understanding that it should not be perceived as an impediment to development (Kozłowski, 2007). It also emphasized the need for scientific research and suggested planning as an essential tool that could protect the environment from the effects of human activity. Although the Stockholm Declaration was not legally binding, its provisions were repeatedly referenced in developing international agreements. This declaration marked the first time that a portion of the international community (77 countries voted in favour) committed to prioritizing environmental issues. In 1983, the UN Commission on Environment and Development began operating within the United Nations. The primary outcome of its work was the report "Our Common Future." Besides considering contemporary challenges, such as maintaining an appropriate level of global food production and limiting the amount of resources used in industry, its significance stemmed primarily from its first definition of sustainable development (Kozłowski, 2007).

The UN Commission's report was published in 1987. Its content was not limited to a recounting of humanity's failures. Instead, it was a balance sheet that also took into account the successes achieved to date (Pawłowski, 2007):

- decline in infant mortality,
- extension of the average lifespan,
- increase in the enrollment rate,
- a decrease in illiteracy among young people,
- faster growth in food production relative to the rate of population growth.

On the other hand, the problem of the widening gap between the North and South regarding the aforementioned achievements was highlighted. Following the commitments made in Stockholm, another major conference on environmental issues was organized 20 years later. From June 3 to June 14, 1992, the Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro was attended by approximately 30,000 people. This event is considered the largest

gathering of its kind in history. Its importance was evidenced by the attendance of 183 government delegations, led by heads of government and heads of state (Kozłowski, 2007). It is important to remember that environmental problems were given special attention at the time, as they were significant for the poorest countries. The most important outcome of the Earth Summit was the documents and conventions adopted at the summit (Kozłowski, 2007):

- The Declaration on Environment and Development (the Rio Declaration or the Rio Protocol) contains 27 general principles, rights and obligations intended to constitute the basis for building new relations (a new order) between states, nations and social groups.

- Agenda 21 – a set of recommendations and actions for environmental protection necessary to be undertaken at the threshold of the 21st century.

- Convention on Climate Change – spoke about the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to prevent the anthropogenic intensification of the greenhouse effect.

- Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity – stating the need to ensure equal protection of fauna and flora.

- Declaration of principles of cooperation for the development, protection and use of all forests.

The Rio Earth Summit delivered concrete provisions for the concept of sustainable development. The year 2000 and the world's entry into the new millennium provided a good pretext for further major meetings of international community representatives, aimed at summarising achievements to date in implementing sustainable development and addressing new challenges. The next stage in shaping sustainable development was the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, which adopted the Millennium Development Goals for 2015. Among the most important are (Stępnia-Kucharska & Kapela, 2022):

- eliminating extreme poverty and hunger,
- halving the number of people whose income does not exceed \$1 a day,
- ensuring universal primary education,
- ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to complete a full cycle of basic education,

- promoting gender equality and women's social advancement,
- eliminating gender inequality in access to all levels of education,
- reducing child mortality and reducing the mortality rate of children under 5 years of age by 2/3,

- improving maternal health care and reducing the maternal mortality rate by three-quarters,

- limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases and stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, including reducing the number of new infections,

- using sustainable methods of managing natural resources,
- taking into account the principle of sustainable development in national strategies,

- the use of methods that inhibit the depletion of natural resources,
- halving the number of people without access to clean drinking water,
- improving the living conditions of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

At subsequent UN assemblies, in Johannesburg in 2002 and Rio de Janeiro in 2012, a global partnership for development was established. The following issues were discussed within this framework (Morzól, 2006):

- opportunities to solve problems with access to water,
- opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,
- increasing the involvement of civil society in the implementation of sustainable development,
- protection of overexploited marine fisheries,
- creating an initiative aimed at achieving absolute gender equality and guaranteeing women equal development opportunities.

Table 1

Characteristics of actions undertaken to implement the idea of sustainable development within the 5P areas

The area of sustainable development	Characteristics of the actions needed
People	It assumes that no social group should be left out, that excluded groups should be reached, and that conditions and opportunities for everyone to enjoy universal human rights and economic achievements should be created. Furthermore, the document promises equal access to economic resources, basic services, land, natural resources, technology, and finance.
Planet	The document addresses the creation of a solid foundation for sustainable development by integrating social, economic, and environmental aspects. It also calls for building a development model that fosters economic growth and greater social inclusion, rationalizing natural resources, achieving a better quality of life and addressing poverty.
Prosperity	This section of the document calls for transforming economies to foster job creation and inclusive development, as well as shifting to sustainable consumption and production models, leveraging new technologies and business potential, ensuring access to quality education, healthcare, clean water, electricity, transport, and telecommunications, and facilitating business start-ups, investments, and trade. It is also essential to intensify sustainable urban development.
Peace	The development of sustainable development principles at this point is based on building peace and effective, fair, open and accountable institutions that guarantee the strengthening of the role of law, social inclusion and co-decision-making, strengthening the role and responsibility of institutions that should support the rule of law, property rights, freedom of speech and media, political freedom, access to justice, and non-discrimination.
Partnership	It is based on solidarity, cooperation, responsibility and transparency of actions undertaken, including partnerships between governments, local and regional administrations, scientific communities, businesses and all interested parties and groups.

Source: own study based on: Raczkowska *et al.*, 2021.

In keeping with the principle of holding Earth Summits every two decades, another global conference attended by states and representatives of institutional structures was held in Rio de Janeiro from June 20 to 22, 2012. Besides summarising the international community's achievements in implementing the concept of sustainable development, the main goal of this event was to reiterate and further disseminate previous assumptions. Topics discussed during the conference focused on "green economies" as a means of combating hunger and poverty, protecting oceans in the face of intensive exploitation, the problems of rural areas, and institutional frameworks for sustainable development (Stępnia-Kucharska & Kapela, 2022).

An essential document in sustainable development was the 2030 Agenda, "Transforming our world." The set of 17 goals and detailed tasks supporting their implementation, included in the document, covers developed and developing countries, oriented towards lasting transformation in key areas for humanity and the planet. It is a unified, global program striving to achieve sustainable development in its three dimensions – social, economic and environmental at the regional, national and global levels (Cenkier, 2024).

It included goals supporting sustainable development in five key areas, defined as 5P – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (Raczkowska *et al.*, 2021). The characteristics of the activities undertaken within the identified areas are presented in Table 1.

## **The development of the concept of sustainable development: historical conditions and contemporary importance**

Sustainable development is a multidimensional research subject from many disciplines: economics, political science, law, etc. (Ciesielska *et al.*, 2024). It primarily refers to macro-level systems – states, economies, and international communities – but its practical implementation requires implementation in the management process at the enterprise level. Sustainable development is a political-economic doctrine that assumes a quality of life consistent with current civilizational development (Rutkowska & Pakulska, 2011). The concept of sustainable development appears in numerous legal acts and various strategic documents of a regional and international nature. It is also the subject of consideration and research by many scientists. The evolution of the concept of sustainable development is presented in the table below.

Sustainable development has also entered Polish legislation (Act of April 27, 2001, Environmental Protection Law, Journal of Laws No. 62, item 627, as amended; Art. 3, item 50). Sustainable development is defined here as socioeconomic development that integrates political, economic, and social activities while

Table 2

Selected definitions of the concept of sustainable development

Year of publication	Definition of sustainable development	Source
1	2	3
1985	A set of all activities that improve human living conditions on Earth without causing degradation of the natural environment.	Kozłowski, S.
1986	Conduct any economic activity in harmony with nature, so as not to cause any irreversible changes in living nature.	Zaufał, T.
1989	A method of socioeconomic development of a given area, the assumptions of which are related to natural conditions, without disturbing the ecological balance and ensuring the survival of current and future generations.	Kozłowski, S.
1991	Such socioeconomic development, which implies respect for natural resources and is based on socioeconomic calculation, is applied in every economic and living activity of man, triggering actions for the energy- and material-intensive and transport savings of the national economy, without limiting economic opportunities for future generations.	Niedka, A.
1993	A form of socioeconomic development that would lead and bring the world system or part of it closer to a state of eco-development.	Michnowski, L.
1995	The issue of future generations is at the heart of sustainable development, stating that it occurs when we leave our entire heritage (including environmental assets) intact for a specific period. We must pass the same „capital to future generations,” containing the conditions for potential prosperity (the same as we enjoy today).	Winpenny, J.T.
1998	Sustainable development as an „idea” and „eco-development,” stating that it is a way of conducting business, shaping and using the potential of the environment and such an organization of social life that will ensure the dynamic qualitative development of new production processes, management systems, the sustainable use of natural resources and the improvement and subsequent maintenance of a high quality of life.	Poskrobko, B.
2001	Socioeconomic development, which integrates political, economic, and social activities while maintaining natural balance and the sustainability of fundamental natural processes, aims to ensure that the basic needs of individual communities or citizens, both current and future generations, are met.	Act of April 27, 2001, Environmental Protection Law, Journal of Laws No. 62, item 627, as amended; art. 3, item 50.
2005	Sustainable development can be understood as a process of long-term changes in socio-economic systems that leads to an improvement in the quality of human life while maintaining the ability of ecosystems to sustain life processes and provide resources for future generations.	Hopwood, B. <i>et al.</i>

cont. Table 2

1	2	3
2015	Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental protection. These three dimensions should be interconnected in public policies and institutions so that progress in one area does not lead to deterioration in another.	Sachs, J.D.
2019	Sustainable development focuses on intergenerational and intragenerational equity and is based on three interrelated pillars: the environment, the economy, and society. It requires decision-makers to consider the relationships, complementarities, and potential conflicts between these pillars in order to support human development.	Mensah, J.
2020	It is extremely important, in an integrated view of the sustainable development paradigm, to define the principles of its practical application. This concept cannot be limited solely to the level of general declarations or theoretical assumptions. Effective implementation of sustainable development requires the establishment of principles and instruments that enable the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives in management processes and public decision-making.	Bugdol, M. <i>et al.</i>
2024	Sustainable development is a process that ensures the needs of contemporary societies are met while preserving the ability of future generations to meet their own need.	Baron, J. <i>et al.</i>
2026	Sustainable development offers an integrated vision to reconcile economic, ecological, and social dimensions of growth by recognizing their interdependencies. Achieving it requires systemic changes in governance, economic systems, and societal behavior so that development pathways operate within planetary limits while supporting human well-being.	Obura, D. <i>et al.</i>

Source: own study.

maintaining natural balance and the sustainability of fundamental natural processes. Its goal is to ensure the ability to meet the basic needs of individual communities or citizens, both current and future generations.

The concept of sustainable development has been defined in Polish legislation. It is understood as socio-economic development in which political, economic, and social activities are integrated. The literature emphasizes that the effective implementation of sustainable development is based on the principles of rational management of natural resources, long-term thinking in decision-making processes, and consideration of the interests of both present and future generations. It is also important to integrate activities in the economic, social, and environmental spheres, which helps to limit the negative effects of development and supports stable and lasting socio-economic progress. This definition highlights the need to integrate human development in the economic dimension while taking into account the well-being of the natural environment (Bugdol *et al.*, 2020).

The cited definitions indicate two fundamental features of sustainable development. First, they point to the necessity of shaping and maintaining outcomes that are as effective as possible from the perspective of the quality of management. Second, they emphasize the implementation of economic and social goals that take into account the high quality of the natural environment and the availability of its resources in a spatio-temporal dimension (Obura *et al.*, 2026). Among the paradigms of the concept of sustainable development, it is emphasized that it is an intergenerational concept, a process that integrates all human activities and an approach that may lead to maximizing the possibilities of satisfying the needs of all inhabitants of the Earth (Teufer *et al.*, 2024). The issue of sustainable development was also addressed by Pope John Paul II. He believed that initiatives related to sustainable development should be based on a vision of the world that places the human being at its center and respects the importance of historical and environmental conditions, which makes it possible to achieve lasting development. Above all, it is necessary to follow a long-term vision of the use of natural resources, but in such a way as to avoid their depletion through unreasonable and excessive exploitation (Kalinowski, 2018).

In conclusion, based on the definitions of sustainable development presented in this paper, it can be observed that each of them focuses on the intergenerational dimension of sustainable development. The presented definitions also indicate the need to integrate activities undertaken in the social, economic, and environmental spheres in such a way that the needs determining the possibility of the existence of different communities can be satisfied effectively and efficiently while maintaining appropriate relations between them (Misztal, 2023).

However, actions aimed at integrating these areas must also take into account the necessity of maintaining ecological balance, particularly through activities that allow the use of the Earth's resources in a way that does not threaten its environmental integrity. Another common element of the mentioned definitions is the transfer of responsibility for maintaining ecological balance to humans, who constitute both a factor that may enable the implementation of the principles of sustainable development and, at the same time, the entity that contributes most significantly to the degradation of the environment in which they operate (in each of the mentioned areas). The cited definitions of sustainable development and the directions of its evolution indicate that it is an interdisciplinary concept applied in various contexts and areas of human activity. This concept is often associated with such terms as eco-development, durable development, sustainable development, and self-sustaining development (Adamczyk, 2017).

In an integral view of the sustainable development paradigm, it is essential to establish the principles of its practical application, which can be understood as (Ogryzek, 2023):

- protection of natural capital, essential for sustainable development, economic production and intergenerational capital,

- in terms of ecology, the population and the total demand for specific goods must be limited in scale, and the integrity of ecosystems and species diversity must be preserved,
- the use of sustainable development practices that must address social inequalities and environmental damage while maintaining a reasonable economic base,
- social justice, meeting basic health and education needs, and participatory democracy as elements linked to environmental sustainability.

Sustainable development requires an integrated approach to this issue and synchronizing individual approaches. The literature also suggests that this issue should be considered in the context of activities within separate scientific disciplines, with the findings in each discipline not being binding within a global understanding of the paradigm, but instead supporting the overarching idea of sustainable development (Stępnia-Kucharska & Kapela, 2022).

Sustainable development should be implemented in a purposeful, territorial, and temporal dimension (Adamowicz & Smarzewska, 2009). Sustainable development integrates social, economic, and natural capital into a single entity. In a territorial context, global commitment to implementing solutions at the local level is crucial, considering development goals and the means to achieve them for all of humanity, including present and future generations. Sustainable development theory emphasizes equal access to limited resources and environmental assets for societies, social groups, and individuals while addressing the general and local communities' needs (Kozłowski, 2007).

## Conclusions

The role of sustainable development is to strike a balance between economic, social, and environmental needs to ensure that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This includes striving for sustainable economic growth, social cohesion, and protecting the natural environment and resources. Preventing the degradation of ecosystems, reducing pollution, and responsibly managing natural resources. Creating conditions for economic development based on innovation and efficiency, and considering long-term impacts on society and the environment. Working to improve the quality of life, reduce social inequalities and poverty, and ensure equal opportunities for all. Ensuring that current activities do not destroy or abuse available resources and opportunities for future generations. The role of sustainable development is to strike a balance between economic, social, and environmental needs to ensure that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own

needs. This includes striving for sustainable economic growth, social cohesion, and protecting the natural environment and resources.

The goal of the study, which was to analyze and assess sustainability in the context of its importance for future generations, was achieved. The research question addressed the recognition that sustainable development ensures future generations' access to limited natural resources, protects the environment from degradation and climate change, and promotes social justice, equal opportunities, a better quality of life, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Actions promoting practices such as using renewable energy, responsible consumption, and nature conservation are crucial to creating long-term ecological balance and human well-being.

Translated by Author

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