



NOVEMBER 2023 NEWSLETTER



The latest [State of Nature report](#), published in September, is one more reminder of the dire crisis which human beings have created for the natural world, with the intersecting climate and biodiversity emergencies. In this newsletter we look at why humanists have a responsibility to take action, what Humanist Climate Action has been doing, and what actions individual humanists can take.

This month Humanist Climate Action [expressed deep concern](#) in a press release about several recent government announcements and the recent *State of Nature* report. These included giving the go-ahead to the Rosebank oilfield, pushing key climate targets into the future, and attempting to weaken nutrient neutrality regulations. We called on the UK Government to recommit to tackling environmental and climate challenges as quickly as possible.

HOW GREEN IS YOUR COUNCIL

In the July newsletter, we looked at ideas for local actions including use of Council Climate Action Scorecards. Here we report on the next stage of that campaign and how you can get involved.



[Climate Emergency UK](#) (CE UK) is a not-for-profit community interest company which has been working with councils and residents since 2019 to share best practice about what councils can do to tackle the climate and ecological emergency and to encourage effective action.

Working with a team of trained volunteers, they have assessed all UK councils on their progress toward net zero. The results are published in their Council Climate Action Scorecards and can be explored in full on [their website](#).

This nationwide data exercise, the first of its kind, makes it possible to see which councils are making progress to net zero and where others are not. Detailed criteria showed that **only 41 councils scored 50% or more for their climate action, the average score being 32%**.

The Scorecard questions were created after consultation with over 80 organisations and experts within the climate sector such as [Friends of the Earth](#), [Ashden](#), councillors, council staff and [mySociety](#) (Scorecard partners). Councils are assessed according to a 3-stage marking process: data from websites, national data and FOI responses from councils.

Four years after councils started declaring climate emergencies, CE UK found that the majority of UK councils are underperforming, with national barriers a key reason for this underperformance. But several councils score well in specific sections. 36 councils, including Leeds, Cornwall, and the Vale of Glamorgan, score over 80% in different sections, such as Planning and Land Use, Waste Reduction and Food, and Collaboration and Engagement respectively. Greater Manchester Combined Authority is the only authority who scored full marks in any one section, in Buildings and Heating.

Some of the councils that scored less than 20% overall scored 0% or less in one or more sections. In total, **127 councils scored less than zero because the Scorecards include four penalty marked questions** where councils lose marks for actions that increase emissions.

The criteria used were published in November 2022, and assess councils according to 91 questions covering actions which they have control or influence over and which have a big impact on carbon emissions and biodiversity loss (some councils had fewer due to differing powers). The seven sections covered are: Buildings and Heating, Transport, Governance and Finance, Planning, Biodiversity, Collaboration and Engagement, and Waste Reduction and Food.

The Action Scorecards were created using a three-stage marking process which involved over 200 volunteers completing the first mark and then all councils able to comment on their first mark in the Right of Reply. The final stage of the marking was carried out by a small team of auditors, who awarded the final score.

Annie Pickering, Co-Director at Climate Emergency UK, [points out](#): 'Scottish and Welsh councils on average score higher, with no Scottish or Welsh councils in the bottom performing councils. This demonstrates that when a national government provides greater support, funding and power to local authorities the climate action of every local authority in that nation increases'.

The [Scorecard website](#) enables you to filter the scores to see which councils scored best. Filters include current political control, urban or rural, council type (district, county or unitary etc.), and each question and section. The website includes suggestions for [How to use the Climate Action Scorecards](#) for climate action in your area, including sharing your council's score, writing a letter to the local paper, contacting your local councillor, and submitting a question to a meeting of your local council.

Geoff Sallis

ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE FUNERALS

Responding to the July newsletter, a Humanist Climate Action member got in touch to suggest that support for cremation in humanist funerals needs to be rethought. Here we look at some of the options and alternatives.



Picture the scene...

As my family, dressed in their most colourful clothes, waded through the mud, the undertakers, dressed formally but with wellies on, picked their way carefully across the field with my mother's bamboo coffin precariously balanced on their shoulders. For a second I wondered what would happen if they dropped the coffin, but it was clear they had done this before and she was delivered safely.

As the funeral started the sun came out and the winter landscape lit up and brightened what was otherwise a rather dreary scene.

My mother expressed clearly that she did not want any kind of religious service and that she wanted her funeral to be environmentally responsible. She had purchased a plot in a field and from that came the environmental restrictions that such burial grounds impose. Her clarity and planning resulted in far fewer decisions for the family and no uncertainty about what she wanted.

For me, being responsible for organising my mother's funeral made me consider carefully the options that I had. Thinking about these things when I was not ill or imminently facing death was for me a helpful process. (I also produced a Living Will at the same time). My only take away was that I would want an indoor venue to be available for the funeral.

A cremation in the UK produces around 400kg of CO₂ and to my surprise is a major source of mercury pollution in the air (from fillings). Having a traditional burial results in toxic embalming fluid being leached into the soil.

There is increasing interest for those living their lives in an environmentally responsible way to find better ways of reducing the environmental impact of their deaths. There is also a wave of innovation that will lead to an increased choice over the next few years. So what are the choices?

Natural burial

There are basically two types of natural burial grounds. There are those where non-embalming is a requirement and where coffins have to be biodegradable. There are others where a tree is planted but no other environmentally friendly rules apply. Advice and information is available from [The Natural Death Centre](#).

Resomation (water cremation)

The practice of [water cremation](#) uses a water based alkaline solution to speed up the natural process, taking about 4 hours. The family receives the remains in the same way as from a traditional cremation. This will be available in the North-East of England later this year. Northumberland Water has granted approval for the water used to be sent back into the drainage system as 'trade effluent'. As 29% of those polled in the UK said they would be interested in this for their funeral it seems very likely it will be widely available in the new future.

For those interested in understanding more about the options being developed, [this article](#) provides additional information.

Pauline Element

A HUMANIST ISSUE

'I would like to respond to the article by Richard Norman, "The Environment - A Humanist Issue?", in the September newsletter.

'In addition to the reason that Richard sets out in his article, for Humanists UK to campaign on threats to the natural world, I think there are two other reasons why Humanists UK should campaign on the environment, or encourage all humanists to campaign on the environment in their own chosen way.

'Firstly, unlike most religions, we don't believe that there is any divine being or god who is going to come to our rescue if we destroy our own habitat. Presumably if there is a god in the Christian or Muslim tradition, they are all-powerful, and could save our natural world if they wanted to, and may even be using the environmental crises we face to "test" humans. (How that god could let innocent humans and other animals suffer so much in the process is something that Christians, at least, never have an answer to.)

'Secondly, people who are not certain how to think about the world, and what beliefs to adopt, look to 'belief systems' like humanism, or the religions, for answers and for guidance on how to interpret the world and how to think and act themselves. So humanism has to help people to understand how we view the big issues facing humanity, and how we suggest people think about

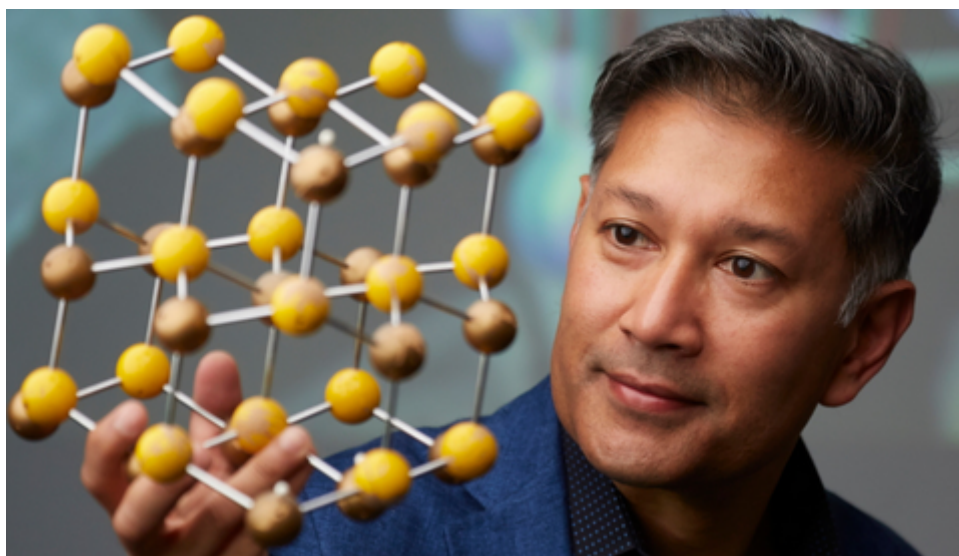
them. That doesn't mean we give detailed prescriptive commentary on every issue, but I think we need to give guidance on how to think about things, using logic and reason and compassion and intelligence, and accepting that there is no other force that is going to solve things for us.

'So I think we should be giving guidance on many issues. That doesn't necessarily mean campaigning on them as an organisation, but perhaps explaining how we see various topics, and how other people may like to think about them or react to them. As well as the natural world, the list might include spirituality, artificial intelligence, other animals, and misinformation in the digital age.'

Cath Sutherland, Nottingham

INTERVIEW WITH A HUMANIST

Continuing our series of interviews, Lori Marriott this month spoke to another Humanists UK patron, Professor Saiful Islam.



Hi Saiful, tell us a bit about yourself

I'm a Professor of Materials Science at the University of Oxford, the 2016 Royal Institution Christmas Lecturer, a Patron of Humanists UK (for more than six years) and a very proud dad of two (Yasmin, Zak).

I grew up in Crouch End, north London and went to a local comprehensive school and then to University College London to study Chemistry, followed by a research fellowship at the Eastman Kodak Labs in New York. I joined Oxford in 2022 after 16 years at the University of Bath.

I'm a chemist who doesn't wear a white lab coat. My research group uses computer modelling techniques to help develop new lithium battery materials for electric vehicles and a new type of solar cell compound called perovskite.

In the footsteps of scientific heroes, David Attenborough and Carl Sagan, I was honoured to present the 2016 BBC Royal Institution Christmas Lectures on the theme of energy titled 'Supercharged - Fuelling the Future', and included a lemon battery world record. When not exploring energy materials, I enjoy family breaks, films and indie music (The Smiths, New Order, The Cure).

How long have you been a humanist?

I was probably an atheist or humanist since my late teens before I even knew what the terms actually meant. I grew up in a muslim household as my name suggests, but I don't recall ever having a strong faith. I couldn't see how following a supernatural deity added anything to my understanding of the natural world around me.

How did you come to be interested in environmental concerns?

Strong influences growing up were TV science programmes about the beauty of the natural world, especially by our national treasure David Attenborough.

I think my real passion for science and environmental issues came in the second half of my PhD when I started studying the exciting topic of superconductors – materials that show zero electrical resistance, with possible use in reducing energy loss in electricity transmission lines. This led to an abiding interest in low carbon energy applications and to my current research on battery materials for electric cars and new solar cell types. I'm also interested in sustainable earth-abundant materials and the three Rs for energy devices – reduce, reuse and recycle – to move away from raw materials that have ethical and environmental issues.

However, I never joined groups such as Greenpeace as I was concerned by some of their unscientific campaigns (for example, destroying GM research). To counter misinformation, climate action should always be evidence-based.

How do your humanist values lead you to want to take environmental action?

To me, a humanist approach to life is rational, positive and optimistic, where you can find out more about the world, universe and environmental issues through rational investigation without needing a reward from a supernatural deity.

Do you think it is important for Humanist Climate Action to exist as a part of Humanists UK?

Yes! It's very important to keep highlighting that climate change is one of the most urgent global challenges of our time. It's a major hot topic – both literally and metaphorically.

What's your biggest environmental concern?

The impacts of climate change on nature and people (especially in poorer countries) are already apparent – extreme heat waves, flooding and wildfires. I try to be optimistic and always look on the bright side of life. But we clearly need urgent action and ambition at all levels (society, political, economic, R&D) to tackle climate change and to meet net-zero targets.

I'm also concerned by the anti-evidence and anti-net-zero forces spreading misinformation on social media and in some political circles.

What one thing would you encourage people to do to live a greener lifestyle?

Not an easy question. There is no silver bullet. As the Muppet philosopher, Kermit the Frog, once said: it ain't easy being green!

Nevertheless, here are a few suggestions: if you can, reuse or recycle as much as you can, buy local produce, draught-proof your home, avoid single-use plastics, use long-lasting light bulbs, eat less red meat, install solar panels, use petrol cars much less and public transport a lot more. Did you know that around 55% of UK car journeys are less than 5 miles? Perhaps the school run and supermarket trips.

Research webpage: <https://www.materials.ox.ac.uk/peoplepages/islam.html>

Twitter: [@SaifulChemistry](https://twitter.com/SaifulChemistry)

KEEP IN TOUCH

We welcome feedback and responses to items in HCA newsletters. You can contact us at climateaction@humanists.uk. All newsletters to date can be found on [the Humanist Climate Action section of the Humanists UK website](#).