



HUMANIST CLIMATE ACTION

JANUARY 2023 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to the first newsletter of Humanist Climate Action for 2023. Since our previous newsletter, two COPs have come and gone. In this edition we offer some thoughts on what they did or didn't achieve, and what we can do in response. We also share thoughts on actions ranging from what you can do in your back garden, and how to make your travel plans more environmentally friendly, to asking whether more radical campaigning is needed.

A FAIR COP?

The day after the World Cup Final, the UN Biodiversity Conference COP15 in Montreal came to a dramatic conclusion. Headlines pronounced it a once-in-a-decade agreement between 196 countries to halt the destruction of nature.

The Conference is held every two years, though this meeting was delayed two years and moved from China to Canada due to Covid. The final agreement, not without some controversy, led with two 30x30 declarations: to conserve 30% of land and 30% of sea by 2030; and for a fund of \$30bn to be provided by developed countries to developing countries by 2030 to support them in protecting and restoring nature..



The World Bank recognises that ‘all pathways to achieving the Paris Agreement [on climate change] include protection of forests and conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of natural ecosystems’. The UN Climate Change Conference COP27 included the phrase ‘nature-based solutions’ as having a role in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

There was pressure to include these words in the COP15 agreement, as well as a push for the phrase ‘nature-positive’, with news outlets reporting that this phrase could be for biodiversity what ‘net-zero’ is for climate. ‘Nature-based solutions’ made it into the wording of targets 8 (minimise impact of climate change on ocean biodiversity) and 11 (to restore ecosystem function through nature-based solutions and/or ecosystem-based approaches).

While this all sounds very positive, none of the agreement is legally binding. The baseline for the protected 30% and the method of measuring the biodiversity and sustainability targets are not made clear. The last set of decadal targets (the [Aichi Biodiversity Targets](#)) weren’t met. The phrase ‘net-zero’ was first proposed by [BP, and it has been revealed that they played a part in the group promoting the phrase ‘nature-positive’](#). As for the term that was included, there was no definition of what a ‘nature-based solution’ is. The danger is that it might erode the existing ecosystem-based approaches that have been defined, and lead to the possibility of the term being used as greenwashing.

While presidents and prime ministers attended the more prestigious climate conference, the success of an agreement depends on us holding our politicians to deliver on what they sign up to. Target 18 requires the identification by 2025 and the phasing out by 2030 of at least \$500bn of incentives and subsidies that are harmful to biodiversity, and the scaling up of positive incentives in a way that is proportionate, equitable, and fair. In the UK, changes to the Environment Bill will have to come after COP15. We hope they will show the UK taking a strong position on supporting nature for biodiversity and sustainability as our climate changes. Make sure you [write to your MP](#) and ask them what they are doing to make sure 30x30 is met.

Tom McMillen

CLIMATE CHANGE AND RAPID TRANSFORMATION



So, the UN Climate Change Conference COP27 has been and gone. The consensus seems to be that, although the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund by developed countries to provide finance to help rescue and rebuild poorer countries was welcomed, the lack of progress on bringing down greenhouse gas emissions was a major disappointment. Governments failed to agree on increasing or accelerating emissions cuts.

As recently as 19 December the UN Secretary General warned that ‘we are still moving in the wrong direction. The 1.5C goal is gasping for breath. National climate plans are falling woefully short’. So it seems clear that governments, corporations, and individuals aren’t doing enough to tackle the most urgent problems that the planet currently faces. Under these circumstances I find myself facing a dilemma: what should I be doing now to help make a reversal of the continuing trend towards climate disaster more likely?

Like me, many of the humanists reading this newsletter will have, for many years, assiduously recycled/reused/repurposed where they can, reduced their consumption of meat or adopted a plant based diet, avoided air travel when possible, reduced car use or given up the car altogether, composted, bought products with sustainable credentials, and carried out a myriad of other actions to reduce their household carbon footprint. Like me, they might also have written to their MP urging Government policy changes, supported campaigning organisations and been on the odd protest march. Some may have taken direct action through involvement with Extinction Rebellion or other groups, risking not only condemnation from parts of the media and public but even arrest and imprisonment.

Important and worthwhile though these efforts are, they are not bringing about what a recent UN Environment Agency’s report describes as the ‘rapid transformation of societies’ that it thinks is needed. Nor are they likely to do so within the timeframes and deadlines that are now imperative.

So, as humanists who recognise our responsibilities towards wider society and future generations, what should we do now? Each individual will have their own response. But if what we're doing currently isn't working, then failing to do nothing new is arguably an abdication of our responsibilities. The compounding catastrophes of global warming and humanity's other encroachments on our planet's limits are creating a dire situation for much of humanity. One which, in my view, requires humanists to re-focus their efforts and become activists for rational change while change can still have an effect.

Personally I'll be considering the extent to which I can influence the behaviour of people I come into contact with, inform and educate others, particularly younger generations who will have to live with the most extreme impacts of climate change, and continue my own efforts to reduce my household carbon footprint. But most importantly I'll be giving serious thought to the extent to which I'm prepared to step outside my comfort zone and adopt a more radical and direct approach to achieving change. If 'rapid transformation of societies' is needed, then I want to understand what types of actions are likely to be successful in bringing about that transformation; from promoting behavioural change, to campaigning for political, structural, and economic reform, or peaceful civil unrest and direct action. And then I need to decide on the extent to which I am prepared to accept the personal risks or discomfort of getting involved, if not on the 'front line' in these areas, then in supporting those who are. It doesn't feel to me as if business as usual is an option. How about you? Please let us have your thoughts.

John Burns

THE BUG HILTON

We were thrilled to get feedback from readers following our last newsletter. Stuart Elton kindly agreed to let us share his spectacular homemade multi-storey Bug Hotel – a masterpiece of ingenuity. It was made using an old CD storage rack.



‘There must be many of these unwanted bits of furniture being discarded these days’, said Stuart. ‘The panel area is a robin’s nest box with another enclosed void below for bugs accessible by a hole. The only addition I would suggest, not shown here, is a waterproof roof to stop the rain prematurely breaking down the indoor composite wood. The addition of a small square of coated fabric to the top has fixed this incipient problem on mine.’

THE LIVESTOCK FARMING DEBATE

In our previous issue we asked for your thoughts on the debate between George Monbiot and Thomasina Miers about the environmental case for and against livestock farming, and Monbiot’s claim that ‘the world’s most damaging farm products’ are ‘organic, pasture-fed beef and lamb’.

Commenting on Monbiot’s approach, Fergus Webster suggested that ‘There are nuances which his polemical style does not perhaps appreciate. There may be a place for synthetic meat; but equally there is a place for organic pasture-fed meat. Indeed on the right bits of marginal land I would argue that it is important both to carbon sequestration and conservation of biodiversity of flora and fauna.’

Chantal Lewis-Villien agreed. ‘If we followed the mostly lab-produced diet advocated by Montbiot we fall straight into another extreme strategy’, she said. ‘Let’s get out of one-way-only thinking, and let’s transition out of intensive farming/agriculture and develop smaller, local models with mixing of crops for resilience, nature diversity, and organic/permaculture principles.’



Fergus added: ‘Much is made of the methane footprint of cattle, by ideological vegans, and when it comes to feed lots and grain-fed cattle they certainly have a point. (For the record most methane released by cows comes from burps not farts!) But there is reason to believe that less intensive methods of raising cattle produce negligible amounts of methane. Furthermore pasture when it is not tilled may well sequester carbon faster and for longer than new-growth forest. Plus it can’t be felled.’

‘Cutting and felling swathes of Amazon and other rainforest to raise beef, or grow soya, or palm-olives is obviously consumer-led despoliation of the planet’, he said. ‘However in small areas of the planet, where ancient forests have long-since lost their Aurochs and indigenous tribes, pasture or, where feasible, silvo-pasture is probably the most ecological way to look after some areas of land. Livestock grazing at a reasonably high stocking ratio can be used in rotation to prepare ground for growing vegetables. And in some cases, on chalk downland for example, where the soil is too poor and alkaline for crops, sheep grazing is possibly the best use of the land. Livestock grazing is also integral to conserving the few remaining hay meadows in the UK, which contain wildflowers and butterfly habitat.’

Many thanks to Fergus and Chantal for their feedback. Would any readers like to take a different view - maybe agreeing with George Monbiot? We welcome comments on anything in these newsletters. Please send your thoughts to climateaction@humanists.uk.

TAKE THE TRAIN

It’s cold and wet and Christmas is over so what next? Well for me it has for many years been moving speedily and with laser-like focus to planning the next year’s family visits and holidays.

So where to start? My suggestion to anyone planning a foreign holiday is to check out the carbon footprint of the flights. ‘Killjoy’ I can hear some of you wail. The reason for this starting point is that whatever the time and budgetary constraints, with the right mindset you should be able to quantify the reduced environmental impact of your travel. Our travel choices are often the single thing we can change to significantly reduce our impact on the climate and those around the world now living with the consequences of the climate emergency.

I have been as guilty as most of us in my choice of destinations, frequency of travel, and means of transport. My husband is Norwegian and his family is in Oslo. My son, his wife and three children live in Berlin and my step son lives in Zurich. I am certainly not alone in having most of my family living outside the UK and for many people flying is the only way to see family. As I got more and more concerned about the climate emergency I have discovered better solutions to minimise the flights I take. So here are some of the things I have learned.

Number one has to reduce the amount of foreign travel but number two is **Take The Train**. Train services in the UK are so expensive and so poor that one could be excused for believing that the same applies in Europe. That is not the case at all. While the Eurostar can be expensive, depending on where your start point is, it can be extremely convenient. Booking early or travelling out of season significantly reduces the cost. Trains within Europe are quick, cheap, and comfortable. If you are able to work remotely you could do a full day’s work rather than taking a day off to fly. Many countries offer quiet or kids carriages which appropriately differentiate between the needs of different passengers. There are an increasing number of overnight trains being reintroduced which open up the option of travelling further comfortably.



The best resource for checking out routes is <https://www.seat61.com/>. An amazing website that provides an enormous amount of sound advice and unexpected options for more challenging routes. The Trainline app allows you to check prices and routes and book tickets.

Train travel is great for multi-stage trips. Sometimes these trips include a flight but often they don't. Last spring we travelled to Berlin and Zurich to visit family and then round Italy by train. We flew home from Florence.

A recent discovery is that while we have to fly to Oslo there is a ferry from Oslo to Germany. The walk from the boat to the station takes five minutes and from there to Berlin and back to the UK were simple train journeys. A fortunate discovery as my husband's family were starting to conclude that I didn't like them any more.

For many years we flew to and from Europe but split the holiday between the coast and a city. This enabled us to do a city break each year without doing a weekend trip with additional flights.

I am certain that many readers have found ways to reduce the impact of their travel in ways that suit them. What works for a retired couple will not be appropriate for a family with young kids or working couples. It is about looking for options that work for you.

If you have any ideas you would like to share or trips you have taken please let us know.

Pauline Element

INTERVIEW WITH A HUMANIST

To continue our series of interviews with humanists who are involved with or concerned about environmental issues and the climate crisis we hear from Siân Berry in this issue. A London Assembly Member, former Co-Leader of the Green Party, and Humanists UK patron, Siân tells us about her humanist and environmental values and reminds us of the need to put pressure on those in power.



Tell us a bit about yourself – how long have you been a humanist?

I signed up officially about ten years ago, but this followed many years of clearly following humanist principles in my life, recognising the value of shared humanity, culture and human rights, and our huge responsibility to the unique planet on which we have evolved.

How did you come to be interested in environmental concerns?

At school I lived through the huge scare for the ozone layer caused by the reckless use of chemicals. I thought then that the world would mend all its destructive ways in good time. Later on, I saw this was not happening and that I had a personal duty to help. I started small though, simply volunteering to help the Green Party with its website and in my local council ward, but things escalated quickly after that!

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

That long view of the earth as a little blue dot should make us all think about the need to preserve and protect the huge range of life that shares our little planet. There are no gods to do this for us, and that is a good thing to know, because it gives us a chance to build the future we want, and to build in global justice and an equal and thriving culture at the same time.

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

Every organisation should have a group like this. Co-operation and community are strong Green values, and a lot of my work supports people to build up ideas from the grassroots. I've been inspired lately to meet with new groups of architects and lawyers, and of course school students, bringing climate action to their peers.

What's your biggest environmental concern?

I am so worried that the prospect of preventing runaway climate change is slipping through our grasp. Back in 2018, the UN's special report gave us a 50:50 chance of achieving this if we agreed on really dramatic action to change society and live within the planet's limits. Progress is far too slow, and the thought of not making it genuinely keeps me up at night.

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

Fixing our individual lifestyles is one thing, but the best thing you can do right now is talk to other people about the need to get involved in putting pressure on those in power. We have no time left to lose.

Interview by Lori Marriott