Humanist Climate Action

JANUARY 2024 NEWSLETTER

Welcome to our first newsletter of 2024. We greet the new year with some reasons to be moderately cheerful – and some reasons to be not so cheerful, and what you can do about it.

COP28 – PROGRESS?

Lori Marriott, Humanist Climate Action Coordinator, reflects on COP28 held in the UAE in December.

At COP28, held in December in Dubai, the world's countries finally agreed to issue the call for a transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems. This historic moment should be welcomed but it is clear that the stated targets are not yet strong enough and further progress will be needed for a just transition to materialise. There are positives that we can take from COP28, though progress fell short on a global adaptation fund and more work is needed to fully realise the loss and damage fund, intended to provide financial support for countries, especially in the Global South, which are most vulnerable to climate change. The conference nevertheless moved in the right direction on loss and damage and a Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action was also signed by many countries.

Humanist UK patron Zion Lights, who attended COP28 and has in a previous HCA newsletter defended the case for nuclear energy as part of the transition away from fossil fuels, commented:

> ‘I am very pleased to see that real commitments to phasing out fossil fuels have been made at COP28, particularly the commitment to clean energy, as over 20 countries have signed a declaration to triple nuclear capacity. Although it's only a start, this is the strongest climate commitment to clean energy that I've seen come out of the COPs. This is a win for climate action and also for science.'

With COP29 taking place in another oil-reliant petrostate later this year, the world has ten months to implement announced commitments and drive forward the change necessary to avoid a 3°C temperature rise before it reconvenes in Azerbaijan. Human and civic rights will also likely remain on the agenda following complaints of civic restrictions at recent COPs and concerns from island states that the fossil fuel deal does not go far enough and that they weren't

even in the room when the decision was made. We must also hope for further detail on agriculture and also a new climate finance goal at COP29.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

While the world has heated and the science behind human-created climate change has been known for decades, the fossil fuel industry has worked against changes. As a result of their campaigning with more lobbyists than any other group at the UN IPCC COP meetings, we have had a 'lost' decade. With the next COP to be held and run in another petrostate, is there still reason to believe that efforts 'to limit the temperature increase to 1.5ºC' of heating as stated in the Paris agreement in 2016 are going to happen?

Unfortunately the answer is a strong no. We have already passed the point where the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere will more than likely take us through that barrier. As an increase in CO2 in the atmosphere leads to more heating, there is a delay as the heating catches up with the higher levels of the greenhouse gas. It's going to get hotter, wetter and the weather more catastrophic and unpredictable. But the overarching goal agreed at Paris was to hold 'the increase in the global average temperature well below 2ºC above pre-industrial levels.' This is still possible, and we're capable of reaching this target and avoiding tipping points and disaster. And it's possible to do so and not lose out on quality of life. Every 0.1ºC matters a lot, and there is so much that needs to change to keep global heating lower. The sooner the changes, the easier it is to ensure that our way of life is protected and we and our children have a sustainable way of living on our finite planet.

The science is clear, that there must be no new fossil fuel exploration and that we must phase out the use of fossil fuels. The political will falls behind the physics and we often see calls for the use of 'future technologies' to enable us to meet that goal. Yet, at the time of the Paris agreement, we were heading for 3.5ºC - 4ºC of warming by 2100. After our 'lost' decade and the changes made to policy, we're targeting a world with warming of 2.5ºC - 3ºC if no other changes are made. While this amount of heating will be devastating, there's still time to bend the curve,

increase the rate of emissions reduction, and meet the 43% reductions in emissions by 2030 needed to hit the net zero in 2050, keeping the next century within the set goal.

In the last 10 years wind-generated power has decreased in price by a factor of 3, and solar by 10, with batteries decreasing in price by 60%. Since 2015, 3/4 of planned coal-fired power plants have been cancelled and 44 countries have pledged, outside the COP process, to stop building them. In the UK we're down to less than 2% of our energy from coal. Coal use in China has peaked and India is levelling off. The costs of renewables, despite the subsidies and pre-existing infrastructure propping up fossil fuels, are lower than gas and coal. In developed countries the continued growth of the economy has been separated from the expansion in use of fossil fuels. There is every economic and climate reason for developing countries to be able to accelerate their growth without having to depend on greenhouse-gas-producing systems.

While many national governments often fail to deliver on the commitments and changes at the speed required, all governments acknowledge that human-caused climate change needs to be addressed. There are now 16 countries generating more than 95% of their electricity from renewables. More and more people are taking individual action to move towards sustainable lifestyles and putting pressure on companies and industries to react. Local councils and cities are making pledges and implementing plans to meet 2030 reduction goals. Innovation is being supported and celebrated through campaigns like the Earthshot Prize. Not decarbonising is a bad business decision. The rate of technological change is accelerating, as is the amount of investment and jobs supporting sustainable living.

At COP28 there was an acknowledgement that 1/3 of global greenhouse gas emissions come from our food systems, and it opened with a declaration on sustainable food and agriculture. This is an area of human activity that cannot be brought to zero emissions and so the net zero target by carbon capture is necessary. Sustainable food needs to be one of the systems that depends on carbon offsetting, whether that comes from carbon capture or expansion of tree planting. It places an emphasis on other systems, industry, transport, energy to make sure that their need for offsetting is reduced.

The estimated cost to reach net zero by 2030 is $2.5 trillion. The cost of not reaching the target is predicted to cost the USA $13.2 trillion in the following 20 years. Current investment in green technology by the US amounts to less than $0.05 trillion. In the last 10 years more than 200 institutions worldwide have de-invested $14 trillion from fossil fuel companies. The costs of building a sustainable, green future are not insignificant, but are globally less than the $5.1 trillion the US spent in 2020 on COVID bailouts and emergency funding.

Hannah Ritchie of Our World in Data, in her new book *Not the End of the World*, shows that global CO2 emissions per person have already peaked, and in the UK we're down 48% from 1990 levels. Our per person emissions are now at 5.5 tonnes, equivalent to someone living way back in 1859, but with a much better lifestyle. The UK peak per person emissions happened in 1971, with our country's emission peak a few years later, though consistent falls in emissions only started to happen after 2005.

We have the science and the ability to leave the world to future generations in a state of sustainable, high standard living. To get there, changes need to happen soon, and the longer we wait to take action the bigger the risk to the future and the more painful those changes will be. So much of this is systemic, and requires legislative changes. Campaign for those changes, look where your money goes. As an individual the largest direct impacts you can make come from ditching car use, fewer flights, adopting green energy, reducing food waste and switching to plant based diets. There's still lots of space to plant trees, and as more opportunities arise, look for jobs that are part of the sustainable economy. The future can be bright if we actively work towards it.

Tom McMillen

THE POPULATION QUESTION

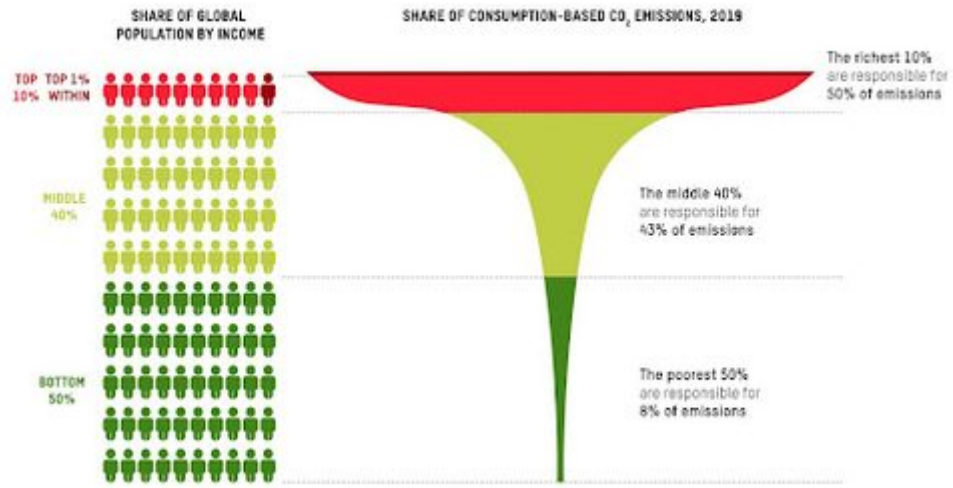
Our newsletters in March and May of last year included views from readers about whether and how the issue of population growth should feature in campaigning on the environment. Since then, we've received more responses suggesting that it should have greater prominence. You can read Richard Norman's full reflections on the different angles of this complex and age-old debate.

Concern about questions of population growth and birth control has a long history in the humanist tradition. In the 20th century it acquired a new emphasis, both in general and for humanists, with overpopulation seen as a global problem standing in the way of development and poverty reduction, and having potentially disastrous consequences for the natural environment. The famous biologist Julian Huxley, a pioneer both of modern environmentalism and of modern humanist thought who was to become the first President of the British Humanist Association, edited a collection in 1961 with the title *The Humanist Fram*e. In his own contribution he wrote that the aim should be a 'decrease in the rate of population-growth; and in the long run equally certainly, decrease in the absolute number of people in the world.'

The wider debate about population levels became more highly charged with the publication in 1968 of *The Population Bomb* by Paul and Anne Ehrlich. 'In the 1970s', they wrote, 'hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.' The failure of their predictions, and the sensationalist tone of the book, was seen by many as discrediting their position, but that was not the only controversial dimension of the debate. Huxley, for instance, was from the 1930s onwards a leading member of the Eugenics Society. The term 'eugenics' was appropriated by the Nazis in the attempt to justify their extermination programmes, and though Huxley and others insisted that what they were advocating was completely different, the associations of the word were widely seen as calling into question the very idea of a 'population policy'. More generally, the language of 'population control' could be seen as question-begging. Who is supposed to be doing the controlling, and who is being 'controlled'? The language smacks of hypocrisy on the part of the industrialised countries of

Europe and North America, who, now that their own rates of population growth have decreased, are telling the countries of the Global South to fall into line.

A recent Oxfam report revealed that 'The richest 1% of the world's population are responsible for as much carbon pollution as the people who make up the poorest two-thirds of humanity.' The journalist Rebecca Solnit commented: 'When you talk about the climate crisis, sooner or later someone is going to say that population is the issue and fret about the sheer number of humans now living on Earth. But population per se is not the problem, because the farmer in Bangladesh or the street vendor in Brazil doesn't have nearly the impact of the venture capitalist in California or the petroleum oligarchs of Russia and the Middle East.'



Oxfam: *Climate Equality – a planet for the 99%*

The inescapable conclusion is that not just billionaires but the people of the richest countries, being the greatest source of carbon emissions, have the greatest responsibility to change their ways. However, that is not necessarily the end of the story. True, 'population per se is not the problem', but it may nevertheless be one part of a complex and many sided problem. The fact remains that if the global population were to continue increasing at the present rate, it would become unsustainable.

But the key word is 'if'. The evidence on 'demographic transition' seems to indicate that as a society's prosperity increases, with greater educational provision including women's education and women's empowerment, population growth naturally falls. Perhaps, then, if population growth remains a concern, the emphasis should be on poverty eradication, and on the promotion of women's rights, including reproductive rights, so that women are empowered to make their own choices about how many children they want to have. But having said that, they cannot make those choices unless contraceptive methods and advice are available to them. And as we know, the provision of contraception and advice on birth control continues to be steadfastly opposed by some religious groups including the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which refuses to support any health services which include the provision of

contraceptive advice. An important contribution which the humanist movement can make, then, is to go on campaigning, as it has always done, in support of women's reproductive rights and against religiously-motivated restrictions on those rights.

Richard Norman

THIS FAIR AND SEPTIC ISLE

In our May 2023 newsletter Geoff Sallis wrote about the appalling extent of river pollution, pointing out that the UK is consistently ranked as one of the worst countries in Europe for water quality. In this month's newsletter he updates the information to show that the situation remains just as dire, and suggests actions you can take.

The UK's rivers and streams are open sewers. Should we accept that water companies' profits come before public health? Why is the Government unwilling to do anything about it?

Raw sewage was discharged into English rivers 399,864 times in 2022, the equivalent of 1,091 times every day. Untreated sewage and rainwater should only be released into rivers and coastal waters via storm overflow pipes *in extreme weather*. However, water companies' data released by the Environment Agency shows that it was released for hundreds of thousands of hours in 2022, and 399,864 spills were recorded on overflows where event duration monitors were in place.

Customer bills make up at least 96% of water company revenue, according to a *Guardian* analysis of company accounts for 2023. The analysis of financial data for all 14 English water companies found the industry has paid close to 20p for every pound of revenue on servicing debt on average over the past five years. England is one of the few countries where water is fully owned by private companies, which answer to offshore investors, including private and

state-owned international funds, banks, multinationals and billionaires outside the UK, and they control at least 72% (in 2022) of English water.

There are serious risks to our health from river pollution, with over three quarters of our rivers failing to meet required health standards. Bacteria and parasites in poorly treated sewage enter drinking water supplies and can cause digestive problems, while contaminated waters are linked to transmission of diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid, and polio. In England and Wales 38% of fish health checks fail due to disease caused by pollution.

Hopefully we will one day see the natural environment as something not for personal profit, but as part of our national wealth. Our cherished way of life depends on clean water: healthy ecosystems provide wildlife habitats and places to fish, paddle, surf, and swim. Our economy depends on clean water: manufacturing, farming, tourism, recreation, energy production, and other economic sectors need clean water to function and flourish.

The Rivers Trust has a map showing where the sewerage network discharges and overflows into rivers, with further information and suggestions for action to take. Their website also tells you how you can contact your local Rivers Trust.

Surfers Against Sewage is a UK charity campaigning for clean oceans. Its website has a real-time map tracking sewage discharge and pollution risks around the UK, and tells you how you can join the campaign, fundraise for it, and take part in beach cleans and other actions.

Top of the Poops has rankings of the worst parliamentary constituencies, the worst beaches, and the worst rivers, enabling you to check out your own locality.

Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) is a campaign using Citizen Science to monitor water quality in the River Windrush, working with volunteers and professional scientists – an example you could perhaps follow with your own local river.

The Angling Trust mobilises Anglers Against Pollution to campaign for clean water and a healthier environment.

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.