



MAY 2024 NEWSLETTER



This May newsletter comes with an invitation to visit our stand at Humanists UK Convention in Cardiff. Do come and say hello – we'd love to see you.

COME AND SEE US AT HUMANISTS UK CONVENTION IN CARDIFF



As last year, we will have a stall at [Humanists UK Convention](#), which this year is in Cardiff from Friday 14 to Sunday 16 June. If you are attending the Convention, please come and see us. Also like last year, it coincides with the national [Great Big Green Week](#), the theme of which is 'Let's Swap Together for Good', so we'll be asking people to pledge to make their own swaps for the climate and the environment – not just swapping to recycle the things we use, but things like swapping to an electric car or a different way of heating the house, or making changes to the food we eat, or something as simple as swapping ideas and skills. We want to make a record of the pledges people make. Come and make your pledge!



We'll also be looking for volunteers willing to liaise with us to promote discussion and action on the climate and the environment in Humanists UK Local Groups. We'd like to expand our list of contacts. If you think you can help, please come and tell us. We'll be in the same area as the other stands and stalls.

TAKING ACTION WITH CLIMATE CYMRU



Having a presence in Cardiff is an opportunity to highlight the work being done by Climate Cymru, whose Network Coordinator is Clare James. Clare is a humanist and has recently joined the Humanist Climate Action steering committee. Here she updates us on three years of campaigning action in Wales.



Climate Cymru volunteers join Eco Dewi for a litter pick at St Davids during Great Big Green Week 2023

Three years have passed since [Climate Cymru](#) embarked on its journey at COP26, aiming to ensure Wales' voice resonated in the global climate discourse in Glasgow in 2021. Since then, we have exceeded all expectations, propelled by a dedicated team, and the unwavering support of our wonderful volunteers.

Campaigning on vital issues such as the cost of living, nature, and sustainable energy, we've transcended borders to collaborate with esteemed organisations like [Global Justice Now](#) on the Fossil Fuel Treaty and The Climate Coalition on the [Great Big Green Week](#), leaving a significant mark not just in Wales but across the UK.

With over 360 partners, ranging from major non-governmental organisations to grassroots groups, and supported by more than 100 ambassadors, volunteers, and 50 small businesses, Climate Cymru has evolved into a formidable force. Rooted in the recognition of climate change's urgent imperatives and its impact on both people and the planet, our movement acknowledges the pressing need for inclusivity.

In Wales, a nation celebrated for its cultural richness and breathtaking landscapes, the effects of climate change are palpable, evident in extreme weather events and agricultural shifts, and we acknowledge the disproportionate impact of climate change on ethnic minorities and nations in the global south.

We are, therefore, committed to rectifying the lack of diversity within our movement.

Our ambition is to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table, and feels empowered to contribute to our meetings and campaigns because we know that by fostering inclusivity, we will harness a broader range of perspectives with which to drive meaningful action.

We take this approach to the heart of our volunteer and ambassador programmes. In fact, our unique model allows individuals, irrespective of organisational affiliations, to actively participate in every facet of our movement.

Individuals are invited to join us as a Climate Cymru Ambassador, attend our monthly meetings and our advisory panel when they can, to help shape our strategic initiatives, as well as an option to participate in our Global Justice Group, which focuses on Wales' global impact.

Alternatively, our [volunteer](#) roles include specific opportunities such as media and communications, partner engagement, and photography, providing excellent networking opportunities for those who would like to gain some experience in the sector.

At Climate Cymru's heart is the recognition of the interconnectedness of all people and the significance of collective action in addressing climate change. Through our volunteer and ambassador programmes, we empower individuals to become agents of positive change in their communities and beyond.

If you're living in or have an interest in Wales, care about the climate and nature, and would like to find out more about Climate Cymru, contact Network Coordinator Clare James at clare@climate.cymru.

FIX OUR FOOD: SUSTAINABLE, HEALTHY AND TASTY FOOD FOR ALL

Professor Sarah Bridle holds the Chair in Food, Climate and Society at the University of York, and is a Patron of Humanists UK. Sarah contributed to [the launch of Humanist Climate Action](#) in 2021, and explains here how we can 'take a bite out of climate change'.



Around [one third of climate change comes from food](#). It's a figure that often surprises people as much of the focus around greenhouse gas emissions remains on fossil fuels. However, even if we stop burning fossil fuels, food will be the leading contributor to climate change and its contribution will increase as the population continues to grow and eats more climate-impactful foods. By the end of the century, [food alone is on track to cause two degrees of global warming](#).

The source of emissions from food includes land clearance for agriculture, fertilisers for growing crops, rearing livestock, growing food for livestock to eat, transport, packaging, cooking, and food waste.

We need to remember as well that climate and food are intimately linked and that food is one area of people's lives where they will experience climate change most directly. Extreme weather events, [driven by climate change](#), are occurring more frequently and raise the prospects of simultaneous crop yield failures across multiple bread baskets in the coming decades, potentially resulting in trade restrictions and increased prices or lack of availability on the shop shelves.

Last year I carried out [research](#) exploring the likelihood of disruption to our food system over the next fifty years. Our survey of food system experts spanning academia, policy, charitable organisations, and business found that [extreme weather – including storm surges, flooding, snow and drought](#) – was seen as the leading cause of future food supply shortages and distribution issues over both a ten- and 50-year time frame.

However, food can be part of the solution. Not all foods contribute the same amount to climate change. If we compare an eight ounce steak and chips with a microwaved potato and beans, the steak dish causes about 20 times as much climate impact as the beans meal.



Source: [Food and Climate Change: Without the Hot Air](#) by Professor Sarah Bridle

We need to reduce the quantity of the most climate impactful foods we eat. For most people in this country, that's going to be reducing the amount of animal based products, and replacing them with more healthy vegetables and climate friendly foods like beans, chickpeas, lentils.

Globally about 80% of agricultural land is used to produce food to feed to animals – you can see the breakdown in the UK below. This means that in the very extreme case, if everybody in the world went vegan, not something I'm suggesting, we'd free up three quarters of the land on this planet that's currently used for agriculture and we could use that land for climate solutions – for example forests, which draw carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

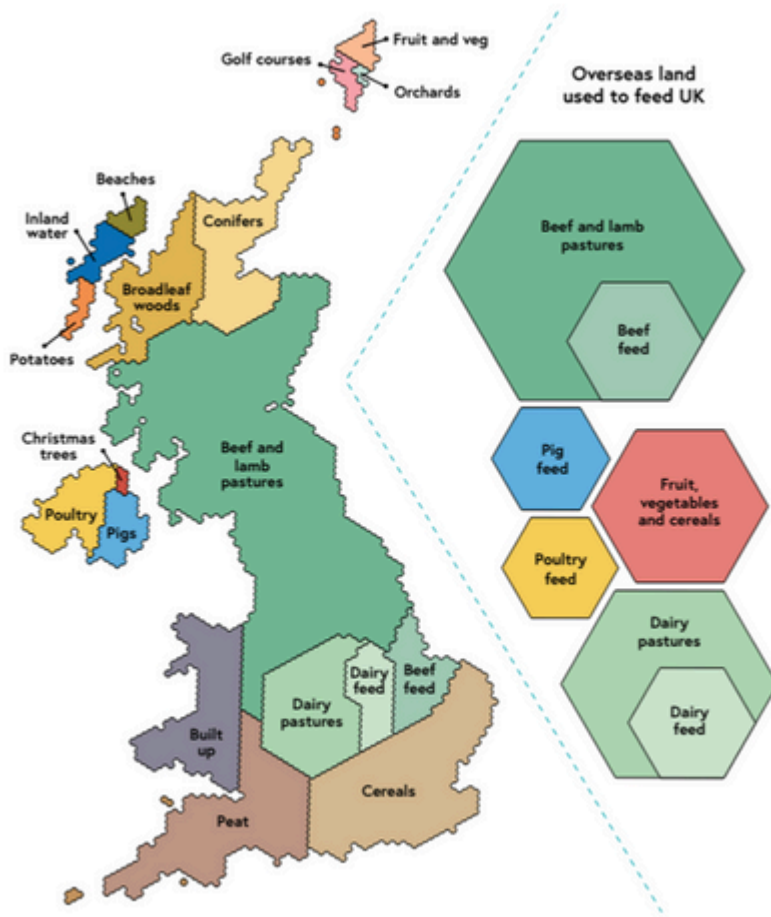


Fig 9.3 from Dimbleby 2021, *The National Food Strategy: The Plan*

But we can't just rely on individuals to change their diets, we need systemic change to make it easy for people to make environmentally-friendly choices. We know, however, that a surprisingly small percentage of people can have a disproportionate influence. We need people to support the changes we need to transform the UK food system – before climate change transforms the food system for us.

BOOK REVIEW

The Book of Wilding: A Practical Guide to Rewilding Big and Small, by Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023)

If, like me, you encounter this book in hardback form on a walking trip to your local library, then you will find it develops your physical strength as well as your mind. It is indeed a weighty tome but you would be missing a treat if you let this put you off. Even if you only have time to manage the introduction and the chapters on your garden and urban environments, I urge you to do it. Anyone who professes an interest in the future of the environment should read this book.

Yes, you will be saddened and possibly enraged by examples of past and current practices and unfortunately come to see that what we now take to be perfect examples of traditional English farmed countryside are in fact a grubbed out, monocultural desert, with dead soil relying on artificial chemicals to feed and protect the over-selected, bulk-producing product that used to be a perfectly adapted plant capable of surviving and thriving on its own, with enough genetic variation to cope with changing conditions. Extreme? Maybe, but that sums up my dominant feelings early on in this book.

However, there is more than hope here. Part of the solution is not only discussed but demonstrated to actually work and the central theme is one of simplicity. Give it space and freedom and nature will return to its diverse and bountiful best, and probably far faster than you may imagine. The main thing that is stopping it is our obsession with control and neatness. We must learn to expand our appreciation of nature in all its chaotic variation.

It is genuinely heart-warming to see the authors' journey from graduate disciples of the latest high tech agricultural methods, bent on continuing the fight to force their family's marginal farming land to their will, moving to an understanding that a much more profitable and satisfying future could be found through allowing the land to do what it does best.

I will not go into details, there are plenty of those on the 560 pages; I will, instead, list some of the things I learned. If you simply leave a plot in England to go wild it will soon become species poor, closed canopy woodland. This is quite different to the open woods that covered ancient Britain and the reason for this is the absence of free-ranging, large herbivores. Thorny thickets are the natural rabbit-and-deer-proof sapling fences. The greening of our cities is perhaps the cheapest and simplest way to extend their habitability when temperatures rise, and certainly improves the quality of life for the inhabitants. While we need to guard against 'the good old days' syndrome, the 'Shifting baselines' section (p.48) made me realise that there probably was a nest with eggs or fledglings in every summer hedgerow of my youth, exactly as I remember it.

And the two big things I got from this book were, firstly, a realisation that conservation can be too focused on the past while wilding is about focusing on the future, and secondly, the main barrier to that green and bio-diverse future is our outdated obsession with control, order and neatness (well, that and the big food and chemical companies' profits). See those barren manicured lawns for what they are, the real-fur coats of those oblivious to nature, its needs and value.

Stuart Elton

INTERVIEW WITH A HUMANIST

Continuing this series of interviews, Lori Marriott spoke to John Barry, who is Professor of Green Political Economy at Queen's University Belfast, and Co-Chair of the Belfast Climate Commission. John recently joined the Humanist Climate Action steering committee.



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

All what I call 'my thinking life' – that is, as far as I started thinking critically, sometime around the age of 14 or 15

How did you come to be interested in environmental concerns?

When I was growing up in Dublin in the early 1980s there was a terrible problem of air pollution due to people burning coal, and that sparked my interest in environmental issues. And then later when I went to university I started reading and learning about issues like animal exploitation, global biodiversity loss and climate breakdown.

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

My concerns for science-based policy and radical transformations in our economic, food and energy systems – I feel – are based on humanist respect for science, but also my ethical concerns for future generations, climate injustice for those who have done least to cause the crisis but are suffering the worst impacts of the planetary crisis, and my enduring concern for extending moral considerability to the more than human world, especially sentient animals.

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

Absolutely. Any organisation that does not take the climate and ecological crisis seriously is not a serious organisation 'fit for future purpose', as it were, for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, in my judgement.

What's your biggest environmental concern?

The worsening climate destabilisation and my fears for what may happen as we head towards a more-than-2-degree warmer world in terms of the impacts on food security, climate migration and human suffering, resource conflict and the socio-ecological impacts of the sixth mass extinction, and more local impacts of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) weakening or collapsing – meaning Britain and Ireland will experience much colder and harsher winters.

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

I am not a fan of individual lifestyle change. What is needed is collective political action and citizen action putting pressure on the state in particular to coordinate and legislate for a planned and managed 'just transformation' of our economies and societies. While flying less, eating less red meat etc are good, they are worthless in my view unless connected to larger political agitation, mobilisation and action.

THE ECOCIDAL COMMONSENSE OF MAINSTREAM ECONOMICS

John Barry here elaborates on his personal view of the 'just transformation of our economies and societies' which he thinks is needed.

The dominant view of economics is 'neo-classical economics' (or neo-liberalism). It supports a particular view of the economy and society, one which, with a few exceptions, is supportive of a capitalist organisation of the economy and private ownership, endorses production for profit, justifies an unequal distribution of income and wealth, and above all is committed to promoting orthodox 'economic growth'. Yet we have growing scientific evidence that this economic growth is the cause of multiple problems, from rising inequality and division within society to eroding democracy and undermining a stable climate and the life-supporting systems of the planet

In short, neo-classical economics supports the prevailing capitalist status quo and therefore justifies growing inequality and unsustainability.

Yet capitalism, the neo-classical economics that underpins it, and the ecocidal fixation on 'endless economic growth', are elements of one way, not the only or even the best way, of organising and thinking about the economy. So why, from the classroom to the boardroom to the bar room, is neoclassical economics the only form of economics that is taught, that informs business and political decisions, and is accepted as the 'common-sense' way to talk about how the economy is doing? And why is any alternative way of thinking about the economy or non-capitalist economic policies by default deemed 'nonsensical', 'impractical' etc.?

We are here dealing with the operation of ideology – of something being presented as 'common sense' and therefore in the interests of everyone, but actually acting in the interests of a few. In other words, a sign of the ideological success of neo-classical economics is that it has, by and large, managed to perform the sleight of hand of replacing 'capitalism' with 'the economy', such

that whenever we talk about 'the economy' we are in fact, usually, talking about a particular mode of economic organisation, namely capitalism. **A category mistake has been made: the confusion and conflation of 'capitalism' with the 'economy'**. Think of when an 'economist' is called to comment in the media; it is without exception a neo-classical economist, who will (generally speaking) talk about (and defend) capitalism. Rarely do we hear non-neo-classical economists in our media, or if we do these are not accorded the label of 'economists' but 'political commentators', nicely eliding the fact that those called 'economic experts' are also political commentators. This depoliticised account is a central element of the neo-classical vision of itself as a 'value-free', 'objective' and 'neutral' form of knowledge.

And identifying capitalism as what dominant views of economics are really talking about enables us to understand why 'growth' is such an important imperative for this dominant, common-sense view of economics. Capitalism requires continuous economic growth (around 3% per year) just to be stable, therefore this type of economy has two positions – it either 'goes and grows', or it collapses. It has no other default position. Which is why it is a problem in terms of sustainability – the natural world upon which the human economy depends is not growing, so how can a sub-system grow beyond the capacity of this non-growing larger system? This opens up the possibility of alternative economic models – ones that are not capitalist or based on continuous economic growth – and it is the development of these alternatives that is most pressing in the 21st century, not simply to develop policies for dealing with climate change or growing wealth and income inequalities but above all else to democratise and re-politicise our thinking about economics.

KEEP IN TOUCH

We welcome feedback and responses to items in HCA newsletters. We aim to exemplify the humanist commitment to rational discussion and debate. 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](#). We aim to produce a newsletter every two months.