



SEPTEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER



Behaviour change or system change? In this September newsletter we look at some ideas under both headings.

BEYOND 'BUSINESS AS USUAL'

In his article in our May 2024 newsletter ('the Ecocidal Commonsense of Mainstream Economics') fellow HCA member Professor John Barry argues that our dominant economic system (so called neo-liberalism) and its obsession with continuous economic 'growth' has led to a wide range of social, democratic and environmental problems including the climate emergency and looming ecological catastrophe. He points out that whilst individual behaviour changes (using public transport, eating less meat, changing to renewable energy, recycling etc) are hugely important, they need to be accompanied by collective political pressure. This collective pressure needs to call for a transition to a more sustainable economic model which doesn't rely on the never ending consumption of limited natural resources.

He's not alone of course. There are a number of alternative economic models intended to tackle our climate and ecological challenges, such as ['circular economies'](#) and ['de-growth'](#). Generally they argue for reducing our use of earth's resources and moving away from the idea that society's well-being and happiness is dependent on increasing economic growth. But any redesigned economic system will inevitably require changes to our political, social and financial

institutions. So what sort of changes should we be talking about? What needs to happen before we might see the shifts in our society as a whole that commentators say we need?

I've recently read three books which might help to answer that question. They are listed below. None are exclusively about the environment but they all include proposals for systemic and structural changes that may (or may not) help address our environmental challenges.

Ian Dunt is a political commentator who argues that it's impossible to solve long term complex problems with the sort of short term simplified solutions that our current system of government often gives us. He calls for transparency around how political parties are funded and for limits on the influence that lobbyists have over policy formulation. He wants to end the constant churn of departmental Ministers by ensuring that only MPs with experience and expertise are put in charge of complex policy areas, and he wants to see the introduction of proportional representation and more evidence based, consensus policy making.

Daniel Chandler is an economist and philosopher. He argues that whilst tackling the climate crisis requires far stronger legal interventions in markets than currently occurs, that also must go hand in hand with addressing social and wealth inequality and economic injustice.

He also calls for proportional representation in national elections and strongly advocates the establishment of citizens' assemblies and other forms of participatory democracy to give people more say in policies and spending at all levels of society.



Daniel Chandler's Voltaire Lecture for Humanists UK will be available for [viewing on-line](#)

George Monbiot is a writer and activist. His book is a critique of our neo-liberal economy which he holds responsible for a crisis in Earth systems and the existential threat that we face. He maintains that gradual or incremental change isn't sufficient to dislodge vested interests and generate the radically different society that we need to avert that threat. Only by revealing the 'truth' behind the way our economic, political and social institutions actually work, and demonstrating how they have led to our current environmental crisis, can we generate the collective political and citizen action that Professor Barry argues for in his May article.

What do you think? Do you believe that 'business as usual' is capable of averting the threat to our environment and ecological futures? Perhaps you think that rapid advances in technology will come to the rescue? Or do you think that we need a fundamental overhaul of the way our economies work and should collectively find ways of pushing for positive change - incremental or radical? If so, how? Let us know your thoughts please.

John Burns

The books I've referred to are:

Ian Dunt: *How Westminster Works... and Why it Doesn't* (Orion Publishing Co., 2024)

Daniel Chandler: *Free and Equal: What Would a Fairer Society Look Like?* (Allen Lane, 2023)

George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison: *The Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of Neoliberalism* (Penguin, 2024)

GOVERNMENT FAILS ON RECYCLING TARGETS – SOME RETAILERS STEP UP

So you have changed what you buy and how you buy in order to reduce the amount of waste you produce. You have a water bottle you refill, you have household cleaning items in refills or delivered plastic free, you use solid shampoo and conditioner and 'proper' soap. You reuse plastic containers in multiple ways. In other words you think about what you use and its impact on the environment.

Depending on where you live, how much space you have, your household income, mobility and a range of other factors, the challenge of how to reduce waste and increase recycling via organisations you believe will actually recycle the items remains. I have successfully reduced what ends up in the normal rubbish over many years but this remains an ongoing battle.

Between 2000 and 2013, the rate of household recycling in the UK jumped from around 10% to 45%. In the last decade, however, there has been little increase in the amount of household waste that is recycled across the UK as a whole (although the recycling rate in Wales has continued to rise) and the government did not meet its target of recycling half of all waste from UK households by 2020.

The government set out in its 2018 [Resources and Waste Strategy for England](#) plans to establish a more circular economy that promoted the reuse, repair and recycling of products, better use of resources and the elimination of avoidable waste by 2050. But a recent report by the National Audit Office has concluded that several years on from the publication of the strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not have a clear plan to deliver on these aims.

In a bid to boost recycling of their products some brands are now operating their own recycling schemes for hard-to-recycle products and packaging. Some of them will even reward you for your efforts if you take part.

Not sure how to recycle problem packaging such as make-up, toothbrushes, toiletry and toothpaste tubes? Sign up to the [Recycle at Boots scheme](#) (registration is free; you'll need a Boots Advantage Card to join) to receive 500 points (worth £5) when you scan five items at boots.scan2recycle.com, drop them off in-store and spend £10. The scheme now enables you to scan and drop off blister packs. Superdrug also offers blister pack recycling at any branch with a pharmacy.



If you wear disposable contact lenses, you can drop off not only the blister packs and foil covers but also the used contact lenses themselves, at over 600 [Boots Opticians stores](#). Boots works in partnership with the Acuvue Contact Lens Recycling Programme.

Drop off clothes you no longer want from any brand in any condition at H&M stores – hand them in at the cash desk and you'll receive an H&M voucher to use towards your next purchase. Zara runs a similar scheme, which either recycles old garments, donates them to charity or sells them for good causes. Alternatively, you can get your old clothes collected from your home for £1.95.

Meanwhile, [John Lewis](#) collects unwanted clothes in-store at its fashion counters for recycling or reuse. 'My John Lewis' members will get £5 off a fashion or homeware purchase of £20 or more when they return five or more items.

You can donate M&S school uniforms your kids have grown out of in M&S stores via its [Shwopping](#) scheme. It will be donated to Oxfam to be resold and reworn and you'll receive a 20% discount off M&S kidswear via the Sparks loyalty scheme.

I have found that telling people I know who are busy, and not particularly engaged in environmental issues, about schemes that provide rewards has been an effective way to motivate them to think about additional recycling. Rather than tell people about all the

schemes, identify the one most relevant to them and share that information with them. And if you get a positive response, ask them to share the information with their friends.

If readers are aware of other widely available schemes please let us know.

Pauline Element

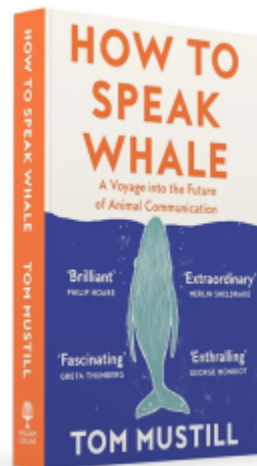
BOOK REVIEW

How to speak whale: A voyage into the future of animal communication

Tom Mustill

Willam Collins, 2023

ISBN: 978-0-00-836342-0, 320pp, paperback, £10.99



Tom Mustill's book is science and nature writing at its best. The engaging style covers Mustill's personal motivation for this pursuit (why did a humpback whale nearly jump on top of him?), the intricate anatomy of whales (how do you autopsy a whale without it exploding?), and the evocative insight that *how* we might speak to a whale is probably less important than *why* we might want to.

As part of the context of this quest it is difficult to read about the slaughter of literally millions of whales, a large proportion of which were killed in the twentieth century. Especially when you learn that some whales live for hundreds of years and have essentially witnessed the near extermination of their species. It is thought that the largest animal in the history of life on earth, the blue whale, was hunted to within 0.1% of its population – the equivalent of killing every human except for the population of Bulgaria. Would you want to speak to a species that had perpetrated such a calamity?

Though the science of the book is enthralling, the poignancy is in the questions that Mustill makes us ask of ourselves. If we do achieve this wonder of science, will it (must it?) fundamentally change us as a species? What on earth will we say to a whale – how could we possibly justify human behaviour? Taking an optimistic view, I hope that we speak to whales soon, and I hope that they are a part of the wake-up call we so desperately need.

“Man has great power of speech, but what he says is mostly vain and false; animals have little, but what they say is useful and true.” *Leonardo da Vinci, quoted on page 87.*

Lori Marriott

ONE SMALL STEP

Continuing our series on actions through the year, here is a step for September.

A 'Library of Things' is a social enterprise which loans out items to members of its local community. These items generally include DIY tools, garden machinery, kitchen appliances and camping gear. A quick search for '[Library of Things near me](#)' will identify the nearest location to you so you can see what it offers.



If you have a local Library of Things, tell friends and family about it. Consider giving membership as a house-warming or birthday gift to family embarking on DIY adventures! The benefits of borrowing items from a Library of Things rather than owning them are multiple:

- we free up space in our homes
- save money by paying a fraction of the purchase cost
- ensure items get a full life of use
- reduce over-manufacturing and material usage
- reduce waste and carbon emissions.

By borrowing and sharing instead of buying and owning, we reduce our collective impact on the planet and ensure the amount of waste is kept to a minimum.

Pauline Element

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.