Humanist Climate Action

MARCH 2026 NEWSLETTER

It’s even worse than we thought – and that’s official.

In January the Government published a report on Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security. It began with a stark message:

> ‘Global ecosystem degradation and collapse threaten UK national security and prosperity. The world is already experiencing impacts including crop failures, intensified natural disasters and infectious disease outbreaks. Threats will increase with degradation and intensify with collapse. Without major intervention to reverse the current trend, this is highly likely to continue to 2050 and beyond.’

The likely threats listed are ‘water insecurity, severely reduced crop yields, a global reduction in arable land, fisheries collapse, changes to global weather patterns, release of trapped carbon exacerbating climate change, novel zoonotic diseases and loss of pharmaceutical resources’. Climate change is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, along with changes in land use and increasing pollution, making the impacts ever more severe.

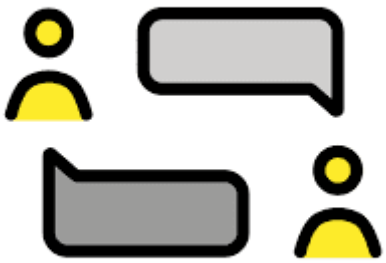
Although officially published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the analysis is reported to have emanated from the joint intelligence committee, which ‘oversees’ MI5 and MI6. It says that it ‘applies the uncertainty frameworks used in intelligence assessments’. And the assessment is, quite frankly, terrifying.

Our recent newsletters have discussed how to talk to climate change deniers, and we continue the discussion this month. One of the conclusions to emerge is the effectiveness of pointing to the social and economic effects of climate change which are already with us. A powerful example is the effect of climate change on human health, discussed in an article in this newsletter. Another example is that of flooding. Global warming is leading to wetter winters, for instance, and to the very visible increase in flooding in the UK this winter, increasing insurance premiums and making some homes uninsurable. We'll have more on this in the next newsletter.

The example of flooding also illustrates vividly the interaction between climate change and other environmental changes. Heavier rainfall means, in the UK, more storm overflows, and with the failures of our national infrastructure, this has led to a big increase in discharges of untreated sewage into our rivers and seas, further degrading those ecosystems (as discussed in our January 2024 newsletter).

In this newsletter we have more about the dire state of our waterways, and about the consequences of climate change for human health. Looking at the facts, it would be all too easy to despair. The antidote to despair is action. We must use the facts to spread the message – urgently.

CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS (CONTINUED)



Even with people who accept that climate change is happening and caused by humans, climate conversations focused on turning acceptance into action can be difficult and frustrating. Many, perhaps most, of the people we meet have an interest in carrying on as they are – consuming extravagantly, flying, using fossil fuels etc – and will make excuses: 'What about China/India/the USA?', 'What difference would my puny efforts make?', 'I pick up litter and recycle – surely that's enough?', 'Climate change will only affect faraway places, in the distant future, not here, not now', 'I/the UK can't afford the changes we'd have to make' – and so on.

How do we counter all this, when, as you may have observed, haranguing, preaching, even scientific and rational arguments, don't seem to work all that well? Setting a good example, normalising climate-conscious behaviour, showing off energy-efficient homes (as some

community groups do occasionally), offering impartial advice… may work better, but we will still find ourselves having to talk about and explain the linked climate and nature crises and what individuals can do about them. As previous newsletters have pointed out, what you say may depend on who you are talking to.

There is help out there. Climate Outreach's *Britain Talks Climate & Nature* groups British society into seven distinct segments, describes their core beliefs and worldviews, and offers advice on how to engage on climate and nature (and what to avoid!) with these different groups:

- Progressive Activists - 12% of the population
- Incrementalist Left - 21% of the population
- Established Liberals - 9% of the population
- Sceptical Scrollers - 10% of the population
- Rooted Patriots - 20% of the population
- Traditional Conservatives - 8% of the population
- Dissenting Disruptors - 20% of the population

You may well recognise yourself and your values in one of these social segments, but the real utility of the research is in its descriptions of other groups and its toolkit on how to talk to people whose priorities you may not share but who could be persuaded to take action (or more action) if approached sensitively. This doesn't mean that you have to lie or ditch your priorities and values, but it does give you some ways in or themes that might appeal to people who are not like you. When public attitude surveys show high levels of concern about climate and nature it's worth trying to turn that concern into action. Avoiding or mitigating climate catastrophe will take millions of individual choices and actions as well as government interventions; individuals can make changes faster than governments so it's important to keep talking.

Guest contributor Marilyn Mason, Transition Town Kingston

As well as the Climate Outreach toolkit recommended by Marilyn, another good resource is the *Debunking Handbook* produced by the Center for Climate Change Communication.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN HEALTH

Anopheles gambiae, the most important carrier of malaria in sub-Saharan Africa

Climate change will produce adverse weather events and reduce water availability and quality. This will have major consequences for the Earth and on human health. The Earth is heating at an unprecedented speed, related to human activity. Carbon dioxide production is at a rate that earth systems can no longer resist naturally. A 0.55 metre rise in sea level by 2100, with ice cap melting and increase in ocean temperature, is built in now, even if CO2 production were stopped today.

There are multiple adverse health outcomes that are inevitable from global warming. The likelihood of these outcomes depends on the vulnerability of individuals and societies. This includes factors such as people's age and sex, geographical factors such as how close to sea level countries are and how densely populated, and how robust their health systems are.

Heat directly kills relatively few people but is already affecting Europe, previously considered secure. These risks are not mitigated by reduced death rates in warmer winters. Heatwaves can contribute to death, for example in someone with heart failure, demonstrating the importance of vulnerability and multiple factors in determining outcome. Storms, rain and drought can all, directly or indirectly, contribute to increased harm.

Flooding can, directly or indirectly, contribute to harm. Injuries with storms or flooding are increasing. Saltwater contamination of drinking water or irrigation water will be a major problem. Approximately 230 million people live within 1m of sea level and 1 billion within 10m of sea level.

Water availability, both quantity and quality, will be a major issue.

Food production will be greatly affected, directly through increased temperature but also with saltwater ingress. It is estimated that by 2050 there could be a 20% increase in the risk of hunger and malnutrition, with a majority of child deaths relating to undernutrition caused directly or indirectly from climate change.

Zoonoses - diseases passed between animals and humans - mostly occur with faeco-oral transmission, and with contaminated scarce water this is more likely. Many diseases which began as zoonoses are now mostly human to human. These include conditions such as salmonella, avian influenza and COVID-2019.

Vector-borne diseases are more likely to re-emerge in areas where they have been eradicated. The greatest reduction in malaria has followed targeting of the vector, although there is now a vaccine. In 2024, there were 282 million cases of malaria with 600,000 deaths (with Anopheles mosquitoes), already 55% less than target reduction. Malaria will almost certainly spread back to previously eradicated areas. West Nile virus (culex mosquitoes) is likely to spread with warmer wetter conditions increasing mosquito range. Dengue, with 390 million cases pa (Aedes mosquitoes), will likely similarly increase.

Air quality will be affected. In hot dry circumstances there is an increase in ozone quantity and particulates. This has already been seen for example in Delhi. It also demonstrates that climate change, even if not the sole cause of problems, increases the likelihood of them happening.
It is difficult to accurately estimate outcomes as there are compound mechanisms in people with individual multipliers. These alter risk rather than certainty. 3.6 billion people live in countries especially susceptible to climate change, mostly in countries with the least resources to manage such problems. The WHO suggests an additional 250,000 deaths per year by 2050 related to climate change, with another estimate suggesting 83 million excess deaths by 2100. These estimates do not take account of the risks of an increase in violent death and indeed wars that will follow attempted migration.

In short, the consequences of climate change for human health pose huge dangers, and add to the already overwhelming case for taking action.

Guest contributor Stephen Robinson

DIRTY WATER AND DIRTY BUSINESS

A still from the film *Dirty Business*

In December, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) issued a report on its investigation into the regulation by Defra, the Environment Agency and Ofwat of combined sewer overflows (CSOs). It said that all three bodies had failed to comply with environmental law. In the case of the Environment Agency, it found three failures:

1. Failing to take proper account of environmental law in devising guidance relating to permit conditions.

2. (As a result of the point above) setting permit conditions that were insufficient to comply with environmental laws.

3. Failing to exercise permit review functions in relation to discharges from CSOs.

It found that the regulators allowed water companies to routinely discharge sewage, failing to properly enforce rules designed for ‘exceptional’ circumstances. The investigation had originally been prompted by a complaint from the campaigning group Wildfish.

Clearly, regulation of the water industry is failing. What needs to be done? In January the Government published its water white paper A New Vision for Water, in which it set out its plans to reform the water sector to focus on the long term, with ‘preventative regulation’ that addresses issues before problems occur. It says that the government is aiming to do this by:

- establishing a single integrated water regulator
- introducing reforms to focus on long-term priorities
- attracting third-party investment in the water sector
- delivering better outcomes for water customers and the environment, such as improved company responsibility and reduced pollution.

Critics say that the approach falls woefully short because it fails to address the 'elephant in the room' – the failed 30-year experiment of water privatisation. The campaigning group Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) says that this is because the government listened not to the public and to experts but to 'powerful organisations that have the ear of our most senior politicians and a bargaining power that ordinary people only have a brief taste of at election time'.

The Ilkley Clean River Group has commented: 'The Water Reform White Paper continues to syphon money off to private equity, inflating the cost of fixing our water system whilst weakening regulation under the cloak of prevention'. The group recognises that some of the recommendations, such as sustainable drainage and rainwater management, and measures to support water efficiency, will have wide support, but says that the white paper fails to address the fundamental problem. Here is the group's concluding verdict:

> *'This White Paper is a private equity dream, tying us in for the long term to this failed water industry. 35% of our bills will still go to shareholders, a total of £22bn in 2025-30 and rising thereafter.*
>
> ***Right now we need:***
>
> 1. *Defra, EA and Ofwat to enforce the law as it stands, and prosecute criminal offences, stopping illegal pollution and removing licenses from illegal water companies*
>
> 2. *Take failing water companies into special administration, turn them around into an ownership structure that delivers outcomes and public value for money.*
>
> 3. *A policy of 'Polluter Pays' so the public is not cross-subsiding polluting companies and businesses.*
>
> ***Whilst putting in place these obvious steps the government should:***
>
> 1. *Develop a Strategy for water conservation, protection and efficiency with the public, that sets the direction for what this country needs to ensure we have water now and, in the future, and affordably protects our rivers, lakes and seas.*

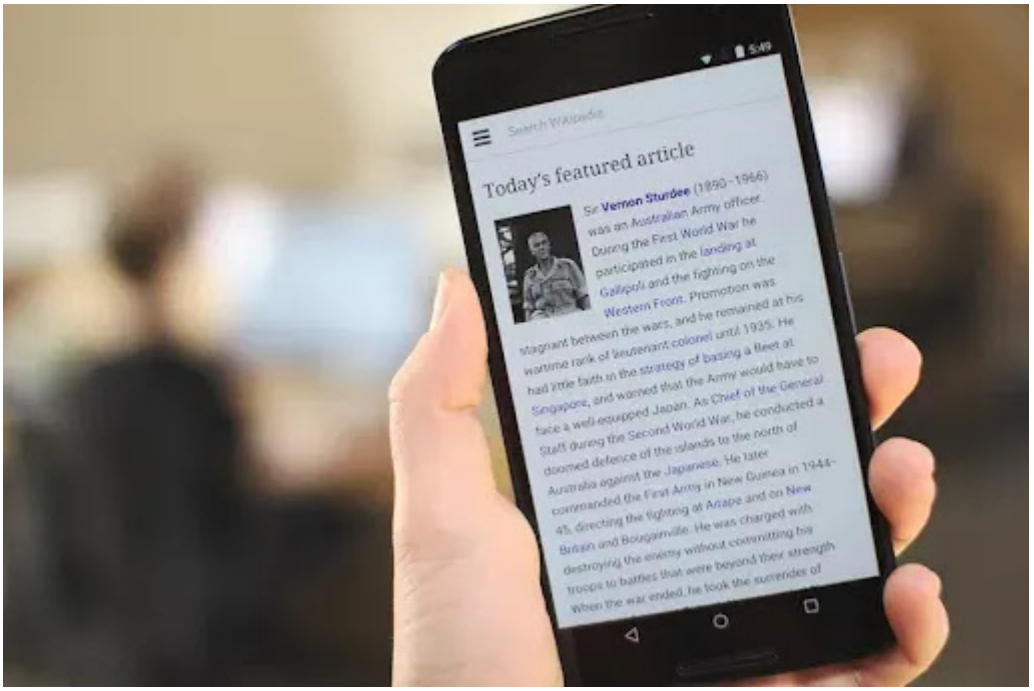
2. *Undertake a feasibility study that sets out all the delivery options and costs (private, public, mutual ownership) including their costs and choose the one that best fits the strategic direction.*

3. *Once the ownership model is determined the government can then design a regulator fit for purpose.'*

Do watch *Dirty Business*, the Channel 4 film about how WASP took on the water industry, and if you feel outraged after watching it, that feeling matters. It's unacceptable that water companies are still profiting from dumping sewage into our seas and rivers. We need fundamental change. Geoff Sallis

ONE SMALL THING

Love your digital devices for longer



Who doesn't love their phone? They are our constant companions, providing contact with family and friends, information and entertainment, but they also have a significant carbon impact. The energy used to mine, manufacture, and ship a device often accounts for 80-90% of its lifetime impact. So what simple steps can you take to reduce your impact in this area?

- Try to keep your smartphone or laptop for as long as possible.
- Replace batteries or screens instead of buying a new unit. Support "Right to Repair" initiatives.
- Buy refurbished laptops and phones rather than new.

- When a device truly dies, take it to a certified e-waste recycler to recover precious metals like gold, lithium, and cobalt.

If you keep a new phone for 2 years its carbon impact is 40kg p.a. If you keep it for 6 years the impact is 13.3 kg. In addition, you will have saved the cost of 2 phones. A win for the climate and a win for your pocket!

Pauline Element

YOUR FEEDBACK

We welcome feedback and responses to 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 website. We aim to produce a newsletter every two months.

As always, all signed contributions to the newsletter represent simply the views of the individual writers and are not necessarily endorsed by either Humanist Climate Action or Humanists UK.