

Humanist Perspective

Environmental issues



Why should we care about the environment?

The evidence is now overwhelming for the impact of human action on our planet, including climate change, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity. Human beings and other animals depend on the natural world for their survival, and it can be a source of wonder and joy.



'As a humanist myself, I often feel like my humanist values and my green values spring from the same place because, to me, humanism is about



recognising we came from the living world and we live within it. Our concern for other living beings, for our planet, and for future generations is core to both these philosophies.'

Sian Berry,
former Co-leader
of the Green party



How would a humanist approach questions about the environment?

Humanists try to use **evidence**, **empathy**, and a concern for the **happiness** and wellbeing of sentient life when thinking about ethical questions. They believe this is **the one and only life and world we have**. We should try to support everybody to live happy and fulfilling lives, both those alive today and future generations.

Because humanists have no belief in a god or in any higher power, they believe that human beings alone have **responsibility** for solving the problems we face. Solutions to our problems will only come through action.

YouGov polling found that 84% of humanists think that climate change is the biggest threat to civilisation, compared to 63% of the general population.

Today many humanists are supporters of **Humanist Climate Action**, which aims to

- promote environmental policies,
- support the work of other environmental campaigning groups,
- challenge beliefs that are not evidence-based and disinformation about environmental issues, and...
- encourage humanists to adopt greener lifestyles, following the best available scientific evidence.

'Humanists, by definition, are guided by science and recognise a moral duty towards the welfare of our fellow beings and the natural world. This leads many humanists to believe they have a duty to protect nature's diversity and beauty in a secure and sustainable manner.'

Humanist Climate Action

humanists.uk/humanist-climate-action

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'No species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it



or not, an awesome responsibility. In our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth.'

David Attenborough,
naturalist and broadcaster

Science reveals that we are part of the natural world and that our welfare depends on it. The **evidence** is overwhelming that human activity is changing the climate and that this could lead to potentially catastrophic consequences for many human beings and other animals.

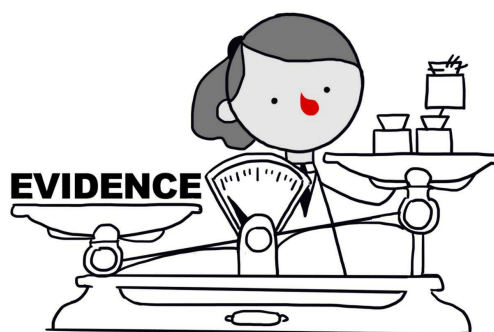
Empathy is of great importance to humanists when deciding how to act. They believe that we should show compassion for those who are already suffering the consequences of climate change, and we should extend our empathy to future generations. Climate change will lead to severe weather events and harm to food production, risking the mass migration of people and conflict over natural resources. Humanists believe future generations are entitled to the same **rights** as we are - to lives that are happy, healthy, and safe.

Many humanists believe that we should also extend our empathy to other animals. They argue that, when considering how we treat the environment, we should take the **consequences** for other species into account, not just the consequences for human beings.



'Empathy for other humans and more widely for all living beings is a central tenet of humanism, and this is a key reason why humanists make sustainable lifestyle choices that limit negative impacts on our planet.'

Lori Marriott,
Humanist Climate Action



Many humanists recognise that the natural world can be a source of **happiness**, inspiration, and wonder. When the scientist and former President of Humanists UK, Sir Hermann Bondi, was asked why he cared about conservation, he replied, 'Because I want my grandchildren to be able to see elephants.'

'It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living.'

David Attenborough,
naturalist and broadcaster

'We are moved not just by the life around us but by the glory of a sunset, the pristine whiteness of a landscape covered in snow, or the awe-inspiring immensity of a sky full of stars. Our concern about environmental destruction is not just a worry about the practical consequences but a testimony to the importance of our sense of kinship with other life-forms and our place within a larger world.'

Richard Norman,
humanist philosopher

Question: Do humanists provide good justifications for taking care of the environment?

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Some religious people think that a god created human beings and the world, and gave human beings 'stewardship' or 'dominion' over it. This is not a belief shared by humanists. They believe that human beings were not created, but instead evolved naturally, and go on evolving, along with all the species alive on our planet today. Science has revealed that all life on Earth is connected – we are all part of one extended family.



Are science and technology to blame?

Many humanists believe science has been a positive force in our understanding of the world and technology has improved the lives of millions of human beings. Science and technology themselves are neither forces for good nor bad: it depends on the way that human beings choose to use them. Scientists have been responsible for uncovering the evidence for climate change and for proposing ways to reduce our impact. We must take responsibility for how we choose to use scientific and technological knowledge. If we use them wisely, many humanists believe they will potentially be part of the solution.

'Think about our descendants in a million years, or two. If the relics of our technology survive the ravages of time, how will those descendants look back on us? As inheritors of a power we were too naive to use well? Or as pioneers who made wise choices, nurturing the natural environment of which we are a part? What would you think if you were one of them?'

The Little Book of Humanism,
Andrew Copson and Alice Roberts

NATURE



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A history of humanist campaigning

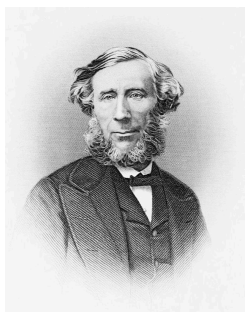
'Who more than the Humanists should recognise that human life cannot be independent of nature? With no immortal soul and no hope of a kingdom not of this world, the Humanist must accept the fact that he has one life, one world. That one world must be shared with all other human beings and all other living species. There is no separate human ecology. With increasing knowledge of the interdependence of life forms and the fragility of the life support systems of all species Humanists must think ecologically.'

Don E. Marietta Jr. (1926–2006),
environmentalist and professor of ethics

Awareness

Humanists and non-religious people have made major contributions to a greater understanding of the environment and our impact on it. Work like this has helped to provide the evidence base for environmental action.

Scientist and agnostic **John Tyndall** (1820–1893) proved the 'greenhouse effect' in 1859, laying the foundations for our modern understanding of climate change. This was the same year fellow agnostic **Charles Darwin** (1809–1882) published *On the Origin of Species*, leading to a recognition that all life on earth was connected.



Humanist **David Glyn Vaughan** (1962–2023) was one of the first scientists to write about the effects of climate change. As a Glacier Geophysicist with the British Antarctic Survey, he witnessed this first hand, later becoming Director of Science and the lead for the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC).

Appreciation

Appreciations of the natural world through literature, art, poetry, and outdoor pursuits have also motivated a humanist approach to take care of the environment.



In the early 20th century, some humanist groups, like the **Forest Group** in East London, held meetings, organised rambles, and even put on plays outdoors. They wanted to feel a direct connection with the natural world, and be inspired to live in harmony with nature.

Humanist writers, such as **Zora Neale Hurston** (1891–1960) used literature to express the awe they experience in nature. In *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, Hurston wrote: 'Somebody else can have my rapturous glance at the archangels. The springing of the yellow line of morning out of the misty deep of dawn, is glory enough for me.'



'Surely we can agree that each species, however inconspicuous and humble it may seem to us at this moment, is a masterpiece of biology, and well worth saving... If there is any moral precept shared by people of all beliefs, it is that we owe ourselves and future generations a beautiful, rich, and healthful environment.'

E. O. Wilson, biologist, (1929– 2021)

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Action

Even before the word 'environmentalist' was common, humanists and non-religious people were speaking up for nature and advocating for human responsibility.

Philosopher **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) was one of the first people to help protect natural spaces for everyone to enjoy. In 1865, he helped to found the Commons Preservation Society (now the Open Spaces Society) – the UK's oldest conservation charity.



Edward Max Nicholson (1904-2003) was one among many humanists who have been leading environmentalists. He played a key role in founding groups such as the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the

World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUCN) – all focused on working together for the protection of wildlife and the natural world.

'Conservation's concern for maintenance and sustainability is a rational response to the nature of living resources... and also an ethical imperative, expressed in the belief that "we have not inherited the earth from our parents, we have borrowed it from our children"'

World Conservation Strategy, IUCN (1980)

Former President of Humanists UK **James Hemming** gave a speech in 1999 in which he called for 'caring, cooperation, and cosmic responsibility': 'We humans now have the power to destroy life on Earth as well as to bring it to fulfilment. This is now the primary global issue.'



'This world, says the Humanist, is man's responsibility, and most things that happen here, whether good or bad, reflect man's use or abuse of that responsibility.'

Barbara Smoker, *What is humanism?* (1970)

Organised humanist action

In 1952, a collective statement of humanist beliefs called **The Amsterdam Declaration** stated: 'We recognise that we are part of nature and accept our responsibility for the impact we have on the rest of the natural world.' This sentiment has continued in more recent versions of the declaration and in 2022 it described our 'duty of care to all of humanity, including future generations, and beyond this to all sentient beings'

In 2019, members of Humanists International agreed the **Reykjavik Declaration on the Climate Change Crisis** acknowledging the significant effect of human activity on the global environment and biodiversity. It stated that, rooted in scientific findings, 'The world must act with urgency and in a globally coordinated way to reduce and prevent human contributions to climate change, to mitigate climate impacts and adapt to them'.

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A personal perspective

Lori Marriott, coordinator,
Humanist Climate Action

As a humanist I feel a deep **connection** to the natural world and an endless fascination with the complex web of interactions that have resulted in life on this planet. Believing that this web was formed over aeons by evolution rather than by a creator does not dim my appreciation and awe. In fact, the interconnections and balance in our natural systems are a source of **wonder** and inspiration for me. It is this balance that humans have not respected, especially since the industrial age. From the climate crisis to biodiversity loss and plastic pollution to resource use, we have not treated the earth as if it is the only one we have. Without any supernatural or creator-based solutions to these challenges, we must take **responsibility** for our actions, including our present activities and future choices.

As humanists we recognise that human beings are a part of the natural world, and we use **science** and reason to inform our beliefs and actions. The scientific consensus is very clear – we cannot keep behaving in the same way if we wish to continue living healthy lives on this planet. Our concern here goes beyond ourselves – to other life on earth and to future generations of species that will inherit a world barely fit to sustain life. While we value the natural world for its beauty and wonder, we also keep in mind that functioning natural systems are essential for **survival**.

Empathy for other humans, and more widely for all living beings, is a central tenet of humanism, and this is a key reason why humanists make sustainable lifestyle choices that limit negative impacts on our planet. In 2019, Humanists International made the Reykjavik Declaration on the Climate Change Crisis. This policy recognised the impact that humans are having on the climate and ecosystems, and stated support for international agreements on climate change. It also highlighted the need for a global transition to new methods of using resources in socially and environmentally sustainable ways. Ultimately, we believe that humans have the **resourcefulness** to live on this planet in a sustainable way.



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A personal perspective

Marilyn Mason, former coordinator of Humanists for a Better World

Humanists believe that we have just **one life**, that we have evolved, along with the rest of the natural world, to live on planet Earth, and that we alone are **responsible** for looking after it. Evidence shows that we are dependent in countless ways on our environment and its ecosystems (for fresh water, breathable air, fertile soil, a tolerable climate). Additionally, many humanists cherish the natural world, its landscapes, wildernesses, flora and fauna, for the beauty, inspiration, and solace they provide. If there are other habitable planets, they are a long, and perhaps impossible, journey away, so we should do our best to look after this planet for ourselves, for other animals, and for future generations.

Why worry about the environment? Humanists base their beliefs about the world on **evidence**. 97% of [scientific papers on global warming](#) conclude that it is real, problematic, and exacerbated by human activity. Many humanists would accept that as a good basis for concern and a motivation to action. Environmentalists express concern about the loss of species, also caused by human activity, such as encroachment on habitats by cities, roads, and agriculture. Agriculturalists worry about degradation of the soil caused by intensive farming, grazing, and deforestation. We will all suffer if we over-exploit or damage valuable, often shared, resources such as forests, fresh water, fossil fuels, and oceans. One can foresee growing tensions – even wars – over resources if we do not come up with rational ways of conserving and sharing them.

Humanist ethics are based on **reason**, taking responsibility for our own actions and their consequences, and **empathy** for other people and other sentient beings. When our actions lead to climate chaos and environmental

degradation, considerable responsibility is placed on us. The worsening environment's biggest impacts are on the poorer parts of the world, many of which already suffer from stresses such as desertification and flooding. These stresses contribute to conflicts and mass migration, with the more secure and affluent populations of the developed world often unwilling to provide for refugees. So, alongside humanist ideals such as justice and fairness, and empathy for those whose homes and livelihoods are threatened, there is an element of enlightened self-interest in trying to prevent or mitigate the changes that lead to so much upheaval and suffering.

Future generations, too, are likely to suffer from environmental stresses, and parents and grandparents will have rational, personal reasons for caring about the future of the planet. But even without direct descendants, intergenerational justice would demand that we safeguard the **rights** of future generations to life, food, and homes. We should not require sacrifices from them so that we can carry on living wastefully and extravagantly. It would take 5.4 Earths to sustain the world's population if everyone lived like the average American (you can measure your own 'ecological footprint' with [Earth Day Network](#)). Most humanists would advocate more rational attitudes to wealth, consumption, and wellbeing as routes to conserving the environment, and, without religious reservations about contraception, would promote birth control as an essential step towards a sustainable world population.

It's not all bad. The knowledge we need to limit and feed the world population and become carbon-neutral exists already; more useful technologies are emerging, and there are potentially millions of jobs in new green industries. Earth remains beautiful and diverse, and, thanks to the work of scientists and environmentalists, we are now aware of the problems and the solutions.

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Environmentalism in the humanist tradition

Maddy Goodall,
Humanist Heritage coordinator

In spite of criticisms by some that the humanist philosophy is anthropocentric – placing human concerns inexorably above nature and other sentient creatures – such claims overlook a strong tradition of humanist environmental and animal rights activism, both on the part of individuals and within the organised humanist movement as a whole. These humanist calls for action on the environment have been rooted in the fundamental belief not of human superiority, but human responsibility. As affirmed in the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration, a statement of global humanism agreed at the World Humanist Congress: ‘Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations’ and recognise ‘our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world’.

In the 18th century, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously advocated for animal welfare, and throughout the centuries to come, others used a similar non-religious rationale, based on reason and compassion, to argue for the rights of animals and the protection of the environment. One such figure was writer, campaigner, and humanist Henry Stephens Salt who founded the Humanitarian League in 1891 to advocate for a range of humane reforms – from the abolition of capital punishment to greater concern for animal welfare. He had published *A Plea for Vegetarianism* in 1886, and was deeply inspired by the environmentalist philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, whose biography Salt wrote.

Defining himself as a rationalist, Salt proposed a humanist ‘creed of kinship’, predicated on the ultimate duty of humankind to protect the vulnerable, to care for one another, and to demonstrate their supposed ‘civilisation’ in the way they engaged with nature and treated

animals. The Humanitarian League was a humanist organisation, and some local groups were directly affiliated with the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK). Many prominent figures were active in both.

Many humanists were closely associated with the Humanitarian League during its three decades of existence, including Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Lady Florence Dixie, and Moncure Conway.

Within the humanist movement, the 1970s saw an increased focus on the human impact on the natural world, with British Humanist Association publications calling for ‘a new, objective understanding of the world on which we live and the diversity and interdependence of life forms it contains’. In a 1979 article for the *New Humanist* magazine, American writer, philosopher, and environmentalist Don Marietta was unequivocal in his statement of ‘ecological humanism’, asking:

Who more than the Humanists should recognise that human life cannot be independent of nature? With no immortal soul and no hope of a kingdom not of this world, the Humanist must accept the fact that he has one life, one world. That one world must be shared with all other human beings and all other living species. There is no separate human ecology.

Today, initiatives such as the American Humanist Association’s Humanist Environmental Response Effort for Climate, and Humanists UK’s Humanist Climate Action, aim to meet this responsibility, addressing the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, and habitat destruction, and working to mitigate them.



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Why Humanist Climate Action?

Richard Norman, humanist philosopher

There is now a widespread recognition that human and animal wellbeing is intimately linked to the protection and flourishing of the natural environment. We know that if radical measures are not taken to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, rising global temperatures will lead to damaging environmental changes such as extreme weather conditions, increased flooding, soil degradation, and desertification, all with potentially devastating impacts on habitations and food production.



We know too that, for the sake of their physical and mental wellbeing, including mental health, in particular, people need access to unspoiled countryside and green spaces, to woodlands and uncontaminated rivers and seas. We know that human lives are enriched by experiences of delight and wonder at the diversity of the living species with which we share our world.

Humanists are in a position to present insights into the interdependence of humans and the natural world in clear and compelling ways, drawing on scientific knowledge of the climate and ecosystems and on people's shared and well-attested experience of what makes our lives go well.

Humanists look to scientific enquiry to understand the causes and consequences of natural processes. We do so not from an uncritical acceptance of scientific authority, but

on the basis of an understanding of how the scientific method works, appealing to evidence and the experimental testing of explanatory hypotheses. As humanists, we have a duty to defend the scientific consensus on the human causes of climate change against the so-called 'sceptics' who are motivated not by intellectual rigour but by wishful thinking and vested interests.

Humanists know that we cannot look to a higher power to solve our problems for us. We have to take responsibility for our own lives, for the lives of others. We believe that this life is the one life we have, and similarly, this is the one planet we have. We are therefore all the more keenly aware that our finite human lives are given meaning and purpose by our membership of an ongoing human community and the legacy we bequeath to future generations.

Given all of this, it is unsurprising that humanists are more concerned about climate change than the general population. YouGov polling has found that 84% of humanists think that climate change is the biggest threat to civilisation, versus 63% of the general population.

Humanist Climate Action seeks to bring these values and beliefs to the movement tackling environmental degradation, such as rising global temperatures, species loss, biodiversity decline, and the destruction of the natural environment. We aim to make our own distinctive contribution. We do not duplicate the work of other campaigns and organisations, but cooperate with them, including through our membership of [the Climate Coalition](#). We aim to raise awareness, encouraging our fellow humanists to take action and to add our voices to this shared human endeavour.

Humanists International Reykjavik Declaration on the Climate Change Crisis (2019)

Human beings are part of the natural world, but have a disproportionate effect on the global environment and biodiversity. Throughout history, our species has used the natural world to increase individual and collective wellbeing, and the impact we have is no longer sustainable. Policies adopted by governments should be informed by scientific findings. Governments need to respect the overwhelming conclusions reached by the international scientific community, including that the overuse of natural resources and the increase in greenhouse gas emissions is driving catastrophic climate change, threatening the diversity of life on Earth and the sustainability of human societies. Indeed, extreme scenarios pose an existential risk to humanity. The world must act with urgency and in a globally coordinated way to reduce and prevent human contributions to climate change, to mitigate climate impacts and adapt to them.

We recognise:

- The overwhelming scientific consensus that human beings are contributing to the climate change trend of global warming;
- That climate change will adversely affect human communities, non-human animals and natural ecosystems;
- The threat to ecosystems caused by land-use and resource extraction, including commercial deforestation and unsustainable farming;
- That investment in new renewable energy technology must happen alongside a massive reduction in the use of carbon-intensive fuels, such as coal, oil and gas;
- That all countries need to work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to preserve habitats and species.
- That economic development resulting from industrialisation has historically advantaged countries as they develop, and that wealthier countries should assist developing countries in meeting environmental obligations.

We support:

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the resulting work of the 2017 Paris Agreement, and the 2017 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP23);
- The urgent work of the scientific, engineering and activist communities to research and deploy new technologies and strategies to mitigate the risks to civilisation and biodiversity;
- The need for a global transition to new ways of using resources and new means of generating energy that will be socially and environmentally sustainable.

We call upon all humanist organizations, civil society in general, and all individuals around the world to:

- 1) Highlight to their governments and regional bodies the need for urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and make land-use and resource extraction sustainable, and to protect and conserve wild habitats;
- 2) Foster a social and political commitment to urgent action and long-term policymaking to mitigate and prevent climate change.

The Reykjavik Declaration on the Climate Change Crisis superseded previous policy statements on the environment from Humanists International dating back to 1971.