
Re: u3a Second Nature 008 (Nov 2023)

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Bulletin 008

Second Nature is a newsletter sent by the Subject Adviser on Climate Change and Environment to subscribers in the u3a Climate Network. The name reminds us that it should be second nature to think about environmental impact when we take decisions, and as instinctively as we think about the financial impact.

The Three 'Buts'

I am not a pessimist. Just a well informed optimist.

- [Antonio Gala](#)

I'm not optimistic, no. I'm quite different. I'm hopeful. I am a prisoner of hope.

- [Desmond Tutu](#)

Never make predictions, especially about the future.

- attrib. [Yogi Berra](#) (and several others)

When you talk to people about climate emergency there are three frequent excuses given for doing nothing - the three 'buts'. They are

- but China - there is no point in us stopping our emissions until China stops
- but population - there are too many of us now, and
- but anyway, it's too late.

I've given a view on the first two in earlier bulletins. The second but - population - generated some comment, such as this from David K:

On the Population Question, I don't feel that you fully covered the issues, but focused too much on GDP. I believe this issue is much more significant than the impression I got from your article. Surely the following problems are exacerbated by population growth:

- *global warming*
- *lack of resources on a finite planet, while everyone wants to catch the West, while we want more*
- *poverty, which is worsened by a high birth rate, hampering sustainable development*
- *destruction of the environment and loss of biodiversity.*
- *potential mass migrations from poor countries, especially due to climate change and sea level rise.*

All of these are valid points; what I'm trying to say is that they're not an argument for doing nothing. While I'm sure that David doesn't take that position, there are many that do. This is Michael Mann, writing in 2021 in *The New Climate War*:

The enemy is employing [psychological operations] in its war against climate action ... This effort has been aided and abetted by individuals who are ostensible climate champions but have portrayed catastrophe as a fait accompli, either by overstating the damage to which we are already committed, by dismissing the possibility of mobilizing the action necessary to avert disaster, or by setting the standard so high (say, the very overthrow of market economics itself, that old chestnut) that any action seems doomed to failure. The enemy has been more than happy to amplify such notions.

Alan B refers to an article in Scientific American. It tracks 35 of Earth's 'vital signs', almost all of which are going in the wrong direction.

This is [the sort of report](#) which ... perhaps explains why I do not share your optimism on resolving our climate change threats.

The numbers speak loudly and point in only one disastrous direction.

What is needed is not optimism, nor pessimism, just reality. We have almost no time left to make the huge adjustments in human behaviour required, even if there was a desire to do so, for which I see no evidence.

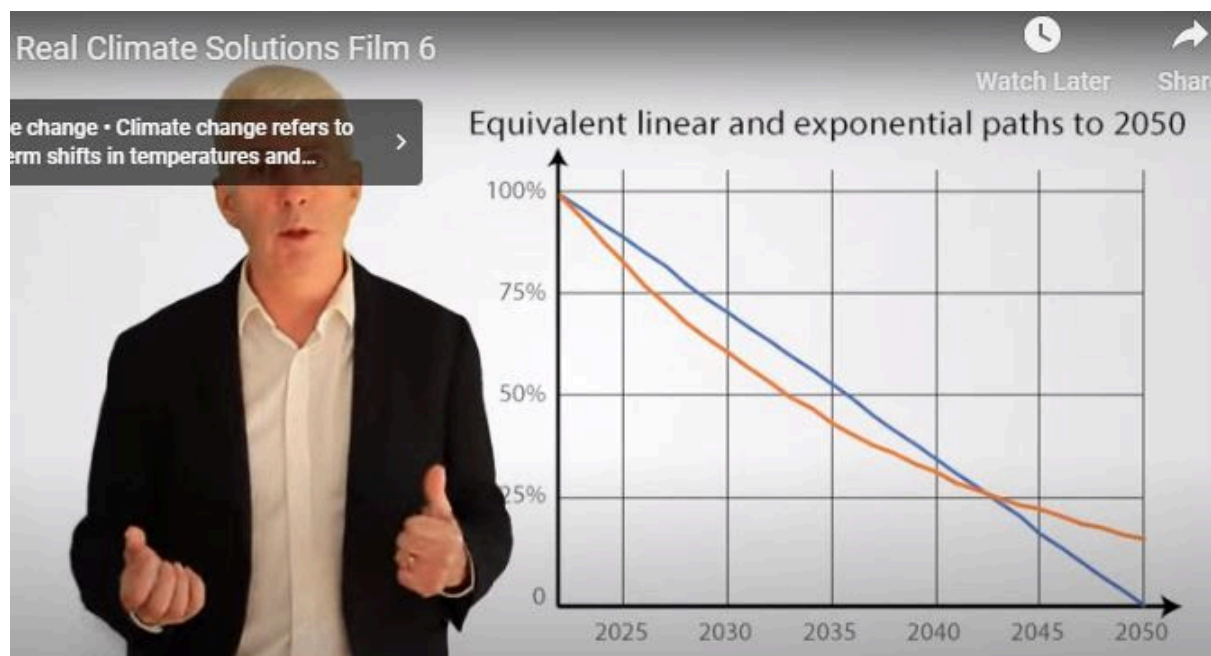
Another [paper published this month](#) estimates that the carbon budget remaining to keep global heating to 1.5C is now very small. One of the authors is quoted as

saying governments can control emissions but, at the moment, they have not done so. This is why we have an ever-shrinking carbon budget. We are not saying we only have six years to solve climate change – absolutely not. If we are able to limit warming to 1.6C or 1.7C, that's a lot better than 2C. We still need to fight for every 10th of a degree. That makes sense to me. I am still a prisoner of hope. [\[More\]](#)

Some forecasters are more optimistic than the UN when it comes to population. A report commissioned by [The Club of Rome](#) (remember them?) and issued in March this year says that in the business-as-usual case global population growth will peak at less than 9 bn in 2046 and decline to 7.3 bn in 2100: this contrasts with UN projections of 10.4 bn by 2100. Although this may sound encouraging it is, they say, too little too late. In another scenario, where governments across the world invest in education, social services and improved equality, it estimates that human numbers could hit a high of 8.5 bn as early as 2040 and then fall to about 6 bn in 2100. [\[More\]](#)

Just One Green Thing: 6%

[Real Climate Solutions](#) is a set of six short films created by climate researchers at the University of Cambridge to help us journey to zero emissions. According to the final film, we need to reduce our emissions by 6% each year between now and 2050.



6% gets you to a bit less than 19% of 2023 emissions. So the One Green Thing this month is - think about how you might do reduce your emissions by one seventeenth next year. If you're already fully green, with solar panels, a heat pump, and an EV on the drive you might want to stop reading now, but for the rest of us it's worth making a back-of-envelope do list. Here is a crib sheet that might help:

Tell your politicians, national and local, what changes you want to see; **write** to the companies and supermarkets that you buy from. **Find out** how your **pensions** and savings are invested; make changes if you are not happy. Work out your **carbon footprint** – use for example [WWF's footprint calculator](#); it will ask how much you fly and drive, what you eat, how much you spend. **Buy carefully**; buy second-hand; buy from charity shops and refill shops. **Donate** to a charity shop. **Fly** as infrequently as you can (or not at all). If you drive [check your tyre pressures, take off the roof rack if you're not using it](#). When you buy a new car think about its emissions. **Car share**. **Look up** the carbon footprint of things - Mike Berners-Lee's [How Bad Are Bananas](#) is a good place to start (spoiler alert: bananas are OK). If you like gadgets buy a power meter and a thermal leak detector; get the [NationalGridESO app](#) and use power when it is greenest. **In the house** turn the thermostat to the left; fix drafts; fit a chimney balloon. Read your meters. Help wildlife by leaving part of the **garden** untidy, with a heap of leaves or sticks, and a bug hotel; grow food, even if it's just some rhubarb in a corner; compost; tell your garden centre that you don't buy peat. [Foods that are good for you are good for the environment](#), so cut down on beef and lamb, eat [local seasonal food](#), don't buy air freighted fruit and veg. **Try** non-meat alternatives – look at [best vegan burgers](#) and [best vegan sausages](#). **Plant a tree** to celebrate the birth of a child or to remember a lost friend or relative: the [Woodland Trust](#) and the [National Trust](#) will plant trees for you for not much money. **Buy a goat**: [Oxfam](#) will sell you one and deliver it to somebody who needs it more than you do. **Repair** things instead of throwing them away; go to a Repair Café, or offer some time to one. **Recycle**, especially aluminium.

I'd like to be able to say that I have done all of these things, but of course I haven't. One of the principles of Just One Green Thing is that you don't beat yourself up over the things you don't do.

The good news is that you don't have to achieve 6% all by yourself: you will have the benefit of a following wind as the electricity supply decarbonises, and the companies that you buy from get a little bit greener.

Feedback

If you have content for this newsletter send it to me. I reserve the right to decide what is included, and to edit things in the interest of brevity. I keep your emails in a Gmail folder to which only I have access; I will delete them when I don't need them any more.

References and Acknowledgements

I use links because I want to make sure that you can track things back to where I got them from.

The quotation *never make predictions, especially about the future* has been attributed variously to Yogi Berra, Casey Stengel, Sam Goldwyn, and to Niels Bohr; Bohr usually credited the saying to Robert Storm Petersen, a Danish writer. However, it did not originate from Petersen; the original author is unknown, although Mark Twain has been suggested. I am grateful to The Guardian's *Corrections and Clarifications* column for this information.

The quote *governments can control the emissions but, at the moment, they have not done so* isomes from Dr Chris Smith and can be found in an [article by Damien Carrington in The Guardian](#). The phrase *prisoners of hope* comes from Zechariah 9:12.

The chap is the screenshot from Real Climate Solutions Film 6 is Prof Julian Allwood of the University of Cambridge.

The list in Just One Green Thing comes from a handout [Steps towards a sustainable world](#) produced by Barnet u3a as part of a Study Day. The title *Just One Green Thing* was adapted from the title of Michael Mosley's book and Radio 4 series.

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See also the [u3a Climate Change & Environment website](#).

A note on sources: I am a Guardianista (and indeed a Guardian Supporter) and I frequently forward links to content from that paper. This is for practical reasons, not political ones - unlike your favourite newspaper Guardian content is not behind a paywall (you may have to register, but you won't have to pay). I will from time to time link to content from The BBC, [The Conversation](#), [Ensia](#), Nature, and other sites that I feel are credible.

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