



# Human Nature

Ten Principles for Advancing  
Arguments on the Environment



# About Us

**NOUS** is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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# Foreword

If we want to solve climate change, we must bring people with us. It is both the right thing to do, and a simple pre-requisite for effective policy delivery in a democracy. We must win a full democratic mandate built on broad, society-wide cross-spectrum consensus. This report is a welcome contribution to making that possible. It helps campaigners and activists to think about how their arguments can broaden their support base, rather than irritating people and pushing them further away.

Of course, good arguments won't be sufficient on their own without fair and effective environmental policies too. Policies need to be rooted in making solutions affordable, accessible, and desirable. But as this report makes clear, these themes must guide our debates and communications about climate change, as well as our policy proposals. The first principle of this report is correct: too often environmental advocates confuse self-interest for selfishness, and set back their cause as a result.

Leaders who embrace aspiration and incentive have more success on environmental policy. In France, Emmanuel Macron is investing in making electric vehicles accessible to citizens on median and lower incomes who can now lease them

## Joss Garman

Executive Director at  
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from 80 euros a month, giving them access to the cheaper running costs that come from electric power compared to petrol. In the USA, President Biden's Help for Households is building a market big enough for businesses to shift over to green technologies – creating jobs and factories in places that need them. These successes stand in mark contrast to the recent controversy in Germany over plans to phase out gas boilers in the absence of thorough distributional analysis or sufficient grants to help households to make the transition. Olaf Scholz is now paying the price.

In this cost-of-living crisis, it is even more important to make sure that the environment is not pitched against people's everyday financial worries, especially when most climate policies will see people save money. Clean energy is cheap energy. The more we have the more we will be insulating people from the expensive cost of imported gas and oil and the threat to peace from governments like Russia's.

The transition to climate safety must work for people – be practical and down to Earth. This isn't easy, but is it not impossible either. It will require political will, investment and long-term thinking. Achieving this is absolutely within our grasp.



# Introduction

The environment is fast becoming the greatest clash in the culture wars. At a time when we most need unity to help solve the climate crisis, we seem to be growing further and further apart. Political and business leaders are facing a reaction against environmental positions by voters and shareholders. Hard right leaders are funding and profiting from this split.

This report is designed to help us avoid the danger of this division. It is aimed at leaders across society that want to advance environmental arguments in a way that is both inclusive and sustainable. It aims to build common ground.

Our starting position is that conversations about the environment are shaped as much by emotion as science. We argue that our views on nature are as much about identity as they are about points and statistics and therefore as much about psychology as policy.

Too often, environmentalists have failed to appreciate this. From the backlash against heat pumps in Germany, to ULEZ in London to drilling in Alaska's Gulf Coast, environmentalists have hurt rather than

helped their causes, simply because our arguments have prioritised making ourselves feel righteous over advancing our position.

This guide helps with ten principles for reframing our arguments on the environment. Informed by psychology, the aim is to be inclusive and convincing. We believe success is defined by bringing more people with us rather than pushing them away.

This isn't easy. Responding to the scientific realities and urgency of the climate crisis, whilst respecting the lived experiences and day-to-day priorities of people struggling with painful rises in the cost-of-living, contains tensions that must be acknowledged and worked through.

Information alone does not lead to persuasion. It must be rooted in empathy, respect, hope and agency. We hope these principles help leaders to make more broadly appealing and persuasive arguments. Environmentalists need to understand this. If we don't, we will lose.



# Principle 01.

## Self-Interest is Not Selfish

Environmentalists have often made moral arguments about the need to sacrifice our way of life for the good of the planet. The logical implication of this is that those who don't are selfish. Triggering guilt is no way to win an argument. If we want to increase support for environmental action, we will have to make it in people's self interest to do so.

When so many people are struggling with the cost of living, there are real, legitimate and understandable fears about being asked to pay more for the environment. Polls repeatedly show that the public do accept the need for action on climate change, but when bills rise so high that their children are left hungry, their parents cold or their neighbours poor, they understandably feel the moral imperative is to look after them first. Even in lower necessity cases, like taking your family on a plane for a holiday, people want to be able to reward themselves. This is not selfish, this is human.

Similarly, business leaders are under huge pressure from shareholders to meet returns. Rather than denouncing shareholders for wanting a strong rate of return, executives should frame their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) agenda in the context of the long-term interests of shareholders and customers.

Rather than pushing individuals to take action against their self interest, political leaders should emphasise policies that make environmental choices cheaper for people, whilst economic leaders should stress the long term and sustainable benefits to shareholders. This creates rewards-based systems that are likely to reinforce pro-environmental behaviours. This is what, for example, helped save the ozone layer in the 1990s. Low cost, workable alternatives to CFC aerosols that were eating away the ozone layer were provided, and the problem was solved.



# Principle 02.

## Patriotism Protects Planet

Patriotism is not nationalism. But if environmentalists don't use patriotism to win, they will find nationalism being used to defeat them.

Environmentalists don't often see it that way. They want people to look beyond their narrow national borders and empathise with all humans equally. We believe this approach is part of the problem. Whilst climate change is undeniably a global problem, nation states will have to lead on the answers, and inclusive, positive patriotism is essential.

Whether we like it or not, the majority of people do feel an affinity to the country they call home. This can be a powerful, uniting and motivating force when working through huge moments in our history. The huge sacrifices made by people during World War II or during the Covid-19 pandemic are just two examples of that.

Psychologists understand that human beings are, at their heart, social animals with a strong sense of loyalty to place and tribe. If solving the climate crisis can be understood as part of a national mission, rooted in our national story and promoting

national success, it has the power to pull the wider public along too.

In Britain, Labour politicians such as Lisa Nandy MP for Wigan have talked about how Britain, and particularly her constituency of Wigan, helped fuel the industrial revolution that led the world, and linked that with the need for the UK to lead reindustrialisation based on the next generation of renewable energy sources.

Of course there is a danger that patriotism can slip into nationalism. Xenophobia can lead to serious division that could undermine global efforts to tackle this problem. But there is a big difference between healthy competition between nations and exploiting or undermining other countries. If environmentalists want to win, they will find a constructive way to harness the power of our national spirit. If they don't, opposing forces may well weaponise this national sentiment to oppose environmental action with huge effect.



## Principle 03. Drop the Stereotypes

We hear someone is against a particular environmental policy, from the ULEZ congestion charge in London to plastic bag bans in Kenya, and we automatically assume they are selfish; we hear someone is vegan, and we immediately assume they are judgemental. That's because human beings depend upon simplification to survive in a complex world. Cognitive scientists understand it to be an automated version of data processing. Essentially, we create shortcuts in our mind to prevent ourselves from becoming overwhelmed. Whilst useful, this can also lead to stereotypes.

These stereotypes can seriously undermine our efforts to advance arguments on the environment. If we think that because someone holds a certain point of view, that they must be a certain type of person, then we raise the stakes of disagreeing. Once you bring someone's identity into question, you make them feel judged or threatened. You also feel more distant from them, making you less likely to engage or reach consensus.

Environmental debates will inevitably lead to different points of view. It is healthy to disagree. But we need to be careful that we don't confuse criticising a particular behaviour or action with criticising someone's entire character. If we do this, we risk losing the respect of those we are debating with, and that will only push them further away, eroding the possibility of finding common ground.



## Principle 04. Make Reasonable Asks

It is reasonable to ask all of us to do our bit to help the climate crisis. But too often, environmentalists have asked people to do more than is fair and reasonable given their individual circumstances. In this instance, we need to consider responsibility and self-efficacy.

For instance, it is reasonable to ask most people to sort their recycling or take their rubbish home with them. They have the power to do these things and it does not unduly interfere with the quality of their lives. But too often, low and median income citizens, with relatively low carbon footprints, are asked to meet the costs of a crisis that is predominantly caused by larger and more powerful actors.

This is important, because we know that if an individual doesn't feel personally responsible for a matter that needs attention, it is very likely they will rely on their peers to do the right thing rather than take charge themselves, in what social psychologists have termed a diffusion of responsibility.

The London Mayor's environmental policies are a case in point. The introduction of ULEZ, a £12.50 daily charge on certain vehicles in the capital, has faced a huge backlash by residents already struggling with a cost of living crisis. In contrast, the Mayor's plan to lay on a million kilometres of extra bus routes has been welcomed as an opportunity to help improve air quality whilst also helping Londoners with affordable and accessible transport options.

The logical implication of all this is to suggest that the successful communication of green policy is dependent on two things: Firstly that people feel reasonably responsible for the issue at hand, and that the resulting 'ask' is within their power.



## Principle 05. Drop the Jargon

The temptation to use scientific terminology when we're talking about the climate is understandable. We think that if our arguments are evidence-based and grounded in expertise, we will be more convincing. Sadly, the opposite is often true.

'Net zero', 'permacrisis', 'eco-anxiety', 'solastalgia' are all terms that describe modern realities, but the more important consideration is whether they have the ability to resonate with enough people to secure broad-based support.

If we want to bring people with us, we are more likely to succeed if we use language that is grounded in people's lived experiences and priorities. So rather than talking about 'net zero' we may have more success discussing 'the air our children breathe'. Rather than talking about particulates in water systems, we should talk about the rivers we can't swim in.

Norwegians embrace the concept of 'friluftsliv', which means 'open-air life' and refers to the lifestyle they aspire to, touching on both culture and the environment. If we want to win debates on the environment, we will need to find ways of talking that resonate with people's hopes and fears about the kind of lives they want for themselves and their grandchildren.

## Principle 06. Messengers Matter

If we genuinely want to persuade people with environmental arguments, we must think about who is delivering the message as much as what the message is. That requires some thought and empathy with the audiences we are hoping to reach. We, as environmentalists, might be moved by highly eloquent experts in the field, but that doesn't mean that everybody will be.

Social identity theory has repeatedly emphasised the importance of belonging to a group when it comes to persuasion. If a message is delivered by a member of your tribe, then you are more likely to trust it, either because you implicitly trust the other person's experiences have been similar to yours and thus have shaped a similar perception, or because trusting that person reinforces your own belonging to your tribe. Either way, if both speakers share a core value or an aspect of their identity, they are more likely to be moved and potentially influenced by each other.

The most effective climate communicators to conservatives, for example, are often people of faith, members of the military, and conservative politicians who are committed to the climate. The Pope has been a fantastic communicator to a diverse range of Catholics, including a range of people who might otherwise tune out of environmental debates. If we are serious about persuasion, we need to get out of our comfort zones and build alliances with leaders of groups who are different from our own. It is often their words, not ours, that win support for the environment.



## Principle 07. Stories Not Stats

Environmentalists are understandably tempted to turn to facts and statistics in debates about climate change. Because science and logic are on our side, we believe we can 'trump' other arguments with recourse to numbers and evidence. This is a trap.

By overly focusing on targets and statistics, environmentalists can actively undermine our ability to persuade people to our point of view. 'Net zero' might be a useful policy instrument in governments, but that doesn't mean that it's the most effective tool for moving the public. In fact, it may even turn people off.

Cognitive research on memory shows that if you want an argument to stick with someone, you need to appeal to their heart as much as their head. Humans are fundamentally emotional creatures, and we are generally wired to respond to narratives more than we are to facts. In controlled experiments, there is a strong 'story-statistic gap' in memory: the average impact of stories on beliefs fades by 33% over the course of a day, but by 73% for statistics.

Of course, the power of a story does depend on the quality of it. Token two-sentence anecdotes that are commonly shoe-horned into speeches by politicians or CEOs are unlikely to do the job, but thoughtful and emotive narratives that have genuinely moved the speaker are likely to be powerful. Some of the most successful climate activists, including Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough and David Suzuki, now focus on this approach.

## Principle 08. Hope Over Fatalism

Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the UK's Environmental Agency, has said that 'climate doomism is almost as dangerous as climate denial'. Psychological research suggests that he is correct. If you want to turn people away from the environment, you focus on the daunting scale of the problem, if you want to engage them, you need to talk about the exciting possibility of success.

Whilst fear can be a highly powerful motivator, the human brain is very sensitive to its volume. A 'healthy' amount of fear registered in the amygdala creates a healthy response, whilst too much anxiety can be counter-productive. Psychology professor Susan Clayton, at the College of Wooster, references 'psychic numbing', whereby we freeze, retreat or deny, rather than act as a result of too much fear.

Interestingly, it's not just climate change we can turn our backs on if it all feels like too much. If the solutions we are proposing to climate change are too difficult, we can become motivated to reject the need for those too, leading to climate denialism. This has been labelled 'solution aversion'. As stated in Principle 4, we need to make 'reasonable asks' of people to help fix climate change, not overburden them.



## Principle 09. Listen more than Speak

Climate communication is about having a conversation, not giving a lecture. It should invite people in, not shut them out. It requires a great level of openness and flexibility. Good communicators make people feel heard.

Although it is tempting to monopolise the conversation with pro-environmental arguments, especially when they are understandably heartfelt and passionate, it is counter-productive.

Listening, on the other hand, has multiple benefits. The more we understand other people's perspectives, the more informed and effective subsequent environmental communication and policy can be. The feeling of being genuinely heard and understood creates a relationship with the speaker, earning their trust and making them more likely to accept different perspectives in return.

In one study of a programme called Carbon Conversations, in which small groups were asked to talk about the actions they were taking to reduce their carbon emissions, half of the participants said that the

programme helped them face their climate anxieties. And, most powerfully, greater emotional engagement was associated with better environmental habits. There was a clear link between feeling part of a community, reckoning with difficult feelings, and taking constructive action to help the environment.

Businesses have also benefitted from creating opportunities for people to surface ideas and share successes. Every major meeting at the multi-national assurance company Intertek, for example, starts with a "sustainability moment" where one member of the meeting shares a story about something positive that has happened in this area. Teams at all levels are also encouraged to develop and enact their own ideas locally. This has created a ground swell of grassroots initiatives in the company that help employees take ownership of the environmental agenda rather than having it imposed upon them.



## Principle 10. Nature is Sacred

Right wing leaders are very good at leaning into powerful faith-based arguments. On issues from abortion to gender and gun control, they know how to ground their points in the sacred and the divine, the sinful and even the ungodly. The left, with its obsession with rationality, often misses the magic and the emotive power of these arguments. If we want to win over different types of people to environmental action, we would do well to lean into this language and its morality.

Many environmentalists, even if we're not religious, would agree that there is something sacred about nature and our relationship to it. Whatever our political beliefs and economic realities, most human beings are, on a personal level, able to enjoy a relationship with nature that is beyond the extractive and transactional. Most of us are able to find delight, awe, solace and inspiration in that relationship, from a tree we planted as a child, to the sight of the constellations at night or the wonder at the ferocious power of a storm. Especially since the Covid lockdowns, the mental health benefits of interacting with nature have been well documented.

Yet despite this spiritual, almost magical relationship with nature, it's very rare to find people articulating these arguments in the environmental movement. Instead, as Principle 5 states, we tend to reduce the environment to a series of numbers and objects - 'carbon parts per million', 'global temperature change' - that misses something special. Ironically, this transactional approach to the environment is part of the reason we've fallen out of balance with nature in the first place. If we want to revive our relationship with nature, we should find meaningful ways of reviving its magic.



