

Getting Planetary Health Messages Across

The most important issue faced by the Millennial generation is the threat of extinction due to climate change, acidification of the oceans, plastics pollution, loss of biodiversity and destruction of rain forests and over use of fertilizers and other factors. The idea that humans depend upon the health of the environment that regulates the climate, air and sea quality and sustains us and the other 8.7 million species that live on our planet is not new. Charles Darwin observed this dependence and the threat posed by the loss of coral reefs, in 1842.

Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring* 1962, raised concerns about the threat to marine and animal life posed by overuse of fertilisers and pesticides. The scientist James Lovelock developed a more radical view of the Earth as a living organism that regulates the conditions that sustain life. His 2006 book - *The Revenge of Gaia*, points to the catastrophic consequences of failure to address global warming. In recent years the dangers of ocean acidification and plastic pollution have been highlighted. Every year oceans absorb ~ 2.8 billion tons of CO₂ per year making seawater less alkaline and killing marine life, 12.7 million tons of plastic waste end up in oceans killing marine life, entering our food chain, Google these issues, science is uncertain but risks are clear.

Most ecologists believe that human impact on nature, is now comparable to five previous catastrophic events over the past 600 million years, during which up to 95 percent of species disappeared. A 2014 study by Stuart Pimm and Jurriaan de Vos estimates current extinction rates are approximately 100 extinctions per million species per year, or 1,000 times higher than natural background rates. They predict future rates may be 10,000 greater see [here](#).

The threat to human existence has short fuse, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned there are only 12 years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which it may be irreversible. Similar danger signals are apparent for sea acidification and loss of rain forests.

Given such threats to the lives of all our grandchildren and future generations one might assume that global diplomacy would focus on this issue rather than petty national interests. This requires intelligent, well informed, ethically responsible global diplomacy. But as President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accord has shown, this is in short supply. A more enlightened approach can be seen at the Global Climate Action Summit see [here](#).

To research these issues visit the Rockefeller Foundation Page [here](#) and Lancet Planetary Health Journal [here](#)

In most countries the reality of these threats to our future are now accepted. A YouGov poll of 30,000 people in 28 countries [here](#) showed that while opinions vary between different countries, most people acknowledge that climate change is happening and will affect their lives and that humanity is at least partly responsible. Most also believe that it is not too late to take action to prevent the worst effects.

In the UK a more recent survey by the Climate Coalition and Greener UK see [here](#) has shown that 69% of people support faster action to avert climate change and hope the UK can show leadership in this field but recent Extinction Rebellion protests have reduced support for this. There are important messages to be communicated, building on a climate of support for action but lack of clarity as to what individuals and governments can do to protect the planet. A Citizen Assembly is being set up to discuss what governments and individuals can do to address climate change see [here](#).

Public Campaigns can be important in raising awareness of issues and engaging the public in finding solutions. In planning any public campaign it is important to be clear about the message to be conveyed, the current state of opinion of those potentially supporting or opposing your aims, the evidence base you are drawing on and the practical steps you hope to promote.

Public campaigns inform public opinion while showing politicians the strength of public support. But any campaign or public protest will be interpreted by the media and onlookers through their own lenses. It is therefore important to think through how the message that is intended to be conveyed could be interpreted by others and what influence your campaign will have on groups opposing or supporting the actions you propose.

For example, some years ago a UK NHS campaign was initiated to raise awareness of Sexual Health and HIV. This included measures to improve sexual health education in schools as well as publicity aimed at adults. Before launch an exercise was undertaken to think through how aspects of the campaign could be misrepresented by the tabloid press and others, who might wish to denigrate the campaign. The headlines we thought up were then used as a starting point for planning ways the campaign could be presented that would avoid such attacks. Discuss this example in your group, it is easy to see how aspects of sexual health education can be misrepresented but more difficult to think of ways of averting or blunting criticism.

In a similar way those planning protest campaigns need to think through how their message can be misrepresented. The recent Extinction Rebellion protests in cities across the world are raise issues of extreme importance to our future. But what does this image and reports of the protests say about the issue? Think through some of the negative headlines that may result or simply Google how the protests were reported. Then consider how the message could be communicated better.



You may also wish to look at the Extinction Rebellion web site and other initiatives for action on the threats to planetary health:

- Extinction Rebellion [here](#)
- The Green New Deal Group [here](#)
- The Planetary Health Alliance [here](#)
- The Committee on Climate Change [here](#)
- The Climate Coalition [here](#)
- Greener UK [here](#)
- The Green Party [here](#)
- UK Parliamentary Select Committee Report on Planetary Health [here](#)