



THE LANCASTER ENVIRONMENT LECTURE 2024

‘Another England Is Possible’

by

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1 Introduction

Thank you so much.

It's a huge honour to have been asked to give the third Lancaster Environment Lecture, and to follow in the footsteps of giants like George Monbiot and Vandana Shiva.

You might be wondering – with some legitimacy! – why a lecture on the environment has been given the title 'Another England is Possible'. The case I'll make tonight is that we can't separate the accelerating destruction of the natural world from the failing democratic structures which we might have expected to prevent it. And neither can we understand it without a deeper reflection of the place of nature in what we might call the broader English social and cultural landscape. In other words, the environment crisis reflects both a democratic crisis and a deeper social one too.

So briefly, what is the nature of this democratic crisis?

I think it's clear that we have an increasingly populist government that has deliberately set out to weaken the very institutions that define a liberal democracy. Boris Johnson was famously a law-breaking, parliament-proroguing, office-abusing Prime Minister with only a casual relationship with the truth. But while his illegal prorogation of parliament was perhaps the most egregious example, it has hardly been an isolated incident.

The attacks on our democratic institutions have come thick and fast under this government. From Ministers taking action against the courts to shrink their ability to hold the ruling party to account, to curbing citizens' rights to protest, and introducing a new Act which will make it harder for people to vote, and imposing new rules that would gag whistle-blowers and sharply restrict freedom of the press.

The dangers of the 'good chaps' approach to government, which assumes that binding rules aren't needed because MPs will obviously always act honourably and in the public interest, has been tested to its limits and far beyond. Without a Written Constitution or a robust system to hold Ministers to account, the foundations of British democracy have been shown to be very vulnerable indeed.

It's clear that, in many respects, our political institutions are broken. Not just in the populist abuse of sovereignty, but the archaic and undemocratic first-past-the-post voting system; an over-centralised governance system; the unelected Lords and the vast networks of patronage. But I'd argue that the crisis is also about nationalisms and identity.

Take the way the referendum on the EU was handled: the fact that England and Wales voted to leave, and Scotland and Northern Ireland to stay has put incredible strain on the myth that the UK is an equal partnership of four nations.

Support for independence remains solid in Scotland, the chances of Irish reunification are growing on the island of Ireland, and even in Wales, the

Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales has put some radical options into play, including full independence.

Ironically, then, although Brexit was framed as being about defending the integrity and sovereignty of the UK, it's actually not at all certain the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will continue for much longer. It is not inconceivable, in other words, that Brexit could be followed by Sexit, Nixit and Wexit.

What does that mean for the England that's left behind? Will it be a smaller, diminished version of what we have now? Will imperial nostalgia and exceptionalism continue to shape its sense of itself? Or could it become a genuine democracy, confident in itself and inclusive?

As far as I can see, almost no one in England is even *thinking* about this. Yet it's time we did. Because if these questions were urgent on 'Brexit Day', they're even more urgent today. Not only as xenophobic nationalism rises both across Europe, and also here at home, but also, as the global nature and climate emergencies which will define this age continue to spiral rapidly out of control. So in the rest of my talk this evening, I'll focus on that interplay between our broken politics and our broken natural world.

And my starting point is this question:

As a nation that prides itself on its love of nature, why is it that we have become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world? For all our supposed love of nature, specifically of the English countryside, the governments we have elected for generations, Conservative and Labour,

have been allowed to preside over its destruction. Indeed, this has happened to an extent that is almost unprecedented in any other comparable country.

In a recent study led by the University of Derby examining biodiversity, well-being and nature-connectedness in 14 countries, the UK came bottom in all three.¹ Let's be very clear. This is not just a matter of size or population density, although these play a part. It's a political choice: one that reflects the gross inequalities in our society and the way power is concentrated in the hands of the wealthy, who use their influence to bypass our creaking democratic structures.

Half of England's ancient woodland has gone in the last century, due to conifer plantations, overgrazing and the spread of invasive species. We've also 'lost' – or, let's be honest – *destroyed* – 80 per cent of our heathland, 85 per cent of our salt marshes and 97 per cent of our wild-flower meadows. With them, we've driven to extinction hundreds of species of plants and animals.

Development for housing, transport, mineral extraction and other industries has eaten up vast chunks of the countryside, while industrial agriculture and increases in traffic have diminished much of what remains. As a result, there are 40 million fewer wild birds than there were just fifty years ago.

¹ Richardson, M., Hamlin, I., Elliott, L.R. *et al.* Country-level factors in a failing relationship with nature: Nature connectedness as a key metric for a sustainable future. *Ambio* 51, 2201–2213 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01744-w>

In my lifetime alone, the total biodiversity in England has been slashed by half, a disaster so extreme it's frankly hard to contemplate. Imagine if we'd lost half our population, or half of England was swallowed by the sea, or half the country's financial wealth was wasted. Yet we have sacrificed half our natural inheritance, without – it seems – a second thought.

So tonight I want to explore how we can explain why England, a nation so in love with the countryside, has allowed its natural world to be so badly harmed? How have we allowed so many people to be cut off from what remains? And how can a reappraisal of the politics of England help to reverse both of these trends?

2 Land ownership

A good starting place is the ownership of land.

England has one of the most grotesquely unequal land ownership structures in the Western world, and certainly one of the most opaque. Painstaking research by land campaigner Guy Shrubsole has uncovered the shocking calculation that half of England is owned by less than one per cent of its population. That equates to around 25,000 landowners, typically members of the aristocracy and corporations. And it's actually probably even worse than that because the Land Registry, the public body responsible for keeping a database of land and property in England and Wales, covers only around 88 per cent of it.

What, you may ask, about the missing 17 per cent of land? That is information that apparently even Members of Parliament can't get hold of. But this staggering concentration of vast tracts of land in the hands of just a few landowners is deeply problematic, not only because it stops the vast majority from having a fair stake in the country, but because of the huge power that goes with it.

Large landowners have a major influence over our food and environmental policies. Just one example that I've been fighting in Parliament for a long time now is pesticides.

We have overwhelming evidence about the catastrophic impact pesticides are having on our wildlife. Yet landowners have effectively blocked more ambitious controls. The result is that poisonous emissions we would not tolerate for one moment from the waste pipe of a factory are accepted as unavoidable when they come from the spray nozzles of a tractor. And at the heart of these neo-feudal power dynamics lies the disproportionate *political* influence of landowners.

Large landowners sprout up so frequently on government committees, in the Cabinet or on the boards of major companies, that it feels as natural as the cycle of the seasons. And the whole system is held together by a lingering sense of deference towards those born to land, wealth and titles. Now I don't doubt that there are some with a genuine desire to act as good stewards and custodians of their land. But to the extent that abuses of power happen, they are really failures of government: if we as a society give landowners excessive power and status, we can hardly be surprised when they're misused.

So if we're serious about creating a greener and more pleasant land, then we have to get serious about breaking the link between land and political power.

For example, through the creation of a comprehensive land register that was open to all, we would know who owns what (with 'who' meaning actual individuals or firms, not shadowy shell companies in Jersey or the British Virgin Islands).

Reform of the House of Lords would mean that landed interests aren't given a privileged position in the legislature. Reform of party funding would push back against the influence of the powerful and wealthy on our democracy.

And a Land Value Tax could also play an important role in tackling the vast windfall profits that come from the development of land. The fact that such a simple and fair measure has not been introduced is itself a textbook example of the landowners' ability to block reform.

3 Access to Nature

And this brings me to my second point which is about people's connectedness with the natural world. Because policy measures like these could also dramatically increase the chances of securing more ambitious policies on widening access to land.

Restrictions on public access to land is another peculiarly English phenomenon, in spite of the fact that England actually has a rich history of land reform movements that is barely even spoken of nowadays.

Take the Charter of the Forest of 1217. Can I ask by a show of hands how many people in this room have heard of it?

[Hardly anyone raised their hand.]

And just for contrast, put your hand up if you've heard of the 1215 Magna Carta?

[Almost everyone raised their hand.]

Just about all of us are taught about the Magna Carta which guaranteed our political liberties, but very few of us about the Charter of the Forest, sealed just two years later, which re-established rights eroded under William the Conqueror and his descendants and enshrined our rights to the environment and its resources. Yet for hundreds of years, it had to be read out in every church in England four times a year. And it contained some of the most radical commitments on access rights to the commons ever to have been agreed.

How quickly it has disappeared from our collective national consciousness. Yet even in the 754 years it was in place – it was only formally repealed in 1971 – it was subject to relentless attack from those in power. Henry VIII, for example, confiscated 10 million acres and handed them out to his favourites, the descendants of whom still possess hundreds of thousands of

acres today. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we had the Enclosure Acts – another massive landgrab by parliamentarians privatising vast tracts of commons that had been governed collectively for centuries.

And the legacy of those attacks can still be felt in the lack of connection to nature that so many people in England have to this day. People want to be able to go to the countryside – but many feel unwelcome or worry that they will be challenged for being in the wrong place.

There's no right to roam over a staggering 92 per cent of England, and a massive 97 per cent of its rivers are off limits too. We've come to accept that as normal – but when you look at other comparable European countries, or even up to Scotland where, since 2003, a comprehensive right to roam has been enshrined in legislation, the extent to which we have been dispossessed becomes clear.

Today one in five people in England struggle to access quality green space of any kind – not just private gardens, but also parks and open countryside. And that number is even worse for people on low incomes or from ethnic minority communities, reflecting the wider inequalities that continue to bedevil England.

For many people, there is simply no practical way to enjoy green space. So perhaps it's no surprise that people in England have become so disconnected from the natural world. Prisoners now spend more time in the open air than most of our young people. And this is a shift with disastrous consequences not only for our mental and physical health – but also, I'd argue, for the state of the natural world itself as well. Because this

lack of connection to nature has also limited our ability to care for it. As the writer Nick Hayes argues, ‘when they took away our right to access the land, they took away our ability to protect it.’ And it’s a vicious circle.

One of the points made by the US writer Richard Louv is that the more distanced we become from nature, the less likely we are to value it – which accelerates not only the loss of nature itself, but also our further alienation from it. As he concludes: ‘We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see. Or hear. Or sense.’

A legal and comprehensive ‘right to roam’ responsibly could start to change all of this, and it’s something I’ve been calling for in parliament, for example through a Private Members’ Bill last year.

But as well as access to nature, we also need to foster an understanding of nature that has been lost from our society. A recent study in the UK found that half of children couldn’t identify even the most common plants – whether brambles, bluebells or stinging nettles. This is an era where children growing up learn about apps and algorithms, chatbots and coding. And I don’t want to detract from the importance of learning any of that. But if we’re to stand a hope of addressing the nature crisis in this country, we can’t continue to let our kids learn everything about the cyberworld, and next to nothing of the natural world around them. Not least because if we are to stand a hope of addressing the crisis, we will need a generation of scientists armed with the knowledge to do so. So education is a vital piece of the solution.

That's why I joined writer Mary Colwell in campaigning for the Government to introduce a new GCSE in Natural History – which was agreed in 2022 and will fill a void in our national curriculum. Because while biology focuses on how life works, on the systems on which it relies, natural history is the study of life itself – our plants, animals, fungi and all that makes up our natural world. Young people will gain the skills of the naturalist – learning how to observe, record, monitor, name and understand. And those are skills that will not only enhance and enrich their own lives but are so vitally necessary to our society as a whole.

As the leading environmental economist Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta wrote in his Treasury-commissioned report of 2021: 'If we care about our common future, and the common future of our descendants, we should all in part be naturalists.'

4 Relationship to Nature

The more we reflect on the importance of the natural world to our physical and mental wellbeing, the more we see how our society fails to give us equal chances to engage with it, or to restore it.

The air we breathe is polluted, bringing thousands of people to an early death and afflicting the health of millions. The water we drink is increasingly contaminated with microplastics and complex chemicals, as well as sewage, and we have little idea of the long-term consequences.

Governments allow this to happen, at least in part, because no one has a legal right to clean air and clean water, or a right to live in a world in which nature is protected, now and for the future. And as a result, firms that stand to make profits from damaging the environment are too often allowed to get away with it – even supposedly regulated businesses like water companies, the directors of which deliberately plan to dump raw sewage in rivers and seas because it is cheaper to pay the fines if they happen to get caught than it is to invest in upgrading Victorian infrastructure and proper treatment facilities.

Yet this has happened, and continues to happen, in a country where millions join the National Trust, the county Wildlife Trusts, the RSPB, the Woodland Trust and dozens more conservation organisations, where millions more tune in to programmes like *Springwatch*, and where David Attenborough has more moral authority than every MP in government rolled together.

The English do, quite clearly, have a deep and abiding love of nature. And yet somehow this does not save it from despoliation.

How then, are we to explain this glaring contradiction?

I think a major part of the problem with the English concept of nature is that we tend to view it as a world separate from our own lives. A beautiful, bucolic realm that we view on TV or admire through train windows. We turn it into a postcard or photo or post on social media. Or a venue for recreation, a temporary respite from the real world, not an essential, indivisible part of us.

This is not, in fact, a phenomenon unique to our era. It's a facet of our culture that is tangible in English literature going as far back as the eighteenth century, and probably farther still.

Consider this from one of the foremost English poets of the eighteenth century, William Cowper – it's an excerpt from his poem, 'The Poplar Field' (1784):

The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,
And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.

His sadness and regret at their loss ring true. Yet at the same time, there is also a perverse satisfaction, because it allows him to muse on the mutability of life and the passage of time:

My fugitive years are all hasting away,
And I must e'er long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head
E'er another such grove shall arise in its stead.

For Cowper, nature exists to serve human needs and purposes – just like the poplars that have been cut down. Nature is picturesque, but viewed from a distance and with a sense of melancholy and nostalgia. And it's a theme running through English literature about the countryside – mourning what has gone instead of fighting to protect what is left. Yet this resigned nostalgia – a theme which runs throughout English Literature – is an indulgence we cannot afford at a time of global ecological catastrophe.

Cowper was writing about the River Ouse that runs from Northamptonshire to the sea at King's Lynn. As with almost every river in England, it is now polluted by algae blooms, as a result of everything from agricultural run-offs to raw sewage. In almost every case, no action is being taken to tackle the level of pollution because it is either apparently 'technically infeasible', 'disproportionately expensive' or 'unreasonably burdensome' – for example, reducing the profitability of the farms which are responsible for the high levels of pollution from pesticides and fertilisers, or the privatised water companies who regularly release raw sewage into the river.

Meanwhile, along the banks of the Ouse, and right across England, the poplars Cowper described are in retreat, their habitats destroyed for drainage, new housing or gravel extraction. As a result, there are only around seven thousand black poplars left, making it England's most endangered native tree.

Yet if literature shows us how nature has been turned into something distant and separate from humanity, it also offers hints of an alternative

relationship. For a writer who hints at a way forward, let's turn to another English poet from that time, John Clare.

An agricultural labourer, with an intimate knowledge of the realities of rural life, he is officially credited with over a hundred first county records of birds and plants gleaned from his work. And the way he writes, to quote his biographer Professor Jonathan Bate, is 'not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it'. The father of modern nature writing, Richard Mabey, described Clare's ability to 'trace out the mutual dependence of things not just "out in the world", but, as it were, in the very structure and syntax of his writings'. To see what he means, let's consider the poem 'Wood Pictures in Winter', an evocation of a landscape where every element is interlinked:

The woodland swamps with mosses varified
And bullrush forests bowing by the side
Of shagroot sallows that snug shelter make
For the coy morehen in her bushy lake
Into whose tide a little runnel weaves
Such charms for silence through the choaking leaves
And whimpling melodies that but intrude
As lullabys to ancient solitude.

You can hear the way he builds up that sense of interdependence between humanity and nature, with a 'string of conjunctions' that pile up one after the other, capturing, to quote Mabey again, the sense that the woodland swamp is 'not a static landscape, but a living ecosystem, connected by the

movement and mutual usefulness of all its components'. For Clare, there is no separation of an animal or plant from its living context – they are one.

5 Rights of Nature

Imagine how transformative it would be if we were to bring that same attitude and appreciation of our interdependence with nature from the verses of his poetry into our whole way of approaching politics and society? And a good place to start would be to recognise the fundamental rights of nature itself.

in fact, there is a growing movement – in the UK and worldwide – to do just that with a new legal framework for nature's rights. Last year, following a groundbreaking motion from Green Party councillors, Lewes District Council became the first council in the country to recognise the 'right of rivers' – in this case the right of the River Ouse in East Sussex to flow free from pollution.

We need to see such commitments to our natural world being made on a national level with a new national manifesto for nature, or as the Greens have proposed, a new Rights of Nature Act, with an independent Commission for Nature to oversee its enforcement. Because a commitment to the wellbeing of England's nature is just as much a commitment to the wellbeing of its people.

The damage done to our environment cannot be divorced from the damage done to the people who are part of it. When our air is polluted, our lungs are damaged too, with thousands dying early deaths. When our water is contaminated with chemicals and microplastics and sewage, so are our bodies. When our environment has no rights or protections, neither do we. And nor do most politicians today even promise them anymore.

At a time when nature is in crisis, when the climate emergency is already unfolding before our eyes, you would think candidates running for election would be bending over backwards to literally promise voters the earth. But it's not a healthy planet that mainstream parties are offering. They continue to promise voters they are the party that will restore economic growth as if that, in itself, were the ultimate prize.

They define our prosperity not by our health and wellbeing, or that of the environment around us, but by this unending quest for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. It has become an overriding, all-consuming, all-destroying national obsession.

So in the name of GDP growth, we allow fossil fuel companies to keep pumping planet-wrecking oil and gas. We allow our water companies to dump sewage and pay fines because it is cheaper for them to do so than invest in proper treatment facilities. We allow developers to destroy irreplaceable habitats, if they replace it with a 'better' habitat elsewhere – a so called 'biodiversity net gain' which far too often is simply a confidence trick. And not only do we allow these violations and despoliations to happen, we even call it progress. We disguise and forgive all manner of ills

– lost species, lost habitats, polluted air, land and seas, all in a haze of trade-offs and cost-benefit analyses.

So as a society, we urgently need to find new ways to dismantle that corrosive mentality that sets economic growth as the pre-eminent goal, which has become so deeply entrenched in UK policy and decision making. Because only if we can change our mindset and see how inextricably our own wellbeing is linked to and dependent on our natural environment... Only if we can acknowledge that we are part of nature, not separate from it... And only if we can recognise the inalienable rights that nature possesses, and fight to uphold them, will we be able to rise to the existential threats of our time – the climate and nature emergencies.

6 Conclusion

This radical reenvisioning of the very foundation of our relationship with nature requires us to tell a different story of another England. Because a country without a coherent story about who and what it is can never thrive and prosper.

The inequitable power structures and landed interests of England's past will not protect and secure England's future. Nor will our broken political system be able to fix our broken planet. But post Brexit, in a society characterised by so many ideological tensions and divisions, whipped up by a populist government, what could make all the difference is starting to tell fresh and inclusive stories about England and Englishness.

And it's not stories of exceptionalism or imperial nostalgia. It's not blathering on about everything about England being world-beating. But perhaps one thing that does have the power to unite people across regions and generations is the story of our connection to this green and pleasant land. That common love of nature which has been part of our culture and our literary tradition for centuries.

Now, more than ever, we need to bring it back. To make it a fundamental part of who we are. Not in the manner of Cowper – sitting on our logs, lamenting the past glories of the English countryside. But as Clare would have had us do; in connection with nature, understanding that fundamental truth that the natural world is an intrinsic and inextricable part of who we are – both as individuals and as a nation.

And if we can find and tell the stories that speak to that truth, and inspire us to imagine and strive towards new and better futures, that could well prove to be one of the most transformative acts we could ever undertake.

Caroline Lucas is the MP for Brighton Pavilion, and is the UK's first Green Party MP. First elected to parliament in 2010, Caroline also served as leader of the Green Party of England and Wales from 2008 to 2012, and co-leader from 2016 to 2018. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Exeter. Find her on X @CarolineLucas