THE LANCASTER ENVIRONMENT LECTURE 2025

‘Lives of Young People at the Heart of the Anthropocene’

by

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THANK YOU SO MUCH TO LANCASTER FOR INVITING ME. It's a great honour to be following people I have admired and idolised for years like Caroline Lucas, George Monbiot and Vandana Shiva.

I'm going to ask you to close your eyes.

Picture the world 4.4°C hotter than pre-industrial levels by the end of this century. That was one of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment report predictions for scenarios with either an unabated rise in emissions or immediate climate action. But unless you've pored over climate models and understand the intricacy of tipping points to a tee, it's unlikely that you can visualise this outcome and truly imagine the severity of what's to come.

Now, picture Timothy, who lives with his grandchildren in Walande Island, a small dot of land off the east coast of South Malaita Island, part of the Solomon Islands. Since 2002, the 1,200 inhabitants of Walande have abandoned their homes and moved away from the island. Only one house remains: Timothy's. When his former neighbours are asked about Timothy's motives they shrug indifferently. 'He's stubborn,' one says. 'He won't listen to us,' says another.

Every morning his four young grandchildren take the canoe to the mainland, where they go to school, while Timothy spends the day adding rocks to the wall around his house, trying to hold off the water for a bit longer. 'If I move to the mainland, I can't

see anything through the trees. I won't even see the water. I want to have this spot where I can look around me. Because I'm part of this place,' he says. His is a story that powerfully conveys the loneliness and loss that only 1.1 degrees of anthropogenic warming is already causing. Remember his story because I'm going to come back to him later.

On 22 April, Earth Day, fifty-five years after the inaugural Earth Day in 1970, which was triggered by an oil spill in Santa Barbara and the river which kept catching fire in Cleveland, I began to write this lecture.

Since the first Earth Day, the world has produced three times as much CO_2 from the burning of fossil fuels as it had in its entire industrial history up to that point.

Since that time, the world has warmed by more than 1.1°C, with the fastest warming occurring over land and in the higher latitude regions of both hemispheres.

After millennia of stability, huge change is not just looming over us, but already permeating most of human society and is, unfortunately, largely invisible to us. Humans tend to react to that which we can see and the thin layer of molecules that makes Earth so habitable has shifted dramatically: the amount of carbon dioxide in the air today is more than 50 per cent higher than it was before the Industrial Revolution. And March 2025, was the hottest March ever recorded by human beings.

The original Earth Day was looking to slow down destruction because things might get worse. Now we're looking to reverse the damage already done and rebuild how society

functions because we are the first generation to be living in a post-apocalyptic state, and to be aware of it too.

So the first question is: if we care, why don't we act like it?

And the second question is : if the evidence piles up, why is our response falling short or even diminishing?

This is the first time since I have been part of environmentalism, that I have seen awareness not stagnating, but actually *retreating,* and it reminds me very much of a moment I experienced in 2021 in Ecuador with Reserva Youth Land Trust, an organisation Callie Broaddus and I had founded just a few years earlier.

We were camping in the Choco cloud rainforest on a conservation and scientific expedition, trekking through the reserve that we had spent two years fundraising for and working to protect with a locally run organisation EcoMinga, and this was the first time I had been there in person.

On one of his solitary escapades, Marco, a fellow member of the youth council and an Ecuadorian local who knew his way around the jungle with his eyes closed, discovered a rugged trail snaking near our makeshift camp. When he returned, I was at the site with the five other expedition members and it was quite clear something was wrong. After some communication, and using my fragments of Spanish, I understood that the shard of yellow rock he held in his hand was a mix of gold and pyrite. Marco had found an illegal mining site on a protected reserve very close to our camp. The miners had decimated more than three kilometres of an ecologically significant gorge – habitat for several threatened and endangered species – and by the looks of it they were still in the area. Their tracks were fresh.

There were four young people, including me, and three adults on the expedition. It was at that moment we discovered that the area we had worked tirelessly to establish as a reserve over the last two years had been encroached on and was now being targeted by mining companies.

That feeling, of working and pushing and striving to protect something then all of a sudden watching it come crumbling down because of the vested interests of a very narrow group of people is a microcosm for what we have just seen millions of people experiencing.

This precipitous drop off in interest and action, undoing decades of effort by millions of people, is echoing through business and politics.

We see it in Canada; the new prime minister, Mark Carney, chose as his first official act the repeal of the country's landmark carbon tax.

We see it in Mexico; climate scientist president, Claudia Sheinbaum, is building fossil-fuel infrastructure

We see it on our doorstep; Kemi Badenoch leader of the Conservative Party saying pursuing the 2050 'Net Zero' target, a policy introduced by her Conservative Party while in government in 2019, would prove too costly for the British economy. (And Tony Blair, too, in fact).

And obviously, we see it in the US: drilling in federal reserves, rolling back electric vehicle mandates, and under Trump, a full-blown revival of fossil fuel dominance – 'drill, baby, drill!' – wrapped in climate denial.

That retreat from environmental action is matched in business.

When Bloomberg recently analysed 'earnings calls'[1] of S&P 500 companies going back to 2020, it found that the companies talked about the environment in the first quarter of 2025, on average, 76 per cent less than they did three years ago.

And even worse, five years ago, the talk was about the business opportunity of a successful transition; these days, in an analysis by the US magazine *The New Republic*, it is much more likely, when talking about climate change, to emphasise the **opportunities, not the drawbacks** of a hotter world (booming demand for air-conditioning, for instance).

And, finally, the US think-tank the Council on Foreign Relations recently began a Climate Realism initiative, suggesting that the world should give up on its goals of limiting warming to 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius and instead prepare well for a brutal 3°C or more. The essay announcing the initiative calls the prospect of reaching net-zero global emissions by 2050 'utterly implausible'.[2]

So this retreat from ambition, which is being called 'realism', is really a thinly veiled example of doubling down on the profit motive. A pursuit of profit masquerading as pragmatism. It's realistic and pragmatic to assume that not revising for exams will lead to failure, in the same way it's realistic and pragmatic to assume that giving up or weakening global treaties and targets will also lead to failure. Yet unlike exams, we will have no resits.

So today I want to open up a discussion that needs to happen not just about why our planetary systems are in crisis, but why the concept of environmentalism itself is in retreat and, worse, is being abandoned...

We, and people who I'm assuming are like all of us – the environmentalists or activists or conscious citizens or whatever we like to call ourselves – need to

understand the reality of our actions better, and where we can perhaps begin to find hope again.

1. Firstly, we need to understand that what we believe about ourselves isn't reflected in how we act.

In the UK we believe, embedded in our national consciousness and identity, that we are a nation of nature lovers. Our supposed love of nature is often expressed, from our poets, to naturalists, in our love of nature documentaries, and millions being members of nature conservation organisations.

Despite all of that;

- Anglia Ruskin University found just last year that we, the UK, are 59th out of 65 on connectedness to nature[3]
- 14 out of 19 of the Aichi targets (biodiversity goals adopted in 2010) have been only partially achieved. Not a single one fully achieved.[4]
- The 2023 State of Nature Report indicates that one in six species assessed in Great Britain are at risk of extinction

So why are we facing this chasm between what we say we care about and what we actually do about it?

If every parent said they loved their kids then proceeded to do nothing about that love and abandon the kids there'd be an outcry.

This has been called the 'say do' gap – the gap between growing consumer awareness of climate change and the lack of widespread changes in consumer behaviour.

The fact that 89 per cent of individuals say they care about environmental action, but when life gets in the way that care doesn't translate into changing how we consume and what we buy.[5]

2. The next issue is the communication strategies we use when we talk about the loss of nature and climate change.

Chris Moscardi of New Zero World, who has become a friend of mine, has called this the 'information deficit model', where we treat the climate challenge as a problem of people not knowing enough and think that the more information there is, the more likely people will be to act. The reverse is true.

As Dr Marcus Collins, a leading expert in cultural marketing and the author of For the Culture, says: 'People move, people buy, people consume, people act not because of what the thing is, but because of who they are.'[6]

Timothy Morton, Chair in English at Rice University, calls climate change a 'hyperobject'.[7] Similar to an oil spill, capitalism, global plastic pollution or black holes, there are certain scales that the human mind is not equipped to understand unless you are studying specific intricacies.

These things tend to be immense and structural, and when we try to understand them through statistics, we experience psychological numbing.

If I tell you about my dog dying, you will feel empathy and sadness for my loss. But you can't feel empathy and sadness for every dog death in the world, or you would be in a constant state of mourning for the many dogs dying every day. A story about an individual victim speaks to our heart, but a dry statistic about millions speaks to our head and overwhelms us. People won't act unless they feel like they can really change

something, and that's the essence of it – efficacy. People would rather do nothing than do something which feels ineffective.

We do not hear information and then rationalise and then act. Kris De Meyer, the well-known climate neuroscientist, argues gut feeling, instinct and intuition comes first then we follow up with the little press secretary in our brain whose job it is to defend ourselves, our reputation and our tribes around us. *Beliefs come before actions*. Our actions change our beliefs, awareness and concerns through a process of self-justification and self-persuasion.

Buying an electric car, for example.

For some people first, there is an intuitive, gut feeling:

→ *'Electric cars just aren't for me.'*

→ *'It feels too risky, too expensive, or too unfamiliar.'*

→ *'That's for rich liberals, not people like me.'*

Then, the 'press secretary' part of the brain comes in to defend that intuition by rationalising reasons that sound credible to themselves and others:

→ *'Lithium mining is terrible for the environment.'*

→ *'The upfront cost is too high.'*

→ *'Battery disposal is a nightmare.'*

→ *'What about the carbon footprint of making the car?'*

Therefore convincing people to act, really act, rather than be part of the silent majority who know we must do something but never do that thing, means looking objectively at some of the great convincers of this era who all use the same basic framework; a framework that follows the narrative structure decisive in every political/religious transformation in human history. George Monbiot, a previous Lancaster Environment lecturer, calls this the 'restoration story'.[8]

The world is thrown into disorder by powerful and nefarious forces working against the interests of humanity.

Heroes rise up against those powerful and nefarious forces and, despite the odds, defeat them.

We see it in the Bible, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and as a repetitively overwhelmingly powerful political story – on both the left and right.

We see it when Trump uses the story of 'Make America Great Again'. The Brexit story promised they'd 'take back control'.

Research from a multitude of fields suggests that story structures match human neural maps. What do a mother breastfeeding, a hug from a friend and a story all have in common? They all release oxytocin, also known as the love drug. And it's powerful. In a study by neuroscientist Paul Zak, participants who were given synthetic oxytocin donated 57 per cent more to charity than participants given a placebo.[9] It is stories which make us more empathetic and more generous.

The power of stories can be harnessed for good. For instance, in 2005, the International Rice Research Institute used a radio soap opera called *Homeland Story*[10] to persuade millions of rice farmers in Vietnam to stop spraying their crops with harmful insecticides. Farmers who listened to the series were 31 per cent less likely to spray their crops than those simply told not to.

In 2017 a gruesome video detailing the rescue and return story of a sea turtle with a plastic straw lodged in its nose went viral and convinced the US city of Seattle, Washington, British prime minister Theresa May, and multiple airlines and global companies such as Starbucks to pledge to eliminate plastic straws.

So far I've labelled two issues:

1. The 'say do' gap.
2. The communication crisis
3. The third and final, and possibly most important of all is the increasing feeling of powerlessness / lack of being heard causing disillusionment and disengagement

'Channel 4 study – Research shows 52 per cent of those aged 13 to 27 want a 'strong leader in charge''.[11]

'10 per cent decline in youth voting over last 5 years – News Decoder.'[12]

And the question should not be 'Why don't young people engage'? We need to flip that around and ask, 'How have we made it hard for them to engage?'

It is because they are disillusioned not with the world, but with the routine meaninglessness of politics if 1) it is riddled with mistruths and 2) it is unrepresentative.

Recent example: the claim that Britain had not built a runway since the 1940s in a speech by the chancellor of the exchequer, Rachel Reeves, repeated several times on national radio shows and on the treasury website. This is self-evidently untrue – a second runway was completed at Manchester Airport in 2001.

More likely a lack of research than a lie, but when deceit in public life doesn't carry real consequences, trust is eroded in the systems supposedly built to represent us and people begin to feel powerless. If change is to happen at the policy level we need citizens who care, challenging and deliberating at that level too.

The same *Guardian* researchers who I mentioned earlier and who found that 89 per cent of people want more climate action, conducted another study where they

brought in randomly chosen participants, gave them each a pot of $450 and asked how much would you give to a charity that cuts carbon emissions by investing in renewable energy, and how much would you keep for yourself? Real money was handed out to those randomly chosen participants, so there was weight behind their decisions.

The average person gave away about half the money and kept the rest. But those told beforehand that the vast majority of other people in the study believe climate action is really important boosted the donations by $16 per person

If you believe others care, you care more.

The problem is, those same participants underestimated the action others would take compared to themselves.

We operate in our own bubbles believing we are inherently smarter, more altruistic and far less lazy than others because we know what we *could* do if we wanted to compared to what others actually do.

Therefore one of the biggest challenges is the echo chambers we operate in which mean we are unaware of how many other people care, even if they're not doing something about it.

So drawing these three factors together:

1. <u>say-do gap</u>

People often *overestimate* their morality and action-taking because life pressures make behaviour inconsistent with values.

2. <u>communication crisis</u>

Climate communication often assumes that more facts = more action (the 'information deficit model'), but people act based on *identity and emotions*, not information.

3. Lastly, the feelings of powerlessness because what we feel needs to be done is not done by those who represent us or surround us.

So how do we move forward?

I believe strongly that we need to completely rethink what environmentalism looks like.

Talking about environmentalism needs to become a verb, an action-based concept rather than an issue-based concept. When you are teaching someone to ride a bike, you don't sit them down and explain it to them. You may show them first by riding yourself then you put them on the bike and they learn through the trial and error of pedalling, falling, pedalling, falling and repeat.

So we need to act ourselves, and talk more about others who are taking action as well. To practise what I preach, I'm going to tell you three stories stories of how people are engaging beyond the conventional two options we're given: the options of consumer choice or climate activism

The first story is about a young woman called Belyndar RIkimani

Remember Timothy, the man living in the Solomon Islands I told you about at the beginning?

I know about him because in 2020 I interviewed Belyndar Rikimani for my book, *The Children of the Anthropocene*. At the time she was a law student, who had grown up in the Solomon Islands, a nation of hundreds of islands in the South Pacific. Her province, Malaita, would fulfil an average European's definition of paradise; fine powder beaches, sighing blue seas lapping at the roots of palm trees. However, a small section in

the 2018 IPCC report on 1.5°C warming undermines this paradisiacal illusion, warning that without drastic emissions cuts Pacific Island nations will disappear.

I was interviewing Belyndar, asking her about the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change's core campaign which she originally started alongside twenty-six other law students from The University of the South Pacific and which has now culminated in the most significant climate case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ); the world's highest court. It looks at state obligations to develop international law, create legal obligations around environmental treaties and basic human rights, and clarify state responsibility for climate harm.

As a result of this campaign the UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 2023 asking the ICJ to clarify states' legal obligations to protect the climate. The court must determine the consequences of state inaction or environmental harm, particularly in relation to those most affected; small island nations and future generations.

Then, between 2 and 13 December 2024, 96 States and 11 international organisations had an unprecedented opportunity to plead before the Court in The Hague on States' climate obligations under international law and human rights.

Right now the ICJ is in the deliberation phase and will deliver its response later this year. The ruling will be an advisory opinion, not a binding judgement. However, the advisory opinions of the ICJ have historically transformed the landscape of legal norms. In 1966 the ICJ deliberated and issued its advisory opinion on nuclear weapons. Even though the opinion wasn't legally binding, it set a global baseline on thinking around nuclear disarmament. This led to a strengthened resolve and treaties such as the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Law holds cultural authority and in a moment when lots of my generation are looking around frantically and confusedly for an authority figure, vying for social order

in a world that seems increasingly disordered, we should find ways for law and the political system, rather than an autocratic dictator, to become that voice we look to for collective reason, which is exactly what Belyndar did.

The second story is closer to home.

In 2019 when I was sixteen my friend Callie Broaduss and I were desperate to do something for conservation: seeing the burgeoning climate movement and recognising how overlooked global nature was in the environmental movement. We thought that since we were both defined as 'youth' and wanted to protect nature reserves, we should set up an organisation that empowered young people to protect the first fully youth driven network of reserves around the world working with a local organisation on each respective reserve.

Reserva: The Youth Land Trust is now a 501(c), a youth-led nonprofit working internationally to help create and support protected areas in biodiversity hotspots. Since 2019, more than 6,000 youth (defined as 26 and under) have participated in our programmes, which have contributed to the protection of 2,269 acres of cloud forest in Ecuador, including the 1,050-acre cloud forest site threatened by mining interests that I mentioned at the beginning and which is now protected by our partners Fundación EcoMinga.

Our youth council has gone on expeditions to Ecuador to conduct field work and assisted our partners in Panama to deploy satellite tags on nesting sea turtles in the Pearl Islands. These tags provide highly accurate, real-time data that will show the migratory routes turtles take as they leave for their foraging grounds. The resulting data will formally establish the importance of these islands to turtle populations and beloved marine icons like Whale Sharks while providing evidence-based recommendations to

integrate the Pearl Islands into the proposed multinational Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor (CMAR).

And finally we are just beginning our work in Colombia with Salvemos Selva, a fellow youth organisation Saving the Caquetá Titi Monkey in the Andes-Amazon foothills in Piamonte, Cauca.

Fewer than 500 adult Caquetá Titi Monkeys (*Plecturocebus caquetensis*) remain in the wild, with a population decline of at least 80 per cent in the last twenty-four years and no nationally protected areas existing in their limited range.

So what can often be seen as a disadvantage financially and experience-wise; being a young person, became our greatest strength in making change when we began to connect with other people who were not conservationists yet, due to their age, knew they wanted to do something.

The third story is about place and community

So, finally, that factor of similarity doesn't have to be career, or identity or passions, it can be place-based, engaging with the community in close proximity to you.

In 2019 when I was working on a documentary called *ANIMAL* where we were investigating solutions to the sixth mass extinction we met Afroz Shah; a young Indian lawyer from Mumbai, who orchestrated the world's largest beach clean-up project on one of the world's most polluted beaches, Versova Beach.

Afroz explained, 'Being a lawyer, your first instinct is usually to go and complain. That would have been an easy journey for me. But the responsibility was mine. I started to look at how I had helped to destroy the oceans and how I could rectify that… so I started cleaning. It began with Versova Beach, where I had grown up. I sat down with my neighbour, sitting by the window overlooking what was now one of the most

polluted beaches in the world, and I said to him 'I'm going to clean this beach. Will you join me?' He looked at me like a bubbly teenager and said 'Yes, Afroz, I'll come with you'.

In 2015, in the first week of October, Afroz and Harbansh walked down to the beach armed with a pair of gloves and some bags. They picked up five bags of plastic.

Painstakingly, they removed every bit of rubbish piece by piece, every single weekend. The clean-ups quickly grew into a global movement.

Within the first three years they had gathered a community and picked up more than 5,000,000 kilograms of rubbish. Then, in 2018, on a muggy morning when the waves boomed and pounded against the sand, something happened which hadn't happened in more than two decades – the hatching of almost eighty Olive Ridley Turtles. Eighty little faces punctured eighty eggs and 160 small flippers scraped and scrambled towards the sea. It was a small moment, but it was symbolic of so much more.

After Versova Beach, Afroz began clearing plastic from a local police station and forest, then, along with his team, decided to tackle the Mithi River which meanders through the heart of Mumbai. Two million people live on the banks of this 18 kilometre long river, which is piled high with rubbish, much of which is swept into the ocean.

It would be ignorant of me to assume I can stand here and give you each a silver bullet solution, especially because all of you if you're here are likely already embedded in environmentalism in your own ways. In the New Yorker, Andrew Maratz wrote that in horror movies 'There is an abrupt, cataclysmic tremor, a deafening roar … In the real world, though, the cataclysm can come in on little cat feet. The tremors can be so muffled and distant that people continually adapt, explaining away the anomalies' like a frog in boiling water.

In a landscape where it is increasingly easy to become oversaturated and overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges confronting us in the wider world, we need

to fall in love with the creativity and power of solutions in our own worlds. Afroz did it on Versova beach. Belyndar did it in the Solomon Islands with her community of law students. All of the young people at Reserva did it because of their love of nature. So instead of unifying us by telling you all one thing you can do, I want to unify us by doubling down our differences. It is when we know our niche, our community, our own skill-set, then we can avoid being that frog unaware of just how much the environment around him is changing.

Bella Lack is a conservationist and environmental activist who began campaigning at the age of twelve. In 2019 she shared the stage with Steve Backshall and Chris Packham and helped create The People's Manifesto for Wildlife. In 2020 she co-founded Reserva Youth Land Trust to fundraise for and conserve areas of land, with projects in Ecuador, Colombia and Panama. In 2021 she presented the documentary *ANIMAL*, directed by Cyril Dion and filmed with Jane Goodall. In 2022, she published her first book, *The Children of the Anthropocene* (preface by Greata Thunberg) with Penguin Books.

NOTES

[1] An earnings call is a conference call between a public company, analysts, investors, and the media to discuss the company's financial results.

[2] https://www.cfr.org/initiative/climate-realism

[3] https://www.aru.ac.uk/news/study-finds-uk-adults-arent-connected-to-nature

[4] The Aichi biodiversity targets were established by the UN Convention of Biological Diversity and consist of 20 specific targets to address and mitigate biodiversity loss across the globe. https://earth.org/what-are-the-aichi-biodiversity-targets/

[5] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/22/89-percent-project-climate-change

[6] https://hmfoundation.com/2024/10/16/how-to-use-culture-to-turn-climate-awareness-into-climate-action/

[7] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[8] https://www.monbiot.com/2017/09/11/how-do-we-get-out-of-this-mess/

[9] https://www.dailygood.org/story/659/how-stories-change-the-brain-paul-j-zak/?lang=

[10] https://journals.openedition.org/sapiens/1578

[11] https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-ceo-urgent-industry-action-and-new-regulation-needed-protect-gen-z-false

[12] https://news-decoder.com/give-youth-a-reason-to-vote/