

Communicating the Environment

by

Rob Hitchcock and Revd Philip Wagstaff

Introduction

Whatever the justice of a cause, without effective communication little lasting change is likely to happen or can be expected to happen. A campaign needs to capture the hearts, minds and imagination of people as well as having validated and ongoing scientific, sociological or (in the case of the Church) theological arguments to back it up. Lessons from history show that it has often taken a great spokesperson, leader or orator¹ to mobilise people before any real momentum for positive changes can be made in the world.

As human beings we are often overwhelmed by the ‘big issues’. How we engage with the environment has an impact on us as individuals, families, communities and our world. Such issues are often seen as being so complex that it is not easy to know how or where to begin. This paper is aimed at those who are exploring these questions as we offer a multi-layered approach including some thoughts on how we might find constructive ways to campaign for a fairer world.

As has been said many times every journey begins with a single step. To begin to engage with environmental issues means exploring how change might happen at a personal, local, regional, national and international level. A campaign has to capture the hearts and minds not just of those who are already involved with environmental issues but must also find ways to speak to those who have never engaged with the subject.

Effective communication is vital in this area, especially in the light of false information which is easily promulgated. An open and honest assessment of environmental issues is important as we look at current scientific, sociological, theological and practical aspects of campaigning. Good background information is essential as we seek to promote change in the environment. How that information is communicated will have an impact on the effectiveness of any campaign.

For change to take place in people’s thinking and behaviour, several conditions need to be met². Firstly, there must be an opportunity to change, secondly the capability to change, and finally the motivation or desire to change.

These principles need to be borne in mind when devising effective campaigns which look at what needs to be changed and how that change may take place for the benefit of individuals, communities and the planet.

What are the challenges and restraining forces to successfully communicating the Environment?

We know from experience that people can be resistant to environmental messages if these messages are seen as being remote or describe events which will only have an impact many years into the future³. Tacit support may be given but this may not be followed up with any action or change in behaviour by individuals or groups. A number of different factors lie behind resistance to receiving

and acting on environmental messages. The following may be considered to be some of the common ones.

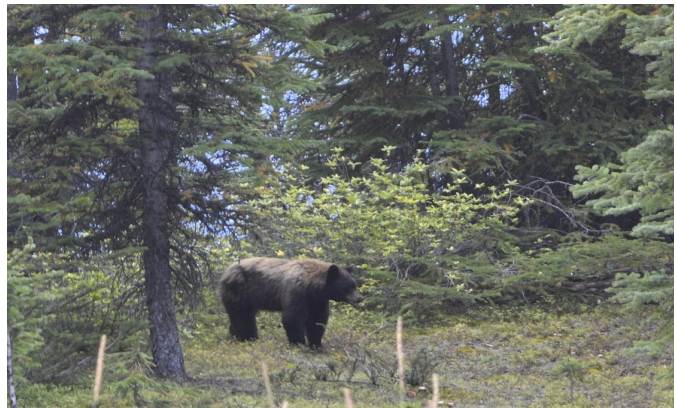
People are often in a hurry and don't have the time to read detailed reports and scientific studies. The main messages need to be put in words and media that can be readily explored. It is desirable that we avoid over-simplistic solutions to complex questions, although campaigning materials need by their very nature to have an immediate impact. A number of fundamental issues are facing the planet, and, while exploring these issues as discrete areas, it is important to recognise that there are often complex interactions between them⁴.

Whilst there has been much scientific work done around the topic of climate change which has led to the broad consensus that the climate is changing due in a large part to human activity, there are some well know climate sceptics who get regular air time, particularly on opinion-forming programmes such as on BBC TV and Radio⁵. Such influencers have an impact on the way that the environment is understood.

Current and former politicians, together with some in the media, can also be sceptical of climate change, sometimes for different reasons. An example can be seen in one of Donald Trump's first announcements, who, on becoming president said that the USA would pull out of the Paris Agreement on climate change⁶.

Industry lobbyists can bring influence to bear on opinion formers. This can have an impact on the way that the environmental debate is conducted and expressed at governmental level.

Many people, particularly city dwellers, have lost hands-on contact with the natural world. For many, their only appreciation of it may be what they see on their tablets, TV documentaries and on news reports. Because of worries about security, parents are now more likely to keep their children at home and the days of children exploring the natural world on their own or just with other children are become rare indeed⁷. There is no substitute for safely experiencing the natural world first hand, and it should help increase receptivity to environmental messages. Careful risk assessments may have to be made but these should not be used as a mechanism to entirely eliminate engagement with the world outdoors.



*Grizzly Bear in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada,
September 2014*

Whilst economic progress is generally something to be commended, unless it is managed wisely progress for some can be at the expense of other people or the planet's well-being. It can be a real challenge to persuade people to constrain their lifestyle for the sake of future generations, especially as culturally we have for generations taken from the world without regard to the wider impact of our actions⁸.

In exploring environmental issues "going green" may not be the cheapest option, or even be an option to contemplate in some parts of our communities. Life choices can be limited in many different ways which may exclude many who want to engage with this area but who do not have the resources to do so.

Fuelled by advertising media, there can be a belief that "short term" is fun and relatively easy (the goal being immediate gratification), whereas "long term", whilst worthy, is often seen as laborious

and difficult. Environmental projects are often long term in nature (e.g. tackling anthropogenic climate change, dealing with global plastic pollution) and are often viewed with some suspicion or are not engaged with at all, as the major impacts lie far into the future⁹.

There is often a prevailing mood of pessimism towards environmental issues. Things are so bad, we cannot reverse the downward spiral however we might wish to, so why bother even trying? There is so much to do and so little time in which to do it. News media typically feeds on bad news and there is no shortage of bad news as far as the environment is concerned. To draw from an early prophet in the Old Testament of the Bible who was contrasting short term expedience with long term planning, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”¹⁰. If that doesn’t then happen what do we do the day after that!

There are great examples of innovations that will help tackle specific environmental problems¹¹, but getting support and traction at the governmental level can be very difficult and drawn out. Governments will take up an issue as long as it serves their political emphasis, but following through to a full conclusion is another matter. For example, climate change and ocean acidification go well beyond the typical five year political cycle, which means that there needs to be long term planning by government recognising uncertainties as well as potential positive outcomes.

Finally, one of the most poignant factors behind a lack of momentum in a number of environmental initiatives is that the biggest impacts are often felt in distant, poorer countries by GDP and therefore do not directly impact those who cause the issues in the first place. Examples include the export of landfill waste to regions such as South East Asia, and species and population loss (which is most apparent in tropical and sub-tropical zones). Mineral extraction is often less regulated and particularly hazardous in developing countries. Rising sea levels impact mostly low-lying areas such as Bangladesh and the Pacific islands. The poor tend to congregate in these areas since house and land prices are low.

Even in wealthier countries, it is usually the poor populations within those countries who bear the brunt of the issues e.g. the people of the Favelas (shanty towns or slums in the outskirts of large cities) in Brazil suffer from poor water quality, and New Orleans suffered heavily from Hurricane Katrina¹².

What positive driving forces/factors can be used when communicating the Environment?

There are a number of things we can do to make an impact, and hopefully win over and motivate citizens and decision makers through direct conversations around natural resource depletion, climate change and other topics, exploring the impact of such issues locally and across the world.



Rubbish litters shorelines across the world. There is an island of plastic in the Pacific Ocean roughly three times the size of France (World Council of Nature, 2018)

We need to understand our audience. Are they young or old; professional or non-professional; in business or the public sector; people of faith or not; active or inactive in environmental matters? We look to find common ground with our audience and use that as a platform to build on¹³.

It is important to engage people’s emotions as well as their understanding. Emotions are a key trigger to remembering messages and help people to reach a point of commitment leading to changes in lifestyle.

Many environmental incidents disproportionately affect poorer people and groups across the world, whilst wealthier nations can feel relatively sheltered. An example of this is coastal flooding, exacerbated by climate change¹⁴. Flagging these injustices can be a way of gaining the attention of your audience but to do so the facts have to be clearly set out.

Our use of language needs to be engaging and our stories interesting, with the use of local examples and examples from around the world wherever possible. Many of these are available from TV, the internet and social media.

Lessons can and should be learnt from environmental disasters. In a large number of cases humankind's activities have contributed to these, examples being seen in major pollution incidents, or in the dramatic decline of species. Information and conversation can move people from complacency or uncertainty to their taking appropriate action to change.

It is also important to provide success stories and highlight promising new initiatives to counterbalance the increasingly bad news on the environment. Hopelessness inevitably results in inaction and we ultimately want to motivate people to do something. Things can change for the good as can be seen, for example, by the way that the trend has been for coal extraction to be phased out in recent years, especially for electricity production in the UK. The interest in renewable energy production is beginning to have financial as well as social and environmental benefits which has given new impetus to renewable energy sources.

Getting the message across

There are many ways of sharing a message, and we have many new and traditional methods of doing so. If we forge partnerships with those who broadly agree with our goals but who may come at things from a slightly different perspective, our appeal and credibility¹⁵ is likely to be widened.

Our words are important, and how we use them can help create or hinder positive environmental change in the world around us. The language we use needs to resonate with the particular audience we

are reaching out to. People remember what they see in an image more easily than what they read in words¹⁶. Pictures and photographs have an important place in communicating the environment. A photograph of a man rowing through the Pacific rubbish patch is more impactful than providing a typed description of it. "Then and now" photographs of a particular glacier separated by 60 years of climate change are tangible evidence of change, as in the example shown.

Blogs and forums¹⁷ as well as the networks of churches and other organisations are useful vehicles for developing groups of people with shared concerns and a desire for action. Social media connects those who are part of it. Used



Graphic: Dramatic Ice Melt provided by NASA Climate 365 The Muir Glacier, Alaska photographed on August 13, 1941 and August 31, 2004

wisely it can be a very useful way of transmitting information cheaply and quickly, and be a tool for generating real momentum in a campaign. It is difficult to see how Greta Thunberg could have started a global movement that spread so rapidly had it not been for her astute use of Twitter. Any environmental campaign nowadays will need to incorporate social media into its plans if it is likely to succeed. Even small charities like JRI now make extensive use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with supporters. These are at least as important now as maintaining an email list. As with most technologies though, social media is a double-edged sword, which is also widely used for spreading climate sceptic views, and other falsehoods. We have even seen the development of “trollbots”, automated accounts that search for certain key terms (e.g. “climate change”) in posts on Twitter, and then respond with sceptical comments, or retweet those with sceptical views to amplify their message¹⁸.

Examples of real world success stories need to be shared more widely, whether they are at the local, regional, or global level. Fostering relationships with media outlets can bear fruit over the longer term.

Our actions in the public sphere matter

Remembering the campaign “Act local, think global”, how do our actions locally impact on the wider world? Establishing alliances and networks with others may yield benefits for years to come. While individuals and families can do much important work on their own, developing links with others who are also campaigning in the same area of concern can extend the reach of a campaign dramatically. Groups like Citizens UK and local community partnerships are good places to start, as are Churches Together groups that are exploring environmental issues.

Getting people to consider environmental issues can be done in many different ways but all involve conversations across the wider public sphere. Examples include petitions and lobbying Parliament, including of course our local MP and County Councillors. We would do well to understand clearly the way that local and central government decision making has an impact on the environment locally and much further afield. We can call for action on plastics, especially reducing the use of single use plastics, finding ways of reducing consumption and the creation of so much “stuff” in the first place.

Demonstrations in the public square on climate change related topics have been going on over a number of years. Recent multinational “strikes” by schoolchildren on climate change during school hours have generated great interest, sympathy and sometimes opposition¹⁹. Greta Thunberg, a young school student from Sweden, has inspired students to protest against the failure of politicians from the main parties to take real action to head off the adverse effects of climate change, which they see as depriving them of a future. This movement has been credited as behind the resurgence of green parties in the European election results in May 2019²⁰. Direct action by some organisations such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) has proved controversial but influential. In addition, the climate strikes and XR actions forced two debates in the UK parliament about climate change, and the declaration by the House of Commons of a climate and environment emergency on 1st May



Students on a climate march, Maastricht, May 2019

2019²¹. Subsequently, the UK government announced that it would target the creation of a net zero carbon economy by 2050.

Our day to day lifestyle demonstrates how serious we are about what we believe in

Our lifestyles need to support our message, they are in many ways the most powerful message we can bring. Whatever the opportunity we personally have to change – let's use it for the long-term future of the environment. It is not possible to do everything at once but the cumulative effect of small changes can have a big impact.

We can use existing recycling services and suggest new ways of recycling to our local authorities (e.g. promoting standardised approaches and greater ease of use). In addition, we can join litter collection initiatives – local litter picking sessions are a great way of forging alliances and friendships with different community groups.

We could promote wider use of alternative travel modes through lobbying for rail reopening schemes, cycle tracks, walking routes, sustainable public transport and changes in transport infrastructure so as to encourage less polluting modes of transport. If we are replacing our car, our choice of petrol vs diesel vs hybrid vs all-electric may make a big statement.

When it comes to domestic heating, we can think about where we buy our energy from (carbon based or renewable), use high quality insulation in our homes, support local energy creation schemes, and work to end fuel poverty. Our purchasing decisions more generally can demonstrate our power as consumers - how we shop has an impact on the environment.

Faith and action – some reflections from a biblical perspective

It has been said that two areas which are off limits in a conversation in a pub are religion and politics. It seems sometimes that people who look at the world from a faith perspective increasingly believe this to be true and see activism as something to be mistrusted. Certain brands of end-times theology see the environmental movement as being irrelevant at best. This is unfortunate as both religion and politics impact on the lives of individuals and communities, and both bring forward strong views and share practical perspectives for action which seek to make for a better world.

At its heart Christian theology is a theology of hope. It is both personal and corporate, and is worked out in our day to day lives. Faith and the way we interpret faith impacts on the way that we as individuals live in the world and help to define how communities engage with each other and the world around us. Christianity is an activist faith and as we see in the letter of James that faith without works is dead²². Perhaps we need to redefine a theology of hope for today's world which will move us from a place of desperation to a place of concern and action for change²³.

Developing such a theology of engagement means that we look beyond the narrow confines of our individual understanding and outworking of faith. We can then explore ways of forming partnerships with others who are involved in protesting against all the dimensions of the current and emerging environmental crisis and who are working to mitigate its effects. An inclusive and activist theology allows for the development of a creative, positive, questioning, activist faith based voice in today's world.

People of faith have always been involved in challenging injustice and the greatest injustice of all today is the injustice against the planet itself. We might look again to the prophets of the Old Testament for insights into political and social activism in the light of the hope found within the New Testament. Amos and Micah recognised the vision of the hope for a world where we should 'let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream'²⁴ and as Micah says we should 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God'²⁵.

If the prophets were where we are now and were looking at the state of the planet today, they would expect us to get activist about finding justice and hope for all people and for the whole planet. In doing so we bring to the table the transformative faith which we see in the Old and New Testaments. It is in those transformations that we find a framework to join with others in our common quest for justice, hope and peace both for the planet and the whole of creation.

Conclusion

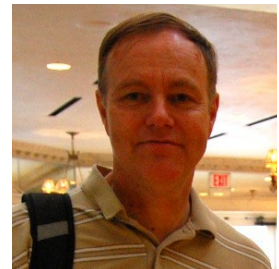
The impact of human activities is now affecting the whole of the earth. Christians believe that God is actively involved in creation but human beings have the freedom to discover and shape the world, and plan for the present and the future. In exploring environmental issues Christians have much to offer to the conversation, and the exercise is as much about listening as doing. We hope that this paper will provide a stimulus for further action that resonates with where we are in the debate.

When working in partnership with others, all theological views are open to scrutiny which is an important part of theological exploration. Christians see that “the Earth is the Lord’s” and human beings have a responsibility to be “stewards of the earth”, but life is rarely simple and many human factors impinge on the way that the environment is used and misused.

Christians deciding to engage with the environment reflect a theological world view which recognises the gift of creation, shares the possibility and recognises the pain. For many years Christians have kept quiet on these issues. Is now the time to speak?

Biographies

Rob Hitchcock (BA Hons) is a retired quality management consultant with extensive experience in the public and private sectors. He has worked in several government departments and the NHS in areas of policy, quality assurance and business change. In the private sector his clients have included insurance, utilities and IT consultancies. He is a member of the Chartered Quality Institute. Rob is a CRES graduate, and his dissertation addressed the factors behind successful environmental campaigns. He is an associate of JRI and supporter of WWF. Rob is currently studying part-time for an MSc in Environmental Strategy at Surrey University.



Revd. Philip Wagstaff (BSc, BA) is a Presbyterian Minister in the Methodist Church who has worked in four Rural Circuits, in Norfolk, North East Essex, Devon and is now stationed at Crewkerne as Superintendent Minister in the South Petherton and Crewkerne Circuit. He has been Rural Officer for the Plymouth and Exeter Methodist District for the past 18 years, is a member of the Devon Churches Rural Forum and while in Devon a member of the Devon Churches Green Action. Over 30 years of Rural Ministry has brought a working interest in Rural Development and local environmental projects. Philip is a CRES Senior Tutor. He will move in the summer of 2020 to take up a new posting in the Hastings, Bexhill and Rye Circuit.



Picture References

Photo 1 Grizzly Bear in Banff national park, Alberta Canada - Sep 2014. (with permission Jan Hitchcock).

Photo 2 Piles of garbage by the shore Photo by Lucien Wanda from Pexels https://www.pexels.com/@lucien-wanda-1179483?utm_content=attributionCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=pexels

Glacier Melt Graphic, free download https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/4/graphic-dramatic-glacier-melt/

Photo 3 People holding banner (Maastricht) Photo by Vincent M.A. Janssen from Pexels

[https://www.pexels.com/@vincent-ma-janssen?](https://www.pexels.com/@vincent-ma-janssen?utm_content=attributionCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=pexels)

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References

- ¹ e.g. Dr Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela.
- ² The COM-B model, Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011.
- ³ Kurt Lewin's ideas on force fields are relevant in the next two sections - Lewin K. (1951) 'Field Theory in Social Science', Harper and Row, New York
- ⁴ The research on 9 planetary boundaries by the Stockholm Resilience Centre provides a good overview of these issues. <https://stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>
- ⁵ See: Martin J. Hodson & Margot R. Hodson (2015) *The Ethics of Climatic Scepticism*. Grove Books Limited, Cambridge.
- ⁶ The Paris climate agreement is an agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change dealing with greenhouse gas emissions mitigation, adaptation and finance starting in the year 2020. See Martin J. Hodson (2018) *One Year On – Donald Trump, the Environment and the Church*. JRI Briefing Paper 34 (section 3) https://www.jri.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/JRI_BP34_Trump_One_Year_On.pdf
- ⁷ Richard Louv, "Last Child in the Woods", 2005, 2008.
- ⁸ "The entire economy thrives on the destruction of nature" – quote from the head of the UN Development Programme speaking at Davos 2019.
- ⁹ A long term perspective for environmental action is endorsed by principle 8 of the 1992 UN Convention on Biological Diversity. <https://www.cbd.int/ecosystem/principles.shtml>
- ¹⁰ Isaiah chapter 22 vs 13. ESV.
- ¹¹ There are several recent examples for instance of tools that can be used to help gather in oceanic plastic waste.
- ¹² Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast on Monday, August 29, 2005. It was the worst hurricane to hit New Orleans since Hurricane Betsy in September of 1965. It was reported that the wealthier residents were more likely to evacuate their homes than the poor in the face of the looming storm.
- ¹³ Good examples of this are referred to in Katharine Hayhoe's talk with the Climate Outreach forum in December 2017 on YouTube entitled "How to talk about climate change beyond the green bubble". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPtE0Cqw2V8>
- ¹⁴ See reference 10 on Hurricane Katrina.
- ¹⁵ The Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief in the 3rd world was successful partly because it developed into an international and diverse coalition of over 40 countries.
- ¹⁶ Terry L Childers, "Memory for the visual and verbal components of print advertisement", © 1986 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.: <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.4220030303>
- ¹⁷ The CRES forum within the member zone of the CRES web site is an example. <https://www.cres.org.uk/member-zone/> (restricted access)
- ¹⁸ Marianne Lavelle (2019) 'Trollbots' Swarm Twitter with Attacks on Climate Science Ahead of UN Summit. <http://www.skepticalscience.com/trollbots-swarm-twitter-attack-climate-science-ahead-of-un.html>
- ¹⁹ Two blogs from the JRI web site can be found at <https://www.jri.org.uk/blog/out-of-the-mouths-of-children/> (Dr Martin Hodson) and <https://www.jri.org.uk/blog/out-of-the-mouths-of-babes-and-grandfathers/> (Dr John Weaver).
- ²⁰ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/european-elections-greta-thunberg-effect-brings-out-young-vote-9szz5gkww>
- ²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg>
- ²² Epistle of James, chapter 2 vs 14-26
- ²³ An excellent series of articles on the subject of the Environment and Hope are contained in *The Anvil Journal*, Volume 29.1 September 2013. <https://www.jri.org.uk/publications/environment-and-hope/>
- ²⁴ Amos chapter 5 vs 24
- ²⁵ Micah chapter 6 vs 6

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The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environment stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

For more information contact:

The John Ray Initiative (JRI),
City Works, Alfred Street, Gloucester, GL1 4DF, UK
admin@jri.org.uk
www.jri.org.uk

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