Dorset Humanists

A partner of Humanists UK

national secular society AFFILIATED GROUP

Dorset Humanists Bulletin – Oct 2023 *Think for yourself but not by yourself (Julian Baggini)*

Leaving My Religion

Apostasy in the UK

A talk by Dr George Askwith

Faith to Faithless

Saturday 14th October 2.00pm Moordown Community Centre, Bournemouth BH9 1TW

This talk will explore the difficulties and challenges of abandoning religious beliefs and affiliations in the context of contemporary UK society. In a nation that has long been influenced by religious traditions yet is increasingly diverse and secular, the act of apostasy can still have serious personal and social implications. While the act of apostasy can be a deeply personal decision, it often has broader consequences, affecting family relationships, social circles, and sometimes resulting in communal ostracism.

George has lived experience of apostasy. Today, she is a member of Dorset Humanists committee and a postgraduate research administrator at Bournemouth University. She's also an active member of Faith to Faithless, a section of Humanists UK which supports people leaving high control religions.

Unlocking the Science of Eating Well

Understanding Evidence-Based Nutrition

With Dr Chloe Casey

Wednesday 25th October 7.30pm, Orchid Hotel 34 Gervis Rd, Bournemouth BH1 3DH

The aims of the session are to understand what evidence-based nutrition is, what healthy diets are evidence-based, and how to adopt a healthier diet that is affordable and sustainable.

Dr Chloe Casey is a lecturer in nutrition and behaviour at Bournemouth University, teaching across undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Her research focuses on the interplay between nutrition and mental health.

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Click for events

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World exclusive! No one cancelled at woke event!

David Warden and Daniel Dancey spoke about 'woke' at our September event at Moordown. Their aim to was to explore intergenerational perspectives on this elusive and divisive cultural phenomenon. Their main disagreement was about what the word actually means, but they managed, nevertheless, to find much common ground.

Given the 'toxic' nature of this particular culture war in much of the media, David and Daniel were relieved that they succeeded in having an honest dialogue about the topic without anyone being 'cancelled'. You can read the transcripts in *Humanistically Speaking* or you can watch the video on YouTube

Dates for your diary

Saturday 14th October 2pm	Moordown	Apostasy in the UK. Dr George Askwith.
Wednesday 25th October 7.30pm	Orchid	Nutrition science with Dr Chloe Casey, lecturer at Bournemouth University
Saturday 11th November 2pm	Moordown	Many Faiths Together Question Time – a Humanist, a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Buddhist will answer all your questions.
Wednesday 22nd November 7.30pm	Orchid	Unlocking the Masonic Mysteries – Malcolm Williamson
Saturday 9th December 2pm	Moordown	Navigating the Maze of Logical Fallacies – Daniel Dancey
Tuesday 19th December 7pm	Marsham Court Hotel	Yuletide dinner – please hold the date in your diaries!
Plus other social events and walks which will be announced on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes.		

Biodiversity

Exploring Life on Earth

At our evening event in September, Dr Tony Curran from Southampton University entertained us with an educational presentation on biodiversity, via the medium of popular game shows including Tenable, Pointless, and Blockbusters. This is an edited version of his talk. To watch the whole thing click the image or visit our Dorset Humanists YouTube channel.

I was intrigued when I looked up the definition of humanism while on the train, particularly from the American Humanist Association. It talks not only about human well-being but extends its scope to all life on Earth. This aligns well with my talk today and serves as a nice segue from humanism to the subject of biodiversity loss.

Three steps

When I give talks like this, I emphasize three steps. The first is to provide lots of information, as we need knowledge to make a difference in this area. It's not just about understanding what's happening to nature but also learning what we can do to help. The second step, often overlooked, is reconnecting with nature. Studies show that we're more disconnected from nature than ever before. Children nowadays rarely experience the outdoors unsupervised, unlike previous generations. This disconnection has consequences, and one way to combat this is by spending time in nature, especially with children. If you grow to love and appreciate nature, you're more likely to value it and take steps to protect it. If we break that link and don't have that step two, then we can't really expect to get to step three, which is people actually trying to help with this problem.

Biodiversity is essentially a portmanteau of ‘biological’ and ‘diversity’, representing the variety of all life on Earth, encompassing all animals and plant species. Does anyone know how many species exist on Earth? We have guesses ranging from two to ten million. In fact, there are approximately 8.7 million species on Earth, give or take 1.3 million. About 1.7 million species have been scientifically described, and unfortunately, this number is on a downward trajectory.

Over long periods, new species are being formed, and species are going extinct. Keep in mind that this is just an estimate; some say there could be as many as 100 million species, especially since expeditions to places like the deep sea or remote jungles often discover new species that we've never catalogued.

Our first game is based on the show 'Tenable.' The game's objective is to guess the top 10 answers to a particular question or category. We're focusing on the different taxonomic groups of organisms, for example, reptiles and amphibians. Did you know that reptiles and amphibians together make up less than 0.1% of the mass of organisms on Earth? So what does the other 99.9% consist of? In the game Tenable, the top answer represents the heaviest group in terms of total mass, and it goes down from there to number 10.

Biomass by species – 550 billion tons of carbon that constitute life on Earth.

Trees are at number one because they're so heavy and numerous – about three trillion. Bacteria are number two on the list. Fungi, like mushrooms, are at number three. Insects and worms are at number four. ▷

Fish are at number five. Molluscs are at number six. Another single-celled organism group, viruses, ranks at number seven. Primates rank eighth in terms of biomass on Earth. Marine life like algae, corals, and jellyfish are at number nine. And birds rank at number ten because, despite their abundance, their lightweight nature means they don't contribute much to the overall biomass. Reptiles make up less than 0.1% of the biomass and so don't make the top ten list. The same goes for amphibians.

https://ourworldindata.org/life-on-earth

If we look at biodiversity by species rather than weight, we find that only 4% consists of vertebrates like birds and mammals. The vast majority – around 75% – is made up of plants, trees, and invertebrates, primarily insects. So, we shouldn't focus only on conserving species that resemble us; biodiversity is much broader.

Now that we're warmed up, let's play another game. The question is about the ten biggest terrestrial mammals in the UK, according to the Mammal Society. We're not including managed types like cattle and horses or vagrant species. The biggest are deer, followed by wild boar, then badgers. Beavers are around 100cm, foxes are around 72cm, and otters are next. Hares are about 59cm. Unfortunately, rabbits didn't make the list, they are the 11th answer. Ferrets are also not in the top ten. Wildcats, however, are number eight and they are critically endangered. Squirrel is number 15 on the list, so it's not quite on there. Polecats are 45cm, so the next thing is bigger than a polecat but only just.

The key takeaway here is that one in four mammals in the UK are now threatened with extinction.

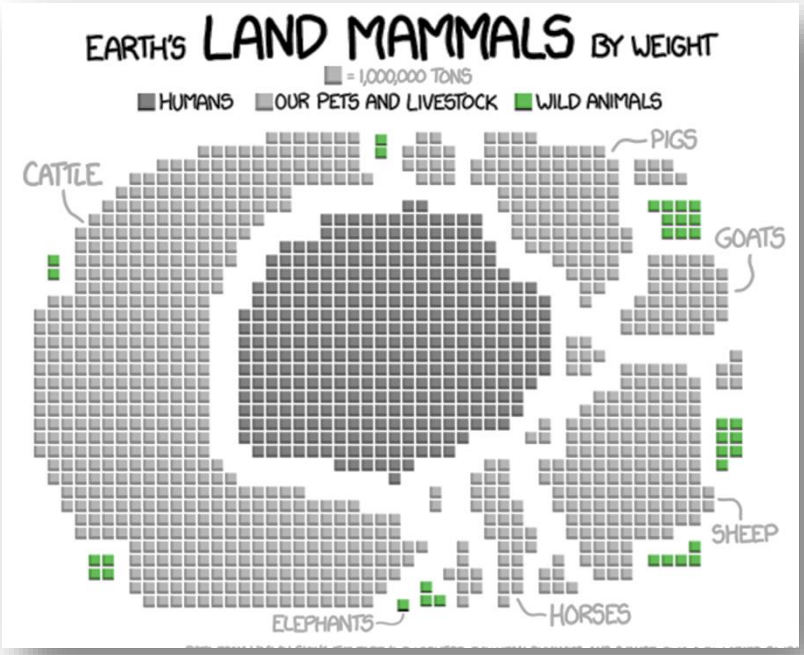
This game illustrates that while we often think of biodiversity in terms of species that are familiar or similar to us, like mammals, the reality is far broader. That was a really good warm-up to get us thinking about biodiversity. We're going to go through these four areas: why does biodiversity matter, what's happening to it, how is it changing, what are the causes of those changes, and then finally, because we're going to dip into some negative thinking for some of those areas, we'll end on a slightly more positive note about what we could potentially do to help nature.

Why do we care about biodiversity?

The Secretary of State for the Environment said a few years ago that biodiversity is key to the survival of life on Earth. It's an indicator, a good early warning kind of thing, if species like butterflies and bees are on the decline. From a moral perspective, how do we as one species have the right to drive many others to extinction? Economically, the services we get for free from biodiversity are invaluable. Biodiversity loss is even scarier than climate change. The services provided by nature are valued at over a hundred trillion dollars a year, more than the GDP of all countries. So, that's why it matters. Now, let's look into what's happening to biodiversity.

It's worth noting that biodiversity loss is not a new or unnatural phenomenon. Over hundreds of millions of years, Earth has experienced five mass extinctions, and 99.9% of all species that ever lived have gone extinct. What's different now is the pace of this loss, which is largely driven by human activities. This era, often referred to as the Anthropocene, is characterized by human-induced changes on a global scale, primarily through the emission of greenhouse gases and land-use changes. The rate of species extinction today is estimated to be between 10 to 10,000 times the normal rate, depending on the source.

Monitoring efforts, such as the Global Living Planet Index, have shown a 69% drop in the abundance of 5,000 species since 1970. Similarly, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List has found that one-third of the 150,000 assessed species are threatened with extinction. In Europe, both habitats and species are predominantly in poor or bad conservation status. ▷



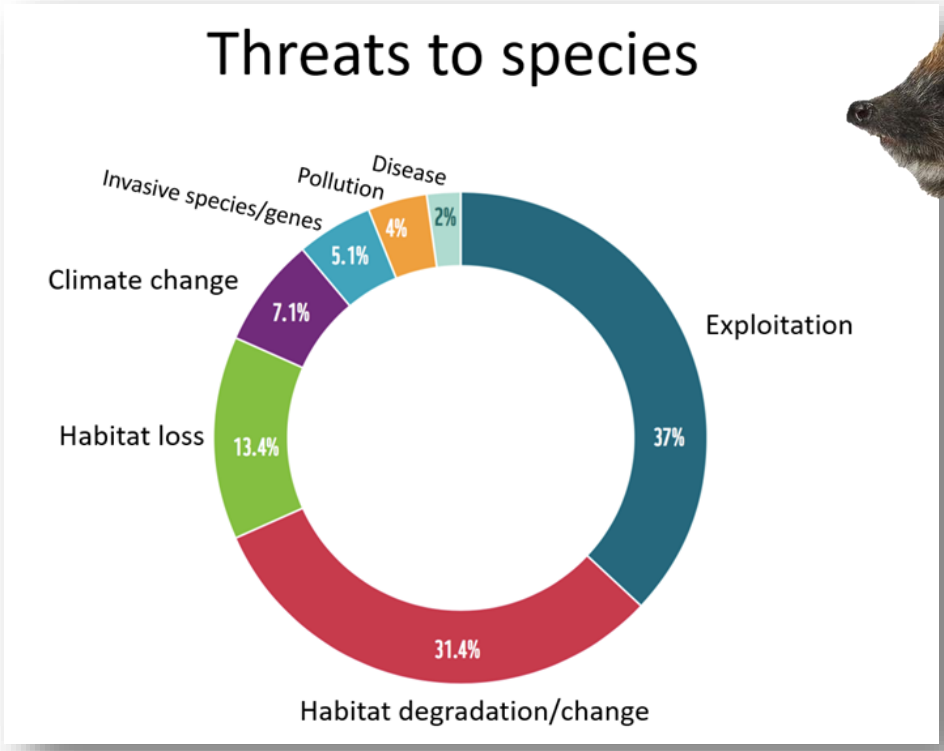
"This is an interesting graphic I often show about just the **land mammals** on the earth. The dark grey in the centre is the weight of all the humans on the Earth. The light grey is the weight of all the cattle, horses, pigs, etc., that we keep for our consumption and our use and our benefit. And the number of wild animals that are left is the green." Source: click image.

Zooming into the UK, the picture is also grim. The country has over 70,000 species, and according to the IUCN's Red List for Great Britain, 15% of these species are threatened with extinction. The State of Nature report indicates that there has been a 58% decline in 700 key species since 1970. Additionally, 27% of UK bird species are of the highest conservation concern. Overall, the UK ranks 189th out of 218 in the Biodiversity Intactness Index, making it one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. This suggests that we have lost about half of our true wild natural areas since the Industrial Revolution, the worst loss across Europe.

Now, let's lighten the mood. We're going to play another game, and I hope you're ready to engage. This is Biodiversity Blockbusters. What "D" is a marine mammal that is vulnerable and in decline due to coastal development? Someone guessed dolphin, but that's incorrect. The correct answer is dugong, known as the sea cow. What "L" is a medium-sized member of the cat family with four species and four letters in its name? The answer is lynx, which was reclassified from critically endangered to endangered in 2015 due to intense conservation efforts. A positive story. What 'O' is a flightless bird in New Zealand with only 150 left and also known as a kakapo? It's an Owl Parrot. Another 'O', a large hairy primate very endangered in the Borneo jungles? Correct, it's an orangutan. They're critically endangered due to habitat loss and poaching. What 'J' is one of the rarest trees, its fruit resembles aquatic animals like jellyfish? Correct, it's the Jellyfish tree. What 'C' is a carnivore of the cat family and the fastest animal? Correct, it's a cheetah. They're vulnerable due to poaching and habitat loss. What 'H' is a large, mostly herbivorous mammal with short stubby legs and sharp teeth? Correct, it's a hippopotamus, vulnerable because of hunting for meat and ivory. Finally, what 'V' is a group of venomous snakes found only in Europe, Asia, and Africa? Correct, it's viper.

What you'll hear repeatedly in these answers and the other things I say is that it's usually the thing that drives the species towards extinction is not just one thing, it's multiple stresses on it. But usually, it's habitat loss because of humans and poaching by humans.

We've learned quite a lot about some of the problems around biodiversity and why it matters. So just thinking a little bit about what's causing it, I've given some hints already. Humans are the primary cause. ▷



You can help hedgehogs!

Just creating a small space under your fence that they can get through really helps them.

Threats to species

Habitat is the biggest threat – either the loss or the degradation of habitats of species. Habitat loss and agricultural change have by far the biggest effect in the UK. It's the reason we've become so naturally depleted because we've had to adapt large swathes of land with monocrops, clearing away hedgerows, rich forest areas, and so on. The second biggest thing is exploitation of species by humans. We take from the natural world more than it can naturally replenish (such as cod, green turtles, and bluefin tuna). The third thing is climate change but we know that's going to get more pronounced as time goes on. The increase in incidence of wildfires is a case in point. Think about the millions of species that get killed directly and then the loss of habitat that those species depend on when these things happen and they're happening more frequently. If you're interested in the impact of climate change on biodiversity, I recommend Richard Pearson's book *Driven to Extinction*. It discusses the first documented case of a species going extinct due to recent human-caused climate change. The fourth is invasive species (such as the Pitt Island longhorn beetle), the fifth is pollution and the last is disease.

Species that have already gone extinct due to humans include the Pyrenean ibex and the passenger pigeon. On the RSPB's Red List in the UK are the kittiwake, shag, cuckoo and turtle dove. Fish to avoid eating include bluefin tuna, Atlantic halibut (wild), common skate, and European eel. Referring to *The Good Fish Guide* is a good way to check if you're unsure. Species that are vulnerable, but not endangered include the giant panda, African elephant, polar bear and koala bear. We often have these iconic big species that we want to protect, and the charities convince us to spend millions of pounds on saving and protecting the habitats, but we shouldn't be only focusing or preoccupied with the big, lovable animals that we see on TV. Because when we think about all these other species, some of which I've referred to and the fact that this is happening at a habitat and ecosystem level, we need to think about bigger interventions and protecting all species, not just the iconic ones that we might want to kind of cuddle or have a photo of on our walls.

How can we help?

So helping to promote biodiversity seems like an obvious one in whatever space you have. It could be a nice garden, it could be common space near where you live, it could just be a window box maybe. You could help with creating some wildflowers, giving some birds some seeds, some food, or some water when there's a drought, or it's hot weather in the summer. Creating a space where animals can thrive and it'll be lots of different ones: small rodents, things like hedgehogs, small birds, etc., insects. A bit of dead wood, allowing a bit of your garden to grow long and rewild, really helps lots of different species: butterflies, bees, birds. Hedgehogs are not endangered or threatened yet in the UK, but they are in severe decline. They're on that trajectory, and again, it's because we put all these fences in and brick walls and got rid of hedgerows and put AstroTurf and decking where there used to be places where they could have a habitat. Hedgehogs need to roam more than a mile every night to find enough food and try to find a mate, and we're making it really difficult for them in our urban spaces. And so things like just creating a small space under your fence that they can get through really helps them.

Opportunities to get involved in citizen science throughout the year include The Big Garden Bird Watch in January through things like the butterfly count, ladybird recording, or getting involved in your local BioBlitz. I know they happen around Dorset. Scientists don't have enough capacity to do it on their own. Where millions of people all over the country come together and contribute to a survey, we can get a really much more accurate picture of what's happening with nature. And it's only if we know what's happening and we can measure it, then we can make the evidence to the government or intervene in some way to make the appropriate changes and help before it's too late. So citizen science is something everyone can get involved in.

Learn, Care, Act: if we want to help nature, we need to care about it. And one way we can do that is to get out and explore it yourselves, take some family members, children perhaps, and have a day out. Maybe allow kids to get their hands a bit muddy, do a project together, try and spot some species, and swap screen time for wild time. Get a love of nature back into people, and then they might start to care about it and want to save it.

Being a responsible citizen, thinking about what your impact on the environment is. I'm sure this won't really apply to many of you in the room, but it's something again you can pass on as tips to other people. Simple things like not littering – I've literally seen animals distraught, stuck in a crisp packet. Not buying seafood unsustainably, we mentioned thinking about your lifestyle and consumption patterns. There are some problems with some zoos, but zoos like we have in England are doing a lot for conservation. They invest, they do research, they support species reintroductions and conservation. So it is good to visit the zoo and help zoos be a voice for change, whether that's locally around you or in more organized ways at a kind of national level.

So thank you very much for coming. Biodiversity is critical to our well-being, and I hope you've heard snippets of that throughout the last hour and 15 minutes. It's us that are causing it to fall rapidly, and so we're the ones who need to help protect it. And I hope you'll do that, thank you.

Letters & Emails

It's your column…

❖ ***From Barney Maunder-Taylor via Meetup after attending the talks on 'woke'***

Thank you David and Daniel for a great talk This is exactly the sort of controversial topic Dorset Humanists covers really well: calmly, rationally and respectfully. The afternoon exceeded my high expectations and I was sorry to have to leave before the end of Q&A.

I actually learned a lot! Thanks to Daniel I now feel more tolerant and accepting of cultural development: like you say, it's not really inconveniencing me a lot if I have to change language that a decade ago would have been perfectly acceptable. And thanks to David I now feel better equipped to call people out who are being needlessly aggressive on these issues: let's fight prejudice and discrimination but also support our rights to have different opinions and to be able to debate them without being stifled. I loved the discussion of David Starkey being "cancelled" for just one transgression which was quite possibly just a miscommunication.

Well done DH for a great talk.

❖ ***From Jonathan Crozier (via Meetup) who tried to make it to the 'woke' talk***

I allowed an hour and a half to get from Boscombe to Moordown. Crawling rush hour traffic from Lansdowne to Westover Road took me by surprise. Then my timetabled bus from the Square to Moordown didn't turn up, and I had to wait for the next one. I persevered, but the net result was that by the time I arrived, I heard David was in full swing, and so I went home. Hopefully, I will be able to see and hear what I missed on YouTube.

❖ ***A response to Jonathan Crozier from David Warden***

I'm very appreciative of Jonathan Crozier's heroic efforts to attend our talk via public transport and his selfless consideration in not entering the hall after the event had started. This highlights the value of car-owning members coming forward to offer lifts where possible. It also highlights the importance of arriving on time as a courtesy to our guest speakers. We appreciate that traffic and other problems can sometimes be a problem but arriving late for our events can be disruptive. We appreciate everyone's efforts in this regard.

❖ ***From Georgia Blume on receiving a link to the 'woke' talk video***

Oh my goodness, I am very glad to have this, thank you. I am so glad this is being talked about, as it really is pertinent to all our lives at the moment, in so many ways. A great choice of subjects, sorry to have missed it, and glad to have the recording.

Simon Bowden's poetry reviewed

Dorset Humanists committee member Simon Bowden has received a great review of his poetry volume, *Gifts of the Dark* by the influential poetry website London Grip. You can read the review here:

https://londongrip.co.uk/2023/09/london-grip-poetry-review-simon-bowden/

"*Gifts of the Dark* is a sequence of thirty-two remarkably candid and authoritative poems written during and after being in hospital recovering from a cancer operation. It's a fascinatingly original and thought-provoking collection."

View from the Chair

David Warden
Chairman of Dorset Humanists

I've been reading *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*. This is the *Working Group One* part of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It weighs in at 2409 pages.

I'm not intending to read the whole thing. It's written in fairly turgid prose with every statement carefully weighed in terms of likelihood and confidence ("Very Low Confidence", "Very High Confidence", etc.) I'm reading it because, in a sense, it is the latest 'encyclical' from the IPCC, and the Working Group I report is the core scientific report. It contains more of the nuance which can get lost in summary reports and especially media reports and political pronouncements. For example, we often hear politicians saying things like "Climate change is unequivocal – you only have to look at the latest fires/floods/storms/droughts" etc. Statements like this are scientifically illiterate and they mislead the public into thinking that all extreme weather is the result of, and evidence for, climate change. The IPCC report makes clear that we have always had extreme weather, including in the pre-industrial period. What global warming does is increase the likely frequency of extreme weather events and their likely intensity. And these effects will continue to grow as global warming proceeds. What is also becoming clear is that deaths from extreme weather events, in general, are on a downward trajectory as we get better at protecting ourselves. The IPCC is also clear that, although some extreme scenarios have been discussed – such as the possibility that we may tip the Earth into a permanent hot state – there is no evidence of such non-linear responses at the global scale in climate projections for the next century.

In 2009, I gave a talk to Dorset Humanists on climate change. In 2014, I debated climate change with science journalist Peter Hadfield, and in 2019 I gave a talk on the science of climate change on our science course. As with so many debates, I think we should avoid tribal polarisation ("Alarmists!" "Deniers!") and just focus on the science and the evidence. If our events programme allows, I would like to offer another talk on climate change some time in 2024, fifteen years after my original talk. This topic is absolutely core to humanist interest because it deals with science, the impact of humans on the planet, the way we conduct public debates, the integrity of science and science journalism, and our prospects for the future as a species. We live on a dangerous planet but, as a species, we have come through much worse periods of climate change. We forget that we are living in a mild phase of an ice age and that sea levels have been rising for 20,000 years. The Little Ice Age from approximately 1350 to 1850 was brutal for our ancestors in Europe and North America. What we want is a Goldilocks Planet – not too hot, not too cold, not too windy, not too wet – but the planet itself cares nothing for our own comfort. Our human challenges are complex and immense. But evolution has furnished us with a large brain to solve problems. The universe will get us in the end but, for now, let's go boldly forward.