

More than than 60,000 people joined the Restore Nature Now march in June 2024. Do some politicians view them as 'eco-nutters'?

PROTEST MARCH: KRISTIAN BUIJS/GETTY

## OPINION

“The level of complacency about conservation is rapidly evolving into outright hostility”

# MARK CARWARDINE

**C**ONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADER Kemi Badenoch called environmentalists trying to stop the approval of new North Sea oil and gas fields ‘eco-nutters’ during Prime Minister’s Questions. Nigel Farage, leader of Reform UK, called Prince Charles (as he was then) a ‘stupid eco-loony’.

Meanwhile, ‘eco-zealots’, ‘eco-morons’ and ‘eco-clowns’ are all expressions used by national newspapers on a regular basis.

Why are environmentalists treated with such little respect? There is no longer just a shocking level of complacency about conservation. It is rapidly evolving into outright hostility. If politicians and the media were to talk about ‘LGBTQ+ nutters’ or ‘farming-morons’ or ‘junior doctor-loonies’ with the same level of disdain they wouldn’t get away with it. They would be forced to resign, and rightly so. But environmentalists are fair game.

I believe we environmentalists have been tilting steadily towards political crisis for some time – and the name-calling is just one manifestation. The crisis is not one of legitimacy (the evidence for ecological destruction grows by the day) and it isn’t one of collapsing public support. I think it’s all about perception.

The first issue is money. Politicians see green issues as a threat to short-term economic growth. Indeed, chancellor Rachel Reeves recently claimed that we have gone too far “in protecting every bat and every newt”. But the assertion that protecting nature undermines economic growth is simply incorrect: a few months ago, the Office for National Statistics issued a report that valued UK ecosystems at £1.8 trillion.

Yet there was an uproar when the chairman of HS2 revealed that a ‘bat tunnel’, built in ancient woodland in Buckinghamshire, cost £100 million. According to some media reports, this amounts to more than £300,000 per bat in the 300-strong colony of rare Bechstein’s bats. It’s not true, of course. The cost of the 1km-long tunnel is eye-wateringly high because of an HS2 decision to make it wider to accommodate local train services – nothing to do with bats. And it’s nonsense to suggest that the tunnel will protect ‘just 300’ of them. It will be there for decades, protecting generation after generation of

bats, as well as many other mammals, birds and insects. But the outcry was about the principle – apparently, wildlife isn’t worth that much money.

It’s exasperating. There were no howls of protest when someone bought

Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan’s unusual artwork of a banana duct-taped to a wall for \$6.2 million (£4.7 million) in November, or when René Magritte’s *The Empire of Light* sold for a mind-boggling \$121.2 million (£91 million) on the same day.

Another predicament is that environmentalists can come across as negative (we condemn everything from flying to eating meat), depressing (we warn that the future is not going to be bright for a soon-to-be 10 billion people) and misanthropic (we are often misjudged as people-haters). The fact that tackling environmental issues is the only thing that stands between us and some pretty nasty stuff doesn’t seem to matter.


Some of the tactics used by more militant factions of the environmental movement probably don’t help. The headlines are all about them and their antics – their intended

### → AT A GLANCE

- Respect for environmentalists seems to be at an all-time low, with some politicians and media frequently referring to anyone trying to avert the climate crisis or tackle biodiversity loss as an ‘eco-loony’ and worse.
- Yet surveys consistently show widespread public support for the goals of the environmental movement.
- For example, a 2024 United Nations Development Programme survey found that 80 per cent of people worldwide want their governments to take stronger action to tackle the climate crisis.

messages often end up lost. They should target the people and companies responsible for the problem, not innocent bystanders. No wonder the general public has taken umbrage.

And, finally, we can sometimes come across as a bit eccentric. I’ve always questioned the temptation to dress up as a rabbit or a badger when joining a protest march for wildlife. It may be fun but it’s not a good look: you can just imagine the politicians watching and thinking ‘bunny-hugging loonies – not to be taken seriously’. Though, I admit, it’s a thin line between showing your passion and appearing professional. I didn’t become an environmentalist because I care about economic growth. I care about wildlife. I love bats and newts. And what’s wrong with that? Other people love surrealist paintings.

I get that there are worse things than being called an ‘eco-loony’. And we know that promoting efforts to curb climate change and biodiversity loss does not make us nutters. But perhaps we should reconsider how we present ourselves and what we are trying to achieve? 

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