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The Politics of the British Environment since 1945

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Abstract

This article examines, first, how environmental concerns have shaped British politics since 1945, making the environment an object of governance; and second, how political developments have an environmental history, focussing on the environmental demands of social democracy. It contends that environmentalism should be considered alongside other political ideologies, such as socialism and feminism, as helping to constitute the modern British state and the evolving relationship between government and the citizen. It considers how the management of the terrestrial environment became a hotly contested matter in the postwar decades, drawing a distinction between the politics of 'landscape preservation' and 'nature conservation'. This discussion is related to access politics and questions of rural governance and regulation, particularly with respect to the agricultural sector. The article concludes with a discussion of some current environmental concerns, reflecting on the possible transition from today's 'carbon democracy' to tomorrow's 'renewable democracy'.

Keywords: environmentalism, rewilding, national parks, democracy, carbon economy

DOES THE ENVIRONMENT have a political history? The snap answer is 'yes', and perhaps obviously so. The environmental activist immediately comes to mind: counter-cultural, middle class, moralising and a bit scruffy. As with all clichés, there is some truth to this one, but this article will show that it hardly does justice to how environmentalism has transformed British politics. Like other ideological commitments that roused popular opinion, such as socialism or feminism, environmentalism has helped refashion the state and the relationship between government and citizen, generating new rights-based claims and expectations. Environmentalism made 'the environment' an object of governance, involving parliamentary legislation and state regulation, often predicated on international law or agreements, semi-autonomous agencies, local government and voluntary organisations. And just as 'the environment' has a 'political history', so 'politics' has an 'environmental history'. 'Social democracy' and 'neoliberalism' both made demands on the environment by seeking to deliver private and public goods through the development of the petrochemical or carbon economy. Once we grasp the significance of environmental thinking to British politics since 1945, the question to ask is: what kind of politics will be produced by the success or failure of the current transition away from the carbon economy and towards a renewable future?

Emplacing 'the Great Acceleration'

Environmental activism has a long history, but in terms of modern Britain, the period 1870–1970 constituted a distinct phase in the development of modern notions of environmental citizenship. That century not only saw the emergence of professional ecologists, but also campaigns for the protection of individual species, particularly birdlife, which led to the introduction of statutory protections. Despite the significance of these developments, the priority tended to fall on preserving charismatic landscapes, sites with rich cultural associations that were judged relatively unscathed by industrial modernity. The preservationist case rested on the claim that these landscapes had significant social utility, usually the provision of 'health and happiness', that trumped alternative private or public interest claims. The Open Spaces movement of the second half of the nineteenth century exemplified this thinking. To preserve the landscape meant preserving the agricultural practices and social

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structures that produced it. As such, for much of the twentieth century, landscape preservationists coexisted uneasily with agriculturalists and access campaigners. But, what happened when the greatest threat to the countryside seemed to come not from an apparently external 'other', from urban sources, but from within—from the very people, the agriculturalists, identified by the preservationists as the custodians of the land? This gave rise to new forms of environmental activism which maintained the focus on access, but were increasingly nature conservationist rather than landscape preservationist.

The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 is generally cited as a catalyst for the development of this new politics, but we shouldn't imagine it came out of the blue.[1] The UK edition intensified an already lively debate about the catastrophic effects of chemical pesticides on wildlife populations, particularly birdlife.[2] Concerns grew about the broader impacts of 'the Second Agricultural Revolution', including the grubbing up of hedgerows, the ploughing up of rough grazing and meadow and the clear-felling of ancient woodland—all destructive of existing wildlife habitat. Local or domestic perspectives were shaped by global concerns, including the consequences of atmospheric pollution and animal extinctions. In 1960s Britain, the peregrine falcon, considered a pest by agriculturalists and the shooting industry, achieved iconic status, just as charismatic megafauna—whales, tigers and pandas—did on a global scale.[3] The World Wildlife Fund was established in 1961; Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace followed in 1969; the first UN Earth Day, EEC Year of Conservation and publication of the *Ecologist* magazine came in 1970; and the People's Party, forerunner of the Green Party, was established in 1972. Less directly environmentalist, but certainly environmental, Edward Heath's Conservative government replaced the Department of Housing and Local Government with the Department of the Environment in 1970.[4]

This new environmental consciousness can be attributed to growing apprehension of 'the Great Acceleration', the term used to describe the exponential increase in the consumption of natural resources and pollution that was central to postwar economic growth, and allied concerns about population pressures and future resource scarcity, particularly oil. Alarmist books like Paul Erlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and the Club of Rome's *The Limits of Growth* (1973) took their place alongside Carson, interventions that reinforced fears about the prospects of human life on Earth. Work is needed to unpick the impact North Sea oil and gas speculation had on this discourse, but 'degrowthism' has been a common theme for environmentalists, sometimes including troubling discourse about controlling the population of the Global South. Domestic environmental disasters, with their ramifying human and more-than-human consequences, also focussed minds. The threat from interglacial climate change—not yet identified as anthropogenic—was recognised in the decision to build the Thames Barrier in 1972, the long-delayed response to the terrible North Sea floods of 1953; the devastating consequences of the collapse of a coal waste tip at Aberfan in South Wales in 1966 highlighted the environmental vulnerability of minoritised communities; and the wrecking of the oil tanker *Torrey Canyon* in international waters just off the coast of Cornwall in 1967 drew attention to the inadequacy of effective governance on the high seas.[5] Adjacent fears about nuclear apocalypse, heightened by the Cuban Missile Crisis, were reinforced by accidents at nuclear power stations at Nine Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986), though the accident

[1]There is a large literature on Carson. A good place to start is L. Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, New York, Henry Holt, 1997.

[2]See J. Sheail, *Pesticides and Nature Conservation: The British Experience, 1950–74*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

[3]See D. Ratcliffe, *The Peregrine Falcon*, London, T. & A. D. Poyser, 1980, ch. 13.

[4]For a good overview of the development of modern environmental thinking, see P. Warde, L. Robin and S. Sörkin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

[5]See T. Cooper and A. Green, 'The *Torrey Canyon* disaster, everyday life, and the "greening" of Britain', *Environmental History*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2017; G. O'Hara, *The Politics of Water in Post-War Britain*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; I. McLean and M. Johnes, *Aberfan—Government and Disaster*, Cardiff, Welsh University Press, 2019.

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at Windscale (now Sellafield) in Cumbria (1957) deserves more historical attention.

These environmental disasters highlight how social democracy's sponsorship of the infrastructure, technologies and practices required to deliver universalist provision has an environmental history that cannot be separated from our current crisis. The coal mined at Aberfan, the oil being shipped to the refinery at Milford Haven, the 'cheap food' policies that drove agricultural intensification were essential components of the commodity flows that enabled postwar improvements in the standard of living. Delivering universalist goals, including full employment, created a heavy dependence on the petrochemical or carbon economy, forms of techno-triumphalism and the construction of much land and resource-hungry infrastructure. The coal-fired power stations and their cooling towers commissioned by the Central Generating Electricity Board in the 1960s and 1970s that made 'Megawatt Valley' in Lincolnshire are iconic examples, but as striking was the centrality of the oil refinery and electricity generation to the industrialisation of the west bank of Southampton Water in Hampshire. The small Esso refinery established in 1916 was massively expanded in 1951, becoming an anchor institution for a succession of industrial developments. In this first wave came Marchwood Power Station (1955), International Synthetic Rubber (1958), Monsanto (1958), Union Carbide (1960), Air Products (1961), Hythe Gasworks (1964) and, finally, Fawley Power Station (1969), a magnificent modernist edifice.[6] Privatisation and financialisation brought later waves of development to the area. As Timothy Mitchell reminds us, the growth of 'carbon democracy' made social democratic or liberal oil-importing countries like Britain complicit in the survival of authoritarian oil-producing states.[7] The *Torrey Canyon* was carrying Kuwaiti crude.

Landscape preservation and carbon democracy

Naturally enough, carbon democracy also has a social and a cultural history: to borrow Nan Fairbrother's formulation, with 'new landscapes' came 'new lives'.[8] Much could be written about the new communities brought to Southampton Water by its industrialisation. But, to emplace carbon democracy historically, we must also consider how the development of industrial modernity and modern citizenship saw the strengthening of the idea that the natural environment, irrespective of private property rights, constituted a form of public goods. Marion Shoard gave clear expression to this principle in *The Theft of the Countryside* (1980), a broadside against the environmental destruction wrought by agricultural intensification. Such claims have a long lineage, particularly among organisations dedicated to the preservation of rural England, but they were also increasingly evident—to adopt Rob Nixon's influential formulation—in the 'environmentalism of the poor' and resistance to the 'slow violence' of industrial modernity.[9] Katrina Navickas has examined local and community commitments to the preservation of what she terms, with a strong sense of irony, 'Non-Outstanding Areas of Natural Beauty', while Ewan Gibbs is starting to tease out the environmentalism of the miners, whose dependence on the coal industry did not preclude a desire to live in healthy or attractive environments.[10]

Demands by modern citizens for healthy, wholesome environments are not new. Think of the sanitation politics of the nineteenth century, the clean air acts and the campaigns to protect the commons and improve rights of public access. Legislative responses created new regulatory frameworks, though these were often permissive, relying on effective action by local government. In postwar Britain, environmental management in the interests of human and more-than-human life

[6]On 'Megawatt Valley' and Southampton Water, see essays by Ian Waites, Ben Anderson and Matthew Kelly in L. Ross, K. Navickas, M. Kelly and B. Anderson, eds., *New Lives, New Landscapes Revisited. Rural Modernity in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

[7]T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London, Verso Books, 2011.

[8]N. Fairbrother, *New Lives, New Landscapes*, London, The Architectural Press, 1970.

[9]R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

[10]For Navickas's essay and related work, see Ross, et al., *New Lives, New Landscapes Revisited*.

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came to be seen as the duty of the government and agencies of the central state. This development was accelerated by the emergence of the 'science of planning' in the interwar years, which attested to faith in the state—and especially local government—to improve living environments and industrial efficiencies, and the confidence of the new professional class who aspired to pull its levers.

The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 was the first of several postwar planning acts to empower local governments. Less noticed by historians of the 'New Jerusalem' was the passage of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act in 1949. These acts reflected and created new expectations of the state among the citizenry. In the case of the National Parks Act, this was a response to an interwar campaign that had brought together grassroots access activism, as exemplified by the iconic Kinder Trespass of 1932, and lobbying by technocratic architect-planners with close links to the Labour Party, such as those of Political and Economic Planning. *National Parks in England and Wales* by John Dower (1945), commissioned by John Reith's Ministry of Works, should be collected up not just with the Scott Report (1943) on *Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, but also William Beveridge's *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942).[11] It was no coincidence that the government which established the National Health Service also established the National Parks Commission.

The National Parks Commission (1949–1968) duly fulfilled its brief, designating National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Long-Distance Footpaths, transforming perceptions of rural England and Wales in the process. Despite this, the new National Park planning committees were notoriously weak. They generally comprised sub-committees of county planning departments, for the government had refused to derogate powers just granted to planning authorities by the 1947 act. Later acts—the Local Government Act 1972 and the Town and Planning Act 1990—established and then strengthened park planning boards, but the National Park authorities of today—full planning authorities—were only established under the Environment Act of 1995. This process has yet to find its historian, but it reflected growing social and economic pressures on the National Parks and the weight of ministerial correspondence generated by the planning controversies that made the parks sites of conflict.

This politics was relatively low-key in the early 1950s—concerns about bungalows and other 'subtopian' blights were of fairly marginal interest—but the dispute about the siting of a television mast on Dartmoor was a harbinger of later conflicts that would see the National Parks Commission, mobilised by the National Park lobby, seek to uphold National Park principles in the face of land grabs by statutory bodies such as the Central Electricity Generating Board, the water undertakers, the Forestry Commission and the War Office (later the Ministry of Defence). These conflicts made the English and Welsh uplands sites of contestation—less between modernity and tradition and more between the contradictory expectations of modern citizenship. It was audacious indeed to apply special protections to marginal agricultural landscapes long associated with non-intensive agriculture and extractive industries—mining and quarrying—now used to site new infrastructure, train the military and grow the national timber reserve.

For the parks to get a fair hearing in Whitehall, the small staffs of the National Parks Commission and, after 1968, the Countryside Commission, had to be mobilised. This generated a distinctive form of pressure-group politics, for both agencies nurtured broadly symbiotic relationships with civil society organisations—the 'amenity' societies—and especially the liveliest branches of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), as exemplified by the role played by the Dartmoor Preservation Association (DPA). Established in 1883, the DPA had been active in the decades before 1914, but became moribund in the interwar years. It was revived in the immediate postwar decades and Sylvia Sayer, the DPA's rather brilliant chair, had a knack for generating press coverage, exasperating hard-pressed county council officials pursuing

[11] On Dower, see J. Sheail, 'John Dower, national parks, and town and country planning in Britain', *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1995; and D. Wilkinson, *Fight for it Now. John Dower and the Struggle for National Parks in Britain*, Oxford, Signal Books, 2019.

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a quieter diplomacy, and riling officials trying to fulfil the statutory obligations of their employers. Sayer's letters to ministers and officials now frequent numerous government files held by the National Archives, helping to evidence the tangible ways in which the British landscape has been environed.[12]

Statutory bodies learned to respect the expertise the amenity societies could mobilise, particularly regarding planning processes, and their enjoyment of *locus standi* at local public inquiries. Sympathetic politicians further amplified the voice of the amenity societies, with speakers in both Houses frequently declaring interests, speaking for motorists, caravanners, equestrians and the like. Particularly contentious in the 1960s was the siting of reservoirs in upland areas, and these extended 'battles' saw the amenity societies work in conjunction with the National Parks Commission or Countryside Commission, often succeeding in their push for a local public inquiry. Consequently, planning issues that ministers would have preferred to see resolved through local processes became national questions pitched in terms of environmental concern, necessitating a ministerial decision made under considerable public and parliamentary scrutiny. The Heath government attempted to minimise the weight of ministerial correspondence by rationalising processes and structures and creating arms-length bodies. Just as it hoped the professional staff employed by the new National Park boards might minimise political conflict by producing five-year management plans based on public consultation, so too did they hope new regional water boards could deliver water security through long-term planning at scale, avoiding the controversies that arose from *ad hoc* solutions.

The nature state

Some of the heat did go out of these questions, but was replaced by new issues driven by new ideological agendas. In the 1980s and 1990s, plans to cut roads through beautiful rural landscapes inspired a new generation of environmental activists, often committed to direct action. To 'Swampy' and his fellow activists, the case for bypassing towns and villages, relieving them of heavy lorries, commuter traffic and air pollution, was a false one. Reducing car dependency was the real answer. It would be wrong, however, to imagine that ecological thinking had not been a component of the postwar state, sufficient even to consider the development of the nature state alongside the welfare state and the warfare state.[13] Prior to the passage of the 1949 act, the National Parks lobby had worked in tandem with the nature conservationists in a somewhat fissiparous alliance. Whereas the parks lobby prioritised the public or amenity interest, focussing on rights of access and the maintenance of landscape aesthetics according to romantic or rustic ideals, the nature conservationists took a more 'biological' view. In the event, in 1949 the Attlee government established the Nature Conservancy by Royal Charter, whose role was to commission research, advise the government on the implications for the natural world of policy developments, notify the planning authorities of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) under their jurisdiction and designate National Nature Reserves.

Notifying SSSI became the principal tool at the disposal of the British nature state. The process was low-cost and allowed the Nature Conservancy to act with considerable autonomy, ensuring scientific judgements prevailed. By the 1970s, the SSSI archipelago amounted to some 5 per cent of British land, but in practice notification was often of little consequence, particularly when farmers wished to make state-subsidised changes to the agricultural use of their land. In response to a mix of domestic pressures and EEC Directives, the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act sought to strengthen the protections provided by SSSI notification. I have written about the politics of this process and its ideological underpinnings

[12]For more on Sayer and some of the other themes surveyed in this article, see M. Kelly, *Quartz and Feldspar. Dartmoor: A British Landscape in Modern Times*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2015; and M. Kelly, *The Women Who Saved the English Countryside*, London, Yale University Press, 2022.

[13]For a general treatment of the 'environmental management state' and the 'nature state', see W. Graf von Hardenberg, M. Kelly, C. Leal and E. Wakild, eds., *The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017. My chapter looks specifically at Britain.

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at length in an open access article, so will limit myself to some general remarks here.[14]

Concerns about the ploughing up of rough grazing and meadows on Exmoor and other uplands saw the Labour government place a bill before Parliament that sought to empower the National Park planning boards by creating a new statutory instrument, the Moorland Conservation Order. The Labour bill was lost to the dissolution of Parliament in 1979, and the new Conservative government opted instead to pursue a more comprehensive bill under the dynamic leadership of Michael Heseltine, the new Minister for the Environment. Conservative attitudes towards agriculture aligned broadly with those across Whitehall, particularly the ethos of the Ministry of Agriculture, which considered it not just difficult, but undesirable, to try to bring rural and agricultural practices more firmly within the purview of the state. Much to the frustration of Labour MPs, who generally represented urban constituencies, Conservative politicians insisted that managing the agricultural interest worked better when based on voluntary agreements and financial incentives rather than direct regulation. For that reason, these debates raise important historical questions about the regulatory capacity or reach of the state, the influence of the unreformed House of Lords on environmental policy and the close relationship between the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). (The NFU had an office at MAFF until the latter's dissolution in 2002.) Throughout the legislative process, the territorial aristocracy mounted an indecorous defence of its vested interests, complaining that even the feeble implications of the existing system of SSSI notifications imposed unreasonable restrictions. Meanwhile, the NFU, a trade union representing a propertied interest whose numerous small businesses were subsidised by the European taxpayer, was assured in private meetings that although the implications of SSSI notification would become more far-reaching, the power to notify would pass from the Nature Conservancy to the Secretary of State, allowing representations to be heard.

In the event, the new system saw numerous 'management agreements' reached between landholders and the Nature Conservancy, and some good was done with respect to individual sites. A hidden and not altogether salubrious history has yet to be written about the sharp end of these processes, likely accessible only through oral history methods. In any case, and this is crucial, the environmental effectiveness of these statutory instruments and accompanying regulations depended on the sufficient resourcing of the agencies tasked with using or enforcing them, which included the rural police. To this day, environmentalists habitually call for stronger legislation, but often what is needed is sufficient cash to ensure existing provisions are enforced; in short, the flow of funds can be switched on or off as dictated by the political priorities of the government. The Environment Agency and Natural England, the Nature Conservancy's latest successor body, are often criticised by environmentalists, but no serious commentator doubts that current failings partly reflect how both have been starved of cash since the 2008 financial crash. Little SSSI notification or adequate monitoring has occurred in the intervening years, nor have other obligations been met, such as preventing the illegal persecution of raptors by the shooting industry, or the pollution of rivers by dumping, or the negligent management of agricultural run-offs. Prosecutions rarely follow contraventions. The custodial sentence handed down in April 2023 to the farmer who destroyed 1.5 km of riverbank in Herefordshire was greeted by environmentalists with a mix of barely suppressed glee and near disbelief.[15] Think, too, of how gratuitously the fox hunting ban is defied. The National Park authorities, exercising a different kind of authority, are equally starved, and some have had to consider selling off their limited land assets.

[14] M. Kelly, 'Habitat protection, ideology and the British nature state: the politics of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act', *English Historical Review*, vol. 137, no. 586, 2022, pp. 847–883.

[15] J. Grierson, 'Farmer jailed for 12 months for damaging Herefordshire river', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2023; https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/apr/21/farmer-jailed-for-damaging-river-lugg-herefordshire

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A renewable democracy?

In recent years, the link between the politics of access and environmentalism has been renewed. The tactics of Extinction Rebellion have attracted most attention, but the post-Covid revival of access campaigning, relatively moderate in its tactics, but counter-cultural in its articulation, has touched a deeper, quieter seam of sentiment in British society. In part, the ambition to legislate a formal 'right to roam', mirroring the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, reflects how Access Land, as established under New Labour's Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, reinforced the distributional problem that dates back to the formation of the National Parks: the marginal upland agricultural landscapes that are the basis of the system are concentrated in Wales and the North and South West of England. The Countryside Act 1968 attempted to correct this by enabling the designation of Country Parks close to urban centres. If the 'Right to Roam' campaign posits a fundamental principle, an alternative approach is to ask what statutory instruments are needed to significantly increase access to intensively farmed lowland England and Wales. Northern Ireland, still without a National Park, tends to be overlooked in these discussions, reflecting the British, if not Anglocentric, rather UK perspectives that have tended to shape environmental debate in UK politics. In any case, common cause has been made with veteran campaigners like Kate Ashbrook and the Ramblers' Association, but just as significant is the challenge posed by minoritised groups to the white, ableist, somewhat masculine and broadly middle-class culture of rambling and access campaigning. For example, the @Muslim_Hikers, founded by Haroon Mota, has helped make the movement richer and more diverse than ever. This groundswell of opinion, coordinated through social media, was given a tremendous fillip in January 2023 by the High Court's 'clarification' that the 1985 Dartmoor Commons Act did not create a right to 'wild camp' on Dartmoor. Whether or not the subsequent campaign to preserve wild camping gathers further momentum remains to be seen, but in the immediate aftermath of the Dartmoor decision, the Labour Party indicated its commitment to new right to roam legislation should it form the next government.[16]

At the same time, a new generation of environmentalists has been excited by the rewilding agenda, which provides radical solutions for those who have learned to see the harm done to human and more-than-human nature by industrial pollution, intensive agriculture and professional forestry.[17] Those of us born during the last fifty years live in an age of nostalgia for a nature we have never known. Sheep rarely come off well in these debates, as the current campaign to restore Britain's temperate rainforests has further demonstrated, though James Rebanks's *English Pastoral* (2020) makes a sturdy case for sustainable sheep farming.[18] The most unexpected voice in the current debate also has the greatest reach. Despite some ill-judged remarks about badgers and much profligate tomfoolery in the two television seasons of 'Clarkson's Farm', Jeremy Clarkson manages to deliver a serious message about farmers facing collapsing profits, proliferating health and safety regulations and much paperwork. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was much talk of achieving 'balance' in land use policy; today, much nature conservation is based on the quiet work of building trust, cooperation and understanding across the agri-environmental divide.

To date, rewilding projects have one thing in common. Whether undertaken by landowners, collectives or NGOs, they are private initiatives that rely on privately-owned land and the ability to mobilise sufficient resources and expertise to access state support. The most high-profile example is Sir Charles Burrell's transformation of the estate he inherited at Knepp Castle in Sussex, a straightforward example of enlightened self-interest.[19] Indirectly, Burrell's experience reflects a larger truth about environmental politics in modern

[16] H. Horton, 'Labour government would pass right to roam act and reverse Dartmoor ban', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2023; https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/27/labour-government-would-pass-right-to-roam-act-and-reverse-dartmoor-ban

[17] The popularising of rewilding, long a component of ecological restoration, owes much to the work of campaigning journalist, George Monbiot. See, G. Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*, London, Allen Lane, 2013.

[18] G. Shrubsole, *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, London, William Collins, 2022.

[19] I. Tree, *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*, London, Picador, 2018.

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Britain: as this article's opening gambit suggests, environmentalism tends to be depicted as counter-cultural, but environmental politics is also the domain of the professional lobbyist, the salaried ecologist and the landowner/holder. Outdoor campaigns are an attractive subject for historians, but much environmental political activity has been long held captive by the legislative and statutory parameters set by the government, as is evident in the current making of the post-Brexit agricultural settlement. Financial support will be offered to farmers, not according to how much food they produce, as is principally the case under the EU regime, but instead by brokering environmental land management agreements (ELMs) based on the principle that 'public money' should only be paid for 'public goods'.[20] Quite how ELMs will work in practice is only starting to become clear and there is much disquiet about whether ELMs will deliver sufficient financial support to small and medium-sized agricultural businesses. Either way, the future of the British terrestrial environment will continue to be determined as much by Whitehall wrangling as it will by outdoor campaigns—a combination that has been the stuff of British politics forever and a day.

This article offers only a sketch of the conditions that made the environment an object of governance and a central component of the functioning of post-1945 British democracy. More work will be needed—and is being done—to advance our understanding of how environmental thinking, in all its variety, has shaped virtually every aspect of modern British life. Though I come to this as a historian, the enormity of climate change and the sixth great extinction means it is fast becoming scarcely meaningful to write about any aspect of contemporary British politics without centring the necessary imminence of a just transition from today's 'carbon democracy' to, shall we say, tomorrow's 'renewable democracy'. The current government, chivvied on by influential Conservative environmentalists like Zac Goldsmith and the economic opportunities promised by a 'green industrial revolution', has committed to 'net zero'. This is but one indicator of the colossal task that awaits. As the recently highlighted catastrophic levels of raw sewage discharged into the UK's rivers and its inshore waters attest, Britain's infrastructure was built for a climate epoch that has now passed. Building new resilience and moving to sustainable energy production will refashion the relationship between government, citizen and the state in a manner more profound than that catalysed by any previous environmentalism.

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[20] DEFRA, 'Environmental land management schemes: an overview', guidance, 15 March 2021; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview/environmental-land-management-scheme-overview

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