

LIVING IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EARTH



INTRODUCTION

This booklet is the fifth in a series designed by Quakers in Britain to explore one analysis of climate breakdown and how we might respond, known as climate justice. It's a term that is increasingly used in the UK, but not one that is well understood. It challenges our status quo and imagines a different world – a world in which we recognise and address the inequalities and power imbalances that have led us here; in which we repair the harm we have done to one another and to the planet, and build a more sustainable, loving system of organising ourselves.

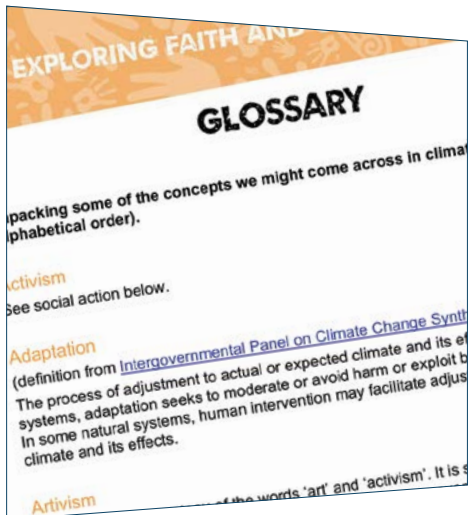
We have tried to make these booklets as accessible in language and content as possible, while offering plenty of links to other resources for those who wish to explore topics further. We welcome ignorance: for us, what's important is a curiosity to learn. While we will try to explore the topic of climate justice as comprehensively as we can, we will never be able to cover it fully. We hope these booklets will serve as a launchpad for you to begin your own journey of exploration into what taking action for climate justice might mean to you.

There will be six booklets in total, and each will consist of three main sections: analysis, practical examples and queries. The analysis section is intended to provide some basic content for consideration, along with lots of further avenues to explore. The practical examples section shares information about grassroots groups and campaigns in the UK and globally that you can draw inspiration from or support. Finally, the queries section offers

some questions for reflection or discussion, individually or in groups, as a tool to process and integrate your thoughts about the booklet and its topic.

As a companion to the booklets, we have put together a glossary of key terms, which you can find www.quaker.org.uk/documents/climate-justice-glossary. Any terms followed in the booklet text by '[G]' appear in the glossary.

For Quakers working through these



booklets, we recommend taking a look at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre's [Responding to Ecological Crisis](#) resource. This has been designed to support Quakers to explore the spiritual underpinnings of the Quaker commitment to sustainability. It will tend to the 'personal' aspect of your journey through these booklets and complement the resources and promptings they contain.

As in the days of early Friends, we sense this is a time of prophecy and want to uphold the prophets in our midst and in the wider world. We must heed the Spirit's call to urgent action. Prophets are visionaries, calling out those in power, and reconcilers stand in the middle of conflict: in this both run great risk.

From the Epistle, Yearly Meeting Gathering 2021

As we embark on this journey, we are demanding courage of each other, looking to support each other, and, especially, seeking to hear and see prophetic voices and examples. We extend an invitation to all to embrace discomfort. Learning to see the wrong in our lives and in our society, and experiencing that inwardly, is the moment we become truly engaged in transforming our lives.

ANALYSIS

We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation.

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1. Introduction

At the UN biodiversity summit (COP15) in Montreal in 2022, almost 200 countries agreed a new set of targets to "halt and reverse" biodiversity loss by 2030. There's no time to lose: global wildlife populations **have declined by an average of 69% over the last 50 years**, with the UK **among the worst countries in the world for biodiversity loss**. Our food systems (mainly livestock farming) are a major driver of species loss, as well as being **responsible for about one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions**.

It doesn't have to be this way. But as with global heating, there is a divide between those who believe that enough commitment and funding can bring about the

necessary changes within our existing economic and political systems, and those who feel a deeper transformation – both systemic and spiritual – is required.

Rising alarm about species loss has led to a proliferation of restoration projects. **Beavers have been reintroduced** to several areas of the UK, while several large mammal species are **making a comeback across Europe**. These reintroductions are already having beneficial effects on ecosystems, providing a glimpse of how our landscape could be transformed within a generation or two.

Against the odds, some in the UK are carving out space for regenerative farming and nature education, and claiming the right of all of us to spend time in our countryside. Environmental defenders around the world are putting their bodies on the line to protect ecosystems. And in some communities, traditional ways of relating to the rest of the living world are being kept alive or restored.

When it comes to our relationship with the rest of the living world, there are many places to find joy and inspiration. We explore some of them in this booklet.

2. People versus nature?

The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God has a dream*

The imagined separation between humans and the rest of the living world is so deeply ingrained in western culture that it can be hard to find language that avoids reinforcing it. 'The environment' is an uninspiring term that implies humans are subjects with agency, while everything else is an object to be acted upon. 'The natural world', or simply 'nature', perhaps does better at conjuring images of the places and creatures we love – but still implies a separation from the human world.

The health benefits of access to green spaces are well documented. Across Britain, millions of people belong to



Photo: BYM

conservation organisations. Yet this hasn't prevented the rapid decline of our ecosystems. Perhaps many of us have not learned to pay close attention, meaning the loss of species goes unnoticed by most. Perhaps, too, we might learn to address other elements of the living world as beings from whom we can learn. Might this make us more attuned to the world as they inhabit it?

There are models we can learn from. Traditional indigenous knowledge and practices from around the world are rooted in a view of humans' role, which is completely different from western norms. Dr Alex Wilson, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation who teaches indigenous land-based education in Saskatchewan, **says**: "If you understand – through our kinship structures or the way the language is structured – that parts of the land or animals are literally related to you, then you have a different kind of relationship with the land: you have something more like a familial relationship, where protection is naturally a part of it."

A view of animals, plants, rivers and rocks as beings within a web of relationships underpinned a way of life for hundreds of thousands of years. For those of us who are of European descent, this is not our (primary) inheritance. So what can we do to become more deeply at home in the places we live?

The popularity of Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggests this is a question many people are asking. Kimmerer, who is a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes powerfully about plants and places as living beings with whom we are in relationship:

To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. [...] This is the grammar of animacy.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding sweetgrass* (Penguin, 2020)

Further exploration:



[Future Natures comic – Commoning](#)



[Gardens of Others: The Beginnings of Outside \(28 mins\)](#)



[Carl Safina – How Western Philosophy Created the Crisis \(48 mins\)](#)

3. Nature reserved? Dismantling fortress conservation

Some conservationists argue that the way to protect 'nature' is to designate larger areas for it. For example, the COP15 agreement commits to protecting 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030. The UK government made its own commitment on this in 2020, though as of early 2023 **it has made no progress towards it**. The UK's land and waters certainly need all the help they can get: a 2021 study **found the UK was one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world**. But is there a risk that by designating certain areas 'for nature', we reinforce the sense that humans and other living things are not really compatible and have to be kept apart – the idea that humans will inevitably destroy our environment?

The 30% pledge could have more sinister consequences in the global south, where the land with the greatest biodiversity – and therefore most likely to be chosen for 'protection' – is often managed by indigenous people. The privatisation of these common lands through transfer to western NGOs frequently entails the violent displacement of the people living there, and the militarisation of park 'security', as the land is given over to **safari tourism and even trophy hunting** in the name of 'conservation'. Human rights campaigners have warned that without proper safeguards, the '30 x 30' commitment **is likely to make this situation worse**. WWF, for example, has been heavily criticised for supporting the 'fortress conservation' model through its funding of the Messok Dja national park in the Congo, and for failing to intervene in response to allegations of **human rights abuses** committed by park rangers.



Photo: First Peoples Mountain by Jacob W. Frank for NPS

The prevailing western view of conservation has its roots in the establishment of Yellowstone and other national parks in the United States in the late 19th century. This view encourages us to see certain areas of the world as pristine 'wilderness' untouched by human activity. However, most of these landscapes have in fact been shaped by people over centuries or millennia. In the case of Yellowstone, the native peoples who had been in the area for thousands of years were

forced off the land and the story of their presence deliberately obscured. In the last few years, Native Americans and their allies have succeeded in making this history more visible – for example through the naming of First Peoples Mountain, previously named after a US Army officer who massacred native people.

To truly protect places and their human and non-human inhabitants, we need to replace 'fortress conservation' with a different model: one that has room for human activity and understands us as part of the ecosystem. The 'Our Land, Our Nature' conference in 2021 developed '[A people's manifesto for the future of conservation](#)', calling for conservation projects to go ahead only with the full consent of the communities affected, and for existing 'protected' areas to be returned to local guardianship.

Further exploration:



[Foreign Policy – How conservation became colonialism](#)



[Cultural Survival – World Refugee Day \(20 mins\)](#)



[Global Environments Network – Colonial conservation and uneven development \(1 hr 50 mins\)](#)

4. What does it mean to live in right relationship with the land?

Our Gracious Creator cares and provides for all his creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works, and as far as his love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have the prospect of one common interest...to turn all that we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives.

John Woolman, *A plea for the poor or a word of remembrance and caution to the rich*

Some argue that in order to protect nature, we need to be able to quantify its benefits for people: a concept known as 'ecosystem services'. According to this view, if those in positions of power fully understood the cost to the economy if – for example – bees died out, they would be able to assign the bees their full value and prioritise their survival over developments and policies that threaten them.

Others object to this approach, arguing that nature cannot be assigned a monetary value and that we cannot fight capitalism by adopting its terms. This view is more likely to be found within the climate justice movement because it emphasises the depth of transformation that is needed: we cannot calculate our way out of such a profound spiritual and systemic crisis.



Photo: Whanganui River from Adobe Stock

An alternative approach advocates for the rights of nature, seeing rivers and forests as beings, not objects to be acted upon. In 2017, the government of Aotearoa New Zealand passed legislation **recognising the rights of the Whanganui River** and acknowledging it as a living whole. This has inspired campaigns for similar steps to be taken elsewhere in the world, **including in the UK**.

Even as their way of life risks vanishing altogether, it is now widely acknowledged that indigenous peoples are stewards of much of the world's remaining biodiversity, and that their traditional approaches to land management **are effective at increasing biodiversity while producing food**. We can learn from approaches that harness nature rather than seeing it as an adversary – for example, some state agencies in the US have begun to adopt elements of **indigenous fire management practices**.

Further exploration:



**Radical Ecological Democracy –
Salween Peace Park: A place for all living things**



99% Invisible – The Rights of Rice and Future of Nature (45 mins)



KCET – Tending Nature: Indigenous Land Stewardship (57 mins)

5. Food sovereignty and the power of solidarity

The food sovereignty movement is based on the right to healthy, nutritious food that is produced sustainably. It promotes local decision-making, working with nature and meeting people's needs, in opposition to industrial agriculture, which prioritises profit and exploits people and the earth.

There is good evidence that agroecology – a collection of farming methods based on working with nature, promoting soil health and upholding the rights of producers and communities – can provide high yields alongside its social and ecological benefits. In the UK, around 200 community-supported agriculture (CSA) projects feed thousands of households while improving biodiversity and soil health, offering training and keeping money within the local economy. Yet these approaches remain marginalised, thanks in large part to the lobbying power of agribusiness.

Long-awaited details of the new UK farm subsidy scheme – replacing the EU's Common Agricultural Policy – were announced in January 2023. Payments based purely on the amount of land owned are being replaced by subsidies for sustainable farming practices and environmental improvements. These measures have been broadly welcomed by conservation groups, but throughout the process there has been a noticeable divide between farmers, who fear rewilding will be favoured over food production, and environmentalists, who are worried the scheme will not do enough to discourage damaging practices.

This reflects a perception in wider UK society that those who work on the land and those who fight for its protection are at odds. Logically this makes no sense – land workers should be our best conservationists, and people who love the land should surely be intimately acquainted with it. This strange state of affairs may have its roots in the transformation of farming into an industrial process, using the logic of mass production and treating food as a commodity like any other, rather than a basic need. When this is what farming looks like, it becomes a threat, working against the living world instead of with it.

Many of us are also deeply alienated from the land – including some who advocate for its protection – and may underestimate the challenges of farming. Organisations like the Landworkers' Alliance bridge this apparent divide between farmers and environmentalists, arguing for agroecological farming methods, as well as for a focus on decent work and access to healthy local food.



Photo: BYM

A 2018 academic paper looked at instances where agroecology had been successfully scaled up, and found that in every case, this had been driven by a crisis that required alternatives to be found. However, this alone was not enough: organised communities were also a prerequisite for success. Agroecology and solidarity go together, because growing food is a collective endeavour, and the way we treat the land goes hand in hand with the way we treat each other

Further exploration:



[SeedChange – What is food sovereignty?](#)



[Farmerama Radio – The Sustainable Cooperative, wilding, beneficial insects and connecting faith with farming \(28 mins\)](#)



[Movimento Sem Terra – O que é solidariedade? \(8 mins, Portuguese with English subtitles\)](#)

6. Digging and dreaming in Britain

As children, we used to be told that if you dug a really deep hole, you'd come out in Australia. I think in some ways this is very true. If any of us digs deep enough where we stand, we will find ourselves connected to all other parts of the world.

Alastair McIntosh, *Soil and soul*

To live in right relationship with the earth, we must get to know it; and to get to know it, we must have access to our local woods, moors, rivers and beaches. Yet in England, 92% of the land is **off-limits to us** because of the law of trespass.

In January 2023, 3,000 people gathered to **protest the removal of the right to wild camp on Dartmoor** – the only place in England where it was allowed. In response, the Labour Party announced that if elected, **it would introduce a new Right to Roam Act**, extending the very limited rights of access that currently exist and bringing England and Wales into line with Scotland, where the right to responsible access to the countryside, including wild camping and swimming, is already enshrined.

The Covid-19 pandemic drew attention to who has access to our green spaces, and who feels welcome in them. Black people in England are **nearly four times as likely as white people to have no outdoor space at home**, while low-income households and people of colour are less likely to be within walking distance of

green spaces. Even when green spaces are available, they may not be accessible: many young women and people of colour report being put off by experiences of harassment, while a lack of facilities and information makes many spaces inaccessible to disabled people.

If nature barely features in your life because of these barriers, you may well feel disconnected from concern about biodiversity loss, and from solutions like rewilding, which is often seen as the preserve of big landowners.

Rewilding remains controversial, partly because it evokes the imagined past of a pristine wilderness untouched by humans, as discussed above.

However, the reality of many rewilding projects on farmland, like **Knepp** in West Sussex, is that they still involve food production and human intervention – as well as attracting tourists. Most projects are led by private landowners, but some community landowners like **Mull & Iona Community Trust** are showing how ecological restoration and community wealth-building can go together.

One of the joys of working with the land is that we can see changes very quickly – whether that's pea shoots appearing in seed trays on your windowsill, or **beavers starting to regenerate woodland** in under a year. Another, opposite joy is the sense of connection to something that will long outlive us: as a widely quoted proverb has it, "a society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they will never sit". This idea is embodied by the **Lost Rainforests of Britain** project, which has mapped and aims to restore the areas of Britain that were once temperate rainforest.

Can it be done? Why not? First we dream, then we dig.

Further exploration:



Interview with Brighton Quakers (22 mins)



BBC Sounds – My Albion: Four Hundred Years (28 mins)



Charlotte Bill/Clapham Film Unit – Right to Roam (33 mins)



Photo: BYM

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

In this section, we highlight examples of grassroots groups and campaigns that you might draw inspiration from or support. We have divided them into 'local' and 'global', but this can be an arbitrary distinction as both are interlinked. We use the terms here to help describe actions that are primarily focused on life in the UK (local) and actions that are primarily focused on life outside the UK (global).

Local

Land In Our Names aims to disrupt oppressive land dynamics relating to Black and People of Colour (BPOC) communities in Britain. They address land justice as a centre point for issues around food insecurity, health inequalities, environmental injustice and widespread disconnect from nature.

Granville Community Kitchen is an ethical, sustainable, culturally diverse community food hub, offering food centred activities, services, education and training that is accessible, family friendly and open to all. They place the most disaffected at the centre, co-creating a local response to social issues while building capacity and lifting voices to advocate for structural change at local, national and international level.

Landworkers' Alliance is a union of farmers, growers, foresters and land-based workers. Their mission is to improve the livelihoods of our members and create a better food and land-use system for everyone.

Solidarity Apothecary exists to materially support revolutionary struggles and communities with plant medicines to strengthen collective autonomy, self-defence and resilience to climate change, capitalism and state violence.

Three Acres and a Cow is a show that connects the Norman Conquest and Peasants' Revolt with climate change and the housing crisis via the Enclosures, English Civil War and Industrial Revolution, drawing a compelling narrative through the people's history of England in folk song, story and poem.

Right to Roam campaigns to extend the right to roam in England to make our downlands, woodlands and rivers accessible to all.

Global

La Via Campesina is an international movement bringing together millions of peasants, landless workers, indigenous people, pastoralists, fishers, migrant farmworkers, small and medium-size farmers, rural women and peasant youth from around the world.

Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) Landless Workers

Movement is a mass social movement, formed by rural workers and by all those who want to fight for land reform and against injustice and social inequality in rural areas.

Zapatista Solidarity Network support other people across Slumil K'ajxemk'op – or Insubordinate land – to engage with the Zapatista word and philosophy.

The **permaculture movement** is a design approach for regenerative systems based on earth care, people care and fair shares. It is often used as an approach to food growing but has wider applicability.

Global Environments Network supports a network of people dedicated to social and ecological justice, healing and planetary wellbeing.

Stop Ecocide International works to build support for an international law of ecocide (widespread or long-term damage to ecosystems).

QUERIES

In this section, we have put together some suggested queries for reflection or discussion, individually or in groups. You might like to use one of the resources we have shared in this booklet as a prompt for reflection and discussion. You are also welcome to find your own resources to use as a prompt!

We are conscious that the Covid-19 pandemic has made our already busy, stressful lives even busier and more stressful. We believe that social action should be energising and sustaining, so throughout these booklets, we will try to weave moments of joyfulness (for example, food) into the queries section. If you are gathering in a group to consider the queries, we also recommend building in time






Photo: David Fegan

to check in with one another:

Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth. Environmental despair is a poison every bit as destructive as the methylated mercury in the bottom of Onondaga Lake. But how can we submit to despair while the land is saying 'Help'? Restoration is a powerful antidote to despair. Restoration offers concrete means by which humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that are simultaneously material and spiritual. It's not enough to grieve. It's not enough to just stop doing bad things.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding sweetgrass* (Penguin, 2020)

Food and plants to explore together:

-  Everyone bring along your favourite food to share with one another (along with any stories you have about that food)!
-  Choose a food that grows in your region, and then each suggest a different way to savour that food. If you feel inspired, make the food that way to bring along and share!
-  Go for a walk together in a local green space, or another familiar place. Find something growing there that you don't usually pay attention to. Smell it, touch it, look it up if you want to.
- How do you feel about your relationship with the non-human living world? Where does your attitude come from? Is there anything you would like to change about this relationship?
- To truly protect places and their human and non-human inhabitants, we need a model that has room for human activity and understands us as part of the world's ecosystem. How can we include people in our vision of nature? And how can we prevent our work for climate justice – which focuses heavily on the human impacts of climate breakdown – from becoming anthropocentric?
- Can the Quaker testimonies help to rekindle a deeper level of human experience when it comes to our relationship with the living world? Do you find the concept of the 'sacred' helpful?
- What nature- or food-related projects inspire you (either those mentioned in this booklet or others you are aware of)? Could something similar happen where you live?

WHERE NEXT?

Exploring Faith and Climate Justice runs from July 2022 to July 2023. Over the year we will explore the following areas:

1. What is climate justice?

July – August 2022

2. Loss and damage: exploring historical responsibility and reparations

September – October 2022

3. Climate justice and the new economy

November – December 2022

4. What happens if we don't focus on justice?

January – March 2023

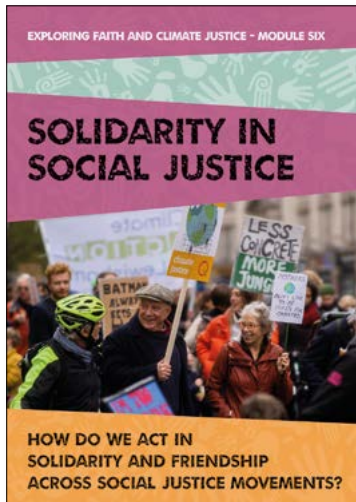
5. Living in right relationship with the earth

March – May 2023

6. How do we act in solidarity and friendship across social justice movements?

May – July 2023

The final module in this course will explore the power of solidarity and how we build effective alliances for social change.



Text in this dark blue colour indicates a link to further information or resources.

To access the further information or resources in this booklet, please go to the online version which you can find on this webpage:

www.quaker.org.uk/efcj



Join **Quakers in Britain** and **Woodbrooke** on our year of learning and spiritual reflection about climate justice.

You can sign up on your own, or as part of a group or meeting at www.woodbrooke.org.uk/efcj.

For more information and resources visit www.quaker.org.uk/efcj.

Get in touch at climatejustice@quaker.org.uk.

This booklet was developed with support from colleagues at Quakers in Britain, and in turn informed by a number of Quakers who helped to shape the project. We are grateful for the time and feedback they generously shared.

Did you find this resource useful? To let us know your thoughts, to share a story of witness or to request support from Quakers in Britain, please email climatejustice@quaker.org.uk or call 020 7663 1046.

For other accessible versions of this document please email publications@quaker.org.uk or call 020 7663 1162.

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