

QUESTIONS FOR NATALIE BENNETT

1. When did you become interested in the environment? And when you were a child was this your dream job? When I was studying agricultural science in Australia, I developed an understanding and great concern about the nature of farming in Australia - mining the soils rather than nurturing them, taking tillage methods and animals from the deep, young, relatively resilient soils of the Northern Hemisphere and applying them destructively to the ancient, fragile native soils. But when I was a child my dream job was being an archaeologist. Like many around age 10 I got fascinated with Ancient Egypt. In year 6 my teacher wrote on my report card: "Natalie would be better off if she paid more attention to the living and less to the dead." I was sadly convinced that "you don't want to study that because there are no jobs", but I've kept my fascination with history, particularly women's history,

Before the Green Party took over my life I started writing what was going to become a four-book history of the women of London, and having recently got into the History of England, Rome and Byzantium podcasts, am thinking about starting a history of the women of England podcast... maybe! The poet Isabella Whitney was one of my favourite characters in the work I've done thus far, and I've also got a soft spot for "Moll Cutpurse".

2. What is your favourite way/method of helping the earth? In terms of personal actions, there are few things as satisfying as planting a fruit tree or bush. In my small Sheffield back garden I inherited an old apple tree, which has come back with pruning, and what I suspect is a very old, and hugely productive, gooseberry, and put in two plums and a cherry tree,. Plus a small stretch of fruiting hedge - there isn't much space for grass, but I think the whole idea of lawns is generally a bad one, and I'm trying to turn the ground into something like a wildflower meadow.
3. What do you think of striking for climate? A brilliant movement that has had a major impact. I know a very common response from some adults is "better to spend the time studying", but I often cite in response to that two message I've heard from strikers preempting the argument. One was from a 14-year-old in Sheffield: "My teacher said to me this morning: 'Wouldn't I be better off studying for my history test, and I said that no, I want a future.' Another was a placard I saw in Bristol, which was powerful, and depressing: "No point in learning when the planet is burning."
4. When I discuss the environment with my friends, it is met with general disregard. How to do you convince others to care about the environment? Often people have had very little contact with or knowledge of nature. One way to perhaps encourage them to think about it is to build their knowledge and experience. Show them a picture of a beautifully patterned butterfly wing, take them out into a garden to listen to the birds, encourage them to walk beside a river and join them in looking carefully at what's there - maybe a dragonfly or a water strider. The more you know, the more you can share, and hopefully inspire them to learn to care also.

And also you can talk about how their lives can be better with more nature and environmental protection in it. Maybe start a discussion about how there's less air pollution now and so people are feeling better, or on how walking or cycling instead of driving is good for physical and mental health - focusing on the positives of how they can benefit.

5. Did you find it challenging to make yourself heard/prominent especially not having many seats in the House of Commons as the rest of the parties? One of the particular frustrations is that when the media do come to us - and we get far less coverage than the support we win in elections - it is most commonly on a narrow range of subjects. On benefits policy, we've long been championing a universal basic income - so that no one is left penniless, and in education calling for the abolition of Ofsted and SATS. Those are just two examples of policy areas in which the Green Party has led and others have slowly followed, but we still most often get called up on narrowly environmental subjects. I often noted that in the first couple of years of my leadership when I appeared on television it was usually in front of a picture of a wind turbine, or on really bad days, a rubbish tip. It was a real breakthrough moment when BBC Radio Four's Westminster Hour invited me on to talk about benefits policy - a great chance to talk about universal basic income, something I'll be doing again in the House on Thursday.
6. Do you feel the current government is doing its best to tackle environmental issues especially during this Covid-19 pandemic? I'm going to divide that answer into two parts - before Covid-19, absolutely not. Expanding airport capacity and building new roads is utterly not compatible with our climate commitments, nor is HS2, or our failure in England to put a penny of public money into home energy efficiency - ensuring everyone has a low-carbon, warm, comfortable home is something the government obviously needs to do. And we were expecting a new food strategy for England out about now - that's another crucial area of government inaction.

In the middle of the epidemic, the government's focus is inevitably and naturally on that, but it should also be - and it clearly isn't - thinking about the transformation of society. We are going to have to enormously change our societies, and in the invest we're going to need afterwards, the types of companies and businesses we choose to spend public money supporting through it, we are creating the new environmental conditions.

7. How can I keep things simple and not too expensive to reduce plastic use? The real cost of something isn't necessarily reflected on the price tag. Supermarkets like fruit and vegetables wrapped in plastic - they're easier to manage, need fewer staff to handle and they force people to buy in quantity - three courgettes even if you only want one. But we all pay - financially in waste disposal costs for local councils and environmentally in terms of pollution and emissions.

So we need to make sure the real price is carried by the supermarket, not the rest of us. But some things might need to be more expensive, which is one reason why poverty is a climate emergency issue. I did a little comparison at my local Lidl and "loose" fruit and

vegetables were roughly double the price of the plastic-wrapped. I'm not going to blame anyone for buying the cheaper plastic-encased option if they are struggling financially, or even just getting by. The problem is the system, and inadequate incomes.

8. Palm oil is a large contributor to global warming and Indonesia produces 34.5 million tons of it every year, how can Indonesia sort this issue? Indonesia consumes only a tiny fraction of the palm oil it produces. It is mostly countries in the Global North - us - so it is our problem even more than theirs. We hear a lot of talk of "sustainable" palm oil, but there is essentially no such thing. We have to ask if we really need many of the products it is used in, from cosmetics to heavily manufactured food. Certainly for the latter, we'd be far healthier and better off without it, moving our meals and snacks to locally grown fruit and vegetables instead, and our waters would benefit from less unnecessary products for home and ourselves - which are usually supplied in plastic bottles. And that would open the way for Indonesia to grow more healthy local food for itself, while allowing the rewilding or restoration of other areas for wildlife and carbon stores.
9. Shouldn't we stop using paper as well? Because it is made by trees? As I said in the talk, paper bags - which use trees (although they could and should when they're necessary use recycled fibre instead) - are not a replacement solution for plastic. Their climate change impacts are about the same. Instead we should stop using all unnecessary single-use plastic, which is nearly all of it - certainly nearly all of it that we find in shops.
10. How long do you think we have to reduce our CO2 emissions and plastic waste to save our earth? The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change told us in 2018 that we have 12 years on the climate emergency. That's a simplified picture, but broadly it is clear that we have to turn our economic structures and societies around in the next 10 years - to have warm, comfortable, insulated homes, walking, cycling and public transport the natural way to make most journeys, much more fresh, local, plant-based food, and of course conversion to renewable energy. On plastic there isn't such a simple target - ideally we'd have stopped choking the planet decades ago. All we can do now is aim to slash production and use of plastics - keeping it only for truly essential and manageable purposes such as maintaining sterility of medical instruments and objects that will be used for many years and recycled at their end.
11. What animal has suffered the most due to plastic waste? There's three ways of looking at that, it seems to me. If you are asking what is the largest number of animals affected, then that's almost certainly salps (zooplankton), microscopic animals that graze on microscopic algae in the oceans, and pick up microplastics while they do that. ([More here](#))

If you think of numbers of animals being killed by plastic waste, I think seabirds would probably be the largest group. Over the last 60 years their numbers are down by two-thirds and plastic is certainly part of the cause. I recently read *The Seabird's Cry* by Adam Nicholson, which is a great source on the issue of seabird decline.

But the species most affected are those who are already endangered and at risk of extinction - and there sea turtles and mammals are a huge concern. ([This article](#) has a list of some of the individual tragedies.)

12. My school has swapped out plastic bottles for cans, is that any better? are glass and aluminium better options than single-use plastic bottles? And is it still “single use” if the plastics are recycled? The recycling rates for glass and aluminium are much better, being easier for recycling plants to handle and particularly for aluminium, having a ready market for the recycled product. And they don’t have the same wildlife-damaging impacts, generally, should they escape recycling. But the best thing would be to get rid of the containers overall and drink water from a tap - which is also by far the cheapest option. Soft drinks are poor for our health, and a piece of fruit would be far healthier than a bottle of juice. Glass milk bottles can be refilled. It is always worth referring to what is known as the “waste pyramid”. “Reduce”, not using something at all, is by far the best option, and next up is re-use, so for example the milk bottles. Recycling is a poor third choice.
13. When do you think this climate crisis will end or do you think we can put climate change to a stop? As I think I said in the talk, history isn’t pre-written, it is made. What happens in the coming years depends on the political choices that we make. The rise of our destructive, consumption-driven society wasn’t inevitable - we made bad choices over recent decades, but we can make better ones. It is in our collective hands, and everyone can play a part in directing us into the right paths.
14. Do you ever get into arguments over petitions? Not arguments, but people often ask me if they are worth signing. My answer is yes - there is an impact, and politicians and bureaucrats do notice them. But it is important they are regarded as part of a broader political campaign, rather than the solution to a problem. If you’ve set up or signed a petition, the next thing to ask is “what else can we do?”
15. Do you think that veganism is a useful solution, or is it just a way of pushing blame from companies onto the consumer? We need to collectively slash the quantities of meat that we produce by ending the practice of factory farming. There are many reasons for that: climate, air and water pollution, the fact that it is food waste to feed grains and protein to animals when it could be human food, and anti-microbial resistance. (I wrote about this [here](#) last week.) And it would be good for human health. That’s always my focus, rather than what individuals eat.
16. How are you coping with your job now that we are in lockdown? And is there less litter now because of the current situation? I have learnt that “Zoom fatigue” is a thing. I’ve spent six hours on calls a couple of days and it is surprisingly tiring. But personally, I’m very privileged by having a house and a garden (and an allotment) - I think of people in cramped flats and overcrowded houses, and know how lucky I am. And having been an only child, with no brothers or sisters, I’m very used to being on my own.

Because there is far less use of takeaway shops, and generally less consumption, litter is clearly down. But certainly not gone away.

17. Have you ever been to other countries and record on which country has the most plastic waste? Visiting many countries in continental Europe, I've seen many of them have better management systems than we have. In Germany and Scandinavia, bottle deposit schemes are just normal and accepted, so if someone did put a bottle into the waste or litter with it, someone would almost certainly pick it up to get the deposit money. And in France even major supermarkets have for some time had bulk foods like nuts, pasta and flour that you can put into your own bags or containers - it is also just regarded as standard while we've only just started to think about doing that. And impressionistically, we seem to have more of a litter problem than most other countries in Europe.

18. Do you think that new generations will not use plastic as much to save the environment? We are already seeing people use much less plastic - it is the public who is leading on this, with companies chasing after them and the government running a very poor third. (I wrote about this a couple of years ago for the [Green European Journal](#).)

19. Who or what inspired you to move to Britain? When I came to Britain in 1990 as a backpacker, I touched the wall of St Bartholomew the Great church in London and thought "This is one thousand years old." For an Australian into history, who'd grown up in a city where a Victorian house was considered "really old", I found walking streets occupied for millennia mindblowing in the best possible way. Of course Australia has a vastly older, continuous tradition in Aboriginal culture, but sadly when I was young very little was taught - or even broadly known - about it. It's only recently with brilliant books like [Dark Emu](#) that many aspects of that culture have started to be explored in generally accessible ways.

I also was captivated by the way in which across Europe, if not so much in Britain, much of life is lived communally in public spaces. In Australia, my suburban childhood didn't involve such spaces. Each nuclear family moved around in a car, which was parked in the driveway, maybe occasionally visited other similar families, but never mixed with other varied people in public spaces. The last time I was back in Australia in the early 1990s, having become "Europeanised", I walked a kilometre or so to a shopping mall. There was no pavement, and passing drivers were slowing down to look at this strange phenomenon of a person, walking (and not with a dog).

20. Is it hard talking in public in front of lots of people? Many years ago, someone told me about talking in public, that if people remember one thing you've said, you've done well. If they remember three things, you've done really well. If you think back to the last talk - (or perhaps lesson :-)) that you attended, you'll probably find that is broadly true. So if you focus on trying to get across those top messages, you really don't have to worry about how you stumbled over your words in the third sentence. Literally, the only person who is going to think about that is you. And the best way I've found of overcoming nervousness is to throw yourself into every opportunity to speak, to groups big and small, whenever you can. The more you do the easier it gets. It was presenting a two-hour community radio programme on university radio for a year that really got me



comfortable in front of a microphone. I generally thought no one was listening - and perhaps no one was - but it gave me lots of practice of different circumstances. And it is hard to stay nervous hour after hour.