

# Climate Activism

## A Before you start

Have you participated in any kind of climate protests? If yes, which ones? What do you think is helpful for fighting the climate crisis?



## B Reading

Read this transcript of a recent podcast.

*Rita:* Hey there, thank you for stopping by for this new episode of my podcast “Rita Rants”. And welcome back to this first episode after the Christmas break. I hope all of you had a wonderful holiday. I sure had an interesting Christmas experience: Instead of having our traditional roast turkey for Christmas dinner, we had steaks from the grill. And no, I didn’t travel to Australia or Hawaii for Christmas this year. The weather here was so unseasonably warm that we were able to cook outside. Sounds fun, I know, but, well, to be honest it’s not a very good sign. Come to think of it, it’s actually pretty scary.

Temperatures are rising. The seven warmest years in the record book ever since 1880 have all occurred since 2014, and this is having horrendous consequences for the environment. More than one million species are facing extinction, including gorillas, tigers, turtles, blue whales and monarch butterflies. Our oceans are also suffering due to climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction. In fact, more than 40% of the ocean is gravely affected and about 75% of the world’s reefs are threatened. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, two-thirds of extreme weather events in the last 20 years were influenced by humans. There are four times as many floods and heavy rains compared to 1980. Droughts and wildfires are becoming more and more common. These natural disasters due to human induced climate change are creating a refugee crisis because people who live in endangered areas are seeking higher ground or clean water. To sum it all up in one sentence: climate change is threatening our existence and could be irreversible by 2030, which is right around the corner.

Therefore, voices of climate activists are becoming increasingly loud and calling for profound changes in climate politics. While climate activists are all essentially fighting for the same goal, they use different approaches for reaching goals such as the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, saving the rain forest or saving endangered species. For today’s episode, I have invited two very special guests: Robert is here from the global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion, who believes that real change will only come about by mass civil disobedience and disruption. Sophia is a member of Greenpeace, a widely known and well-established organisation. Welcome Robert and Sophia, thank you so much for joining me today!

*Sophia:* Hi Rita, thank you for having us.

*Robert:* Hello. It’s a pleasure to be here.

*Rita:* Robert, Extinction Rebellion was founded in 2018, but tell us, what is Extinction Rebellion all about? What are your main goals? What strategies do you use?

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**Robert:** We have three main goals. First of all, we want the British government to declare an official climate emergency in order to accentuate the urgency to act now so that greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced to net-zero by 2025. That's why the government must create a citizens' assembly on climate and economic justice – which is our second goal.

Citizens' assemblies are fair and transparent and are not under the influence of powerful companies, the media or public opinion, as are elected politicians. So they produce informed democratic decisions, which politicians can then follow with less fear of political backlash. And thirdly, we want global warming to be treated not only as an environmental problem, but as the problem it is – an existential one. This calls for more radical measures than just collecting signatures for petitions. Unfortunately, our government is only mildly moved by petitions, so they can easily be ignored. But when you block a road, which is one of our tactics, people are forced to take notice and the media coverage we are receiving shows its effectiveness. Members of Extinction Rebellion are willing to take risks, such as being arrested. In fact, we use mass arrests as a tactic to generate attention.

**Sophia:** I'm sorry to interrupt, Robert, but this is where I see a flaw in your tactics. These mass arrests waste police time and resources, which might be crucially needed elsewhere. And besides, the way you're casually talking about arrest undermines the negative experiences of, for example, ethnic minorities suffering imprisonment in the UK or people demonstrating for basic human rights in other countries.

And you're making it sound as if Greenpeace hasn't achieved anything through more "conservative" tactics, as you might put it. But we have, lots of times. Thanks to Greenpeace, a huge multinational food company with one of the biggest and richest global supply chains in the world made a 'no deforestation commitment'. And as of the end of 2021, 97.2% of this corporation's forest-risk products were assessed as deforestation-free.

**Rita:** That is true. And thanks for not mentioning the name. We can probably all guess the name, but there's no need to give them free advertising. However, soon after they made that commitment in 2010, that company postponed indefinitely their initial goal of being completely deforestation-free by 2020. On the other hand, Greenpeace has forced governments to make changes to protect our planet. In 2022, after an intense campaign by Greenpeace, destructive bottom trawling, which is a kind of industrial, large-scale fishing, was banned in four vital ocean habitats, protecting a large variety of sea-creatures.

**Robert:** I am not trying to deny that Greenpeace has in fact made an impact, but to put it bluntly it is simply not enough. We are running out of time. 2030 is right around the corner, which marks the end of the decade of green innovation! If we want to save our habitat, we need to make fundamental changes. Civil disobedience has been successful before and we believe it will help further our cause. In lots of cases, it's the only way to really draw attention to the core problem. Look at the suffragettes in the 1920s, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s or the more recent Polish and East German democracy movements – civil disobedience was one of their main strategies for success. And where would we be today without them?

**Sophia:** Are you sure you're drawing attention to the core problem here? Aren't you actually shifting attention away from the discussion about the best actions to take in order to save our environment and to the discussion of whether your roadblocks are good or bad? On top of that, aren't you risking scaring away potential supporters by your controversial actions and just generating vague, unfocused frustration in the population? What about the people just trying to get to work or pick up their kids? And think about it: people's lives might actually be endangered by your roadblocks, preventing ambulances from passing by to either reach a person in need or take them to hospital. Does endangering other people's lives really justify a higher cause?

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*Rita:* With these questions, Sophia, I think you're finally getting to the core of this discussion – negative attention. And as Robert told me right before recording this conversation, he's convinced that drastic strategies are necessary and have been effective so far. Is that correct, Robert?

*Robert:* Totally! Climate change is endangering lives on a much larger scale than these protests ever could.

*Rita:* Nonetheless, as 2022 came to an end, Extinction Rebellion made a resolution to “temporarily shift away from public disruption as a primary tactic”, as stated on your website. Within the movement the decision was quite controversial.

*Robert:* It was. And some people argue that Extinction Rebellion is losing its credibility, but we believe that constantly evolving measures are vital to keeping the movement alive.

*Rita:* Alive and kicking, so to speak. Thank you so much, Sophia and Robert, for being part of my podcast today and for the very lively and interesting discussion. And thank you, listeners, for once again tuning into “Rita Rants”. We hope it has given you some food for thought. Tune in again next week!

## C After you read

### 1. Comprehension

- Find at least eight adjectives in the podcast that have a negative meaning in the given context. With a partner or in a small group, discuss how changing the adjectives can alter the message. How can you make the message more or less threatening by using different words?
- How would you explain the difference between an environmental and an existential problem?
- Sum up Sophia's criticism of Extinction Rebellion's tactics.
- What makes the story of the large international corporation a good example of Greenpeace's success?
- In what ways could Greenpeace's impact be “simply not enough”?
- Explain in your own words what Sophia means by “shifting attention”.

### 2. Research

What other organizations use civil disobedience to fight climate change? What are some similarities and differences between these organizations? What are their aims? What strategies do they use? Can you find any organizations that use even more extreme measures to fight global warming and its consequences?

### 3. Speaking

One of Extinction Rebellion's first major actions on 17 October 2018 was to occupy the London Greenpeace offices. To what extent did that make sense?

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## 4. Discussion

Read about these three events of civil disobedience by climate activists below. What underlying problems did they hope to address? To what extent could these protests be criticised or commended?

- a) On 30 June 2022, two supporters from the UK activist group “Just Stop Oil” poured tomato soup across one of Vincent van Gogh’s sunflower paintings, which was behind protective glass, at the National Gallery in London. They then proceeded to glue their hands to the wall. They had t-shirts on with the name of the activist group printed on it.
  
- b) On 30 August 2021, a group of seven members of the German activist group Letzte Generation began a hunger strike in front of the Reichstag in Berlin. The activists’ main demand was a public discussion with the three candidates for chancellor.
  
- c) On 5 November 2022, hundreds of environmental activists from Extinction Rebellion stormed an area at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport which houses private jets. They stopped private jets from leaving the airport by sitting in front of their wheels and riding around the airfield on bicycles.

### C After you read

#### 1. Comprehension

- a) Adjectives: pretty scary, horrendous, grave, extreme, heavy, threatening, irreversible, existential, destructive, drastic, crucial
- b) An existential problem is much more severe and urgent than “just” an environmental one. In the case of our world, by not reacting soon enough to environmental problems we have created existential problems which immediately threaten the lives of hundreds of millions of people.
- c) Sophia believes the tactic of mass arrests is wasteful and disrespectful. In addition, she thinks this and other extreme tactics and the debate about their justification distract from the real problems at hand.
- d) It's a good example because it's such a powerful global company. And if Greenpeace has the ability to influence a huge multinational food company, then it shows Greenpeace's authority in the world.
- e) It could be “not enough” because in the case of the multinational corporation, it doesn't really affect individuals or our everyday lives. Not enough people are made aware of the drastic dangers our environment faces. The tactics they use are at a higher level, aimed more at politicians than civilians.
- f) Sophia means that Extinction Rebellion is taking the spotlight away from the environmental problems we face by putting their tactics in the focus of the media, politicians and individuals and their discussions.

#### 2. Research

Other groups: Fridays for Future, Last Renewal, Last Generation, Just Stop Oil, Scientist Rebellion, Guardian Rebellion, Declare Emergency, Fireproof Australia, Insulate Britain, Save Old Growth, Earth First!, Sea Shepherd. Earth Liberation Front describes their group as using “economic sabotage and guerrilla warfare to stop the exploitation and destruction of the environment”. Members have been described as eco-terrorists.

#### 4. Discussion

- a) Statements from the activists: What is worth more: art or life? Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people?  
Criticism: attacking a piece of art revered around the world alienates people otherwise supportive of climate activism; the messes created by the climate activists have to be cleaned up by others, namely working class people.  
Rebuttal: art is not necessarily innocent; museums and art galleries are sometimes connected with oil companies and receive funding from them; this is referred to as “artwashing”; by fighting for climate justice, they are also fighting for social and economic justice and total system change
- b) Statements from the activists: We're young, but we are prepared to risk our lives to save others. Our only wish is that we have a future. We demand a discussion with politicians about how the young generation is being left without a chance for survival.
- c) Information from an Oxfam report: While private jets account for a tiny fraction of global greenhouse emissions, the world's richest 1% produce more than double the emissions of the poorest 50%, and a single billionaire produces a million times more emissions than an average person.