

Jun 27, 2016 12:34 BST

EXPERT COMMENT: Save the environment from posh crusties – it’s a working-class issue too

[Mike Jeffries](#), Teaching Fellow in Ecology at Northumbria University, writes about climate change for *The Conversation*.

Environmentalism is often belittled as an indulgence for the affluent. This is not simply an existential criticism, but also a potent ploy to head off any environmental argument before it can gain traction.

The tactic has merit. Contemporary environmentalism’s roots make easy targets, whether it is the bunny-hugging activism of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth born in late-1960s West Coast America or the more genteel concerns about ladies decked out in egret feathers which gave rise to the UK’s [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) (RSPB) or the National Trust’s rapture for “beauty and historic interest”. Even today, a new Oxford study found the people most interested in environment news tended to be [left-wing, older and highly educated](#).

If the charge of affluence was not awkward enough, the ammunition to defend the environment is often provided by these same boffins. Being an expert is now an automatic disadvantage in any debate, even before leading Brexit campaigner Michael Gove’s recent [assertion](#) that “people in this country have had enough of experts”.

All too often, the environment’s advocates can be portrayed as outsiders, an elite, out of touch. This antagonism is also a curse for the disadvantaged and excluded around the world, who have pressing environmental concerns, but maybe not the same as those of the experts.

In the early 2000s the Joseph Rowntree Trust worked with residents in poor areas of the UK. Their environment mattered dearly to them, but it was litter or dog poo, municipal tidiness and their immediate surroundings [that were important](#). When asked about the likes of WWF or the National Trust, people responded: “Locally you have no contact with them”. The burden of day-to-day problems was harsh enough, with residents explaining how: “I don’t think in the long term ... I live for the day and see what tomorrow brings”. The [Anthropocene](#) can seem a long way away when you are struggling to feed a family.

In the [developing world](#) a similar outlook prevails. In equatorial Cameroon locals were once [asked about attitudes to protected areas](#), forested peaks internationally famed for their endemic biodiversity: “We didn’t even know the parks existed”, people said, or: “We couldn’t hunt where we used to hunt”. Again, the burden of everyday survival trumps the long term conservation.

The same tensions cloud the use of big-game hunting [as a device for conservation in southern Africa](#). If local people living next to large, dangerous, disease-carrying wildlife can have some financial reward maybe they will put up with the other costs and threats. This reward could be permits to legally hunt elephants, for instance. In the UK these huge animals are understandably popular, as they live in loving, protective families and are seemingly [aware of their own mortality](#). Yet British people don’t have to [put up with](#) elephants destroying their own family’s reserves of food.

In each case the classic themes of environmentalism, such as climate change, air quality or biodiversity can miss a profound appreciation of the environment among local communities. One of my favourite examples is from my part of the world, documented by the photographer Chris Steele-Perkins in his book [Northern Exposure](#). This is the white working class of north-east England, out in the countryside, enjoying the landscape and wildlife, but not bird watching or visiting historic monuments. This is the countryside of ferreting, rough shooting and whippet racing in an eerie rural periphery of industrial decay.

This is not respectable environmentalism – not a world where academic expertise carries any credit – and yet it is a deeply ingrained and heartfelt culture, rooted in place and land. It is an appreciation of the natural world run through with violence and sentimentality, but one without much sympathy for outsiders who want to impose their version of the countryside.

For example a [new opencast coal mine](#) is planned for Druridge Bay in Northumberland, a wild coastline of big skies, North Sea fog and rare wildlife. The plan has met expertly argued opposition from the [RSPB, National Trust and Wildlife Trust](#) along with many local residents. De-carbonisation, climate change, protected species: opponents are able to call on a full house of expertise-led reasoning.

However other locals are vehemently in favour of the mine and dismissive of the opposition. As one resident writes on a [Facebook group](#) supporting the development: “the tree huggers give nothing and cost hardworking men their bonus and overtime at work, some of those depend on that extra money to look after their families”. The criticism is not only of the opponents but essentially a conflict of class and culture.

These schisms are desperately sad and are exploited ruthlessly by powerful lobbies who have as little concern for the Cameroonian villagers, or County Durham ferreters, as they do for the environment. And experts are all too easy to portray as boffins in ivory towers, wasting taxpayers' money on daft research – people whose out of touch ideas hit ordinary people – [hardworking families](#).

Experts should be less surprised by this tactic – crocodile tears over their research are used to negate debate. But equally, experts might be more fun than sceptics realise, maybe invite a boffin out ferreting? Then those local environmentalists, who feel left behind may find they too have some powerful allies on their side.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

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