

## **Race and the Environmental Emergency: Call for Written Evidence**

Wildlife and Countryside Link response – November 2023

*Wildlife and Countryside Link is a coalition of 80 organisations working for the protection of nature. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.*

This response is supported by the following Link members:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- Born Free Foundation
- CIEEM
- CPRE
- Earth Trust
- Froglife
- Institute of Fisheries Management
- League Against Cruel Sports
- Open Spaces Society
- People's Trust for Endangered Species
- WWT

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The health, wellbeing and prosperity of nature and people are inextricable. The current crises our world faces—rising global temperatures, declining biodiversity, increasing disease and mental illness burden, and significant social, health, and economic inequalities—are all interconnected.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is a coalition of 80 environmental organisations in England committed to protecting the natural environment. [Link recognises](#) that people are at the core of our work. People are essential to nature's future: so, we must make our movement and our policies more inclusive and representative in order to deliver effective environmental policy for nature, for all. Nature is essential to all people's future: so we must ensure that our policy recommendations ensure that all people have the right to a healthy natural environment, all people must have access to nature (e.g.,

high-quality accessible green and blue spaces nearby, public rights of way), and all people must be empowered to connect with nature and play a meaningful role in restoring and protecting the environment around them to address the ecological and climate crises.

Environmental action should have people at its heart. In addition to the moral imperative to include people and communities who have been historically excluded and are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change, and the extensive social, health and economic co-benefits for people from action to ensure a high-quality natural environment, especially in relation to physical health and mental wellbeing, an inclusive and representative environmental movement is a stronger one. We cannot address the crises without people from all backgrounds being involved.

### Questions:

#### **1. What are the key drivers behind the climate crisis and who are the main contributors to global emissions?**

The key drivers of the climate crisis are human activities that produce and increase the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This includes but is not limited to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, and land-use change – including the expansion and intensification of agriculture, and deforestation.

The Global North and higher income countries are disproportionately responsible for global carbon emissions. Data from the [Global Carbon Project](#) shows that just 23 of these countries are responsible for half of all historical CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, including the US, the UK, and much of Western Europe. These countries account for just 12% of the current global population. These countries are also responsible for the greatest emissions per capita. More than 150 countries are responsible for the other half of historical emissions.

In 2020, it was reported that [just 20 fossil fuel firms](#) are responsible for a third of global emissions, and that [just 100](#) investor and state-owned fossil fuel companies are responsible for 70% of historic emissions. The [richest 5% of the world's population](#) were responsible for over a third of emissions growth between 1990-2015. The total increase in emissions from the richest 1% was three times more than that of the poorest 50%. In 2022, [research showed](#) that 125 billionaires are each responsible for one million times more emissions than the average person.

Those who have contributed the least to global emissions are [disproportionately impacted](#) by the impacts of climate change and the nature crisis.

#### **2. How does the climate crisis disproportionately affect black and minority ethnic communities within the UK and internationally?**

Environmental degradation [occurs disproportionately](#) in or around low-income areas and where a higher percentage of ethnically diverse people live, both globally and within the UK. Research from [NPC's](#)

'[Everyone's Environment' programme](#) and from [the Runnymede Trust and Greenpeace](#) shows that on average, people from ethnic minority communities within the UK are more affected by the climate and nature crises than White British people. This [is a result](#) of both historical and systemic racism and societal inequity. This has negative implications for both physical and mental health, and relating to income, skills, and jobs.

Ethnic minority communities [are particularly vulnerable](#) to the nature and climate crises due to how this intersects with [health inequalities](#) and with socioeconomic inequalities. People from ethnic minority communities are disproportionately represented in lower-income households and economically deprived urban areas in the UK. These communities are more likely to live in poorly adapted or overcrowded housing, and in neighbourhoods with greater air pollution and a lack of access to green spaces, and are therefore more likely to have greater vulnerability and have less access to the resources needed to address the impacts of nature and climate crisis.

For example, health issues arising from [heatwaves and hot weather](#) may be exacerbated by poorly adapted urban housing, as may [health issues arising from damp](#), further worsened by heavy rainfall and flooding. Air pollution is particularly significant, responsible for health impacts including asthma, some cancers, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Ethnic minority communities are [more likely to live in areas](#) known to be permanently affected by air pollution. [Research shows](#) that waste incinerators in the UK are disproportionately built in low-income areas and neighbourhoods with high populations of people of colour.

As the NPC's report highlights, further evidence of the impact of climate change and nature decline on ethnic minority communities – both in the UK, and internationally – is required. Further research should take account of the nuances and variance between different ethnic minority communities, recognising that for different groups and communities of people, impacts will present and be felt differently.

### **3. What role has the UK played historically or currently in the climate and nature emergency and how does this intersect with racial inequality?**

As discussed under question 1, the UK - alongside much of the Global North and Western Europe - has contributed disproportionately to historic carbon emissions, driving climate change and nature loss at both the national and international scales.

The UK's role in the European colonial project has also driven the current climate and nature crises, through the unchecked extraction, exploitation and consumption of nature. The 2022 Sixth Assessment IPCC report [acknowledges colonialism](#) as both a driver of the climate crisis, and an ongoing driver of communities' vulnerability to it. Colonialism has driven the exploitation and erasure of the rights and knowledge of indigenous people, and the assertion of white, Western values and knowledge at the expense of other values and knowledges.

Racist colonial legacies [continue to frame](#) nature in the UK as a 'white space', and people of colour as '[out of place](#)' in these spaces and the environmental sector. The enduring influence of these legacies can

also be seen in how ethnically diverse people are disproportionately impacted by the nature and climate crises, and in how these intersect with broader health and socioeconomic inequalities, as discussed in previous questions.

#### **4. What further measures ought to be introduced in order to better protect communities of colour who are at risk from climate change?**

It is a joint nature and climate crisis that we are facing, and that is disproportionately harming and impacting people from ethnic minority communities. Measures are needed to address both the nature and climate crises, as opposed to treating these issues as separate and siloed.

Environmental action should have people at its heart. In addition to the moral imperative to include people and communities who have been historically excluded and are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change, and the extensive social, health and economic co-benefits for people from action to ensure a high-quality natural environment, especially in relation to physical health and mental wellbeing, an inclusive environmental movement is a stronger one. Greater inequalities of power and wealth lead to more environmental degradation. We cannot address the nature and climate crises without people from all backgrounds being involved.

The environmental sector is one of the least ethnically diverse in the UK, with [just 7% of staff](#) identifying as Black, Asian or from other minority ethnic groups. [In 2022](#), just 7% of senior leaders in the environment sector were people of colour, and just 11% of those in governance and trustee positions. [Research shows](#) that people of colour face significant barriers to joining environmental organisations in the first place, and then once in the sector, experience both overt and covert racism. People from ethnic minority communities do not feel listened to by policy makers, and [report distrust](#) as to whether environmental policy recognises the challenges and risks that they face.

The environmental sector must do more to increase ethnic diversity, to ensure that it is engaging with and making policies that reflect the needs and wants of everyone in society. Better including people from ethnic minority communities within the sector would increase understanding of the challenges faced by people of colour, and therefore help to identify potential solutions. An inclusive environmental movement will also [be better equipped](#) to address the global challenges of the nature and climate crises.

The Everyone's Environment Programme 2023 report '[How people from ethnic minority communities want charities and government to respond to the climate and nature crises](#)' identifies that people of colour want to see energy, housing and transport prioritised in environmental policy to help address the health and socioeconomic inequalities that exacerbate vulnerability to climate change and nature's decline.

This could include, for example, schemes to better insulate homes, more promotion and support of active travel such as walking and cycling, low emissions zones and tighter emissions standards to improve air pollution, greater investment in public transport, and greater provision of affordable renewable energy with policies to help those from ethnic minorities to access and benefit from these

options. This [May 2023 briefing](#) from NPC and the Race Equality Foundation explores and provides evidence for these ideas in greater detail.

## Air Pollution

### a) In your view, which social factors increase exposure to polluted air?

Both health and socioeconomic inequalities can increase exposure and vulnerability to air pollution. These factors include, but are not limited to; coming from a lower-income household or community, or a household in poverty; living in economically and/or environmentally deprived urban areas; living in overcrowded housing; living in privately rented housing; living in poorly adapted housing; having reduced access to health and medical care; living with a health or medical condition.

These health and socioeconomic factors intersect with historic and systemic racism to place ethnic minority communities at particular risk from air pollution. For example, as discussed, ethnic minority communities are [more likely to live in areas](#) known to be permanently affected by air pollution, and waste incinerators in the UK are [disproportionately built](#) in low-income areas and neighbourhoods with high populations of people of colour.

### b) To what extent does air pollution influence the health and wellbeing of the UK's Black and minority ethnic populations?

Air pollution is a significant contributor to health inequalities in the UK, and poorer health outcomes for lower income groups living in economically and environmentally deprived (urban) areas. Black and minority ethnic populations disproportionately make up these lower income groups, and are therefore [disproportionately impacted](#) by air pollution.

In the UK, [air pollution is the largest environmental risk](#) to public health. Overall, from 2010 to 2020, health inequalities actually increased in England. There are [health inequalities](#) between ethnic minority and white groups, and between different ethnic minority groups.

### c) What, if any, items of legislation could be introduced or amended to mitigate against the environmental impacts of air pollution?

[Retain Regulations 9 and 10 of the National Emission Ceilings Regulations 2018](#) (the “NEC Regulations”) and the Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2018/1522 (the “Implementing Decision”) from Schedule 1 of the Act, so that they are not removed from the statute books at the end of this year. These regulations provide a framework for robust plan making to ensure that emission reduction commitments can be met and a requirement to ensure that the public has a say in government policy. ClientEarth analysis has demonstrated that the removal of Regulations 9 and 10 and the Implementing

Decision would constitute a removal of protective legislation and the OEP has raised concerns that this could lead to a regression in environmental safeguards.

Introduce a new Environmental Rights [Bill](#) including a new human right to a healthy natural environment, including clean air. The Bill is complementary to “[Ella’s Law](#)” which addresses the specific issue of air quality. This Bill would require public bodies to act consistently with the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for everyone, or ensuring all people have access to clean air. This Bill focusses more broadly on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and the implementation of the Aarhus Convention.

We also wish to flag the recommendations on reducing air pollution [developed by the EFRA Committee inquiry on air quality](#), which had particular regard to reducing health inequalities.

## Green Spaces

### e) To what extent does access to green spaces influence the health and wellbeing of the UK’s Black and minority ethnic populations?

Access to quality green and blue spaces has a significant impact on both physical and mental health and wellbeing. [Research has shown](#) that when people are able to connect with nature, they tend to be happier, healthier, and more socially connected. [Evidence shows](#) positive associations between exposure to nature and improved cognitive function, brain activity, blood pressure, mental health, physical activity, and sleep. There is also evidence of protective effects from exposure to natural environments on mental health outcomes and cognitive function. People who live in areas with more green space [live longer](#). There is [evidence](#) that people exposed to poor quality environments are more likely to experience poorer health outcomes than people who enjoy good quality environments.

Access to and connection with nature can create [a positive feedback loop](#), as those with greater nature connectedness are also more likely to have pro-environmental behaviours, and therefore help contribute towards tackling nature and climate crises.

A lack of access to quality green and blue space is a contributing factor to health inequalities experienced by those from ethnically diverse groups and lower income communities. These groups are more likely to live in environmentally deprived areas, with a lack of access to nearby quality green and blue spaces. Ethnic minorities [are twice as likely](#) to live in nature-poor neighbourhoods. The most deprived communities in England (as ranked in England’s index of multiple deprivation) [are more than twice as likely as](#) wealthy communities to live in areas with a low amount of natural space per person. Black and Asian people are [also the least likely to have visited](#) the natural environment, according to a study in 2017. Thus, those who are at greatest risk of poor physical and mental health [have the least opportunity](#) to reap the benefits of greenspace.

**f) In your view, are there any cultural barriers which prevent Black and Minority Ethnic communities accessing rural green spaces?**

There are multiple, intersecting barriers that can prevent ethnically diverse people from accessing [urban](#) and rural green spaces. [These barriers](#) are structural, experiential, and cultural.

Structural barriers relate to the shortage of quality, nearby, accessible green spaces, and that the costs of visiting spaces further afield are often prohibitive.

Experiential barriers relate to ethnically diverse people being made to feel as though they do not belong in green spaces, whether overtly or covertly. The experience of racism in these spaces [can prevent people from ethnic minority backgrounds](#) from using green spaces.

Cultural barriers reflect that in the UK, it is White British cultural values that have been embedded into the design and management of green spaces, and into society's expectations of how people should be engaging with them. Racist colonial legacies that frame nature as a 'white space' create further barriers, suggesting that people of colour are not legitimate users of green spaces. The perception [that green spaces are dominated](#) by white people can prevent people from ethnic minority backgrounds from using green spaces. For example, people of colour led access organisations such as 'Black Girls Hike' and 'Muslim Hikers' are [routinely subjected](#) to racist comments and abuse both online and outdoors. These impacts can be passed on: people who are not used to visiting green spaces may be less confident in accessing green spaces. There is [evidence](#) that the presence or absence of positive childhood memories associated with green spaces had a significant influence on their use in adulthood.

These barriers mean that people of colour in the UK are [less likely to spend time in nature](#), and are deprived of the mental and physical benefits that green spaces can deliver. In 2021, [it was reported that](#) those from ethnic minority communities have, on average, 11 times less access to green space than White British communities, and that only 20% of children from ethnically diverse backgrounds who visit natural environments go to the countryside, compared with 40% of white children. This can also feed a ['generational disconnect'](#) for people of colour, further perpetuating stereotypes of not belonging and a sense of being 'out of place'.

**g) What, if any, pieces of legislation could be introduced or amended by local or national governments in the UK to increase access to green spaces for Minority Ethnic communities?**

A new [Environmental Rights Bill](#) would introduce a new human right to a healthy natural environment, including local high-quality green and blue spaces, could also help tackle existing inequalities through a [rights-based approach](#). This new right would require all public bodies, including local authorities, to recognise the right of equal access to nature and to ensure decision-making about urban green spaces includes all sectors of society.

We also recommend the Government set a legally-binding target for access to nature by putting the current Government policy commitment to provide access to high quality green and blue spaces for all people within a 15-minute walk of home on a statutory footing through the Environment Act 2021. A legally-binding target for access to nature would drive cross-Government action and investment. This must be supported by a national strategic plan for access to nature, to set out how the Government will deliver on its target, including policies, actions, and required funding. This strategy should recognise the importance of local government for the Government to achieve the target and provide the policy solutions and funding required to local authorities. The strategy must be cross-Government and cross-sector, recognising the multiple benefits of green infrastructure and the multiple Departments, sectors, and other stakeholders involved in planning, designing, delivering, and maintaining urban green spaces.

**e) How can the UK government address potential environmental based health problems in Black and minority ethnic individuals and communities?**

To address the inequalities in access to urban green spaces, solutions must tackle provision, physical and sociocultural barriers.

a. The presence of park staff, the involvement of diverse communities in planning, and inclusive community events are [commonly identified](#) as ways of building confidence among people who feel or are excluded from urban green spaces.

b. In-depth consultation with users and potential users of urban green space [is essential](#) to developing and managing urban green spaces that meet the needs of all people. In our view, this engagement with local communities and people should be initiated by local authorities when developing their local Green Infrastructure Strategy.

c. Crucially, addressing barriers to accessing urban green spaces and conducting in-depth consultation with local people to ensure accessibility and inclusivity of urban green spaces will require increased capacity and resources within local authorities. As a start, the Government should [pledge £5.5 billion over 5 years to local authorities](#) to level up urban green spaces. Funding should be prioritised to the most nature-deprived areas, as identified by the local Green Infrastructure Strategy. Core funding to support resource-stretched local authorities in the long-term is also needed.

d. Mandating the [Green Infrastructure Standards](#) in all new development and taking action to retrofit existing communities in line with the GI Standards will contribute to addressing inequalities, as the GI Standards include accessibility, quality, and consultation standards, including the Green Flag criteria, which provide a guide to ensuring local people from all sectors of the community are involved in decision-making and served by the green space.