



The British Environment

The environment is a hot topic at the moment and probably will be for years to come. Following the industrial revolution, it's fair to say that the UK has contributed vastly to global pollution and, as a result, consequences such as ozone-layer depletion and global warming. But what are we doing to overcome this and "put it right"?

Where do we stand?

Carbon dioxide emissions in the UK stood at 326.1 million tonnes in 2020 whilst greenhouse gas emissions were 414.1 million tonnes carbon dioxide equivalent making us the 17th most polluting country in the world, with China, the USA and India leading the list. Although this result is shockingly high, pollution is reducing in the UK, currently 48.8% lower than in 1990, just 30 years ago. Greenhouse gas emissions are reducing year on year and, although COVID and less transport helped enormously, carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions fell by 10.7% and 8.9% respectively.

What are the issues?

Perhaps the largest issue that the UK faces, like most other countries, is this huge emission of greenhouse gases. The UK is an industry-heavy nation that relies heavily on natural resources and fossil fuels and with an ever growing population, we seem to be contributing endlessly to the greenhouse effect. Surprisingly, the biggest culprit is the transport industry, namely private cars.

In 1971, there were just 19 million cars in the country and in 2021, there are around 31 million. In fact, LGVs and HGVs, buses and motorcycles have all increased in numbers. Having said that, the introduction of hybrid and electric vehicles to the automobile market in 2012 may prove to be effective in the long run. There are only 300,000 pure-electric vehicles and 600,000 hybrid vehicles to date but this number is growing rapidly year-on-year.

The second largest industry emitting greenhouse gases is the energy supply. Energy consumption is decreasing year on year and by 2019 was 142 million tonnes of oil equivalent. Petroleum, electricity, gas and solid fuel consumption are all decreasing whilst bioenergy is increasing, but the issue still remains. Investment in renewable energy is key to reducing the use of natural resources for energy. The UK's National Renewable Energy Plan intends to increase renewable energy sources in the UK and reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Today, 43% of electricity is renewable with just 35% from fossil fuels.

Next in line is general business, including industrial pollution, residential and household emissions and agriculture.

The sixth largest polluting industry is waste management. In 2018 the UK generated 222.2 million tonnes of total waste, around 392kg per person per year. Recycling is an increasingly popular habit with a rate of around 46% and this rate is growing each year. Brits are becoming more aware of the recycling possibilities with less biodegradable waste being sent to landfills and more packaging waste being recycled too.

Down towards the bottom we have land use and forestry. The UK is a relatively small island of just 242.5km² but deforestation is still an issue close to home. Only around 13% of UK land area is woodland, that's 3.23 million hectares but this used to be larger in the past. Over the past 10 years, 481,000 hectares have been destroyed. The UK is planting new trees but with a rate of around 13,000 hectares annually, this may not be enough.

Litter is also a non-environmental and expensive problem the UK faces, costing the taxpayer £1 billion annually. This is a combination of any waste, such as cigarette butts or food packets left around on the ground. Littering is illegal in the UK and if you are caught doing this, you can be fined up to £2,500. One of the largest organisations trying to combat Brits littering is Keep Britain Tidy, who organise litter picking sessions where Brits can volunteer to get the country clean.

What are we doing to solve them?

Eco-warriors, although not generally popular with the general public, play a huge role in the UK. The biggest names around are Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. They are known for their dramatic protests, glueing themselves to motorways and runways and blockading ports. Although they don't tend to result in environmental policy change they do always make the headlines.

There are a number of environmental NGOs in the UK too. Most notably, Green Alliance, Friends of the Earth and The Wildlife Trust. Each NGO works towards a specific environmental goal. Through adverts and word-of-mouth from these NGOs, the people of the UK are slowly starting to realise the impact that climate change could have on the world.

The government has set an ambitious environmental policy, most notably through the Environment Bill 2020, which is a 25-year plan that aims to protect the environment. Some key points are;

- To reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, including investing more in low-carbon means
- To host the COP26 Climate Change conference
- To continue with carbon pricing, taxing industries for overusing carbon and increasing fuel duty tax with the abolition of diesel cars and vans by 2030
- To further The Energy Company Obligation requiring all energy firms in the UK to increase energy efficiency in the home, including the implementation of smart meters
- To increase spending on cleantech research and development alongside all countries from the Paris Climate Conference

In conclusion, steps are being made to work towards a more environmentally-friendly globe. Whether it's too little too late, we'll find out in the future.

Resources

- <https://www.racfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/car-ownership-in-great-britain-leibling-171008-report.pdf>
- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972583/2020_Provisional_emissions_statistics_report.pdf
- <https://www.nextgreencar.com/electric-cars/statistics/>
- <http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/CO2-emissions>
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