



# Are you an eco-hypocrite?

**Recycling. Electric cabbing. Not eating meat. All in a day's fighting back for Samuel Fishwick. Well sort of. Welcome to the conflicted life of a London climate helper**



### Eco-compromises

I don't plant a lot of trees, which makes me feel even worse (to be fair, this is no loss to the arboreal community, given I splashed out on an £80 kumquat tree from a garden centre in a fit of pique and it is currently dying a very sad death in my garden). I cycle, but will hop in a non-electric cab when drunk. I eat less meat than I used to, but still default to a grab-and-go burger



in a rush. Forgetting my keep cup won't stop me guiltily purchasing a morning coffee.

I'm a huge hypocrite. This sets me in an awkward position between two furious opponents at loggerheads. On the one hand, the finger-pointers: those lambasting the hypocrisy of celebrities doing their best and, well, me. Could I have taken an extra day off work to board a train to my holiday on the France-Spain border this year at a lower carbon cost? Yes. Was I too impatient to do so? Also yes.

On the other hand, I fear the castigation of my ecologically minded peers. I'm wary of what some call the cult of 'zerology' (no nuance or compromise, no attempt to lash together good

enough solutions). From that perspective, XR co-founder Roger Hallam's manifesto can be viewed as a bloody call-to-arms: 'The only way to prevent our extinction is through mass-participation civil disobedience – thousands of people breaking the laws of our governments until they are forced to take action; if they don't, we will bring them down. And yes, some may die in the process.'

### Eco-complexities

But Dr Gail Bradbrook, another of XR's co-founders, strikes a more conciliatory note. 'To be creating mass disruption and making no personal changes will obviously lead to accusations of hypocrisy,' she tells me. 'And I do personally believe that we should try to operate with integrity and enact some of the changes we know are needed. However, my own experience of trying to live in a much better way is that I can manage it more when I feel less pressured – at other times I slip. Especially being a mum and sometimes over-busy.' In any case, she says, as an environmentalist you can't win – if you work 'really hard at being green then you are accused of being privileged enough to do that, or being judgemental. I always feel it is better to own our hypocrisy.'

Bradbrook points out that figures from climatologist professor Kevin Anderson show that 50 per cent of emissions come from 10 per cent of the population – so the burden should fall less on the individual than the state. Yet a

climate of eco-anxiety is taking a toll on mental health. Caroline Hickman, a teaching fellow at the University of Bath and member of the Climate Psychology Alliance, who has been a psychotherapist for more than 20 years, says it's imperative that we're more forgiving. 'That whole drive to perfectionism is worrying, particularly when it's around young people. We've already got an epidemic of self-harming, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders in young people, and we don't need something else to feel bad about,' she says.

## When it comes to taking an eco-cheat day, I'm in illustrious company

### Eco-guilt

'I have clients talking about their feelings of guilt of having babies, feeling guilty towards the child, and towards the planet, or I have people guilty because they're booking flights,' explains Hickman. 'One of the worst things any human being can do is aim for perfection, because you're setting yourself up for a constant cycle of starving yourself of something possible to achieve. I'd rather you directed that energy to some healthy engagement with the planet and yourself in relation to the planet.'

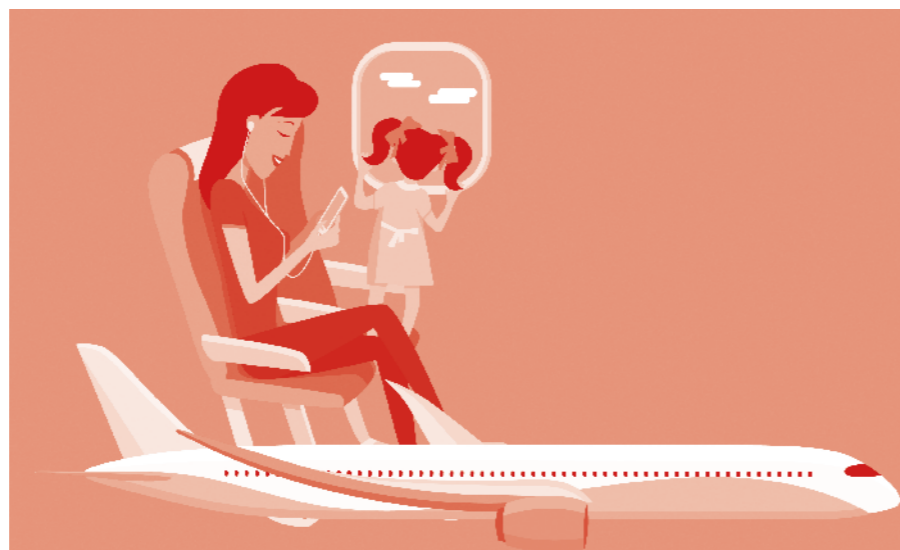
Anna Hughes, who leads the UK's no-flying movement, says that climate emergency means we have to change everything about the way we live, and that some people refuse to see that – so perhaps it will take shaming to make them understand. 'We can't afford to be forgiving – because our children will not forgive us,' she says, adding that it's worth setting the bar high. 'Zero waste is ultimately impossible, so most of us doing our damndest is better than a couple of us getting it absolutely spot on.' <<

The only thing worse than an eco-hypocrite is realising you are one. 'Think of the turtles,' I said to my friend at a Dulwich pub last December, impounding her plastic straw with the punctilious sanctimony of a teacher confiscating a pea shooter, then showing her the viral video of a sea turtle struggling as a 12cm plastic straw is dislodged from its nostril with a set of pliers. That friend and I haven't been for a drink since.

Still, I considered sacrificing my social life for sea life a noble cause, driving this plastic straw amnesty with zeal. I wrote newspaper articles about the damage caused by the surfeit of single-use plastics in the marine environment, tweeted about it vigorously, and stored the fruits of my enforced cull in my rucksack. Then, one morning, nursing a hangover, I tried one of those paper alternatives that suck all the joy out of a McDonald's milkshake, reached for one of the plastic straws in my confiscated collection and relapsed. What a sucker.

When it comes to taking an eco-cheat day, I'm in illustrious company. Prince Harry devoted a chunk of the *Vogue* September 2019 issue, guest-edited by his wife, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, to espouse their determination to be kinder to the planet by having only two children. But he then

drew widespread condemnation for reportedly boarding a private jet to Google's climate camp in Sicily, alongside A-listers Leonardo DiCaprio and Katy Perry (the last leg of Harry's journey was apparently by helicopter). Dame Emma Thompson, the actor and inveterate campaigner against climate change, rallied Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists from atop a pink boat in Oxford Street – prompting a backlash when it transpired that she'd flown 5,400 miles to attend. 'Unfortunately, sometimes I have to fly,' she told the BBC, 'but I don't fly nearly as much as I did because of my carbon footprint and I plant a lot of trees.' Extinction Rebellion demands we reach zero emissions by 2025, long before the Government's promise of 2050. Inevitably, we are falling short.



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