

# Why the Guardian is changing the language it uses about the environment

From now, house style guide recommends terms such as 'climate crisis' and 'global heating'



The destruction of Arctic ecosystems forces animals to search for food on land, such as these polar bears in northern Russia. Photograph: Alexander Grir/AFP/Getty Images

The Guardian has updated its style guide<sup>1</sup> to introduce terms that more accurately describe the environmental crises facing the world.

Instead of "climate change" the preferred terms are "climate emergency, crisis or breakdown" and "global heating" is favoured over "global warming", although the original terms are not banned.

'Extraordinary thinning' of ice sheets revealed deep inside Antarctica

"We want to ensure that we are being scientifically precise, while also communicating clearly with readers on this very important issue," said the editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner. "The phrase 'climate change', for example, sounds rather passive and gentle when what scientists are talking about is a catastrophe for humanity."



"Increasingly, climate scientists and organisations from the UN to the Met Office are changing their terminology, and using stronger language to describe the situation we're in," she said.

The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, talked of the "climate crisis"<sup>2</sup> in September, adding:

"We face a direct existential threat."

The climate scientist Prof Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, a former adviser to Angela Merkel, the EU and the pope, also uses "climate crisis"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/info/series/guardian-and-observer-style-guide>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-09-10/secretary-generals-remarks-climate-change-delivered>

<sup>3</sup> <https://climateextremes.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/What-Lies-Beneath-V3-LR-Blank5b15d.pdf>

In December, Prof Richard Betts, who leads the Met Office's climate research, said "global heating"<sup>4</sup> was a more accurate term than "global warming" to describe the changes taking place to the world's climate."

In the political world, UK MPs recently endorsed the Labour party's declaration of a "climate emergency"<sup>5</sup>.

The scale of the climate and wildlife crises has been laid bare by two landmark reports from the world's scientists. In October, they said carbon emissions must halve<sup>6</sup> by 2030 to avoid even greater risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. In May, global scientists said human society was in jeopardy from the accelerating annihilation of wildlife and destruction of the ecosystems<sup>7</sup> that support all life on Earth.

Other terms that have been updated, including the use of "wildlife" rather than "biodiversity", "fish populations" instead of "fish stocks" and "climate science denier" rather than "climate sceptic". In September, the BBC accepted it gets coverage of climate change "wrong too often"<sup>8</sup> and told staff:

"You do not need a 'denier' to balance the debate."



Earlier in May, Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who has inspired school strikes for climate around the globe, said<sup>9</sup>:

"It's 2019. Can we all now call it what it is: climate breakdown, climate crisis, climate emergency, ecological breakdown, ecological crisis and ecological emergency?"

The update to the Guardian's style guide follows the addition of the global carbon dioxide level to the Guardian's daily weather pages.

"Levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere have risen so dramatically – including a measure of that in our daily weather report is symbolic of what human activity is doing to our climate," said Viner in April<sup>10</sup>. "People need reminding that the climate crisis is no longer a future problem – we need to tackle it now, and every day matters."

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/13/global-heating-more-accurate-to-describe-risks-to-planet-says-key-scientist?](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/13/global-heating-more-accurate-to-describe-risks-to-planet-says-key-scientist?CMP=share_btn_tw)  
CMP=share\_btn\_tw

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/01/declare-formal-climate-emergency-before-its-too-late-corbyn-warns>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/06/human-society-under-urgent-threat-loss-earth-natural-life-un-report>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/07/bbc-we-get-climate-change-coverage-wrong-too-often>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/gretathunberg/status/1124723891123961856?s=11>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/05/why-the-guardian-is-putting-global-co2-levels-in-the-weather-forecast>