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Second Nature 060 (May 2026)

*Second Nature (SN) is a newsletter from the u3a Subject Adviser on Climate Change & Environment. Its primary purpose is to put forward topics that U3A climate groups might want to talk about. To **subscribe** click [here](#) (you don't need to be a u3a member); to **unsubscribe** use the link in the email footer.*

All past issues are available [here](#).

Welcome to new subscribers Mary from St Ives and Adrian from Halesworth. If you know someone who might like this newsletter please forward it to them.

In this issue: confirmation bias (never let yourself be diverted by what you wish to believe), the collapse or slowdown of the AMOC, electric railways, plug-in solar, the conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels, curtailment, hydrogen from waste, Viking toilet paper, consumerism, do we need SMRs? It draws on or links to material from the BBC, Carbon Brief, the Guardian, Hannah Ritchie, The Conversation, Science Advances, Geophysical Research Letters, Railmap, the University of Leeds, Friends of the Earth, Our World in Data, and subscribers Alan, Arun, Carole, and Dick. All of it is gratefully acknowledged. I use sources that I believe to be credible and, in most cases, not behind paywalls. For some you may have to register.

Know your audience

The most used link in SN059 was the Our World in Data interactive chart about [carbon intensity of electricity generated in different countries](#). Second place went to the University of Leeds [online course on tackling the climate crisis](#), recommended by the Warwick group.

Confirmation bias

When you are studying any matter or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only what are the facts and what is the truth that the facts bear out. Never let yourself be diverted either by what you wish to believe or by what you think would have beneficent social effects if it were believed, but look only and solely at what are the facts.

- Bertrand Russell, [speaking on the BBC in 1959](#)

I came across this quoted as an epigram in Rutger Bregman's *Humankind*: never let yourself be diverted by what you wish to believe. It's a noble maxim but harder to live up to. I aim to keep Second Nature based on science and data, but inevitably the things I want to believe influence the topics that I select for inclusion. In Second Nature 059 I quoted at length from this piece by George Monbiot:

A catastrophic climate event is upon us.
Here is why you've heard so little about it
George Monbiot



Click on the image for the original article.

Should I perhaps have dug a little deeper before putting this in the newsletter? [A letter to the Guardian from Prof Andrew Watson](#) suggests that I should have:

Monbiot notes that, according to a recent paper, some scientists believe that the AMOC is more likely than not to “collapse”, implying a complete cessation. In fact, the authors project an increased chance that the AMOC weakens by 50% by the end of the century under continued fossil-fuel emissions. Concerning as that is, they are projecting a slowdown, not a collapse. The outcome is not certain and with sustained efforts to reduce emissions there is still time to avoid the worst outcome.

While the public needs to hear about the dangers, exaggerating the response of the AMOC from “weakening” to “collapse” gives the impression that there is no getting off the road to impending disaster. What the science is saying is that the fate of the AMOC is in the balance. [Edited]

Carbon Brief has provided an excellent summary of AMOC science:

[Is global warming tipping key Atlantic ocean currents towards ‘collapse’?](#) | Cecilia Keating for Carbon Brief, 24 April

I always like to have at least a quick look at the original science, but in this case I didn't

I always like to have at least a quick look at the original science, but in this case I didn't bother. Here it is. If you're not comfortable reading scientific papers, don't be discouraged: the sections *Abstract* and *Conclusions* are often comprehensible, and you can skip the stuff that isn't.

[Observational constraints project a ~50% AMOC weakening by the end of this century](#) |

Portmann et al, Science Advances, 15 April

[European Temperature Extremes Under Different AMOC Scenarios](#) | van Westen and

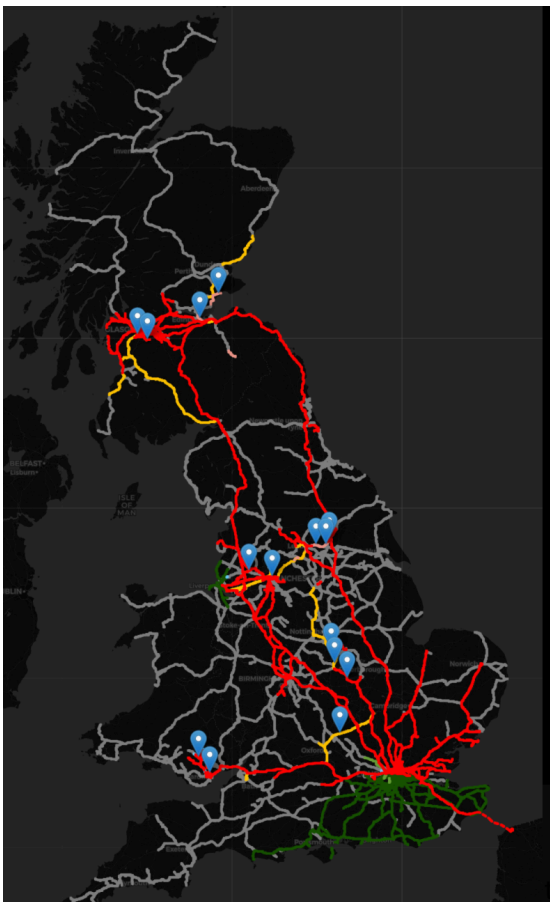
Baatsen, Geophysical Research Letters, 11 June 2025

The good thing about Science is that it's true, whether or not you believe in it.

- attrib. Neil deGrasse Tyson

Electric Rail

For a stats nerd like me it's always educational to see Hannah Ritchie work with data. In [a recent 'By the Numbers' Substack post](#) she looks at rail electrification. Switzerland has electrified 100% of its railway network, India 94%, China 74%. The UK lags behind at 38%. That's if measured by length of track, however: in the UK many of the busiest routes are electric: the East and West Coast main lines, most of the central belt of Scotland, and many of the commuter lines in South-East England. Change the measure to train miles and the UK rail network is around 60% electric and the rest is diesel. Almost no UK freight goes on electrified tracks.



Click on the map for source data.

So should the world invest in electrifying the rest of its rail networks? Ritchie points out that rail generates a mere 0.2% of our carbon emissions, so we would be building a lot of infrastructure for a small return. She says however that electrifying rail can make the experience of traveling by train better and faster, so that people have an incentive to switch from car or plane.

In April, Ritchie was awarded the Publishers Association £10,000 Unwin Prize, given to "non-fiction authors in the earlier stages of their careers as authors whose work is considered to have made a significant contribution to the world." She is donating the prize money to the [Against Malaria Foundation](#).



Ritchie's book *Not the End of the World* is available on Kindle for 99p during May: definitely an SN 'Best Buy' recommendation.

Plug-in solar

Plug-in solar panels should soon go on sale in the UK for around £500. They can produce about 10% of a typical household's energy, depending on how they are positioned. If you are thinking of buying panels, there are practical considerations, and paperwork to be done. Dylan Ryan, a lecturer in Mechanical & Energy Engineering, explains.

[£500 plug-in solar panels are about to go on sale: here's what you need to know](#) | Dylan Ryan in *The Conversation*, 28 April

Arun already has plug-in panels. He is a fan:

My plug-in solar is brilliant and idiot proof. I estimate payback time 2.5 years on £400 outlay. No brainer.

Will NOT work in a power cut.

No feed in tariff.

No battery: battery costs £900 on special offer 5kWh storage. Looking into at present... payback time extra by having battery is maybe 5-10 years. May not be worth the hassle and capital cost.

We don't have an EV yet.

Best bit of roof was used for solar hot water 30 years ago. We don't need gas for hot water for showers in May-October. For last 30 years. We don't [have] enough good roof space for a 4kW array of panels. and may move home in next few years. We can take our balcony solar with us.

In the press (and on the web)

Lots of positive noises from the 'coalition of the willing' conference in Columbia. The Guardian tells us *the single most important thing to come from the first Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels conference has been a change of mood. Whereas the CoPs can often feel stuck and frustrating, with countries circling the same topics without resolution, nearly every delegate in Colombia felt liberated. ... In a world of climate denial and misinformation, [this] was a shining example of science-led decision making. Hundreds of experts, academics and scientists inspired and informed the launch of three major initiatives on the energy transition.*

[Hope is contagious and science is king](#) | Jonathan Watts and Fiona Harvey in the Guardian, 1 May

Governments must now go away and develop national “roadmaps” setting out how they will end the production and use of fossil fuels. It will be interesting to see how many in fact do that.

[Key outcomes from first summit on transitioning away from fossil fuels](#) | Daisy Dunne for Carbon Brief, 30 April

The next summit will be held in the island nation of Tuvalu and will be co-hosted by Ireland.

Friends of the Earth UK has published a well-researched report **Are small modular nuclear reactors needed?** Given the source it is perhaps unsurprising that the report concludes that we don't need SMRs in our energy mix. The author, Chris Gordon-Smith, is a subscriber to this newsletter and if you have comments on his work you can route them via me.

[Are small modular nuclear reactors needed?](#) | Chris Gordon-Smith for FoE, 27 April

Feedback and Groups News

Dick from Kent responds on two points raised in SN059:

- **curtailment** - *we should be urging the government to alter this system of payment because it is expensive and reduces sustainability.*
- *there is a planning application into Kent County Council (KCC) for a plant at Thanet to produce hydrogen sustainably by the annihilation of household waste (ie without toxic halides and alkyls produced). This would be a tremendous boon for our litter-laden Isle. The plant would be the first in UK. But, the problem is will it get past the Reform-controlled KCC?*

It looks, on the face of it, that a big windfarm on Shetland was always a bad idea. It should soon be connected to the local distribution network, so Shetlanders should get some benefit. I don't see Defra getting rid of constraint payments any day soon - the generators have long-term contracts. The favoured option is to beef up the grid so that the power can be moved to where the demand is; an alternative approach (pushed by Greg Jackson, the Octopus CEO, and others) is zonal pricing, so that demand (data centres, aluminium smelters) will over time move closer to supply. I don't understand why the devolved governments aren't lobbying for this (it could save Port Talbot, you might think).

The [Thanet pyrolysis plant](#) will be using feedstock which contains a lot of fossil carbon (from plastics, tyres etc), although it may also use some wood. The carbon is captured as CO₂ which is saleable but I guess that most if not all of it ends up in the atmosphere. Still, it's probably cleaner than a conventional EfW plant.

Carole continues the conversation about toilet paper, telling me that *the Jorvik Museum here in York tells us that the Vikings used moss which had antiseptic qualities. Much softer than San Iza!* They presumably chose it after reading an in-depth review in *Ethical Pillager* magazine.

Regular correspondent **Alan** emails:

With scientists now convinced that AMOC is collapsing, Drax having given up on the always silly attempt to overturn the laws of physics via carbon capture and storage; and China, India and US burning coal as much as ever, we are well on the way to climate collapse.

As long as the zeitgeist - the growth of consumer capitalism remains - humanity's denouement is certain. It's the elephant in the room.

People will talk endlessly about transitionina. renewables. areenina etc. but almost no one

talks about the real culprit - our western lifestyle and its reach across the world.

Science won't solve this very, very urgent problem, only honesty about its true cause will save our skins.

I'm not sure what a UK without consumer capitalism would look like - maybe it a bit like the world I grew up in, in the 1960s. We didn't consider ourselves poor but we didn't have money for recreational shopping and buying on impulse; and of course there was no eBay and no Amazon to tempt us.

I learned a lot about consumerism by reading this:

[These 'buy less' tricks helped me save hundreds](#) | Jane Hoskyn in the Guardian, 28 April

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