

# There Are 100 Companies Responsible for Climate Change, Activist Says

BY **BASIT MAHMOOD** ON 9/8/20 AT 4:00 AM EDT

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Around 100 companies are responsible for climate change and we must act to stop them now in our last chance to save the planet, a climate change activist has warned.

The warning comes as global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) restarted large-scale protests in the U.K., saying that it will target the Houses of Parliament as well as other "key institutions of power" in a bid to raise awareness of the climate emergency.

Protests have seen hundreds of arrests, activists gluing themselves to the street outside Parliament and the closure of traffic routes.

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Extinction Rebellion has also previously launched what it called an "international rebellion" where protests took place in more than 60 cities worldwide. There are now over 50 local XR groups in the U.S., for example.

The group is demanding an emergency response from the government to tackle what it describes as the looming "climate cataclysm" and says its protests, which have previously resulted in major transport disruption, will last for 10 days.

"We need to have more of a focus on companies and XR has been moving in that direction," says Rupert Read, an XR spokesperson, speaking to *Newsweek* while people near him are being arrested during a demonstration.

"I've been urging it to move in that direction for a while, so that means things like doing significant non-violent direct-action protests against those companies."

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A report from Carbon Majors, part of the Climate Accountability Institute, found that just 100 companies since 1988 were responsible for 70 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.\*

Highlighting companies such as ExxonMobil, Shell, BP and Chevron, the report claimed that a "relatively small set of fossil fuel producers may hold the key to systemic change on carbon emissions".

What then could action against these companies look like?

Read says that boycotting the companies is one way to move forward while also calling for shareholder activism.

"Those companies need to feel the pressure and they need to understand that they are complicit in bringing our civilization towards an end and that we're not going to let them get away with that," he says.

However, Read rejected rumors that the group had plans to occupy Parliament, saying that the emphasis was on targeted, non-violent direct action aimed at those most responsible for the climate crisis.

"We are blocking roads around Parliament Square, we were seeking to stop [U.K. Prime Minister] Boris Johnson getting into Parliament for Prime Minister's Questions, I think that effort has been foiled but we're going to put the pressure on.

Non-violent direct action works and it's important now more than ever because now is our last chance."

Read thinks that rather than COVID-19 pushing climate change off the agenda, it has galvanized the public after many realized just how vulnerable societies are.

"[The COVID-19 pandemic] wouldn't have happened without the habitat destruction driven by the economy in China," he says. "It wouldn't have happened all over the world, without the real super spreaders, planes, taking it all over the world in rapid time."

Read says that despite all this, COVID-19 could be a good thing for the climate.

"We can't wait another decade for another reset in the economy and society we, have to build back in the right way now. That kind of opportunity doesn't come along very often, the last comparable opportunity was in 2008 with the financial crisis, that's over a decade ago.

"We have to build back in the right way now."

For climate activists like Read, the pandemic is inextricably linked to climate change.

He says: "The COVID-19 emergency is part of the broader ecological emergency, It's a product of habitat destruction, it's a product of animal cruelty and in terms of its spread it's a product of rampant and out of control air travel."

But isn't China, so often called the world's factory, also responsible for global emissions, why the focus on the West?

Read says that his group's energies must be directed primarily against his own government as that's where they have the most influence.

"Responsibility begins where we are, responsibility begins at home," he says, acknowledging that China has to accept its role in global warming but that much of what's happening there is driven by what happens in the West.

"We've exported a lot of our pollution to China, we've exported a lot of our climate deadly carbon emissions to China, and we need to take responsibility for that," he says.

"The government goes on and on about how we've reduced our carbon emissions since 1990, but they don't include the emissions that we have outsourced or exported to China, we've got them doing our dirty work for us. When you include those emissions, our emissions in the U.K. have barely decreased at all since 1990."

According to Professor Stephan Harrison, professor of climate and environmental change at the University of Exeter, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided hope to those fighting against climate change because it's shown how governments can quickly reorganize society to tackle an emergency and how that which was previously thought of as impossible can become a reality.

He told *Newsweek*: "Some say [tackling] climate change would cost so much money we couldn't possibly afford it, actually we've thrown huge sums of money at COVID-19, so clearly our economic systems can use funds as and when required when we are facing big threats"

The Paris agreement of 2016 committed nearly every nation in the world to keeping the increase in global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit).

Is it a goal that is now beyond reach? Professor Harrison thinks so.

"Climate sensitivity is high enough that it'll be almost impossible to keep to 1.5C rise in temperature if not impossible and highly unlikely to keep to 2C."

Prof. Harrison thinks we'll be lucky to keep climate warming below three or four degrees Celsius (5.4 to 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century.

Yet unlike Read, he thinks action against polluting companies alone will not suffice.

"Point fingers at the public," he says. "We are the ones who use the services and the goods that are produced, companies wouldn't produce those if there was no demand for it."

For Prof. Harrison, the pandemic has also shone a light on why we need to tackle climate change, with COVID-19 fatalities higher in areas with higher levels of air pollution.

According to one study by Harvard University, COVID-19 death rates rise by about 15 percent in areas with even a small increase in pollution levels in the years before the pandemic.\*

Prof. Harrison thinks that societies are now on the cusp of a real tipping point, an opportunity provided by COVID-19.

"COVID-19 has allowed the debate about climate change to come slightly further up the agenda because we can show that our so-called complex and complicated civilizations are really vulnerable to external threats," he says.

Not everyone agrees with the actions XR has undertaken, even if they may agree with the overall aims of reducing climate change.

Simon Gentry, a managing partner at Newgate Communications, told *Newsweek* that he felt XR had hurt their own cause through their demonstration tactics, which last week included blockading two UK printworks, which delayed the

distribution of major national newspapers.

He said: "We live in a democracy and that is the place which you make your arguments, these kind of actions reveal that they've lost the argument because they're unable to convince the majority of voters or political parties."

Simon also said that the group represented only a "tiny fraction of society" and had failed to build a coalition for change.

"The point is, disrupting other people's lives, stopping ambulances from getting to hospitals doesn't help your argument it just p\*\*\*es people off," he said.

Emily Hewertson, a 20-year-old Conservative activist said she felt that XR had made the climate change debate toxic.

She said: " Whilst protesting is perfectly legal (and rightly so), vandalism is not. Extinction Rebellion "protests" have become more and more sinister, violent and disruptive.

"Whilst, I am proud to live in a country which upholds people's rights to peacefully protest, I am also proud to live in a country which supports a free press. Extinction Rebellion's blockading of prints work was not only a denial of this great British value but an attack on democracy. This authoritarianism should be deeply concerning. Extinction Rebellion wants their way only and will do anything to get there, even if it means blocking an NHS ambulance in the middle of a pandemic.

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"If we want to encourage more people to get on board with environmentalism, we must fight eco-extremism. With their criminal antics, mob-like behavior and unrealistic demands, Extinction Rebellion are alienating masses and playing into the hands of climate-deniers. This is the biggest problem. Their actions are having the opposite of the desired effect."

ExxonMobil said it remains committed to providing affordable energy to support human progress.

A spokesperson said: "Sustainable climate change solutions require a united effort across industry, academia, government, and broader society, which is why our scientists and engineers collaborate with more than 80 universities, as well as government agencies and leading research organizations to develop breakthroughs in lower-emission technologies."

Chevron said it welcomed honest discussion about climate change and the role investor-owned energy companies need to play in creating a lower carbon future.

A spokesperson said: "The Climate Accountability Institute ("CAI") Carbon Majors report by Richard Heede is not objective academic research.

"It is propaganda from a long-time member of a plaintiff lawyer litigation team. It is full of inaccuracies and bias.

"Heede's latest advocacy piece adds nothing to climate science. It is a calculator exercise that purports to track — inaccurately — historical production of oil, gas, and coal. The report unintentionally highlights one reason climate

litigation against oil and gas companies is not a part of serious climate policy.

"It verifies that global demand for oil and gas has consistently grown over the decades, which has shifted our energy system away from more carbon intense sources like coal."

Heede rejected claims made against the report and said that such criticism was typical and uninformed.

He told *Newsweek*: "The work done... is based on data on the annual production of oil, natural gas, and coal published by the companies.

"There is no disagreement about the basic production data, nor about the carbon contained in the fossil fuels extracted, refined, and marketed by each company."

BP and Shell have been contacted for comment.

### **\*Survey methodology**

- The Carbon Majors Database report was based on publicly available emissions data collected from 100 companies and can be read in full here.
- The study by Harvard University looking at the relationship between air pollution and COVID-19 deaths focused on more than 3,000 counties across the U.S. and found that a small increase in long-term exposure to PM2.5 (a term used to describe the mixture of solid particles and liquid droplets in the air) leads to a large increase in the COVID-19 death rate. It can be read in full here