

Crying Won't Help You
Praying Won't Do You No Good

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When I was a teenager in the 1970s, I often heard the song Big Yellow Taxi by Joni Mitchell on the radio. It featured the memorable line "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot". I assumed then that the song was a reaction to a particular environmental transgression and this was true. The first time Mitchell went to Hawaii, she looked out of her hotel window expecting to see a virgin forest and was instead confronted with a parking lot.

It's a great protest song and has stood the test of time. Sadly, the ecological destruction to which it refers is now not just a forest in Hawaii, it is the whole world.

Planet Earth is unique. We know of nowhere else where life exists. Earth is home to a complex ecosystem that supports a spectacular diversity of living things. That virgin diversity survives in the wilderness of Patagonia or the central African forests. It also survives in pockets elsewhere. But so much of this natural wonder has been destroyed by rapacious human activity.

We are witnessing a horrifying replacement of diversity with monotony. When a living ecosystem, abundant with life, is destroyed and replaced with concrete, tarmac or a mono-crop, that ecosystem dies. Life is being replaced with death all over the world.

For years, the environmental movement used pictures of distressed animals to illustrate the crisis caused by climate change. Polar bears clinging to tiny ice floes or Orang Utans gazing at what remains of their forest home.

Unfortunately, these pictures created the impression that the environmental crisis was limited to the Arctic or Indonesia. The exoticism of those pictures blinds us to the devastation all around us. When we gaze out of a train window at the concrete and glass cityscape on all sides, we are the Orang Utan. When we return to a much-loved place and find it ruined by human activity, we are the Polar Bear.

This project is my reaction to the clearing, digging, polluting and concreting of the living Earth. Far from the Arctic or Indonesia, it's about what I see in my own corner of England. It's about what is happening all around us and the price we will pay.

Polycrisis - a term that describes a complex situation where multiple, overlapping and interconnected crises converge and amplify each other. This creates a predicament that is unstable and extremely difficult to manage or resolve.

From the French polycrise or poly-crise.



Part One

“The trash and litter of nature disappear into the ground with the passing of each year, but man’s litter has more permanence”.

John Steinbeck

A discarded takeaway food container lies where it has been discarded.
East Grinstead, West Sussex.



This propane gas bottle was disposed of by rolling it down a hill.
East Grinstead, West Sussex.



Rubbish discarded in a rewilded area full of wildlife.
Dormansland, Surrey.



Litter is an insidious, creeping menace. The first crisp bag or drink bottle is barely noticeable. But soon, as the items multiply and catch in the grass or blow into a corner, they grow into a threatening mass that degrades our pleasure in a place. Litter is a marker of human attitudes. No litter indicates clean and cared for, litter indicates irresponsibility and disinterest.

Litter drives our sense of place. When every street is littered, every open space is filthy, and rubbish blows around, all seems hopeless. Sometimes an exceptional person will lead the recovery, but mostly acceptance sets in. The senses filter out the mess and life goes on. But parts of the world are blurred out, parts are missing.

Litter, rubbish, and trash are all forms of theft. They steal joy, they steal pleasure, they steal pride in place. They steal part of the future. Someone today wouldn't face up to their responsibilities, so someone has to fix it tomorrow.

Waste dumped behind houses next to Heathrow Airport.



Plastic film from a poorly managed waste plant wrapped around this tree. The tree survived.
Erith, Kent.



Part of a Mercedes car.
River Thames, Kent.



Hardly anyone visits this disused railway cutting but still the rubbish piles up.
East Grinstead, West Sussex.



This garage has been destroyed by the rubbish crammed into it.
East Grinstead, West Sussex.



Each morning before I settle down to work, I walk or run for exercise. Frequently, I pass a children's play area, which often looks like this. It is absolutely wrong that a valued community space should be defiled like this, but why does this happen?

Pretty much all this rubbish was fast food wrappers from KFC, Costa and McDonald's. All these companies sell food in throwaway packaging. Once the food and the packaging are out of the seller's door, they have no further involvement. This means that nearly all the costs of presenting the food for consumption have been externalised. The seller does not pay for plates and cutlery, does not pay to clear them from tables, does not pay to wash them or store them. So who pays? The public sector. The local authority bears the cost of emptying public litter bins, picking up litter and emptying household waste bins with KFC, Costa and McDonald's products inside.

There is so much wrong with such a policy. Waste is deliberately generated to increase profit. That waste goes into the already massive waste stream of contemporary society. A stream consisting of domestic rubbish, business waste, discarded food, tyres, rubble, electronic goods, plastic and medical waste. It's a squalid, wasteful business and yet it is all avoidable.

I recently spent a week in Cassis in the South of France. It's a beautiful town and there is no litter. There are many restaurants but no fast food outlets. If you want to eat, you sit down and eat from a plate. The culture is totally different. Whilst culture can't be copied and pasted from one place to another, a positive culture can be used as a basis for positive change. Suppose the default response from local authorities to planning applications for new fast food outlets was "no". Also, suppose that the law was changed to support local authorities in those decisions. No opportunity for large chains to overturn decisions at appeal.

All this is possible and desirable. It can be justified by the improvement in public spaces and the removal of the undue burden on local authorities to clean up after the fast food industry.

Nothing is just the way it is. Our collective lives are shaped by customs, laws and culture. We can change all these for the better.

King George's Field.
East Grinstead, West Sussex.



Building waste
Ceramic tiles
Reinforcing wire
Tyres
Mattress
Furniture
Bean bag
Food tins
Plastic bottles
Bags of rubbish
Morrisons shopping bag
Broken glass
White vinyl corner unit
Rubble
Tree bag
Toy car
Storage boxes
Cistern
Clock
Spray gun
Doll
Cable drum
Plastic flower pot

Broken mirror
Building panels
Aluminium recycling bags
Business cards
Security shutter
Fridges
Telecoms cable
Propane gas bottles
Farm water tanks
Catheters
Fish and chip wrappers
Bags of earth
Paint pots
Shoes
Kitchen units
Gloves
Oil drums
Beer bottles
Aluminium strip
Webbing strap
Pallets
Fence panels
Alloy tubes

Mini croissant packet
Bottles of urine
Insulation foam
Bread crates
Vodka bottle
Muck bucket
Underlay
Bookcase
Armchair
Chest freezer
Banana box
Bed linen
Cool box
Flip flop
Biscuit tin
Duffel bag
Packing cases
uPVC window frame
Shower gel bottle
Carpet off-cuts
Faux fur jacket
Mattress springs
Divan

Flytipping.
Erith, Kent.



Facts

For the year 2020/21, local authorities in England dealt with 1.13 million fly-tipping incidents, an increase of 16% from the 980,000 reported in 2019/20. Even when rubbish is disposed of “correctly”, it is still a huge burden. In the UK in 2020, 12.6 million tonnes of municipal waste was sent to landfills. This is waste that is handled by local authorities.

If all sources of waste are considered (municipal, commercial & industrial, construction, demolition & excavation) the UK generates over 222 million tonnes of waste per year. Approximately 50% of this is recycled, but this activity is not without problems. Plastic recycling is one of the largest sources of microplastic pollution. Large quantities of plastic and electronic waste are sent to developing countries where poor handling causes even more pollution.

A further 5% of waste is incinerated which produces carbon dioxide emissions. Plastic is made from oil, a fossil fuel. Burning waste plastic contributes to greenhouse gas emissions in the same way as burning fossil fuels for energy.

This incinerator in Slough is known as Lakeside EfW. It incinerates material that would otherwise have gone to landfill. Since 2010 that has included low-level radioactive waste.



There are currently around 500 active landfills in the UK which accept all the waste not handled by other methods of disposal. In addition, there are around 20,000 known historic landfills. Many of the historic landfills are in poor condition, leaking methane into the atmosphere and toxic leachates into the water table.

Burial is not forever. Many landfills are close to the coast because ships and barges were used to transport the rubbish from population centres. Rising sea levels and more violent storms are causing coastal erosion and exposing rubbish in the landfills that was buried decades before.

This historic landfill is gradually being exposed by high tides on the River Thames.



Fabrics dumped into landfill decades ago are being exposed as the banks of the River Thames erode.



Plastic debris on the foreshore at Rainham Marshes, a bird sanctuary. Birds find it difficult to distinguish between plastic debris and their food.



“The trash and litter of nature disappear into the ground with the passing of each year, but man’s litter has more permanence”.

As I worked on this section of the project, I wondered if I could illustrate the opening quote. I walked to my local park and found this scene within two minutes. Man’s litter is absolutely everywhere.

My nearest specialist Pringles recycling facility is 15.5 miles away.



The rest of the book looks at:

Rivers and waterways

Human treatment of land

The sense that this is not OK

Consequences