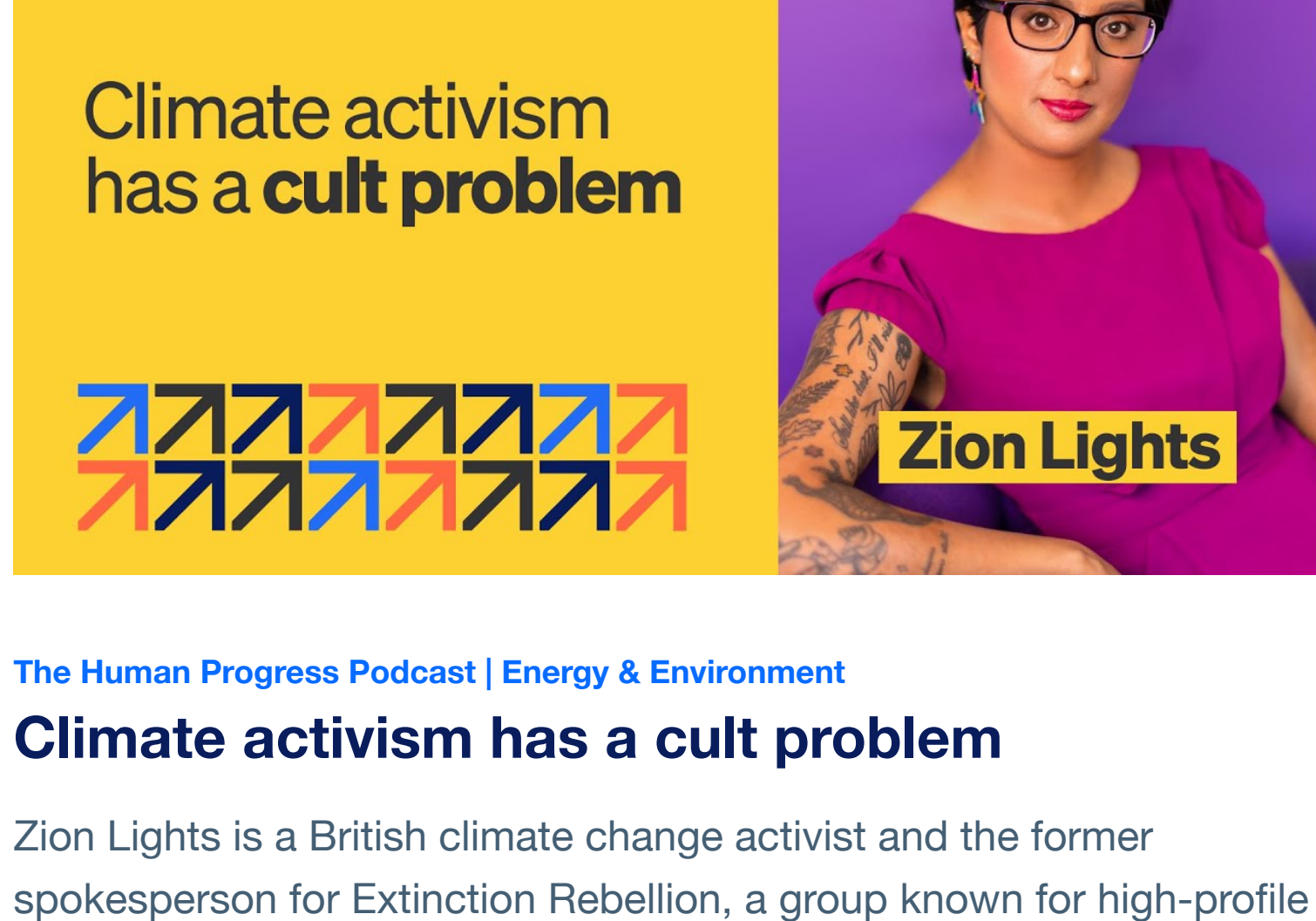


Human Progress DOOMSLAYER

a newsletter that cuts through the gloom



The Human Progress Podcast | Energy & Environment

Climate activism has a cult problem

Zion Lights is a British climate change activist and the former spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion, a group known for high-profile and disruptive demonstrations. She has also written [several posts](#) for HumanProgress.org.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Zion discusses her experience in radical activist circles and what led her to eventually leave Extinction Rebellion and found her own, [solutions-focused activist organization](#).

Be sure to check out [her Substack](#), where she blogs about nuclear energy, climate adaptation, optimism, and more.

[Listen to the interview](#)

Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.

You open the piece by mentioning the Van Gogh painting stunts and several other dramatic incidents. Given your experience in climate activism, what's your reaction now when you hear about one of these incidents?

I feel sorry for the people involved. I think they're being misled, especially young people. The people behind these groups are not young. Many of them are older men who give talks around the UK and encourage young people to deal with their anxiety by pouring themselves into activism, which does nothing to reduce global greenhouse emissions or protect biodiversity. But when you're young, impressionable, and anxious, it's very easy for those people to convince you that this is the only way you can help.

It's also an outcome of this constant doomerist narrative that's widely supported by the press. All the reporting is so negative, and it feeds young people's anxiety. So, I don't blame them for getting involved, but I worry, as a mother of two daughters, that young people feel hopeless and like there's no other option than extreme action.

Can you tell me about your involvement in activism?

I started a long time ago with different groups. We were shutting down banks. We tried to shut down Kingsnorth Coal Fire Station here in Britain. I'm not against these actions in principle, but climate activism is not leading to anything concrete. It's not getting people on board.

When I was part of Extinction Rebellion, I took part in what we call the April Rebellion in 2019, where we shut down four huge roads across London. It was very successful, with thousands of people involved. But the main thing was, it was very positive. People were coming and asking us questions. And they were glad. They were saying, how can I get involved? And I saw this as a moment where we could lead people to solutions. So, I was happy when I was asked to be a spokesperson.

But the mood very quickly changed. A year later, you had people stripping off in Westminster and holding banners saying, "We're all doomed." I tried to prevent that from happening, but I was not successful.

Tell me about how you first became involved with radical environmental activism.

My entry into activism was Greenpeace. I felt very hopeless about what I was learning at school about global warming, and no one else around me seemed to care about it.

You have to remember that everybody thinks that these are the good guys. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are funded by public donations. I was young, and I also thought they were the good guys. I did not see them as fighting against solutions. I thought they were fixing problems. They have done some great things around, for example, protecting whales. But none of these organizations support concrete things that would actually stop climate change.

For example, they're all anti-nuclear. They had put out literature that said that Fukushima had killed lots of people and that there were radioactive fish. I was young, and I believed it. Everybody around me believed it. We all believed the same lies. It took me a long time to start stepping back and asking, have I been lied to by people who are kind to me? People who cook dinner for me? It's an entire movement that misleads you about the world's problems and how to fix them. And yet everyone thinks that they are the ones who care most about the problems and most want to fix them.

You speak of noticing red flags when you joined Extinction Rebellion. What were some of those initial red flags?

It was quite a toxic environment. There were a lot of issues involving women being harassed. When people took complaints forward, they were told, "We don't have time to deal with that. We just want to save the planet." One of the founders said awful things about the Holocaust, and some Jewish members were deeply upset. They were told, "If that's what you want to fight about, there's no space for you in the movement." And several of them did leave.

There's a youth group in Extinction Rebellion, and these young people are so anxious. If my kids were that anxious about anything, they would be in therapy. And we knew that there were huge issues with self-harming in those groups. I understand that happens with young people, but it was seen as normal. The planet's screwed; of course they're going to self-harm.

There were a couple of actions where they stripped off, and, in the photos, you could see their arms are covered in cuts. I would talk to some of them and say, "It's not as bad as that. There are things you can do, and you're doing your bit, et cetera." They would say, "Nothing I do is enough. What's the point?" I remember thinking, if this person didn't have bad anxiety, would they even be in this movement? Is the anxiety about climate change, or do they have mental health issues, and instead of getting help, they're going into an organization that claims to help them but is actually using them for photo opportunities and drastic action?

There were many cultish elements. There's this ideology that you can't question the message. That we have the truth, and we are telling you to tell the truth about how apocalyptic the future will be. If you brought other issues forward, you were accused of distracting from the climate crisis.

Extinction Rebellion bills itself as a leaderless movement. And you are autonomous. You can just take action in their name. But the demands come from a small group of people at the top. The funding is controlled from the top, largely by one individual. It's very clever because if people think it's leaderless, how could it possibly be anything like a cult? It's not true, but it takes time to see that. And I only really saw it because I got in with those people at the top and saw it happening myself.

Let's talk about your appearance on The Andrew Neil Show. You say you were pressured to defend Extinction Rebellion founder Roger Hallam's assertion that six billion people will die by the end of the century because of climate change. At one point in the interview, Andrew notes that deaths from extreme weather events are declining. There's another moment when he asks you what we should replace gas energy with, and you answer, "I'm not here to talk about solutions."

Can you tell me about that interview?

Andrew Neil asked me so many questions that I had answers to, but I wasn't allowed to give any of them. As a spokesperson, that was not in my training. It was not, how do you answer about transport? How do you answer about energy? It was always bring it back to the climate emergency and that people will die. Bring it back to I'm a mother, and I'm here because of my kids. And try to cry.

The only solution they offer is citizen assemblies. They say the system has failed. Climate change was caused by the system; therefore, it's failed, and we need to get rid of it. It's really about political revolution, not climate change. I wanted to talk about climate change, and I suddenly realized all the things I want to say, I can't say.

Afterwards, they did ask me, "Why didn't you talk about citizen assemblies? That's our solution." But the reason I didn't is because I knew that he would absolutely tear that apart, and I was not prepared to try and defend it. I couldn't defend what Roger had said about 6 billion people dying by the end of the century. I couldn't answer the questions about solutions. Millions of people were watching, and I was sitting there thinking, what am I doing here? That was what jolted me out of the bubble.

What can you tell me about degrowth and your more positive activism with Emergency Reactor?

Degrowth is this idea that humans are a problem, that there are too many of us, and that we should scale everything back. It's a very dominant idea in environmental activism. I was in the Green Party here for years. They do not believe in abundant energy for everyone. They believe in scaling back, using less. They want 100 percent renewables, but they also recognize that it's not enough to power the world. They believe we should have periods without power. That's the ideology behind these groups, right at the very foundation.

Think about Germany shutting down all those nuclear reactors after the Fukushima power plant meltdown, which didn't kill anyone. Green party-led government, right? Knee-jerk reaction, shut them all down. Emissions have skyrocketed. They spent billions on renewables, and now they're reopening coal plants. They're going back to fracking. They're burning masses of wood biomass. It's terrible.

I set up Emergency Reactor as a space for people who care about these issues but support evidence-based solutions. We believe in an abundance of cheap energy for everyone, but we also don't want people to die from air pollution or climate change to worsen. So, if it's going to be clean, we'll go for nuclear. We've saved nuclear power plants from being shut down. We can calculate how much carbon we're saving. We can speak to the workers whose jobs we've saved. These are powerful things that make you feel good and like you're doing something useful in the world. So, we're still doing climate activism. It's just how climate activism should be.

[Read the full transcript](#)

