# How Extinction Rebellion’s protest momentum faded but sparked new climate activism



On 21 April 2019, I found myself on Waterloo Bridge in London alongside my younger siblings amidst a vibrant gathering of Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists. As planters brimming with flowers replaced the usual cars, and chants filled the air, the atmosphere was electric. My siblings, then only 14 and inspired by Greta Thunberg's call to action, were eager to witness her speak at the protest—part of a larger movement that would shut down four major bridges in the capital for 11 days straight. The scale of participation was staggering; tens of thousands mobilised across the UK, affecting an estimated 500,000 people, while over 1,000 demonstrators were arrested during this ambitious operation.

The movement ultimately saw significant victories. Notably, its first demand, to "tell the truth" about climate change, was acknowledged when the UK became the first country globally to declare a climate emergency, mere days after the protests concluded. Public sentiment shifted markedly; subsequent polling showed that climate issues ranked among the top concerns for 24% of respondents—a clear jump from the preceding months where economic issues had predominated.

Fast forward to 2025, and the narrative has shifted markedly. While climate change remains an existential threat, the urgency evoked during XR's inception has seemingly dissipated. Current public surveys reveal a renewed focus on economic stability, immigration, and health, with climate breakdown concerns relegated to the background. The momentum that once saw mass gatherings and passionate protests has waned significantly. So, what has happened to the energy that fuelled this revolutionary movement?

Douglas Rogers, an organiser with XR from 2018 to 2021, identifies the pandemic as a crucial turning point. Although he noted a slowing down prior to COVID-19, the pandemic fundamentally deterred mass mobilisation efforts, as lockdowns substantially altered public life. Any plans the movement had to invest back into local groups for experimentation with new strategies were halted. Instead, the pandemic forced a complete demobilisation.

In the aftermath, splinter groups have emerged that embrace riskier tactics and direct actions. For instance, groups like Just Stop Oil have garnered international media attention by adopting more aggressive forms of protest, albeit at the cost of alienating less committed activists. Graeme Hayes, a political sociology expert, observed that many activists are now reluctant to face significant prison sentences, which has resulted in a shrinking pool of participants willing to engage in high-stakes protests. The introduction of new anti-protest legislation has further complicated the landscape. The UK government's increasingly repressive measures, which now classify certain protest tactics as criminal offences, indicate a significant shift in the approach towards climate activism.

While XR recognizes the changing dynamics and has toned down its more controversial tactics, the era of mass protests seems a relic of the past. The emergence of the Palestinian solidarity movement has attracted significant public energy, diverting attention away from climate activism. This fragmentation poses further challenges; groups that initially collaborated to accomplish massive protests now struggle to find common ground on strategies moving forward.

Yet, not all is lost within the climate movement. Various local initiatives continue to flourish under what Rogers describes as a "post-XR" ethos. In Scotland, for example, the Climate Camp is actively engaging communities through periodic protest camps at fossil fuel infrastructure sites. Moreover, XR co-founder Gail Bradbrook is advocating for strategies based on Deep Adaptation and collapsology, which focus on preparing communities to manage societal collapse with resilience rather than resorting to chaos.

Despite the visible ebb in mass mobilisation, the legacy of XR persists. Its initial successes have inspired new organisations and strategies, albeit in a fragmented and perhaps more radicalised form. Yet as climate consequences intensify and emerge as intertwined with economic challenges and geopolitical conflicts, experts like Hayes and Rogers suggest the end of the "protest cycle" may merely signify a preparatory phase for future climate activism. With the impact of climate change becoming increasingly evident and connected to broader societal issues, the potential for the next wave of activism—albeit through different forms and methods—remains crucial as we navigate an uncertain future.

### Reference Map

1. Article [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-law) informed the entire article.
2. Article [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-law) contributed background on XR's evolution.
3. Article [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/08b8a4d2-b395-4a81-b4e8-97749bc9fab2) provided context regarding legal challenges faced by activists.
4. Article [[4]](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/7/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-brings-london-to-standstill) offered insights into initial protest actions and global reach.
5. Article [[5]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/extinction-rebellion-metropolitan-police-government-met-crown-prosecution-service-b951581.html) and [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/extinction-rebellion-london-met-police-cost-bill-september-b1017959.html) supported details on policing costs associated with protests.
6. Article [[7]](https://www.dailysabah.com/life/environment/extinction-rebellion-protests-left-120-tons-of-rubbish-in-london) highlighted environmental impacts of XR activities.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-law> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/20/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-law> - This article discusses the evolution of Extinction Rebellion (XR) from its impactful 2019 protests to its current state in 2025. It highlights the movement's initial successes, such as the UK's declaration of a climate emergency and increased public awareness of the climate crisis. However, it also addresses challenges faced by XR, including internal disagreements, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of more radical groups like Just Stop Oil. The piece also examines the UK's legislative response, noting the introduction of laws that have led to harsher penalties for climate activists, raising concerns about the suppression of peaceful protest rights.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/08b8a4d2-b395-4a81-b4e8-97749bc9fab2> - This article reports on a mass court appeal in London, where 16 climate activists from Just Stop Oil challenged their prison sentences. The activists, including Roger Hallam, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, argued that their sentences were excessive and violated international human rights. The case highlights the UK's tightening legislative and judicial control over climate activism, with concerns that such measures may deter future peaceful protests and undermine fundamental freedoms.
4. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/7/extinction-rebellion-climate-protest-brings-london-to-standstill> - This article covers Extinction Rebellion's October 2019 protests in London, where thousands of activists disrupted major sites to demand action on the climate crisis. The protests led to over 1,000 arrests and resulted in the UK government declaring a climate emergency, one of XR's key demands. The piece also discusses the movement's global reach, with simultaneous protests in countries worldwide, and the group's specific demands for the UK government to reduce carbon emissions to net-zero by 2025 and establish a Citizens’ Assembly to lead decisions on the climate crisis.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/extinction-rebellion-metropolitan-police-government-met-crown-prosecution-service-b951581.html> - This article reports that policing Extinction Rebellion protests has cost the Metropolitan Police over £50 million since 2019. The figure covers the police's response to three prolonged demonstrations in April and October 2019 and September 2020. The article also mentions that XR plans to stage a similar occupation in central London for two weeks from August 23, with the main aim being to demand the government halts all new investment in fossil fuels.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/extinction-rebellion-london-met-police-cost-bill-september-b1017959.html> - This article reports that Extinction Rebellion protests have cost the Metropolitan Police over £60 million since 2019. The article details the costs associated with policing XR's demonstrations, including nearly £2 million in overtime payments. It also mentions that XR members are expected to take to the streets of London again for three days from September 10, with plans to block major roads and disrupt business as usual to demand action on the climate crisis.
7. <https://www.dailysabah.com/life/environment/extinction-rebellion-protests-left-120-tons-of-rubbish-in-london> - This article reports that Extinction Rebellion's two-week demonstrations in London in 2019 left at least 120 tons of rubbish on the streets, with clean-up costs hitting £50,000. The protests, aimed at demanding action on climate change, led to significant disruption in the city, and the article highlights the environmental impact of the movement's activities.