# Lichens on Stonehenge spotlighted amid environmental protest and heritage debate



Lichens on stone—those "still explosions," as poet Elizabeth Bishop aptly described them—are often overlooked, despite their prevalence and ecological significance. These fascinating organisms, stemming from a symbiotic relationship between fungi and photosynthetic partners, are perceived by many as mere plants. This misidentification contributes to what researchers have termed "plant blindness," a phenomenon where individuals fail to notice plants in their surroundings. This oversight is unfortunate, as lichens have gained unexpected attention in recent months, especially following the Just Stop Oil protest at Stonehenge in June 2024.

The protest, marked by activists spraying orange powder paint on the UNESCO World Heritage Site, aimed to draw urgency to climate change, provoking widespread debate about environmental activism and its impact on cultural heritage. The protest was galvanised by a quote from a demonstrator who labelled the stones as "inert," prompting opposition from many who were concerned for the lichens that inhabit these ancient rocks. English Heritage, which manages Stonehenge, responded by emphasising the significance of these stones, not just as physical relics, but as vital connections through time to nature and to each other.

In the aftermath, cultural heritage experts raised alarms about the potential harm to the rare lichens on Stonehenge. The cleaning process itself posed challenges, as removing particulate matter from stone without damaging the lichen required careful methods. English Heritage confirmed that they used specialist blowers, avoiding chemical cleaners that could further jeopardise the fragile ecosystem residing on the stones. This event draws attention to an often-overlooked interplay between activism and heritage conservation, illustrating how modern environmental issues can intersect with ancient cultural landmarks.

Understanding lichens is crucial to this dialogue. Traditionally, scientists have defined lichens as entities easily categorised within our biological classifications. However, their unique composition—spanning multiple branches of the biological tree—complicates such simplifications. Researchers now argue that lichens represent complex ecosystems unto themselves, encompassing not only fungi and algae but also various bacteria and microorganisms. This evolving perspective can enhance our comprehension of ecological systems, encouraging holistic approaches in conservation strategies.

The dynamic relationship between lichens and stone challenges our conventional perceptions of life and non-life, blurring the lines between what is biotic and abiotic. Some lichens, such as Verrucaria baldensis, neatly embed within stones, prompting us to reconsider the very nature of what it means to exist. Their longevity—some being thousands of years old—suggests a compelling narrative that transcends simple categorisations. In a world increasingly focused on sustainability, recognising the interactive histories that lichens and stones share is vital.

As discussions surrounding the Stonehenge protest unfold, it becomes evident that the value of lichens extends beyond ecological markers; they are integral to cultural and artistic narratives that intersect with our human experiences. Contemporary artists and scholars draw upon these symbiotic relationships to frame issues of resilience and interconnectedness, allowing for new cultural dialogues around heritage conservation. Examining lichens through a lens that imbues them with agency reveals alternative ways of understanding the natural world.

This intersectionality prompts a reconsideration of how we value the environmental components of our heritage sites. Traditional views often prioritise the preservation of stone over the living entities upon them, resulting in costly restoration efforts that can inadvertently harm the lichens themselves. A reconceptualisation of what constitutes heritage could foster an appreciation that embraces both the biotic and abiotic, advocating for holistic conservation approaches that reflect our intertwined existence with the natural landscape.

In essence, lichens encourage a reframing of the narratives surrounding our cultural relics. They serve not only as biological indicators of environmental health but also as bridges linking the geological and cultural histories of human existence. Recognising the importance of these complex relationships urges us to expand our environmental ethical discussions beyond mere prioritisation of one domain over another, fostering a more integrated and compassionate stewardship of our shared heritage. The challenge lies in cultivating relationships with the non-living elements of our world—treating stones not as inert objects but as parts of a living ecological tapestry that tells the stories of both nature and culture.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.science20.com/the_conversation/the_still_explosions_of_lichens_on_stone-257442), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/19/stonehenge-sprayed-orange-powder-paint-just-stop-oil-activists), [[3]](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/search-news/pr-stonehenge--just-stop-oil-protest/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/19/stonehenge-sprayed-orange-powder-paint-just-stop-oil-activists), [[4]](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/climate-change-protesters-cover-stonehenge-with-orange-powder-180984578/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/stonehenge-orange-powder-cleaned-with-blowers-not-chemicals-2024-06-26/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.science20.com/the_conversation/the_still_explosions_of_lichens_on_stone-257442), [[3]](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/search-news/pr-stonehenge--just-stop-oil-protest/), [[6]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/06/stonehenge-spray-paint-climate-protest/678765/?utm_source=apple_news)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/climate-change-protesters-cover-stonehenge-with-orange-powder-180984578/), [[7]](https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/06/sector-bodies-condemn-just-stop-oil-vandalism-of-stonehenge/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.science20.com/the_conversation/the_still_explosions_of_lichens_on_stone-257442), [[6]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/06/stonehenge-spray-paint-climate-protest/678765/?utm_source=apple_news)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.science20.com/the_conversation/the_still_explosions_of_lichens_on_stone-257442), [[7]](https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/06/sector-bodies-condemn-just-stop-oil-vandalism-of-stonehenge/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.science20.com/the_conversation/the_still_explosions_of_lichens_on_stone-257442> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/19/stonehenge-sprayed-orange-powder-paint-just-stop-oil-activists> - On June 19, 2024, two activists from the climate group Just Stop Oil sprayed orange powder paint over Stonehenge, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to demand the UK government commit to phasing out fossil fuels by 2030. The protest led to the arrest of the individuals, and political leaders condemned the act as vandalism. English Heritage swiftly removed the powder to prevent potential damage to the ancient stones and the rare lichens growing on them. The incident sparked debates on the methods of environmental activism and the preservation of cultural heritage.
3. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about/search-news/pr-stonehenge--just-stop-oil-protest/> - Following the Just Stop Oil protest at Stonehenge on June 19, 2024, English Heritage expressed deep concern over the vandalism of the ancient monument. The organization emphasized the stones' significance as a testament to humanity's connection with nature and criticized the activists' actions. Experts from English Heritage promptly removed the orange powder from the stones, highlighting the risk it posed to the rare lichens growing on them. The organization also noted that the cleaning process itself could harm the fragile stone and the lichens.
4. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/climate-change-protesters-cover-stonehenge-with-orange-powder-180984578/> - In June 2024, members of the climate activist group Just Stop Oil sprayed orange powder made from biodegradable cornflour over Stonehenge to draw attention to their campaign demanding the UK government end fossil fuel extraction and burning by 2030. The protest led to the arrest of two individuals. English Heritage, responsible for the site, quickly removed the powder to prevent potential damage to the ancient stones and the rare lichens growing on them. The incident sparked widespread condemnation and discussions on the methods of environmental activism.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/stonehenge-orange-powder-cleaned-with-blowers-not-chemicals-2024-06-26/> - After the Just Stop Oil protest at Stonehenge on June 19, 2024, concerns arose about the potential use of chemical cleaners to remove the orange powder sprayed by activists. Reuters fact-checked and confirmed that English Heritage used specialist hand-held blowers to remove the powder, avoiding chemical cleaners. The organization highlighted the risk the powder posed to the site's rare lichens and emphasized the importance of swift removal to prevent harm. The incident underscored the delicate balance between environmental activism and the preservation of cultural heritage.
6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/06/stonehenge-spray-paint-climate-protest/678765/?utm_source=apple_news> - A recent protest by the climate activist group Just Stop Oil, where members sprayed orange-dyed corn flour on Stonehenge, ignited debates on environmental activism methods. While some criticized the act as vandalism, others emphasized the urgency of addressing climate change. The article discusses the complexities of balancing environmental activism with the preservation of cultural heritage and suggests that protests should strategically focus on impactful targets to avoid alienating public support.
7. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/06/sector-bodies-condemn-just-stop-oil-vandalism-of-stonehenge/> - Following the Just Stop Oil protest at Stonehenge in June 2024, various sector bodies, including the Museums Association, condemned the vandalism of the ancient monument. They expressed concern over the potential damage to the stones and the rare lichens growing on them. The organizations emphasized the importance of preserving cultural heritage and criticized the activists' methods, calling for a more constructive approach to environmental activism that does not harm historical sites.