

Scientist Rebellion: researchers join protesters at COP26

Scientists were among hundreds of demonstrators at the climate conference — and want more to become activists.

It is about 1 p.m. on 11 November when I arrive at the rendezvous point: South Portland Street Suspension Bridge, a footbridge above the River Clyde in Glasgow, UK. On a dinghy floating across the river, a distant figure in a lab coat holds up a banner that reads: “Tell the truth or we will lose everything”. It is Tim Hewlett, an astrophysicist and co-founder of activist group Scientist Rebellion. I am told that he will continue to float across the river until he docks by the Scottish Event Campus, where the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) is taking place, or until he’s arrested — whichever comes first.

For the past week, I have been speaking to scientists at COP26, where nations are trying to agree on how to fulfil their pledges to tackle climate change. Some of the researchers are advisers at the meeting or part of the delegations trying to negotiate a final deal. But others are among the hundreds of activists staging protests on the streets of Glasgow throughout the summit to demand stronger action.

Scientist Rebellion carried out various protests during COP26. On 6 November, activists blocked King George V bridge, one of the main routes connecting Glasgow city centre to the south side of the city. They chained padlocks around their necks and to each other to form a line. Hours of chain-cutting later, the police arrested 21 people — including 15 scientists, according to Scientist Rebellion.

“We believe this is the first ever mass arrest of scientists over the climate crisis,” says Charlie Gardner, a conservation biologist at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK, who was among those arrested.

About six years ago, Gardner started teaching an undergraduate module on climate change. “That made me realize just how serious and impactful the climate crisis is for biodiversity,” he says. Gardner transitioned his research to focus on climate-change ecology, and used platforms including a 2019 essay in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* to call on other academics to join



Members of Scientist Rebellion, including Kyle Topfer (second from left) and Charlie Gardner (far right), chained together on Glasgow’s King George V Bridge.

civil-disobedience movements (C. J. Gardner and C. F. R. Wordley *Nature Ecol. Evol.* **3**, 1271–1272; 2019).

Gardner says Scientist Rebellion’s aim at COP26 is to highlight failures of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. He adds that he is not impressed with the COP26 climate pledges that have been made so far, and says that money and lobbying from sectors including the fossil-fuel industry have too much sway over governments. “There are a lot of very powerful vested interests that do not want us to rapidly decarbonize, as that will limit their ability to make profit.”

Some members of Scientist Rebellion even glued research papers describing the scale of climate change to a building. Among them was Kyle Topfer, an environmental scientist from Sydney, Australia, who also glued his left hand to a paper from *Frontiers in Conservation Science*. Topfer was eventually arrested — still stuck to the paper — and taken away in a police van.

It has been difficult for scientists to persuade their peers to join in with protests, says Caroline Vincent, a London-based independent consultant for the pharmaceutical industry who is a member of XR Scientists — a branch of the organization

Extinction Rebellion, which is known for disruptive protests.

“A lot of people in academia fear about their jobs because some institutions and universities frown upon people who engage in activism,” Vincent adds. “It’s ingrained in scientists to report in an impartial way and not take a view, a little bit like the queen.”

But Gardner thinks many scientists are reluctant to protest because “they’re just too busy”. Senior academics have high workloads and are under constant pressure to publish and secure grants, he says, and early- or mid-career researchers have to concentrate on their research and publications. “To them I say, there are no professorships on a dead planet,” Gardner says.

Although there are still relatively few scientists taking to the streets, Gardner has noticed a lot more discussions about the role of academics in going beyond teaching and research to engage in advocacy and activism. He hopes that this will be followed by more involvement in movements such as Scientist Rebellion. “Climate change isn’t just a battle of information, but of power and influence,” he says.

By Tosin Thompson