

Plant-Based Universities

Activism and Climate Ethics at the University of Basel

QUDSIA SHUJAZADA AND LAURA VON SALIS IN
CONVERSATION WITH NOËMI BERTHERIN

In order to situate our analysis of nonhuman ethics, veganism and institutional responsibility in the context of the climate crisis, we open by canvassing two prominent academic outlooks. At best, Clare Palmer's chapter in *Ethical Issues in Global Climate Change Policy and the Landscape* goes to the heart of basic questions as to why and in what way the harms—and indeed the novel “beings” coming from climate disruption—could matter morally, highlighting profound uncertainties and requesting a more stringent ethical accounting. Expanding on this, and on Mike Fraser Dyke and George Monbiot's exchange on the roles of universities, is a dialogue about our shared work in higher education, from safeguarding student protest and questioning the myth of the neutral academic, to resisting fossil-fuel funding and reimagining metrics of impact in the name of social transformation. Together, they lay out a path from abstract ethical theory to concrete institutional change—clearing the way for our later interview with a University of Basel student and environmental activist who embodies these conversations in a lived reality.

To ground these theoretical perspectives, we draw on an interview with Noemi, a University of Basel student and animal rights activist involved in the Plant-Based Universities (PBU) campaign. Her activism bridges the gap between ethical discourse and on-the-ground initiatives, from rethinking food systems to advocating for institutional responsibility. Noemi's personal and political commitments illustrate how climate justice concerns—especially those involving nonhuman animals and vulnerable human populations—are being translated into real-world strategies on campus.

Very little has so far been said about the direct ethical implications of climate change for other-than-human entities (‘nonhuman nature’),

writes Clare Palmer in the opening sentence of the title under review: *Ethical Issues in Global Climate Change: Policy and the Landscape*. She suggests that although we may accord species, ecosystems, insentient organisms, and sentient animals direct moral considerability, “we cannot always move straightforwardly from anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases to morally cognizable harms to the nonhuman world.” Turn, Palmer argues—and here is where currently the five factors remain (harm versus change, climate change as a productive force, numerical shifts, non-identity problems, and deep scientific uncertainty) that the ethical picture is complicated. For one thing, “it also brings new things and beings into existence that would not otherwise have existed” (some of which may themselves possess moral interests), even while it may be driving species extinct.

In her conclusion, Palmer accentuates all that is “extremely unclear” about these ethical implications and argues for “a much more careful and detailed account both of the likely effects of climate change on the nonhuman world and whether—and why—these effects might be of ethical importance.” This concern for moral clarity in the face of ecological complexity also emerged in our interview with Noemi, one of the students of Basel university, who emphasized the ethical significance of our everyday choices—such as food systems in addressing climate injustices affecting both Humans and nonhumans.

Dyke and Monbiot explain (in their abstract of their paper) the paper is “a dialogue between a writer and an academic about the roles and responsibilities of universities with respect to the climate and ecological crisis” covering six key areas: education; student protest; academic objectivity; student debt and financing; fossil fuel funding; consensus and risks. Education: “the Earth system is under assault... the sixth

great Earth systems collapse”.⁸ We need “the collective genius of humanity” working across specialisms for successful transformations (Monbiot).

Student Protest: They argue that universities should not be “impeding the people who are protesting or otherwise making a big fuss,” but they should instead “facilitate and protect and look after the students who are protesting.” **Academic Objectivity:** Both authors dismantle the neutrality myth (“when people say that they are politically neutral, they really mean they are siding with power”) and push back against the idea that scholars do not have political effects. **Student Debt & Financial Pressures:** Monbiot attacks the universities’ obsession with graduate salaries, branding it as “high graduate starting salaries” – as set out in the government’s rating of universities – a “total disaster” as it drives students into “Earth-eating sectors” (finance, fossil fuels etc.).

Fossil Fuel Funding: He compares taking donations from oil companies to “a medical department taking money from a tobacco company,” and says there’s “no excuse” for universities’ taking money that gives polluters a “societal license to operate.”

Where They Agree: They point out that a “decades of delay” have led us to dangerous new territory and that only incremental steps can’t address tipping-point risks. Their comparison of fossil-fuel funding to “a medical department taking money from a tobacco company” resonates with Noëmi’s reflection on the “work she did for a major global study in 2019, which investigated inefficiencies in the food system, focusing on its animal products production,” both critiques targeting systemic complicity in environmental harm.

In their conclusion, Dyke and Monbiot claim that “the modern university has a crucial role to play in the response to the climate and ecological crisis” and advocate for broadening curricula, managing protest productively, developing interdisciplinarity, and reframing impact metrics to prioritize social change alongside research outputs.

We interviewed a University of Basel student Noëmi Bertherin, an animal rights activist to discuss her motivation for the Plant-Based University Program.

Career Goals: The speaker makes no bones that she wants to follow the study of law and protect the environment and sever a sly little activist on the way out. “My dream is to really protect and fight for the environment and also protect activists as a job later. “She said.

She stresses the value of advocacy experience in the field of conservation, underscoring a firsthand dedication. She also cited work she did for a major global study in 2019, which investigated inefficiencies in the food system, focusing on its animal products production.

Personal Journey: Noëmi also shares their food choices, as vegan, which she links to their concern for environmental and climate justice. Their mother was a vegetarian, she says, inspiring their own dietary evolution over the last 15 years to what has been a mostly plant-based diet for about a decade. This way of life is portrayed.

Noëmi highlights the dilemma between eating animal products from animal-friendly sources, which typically cause higher emissions or consuming mass-produced animal products with lower ethical standards but a smaller carbon footprint which raises a significant ethical question. This tension reveals a deeper issue within climate justice: whose interests count? As Clare Palmer argues in *Does Nature Matter? The Place of the Nonhuman in the Ethics of Climate Change*, climate ethics has largely centered on human interests while neglecting the suffering of animals and the destruction of habitats. From this perspective, discussions about sourcing “ethical” animal products become less relevant when we consider that veganism eliminates both emissions and animal exploitation, making the debate about production methods redundant.

From a social justice perspective, as discussed in *From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice* by David Schlosberg and Lisette B. Collins, the environmental harm caused by large-scale industrial livestock farming disproportionately affects marginalized communities. The caused damages include water contamination, air pollution, and the release of greenhouse gases. These groups often live near such industries due to historical and economic factors, leaving them with few options to resettle or mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change. As a result, these communities face significant health risks linked to environmental degradation.

Angela Martin, in her contribution to the panel discussion *Current debates in climate Justice*, highlights that animals are both contributors to and victims of climate change. Livestock farming is responsible for 14.5% to 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions, especially from species like cows and sheep. At the same time, wild animals are facing habitat loss, malnutrition, and increased mortality due to climate impacts, particularly species in polar, mountain, and amphibian ecosystems. She concludes that while climate-based reasons for adopting plant-based diets are already

strong, the ethical arguments from animal rights perspectives are even stronger.

In order to give animals a voice, activism and initiatives are needed to raise awareness of the climate benefits of a plant-based diet. The PBU's attempt to veganize the university mensa over the next 5 years closely aligns with *What Makes a Protest Successful?* by Social Change Lab. The Plant Based Universities initiative is advocating for nonviolent, peaceful tactics to gain support from students. For example, they organize weekly PBU meetings to update students on current topics or set up stands in front of the university building to foster exchange and spread their ideas. Instead of targeting and blaming individual students based on their diets, they expect change to come from the institution of the University of Basel as they act as a role model.

The agenda of the PBU aligns with the climate strategic goals of uni basel *Climate Responsibility: Climate Strategy 2024-2030*, their approach to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 35% by 2030. It includes that they strive towards reducing their emissions caused by their catering by 40%. Their key measures are *"Increase the range of vegetarian and vegan options. Carry out awareness-raising campaigns. Annual definition of measures to achieve the interim target of -15% reduction in emissions by 2027. Expand vegetarian/vegan offering as part of the new tender for catering establishments."* Therefore PBU would be one of those awareness

raising campaigns. Most of their support by the university comes from professors of sciences and students who recognize the importance of plant-based diets in reducing climate change. However, there is still resistance from some university employees, particularly PhD researchers, who argue that these changes might not be practical for their work schedules or preferences as it limits their freedom. Many criticize the Plant-Based University initiative for being patronizing toward their personal dietary choices. Noëmi argues that it is more critical for vegan students to have more options, as they rely on the budget meals provided by the university, while employees have more flexibility and can eat elsewhere. The definition of "freedom" in this debate depends on perspective. More plant-based options would offer greater choice for vegan students or those with allergies, while non-vegans would also have the option to enjoy vegan meals. Since most students eat only one or two meals a week at the university canteen, expanding plant-based options would not drastically limit their overall diet and they would not be forced to become vegans. Additionally, it could be an opportunity for rebranding the canteen, potentially increasing student participation and frequency of visits.

The most recent success was In April 2025 - the Student Council of the University of Basel officially accepted PBU's motion which is a major step towards more sustainable, plant-based catering on campus.

Collins, L. B., & Schlosberg, D. (2019). *From environmental to climate justice: Climate change and the discourse of environmental justice*. WIREs Climate Change, 10(3), e598.
 Dyke, J., & Monbiot, G. (2021). *Universities and the climate crisis: A dialogue on the responsibilities of higher education*.
 Foerster, A. (2022). *Climate justice and corporations*. In Climate Justice Colloquium.
 Palmer, Clare. *Does Nature Matter? The Place of the Nonhuman in the Ethics of Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Schlosberg, David, and Lisette B. Collins. *From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
 Martin, Angela. *Current Debates in Climate Justice*. Panel discussion Climate Justice Colloquium, 2025.
 Social Change Lab. *What Makes a Protest Successful?* Social Change Lab, 2024.
 University of Basel. *Climate Responsibility: Climate Strategy 2024-2030*. University of Basel, 2024.