

Talking About the Environment – Video

In this lesson, you can learn about talking about the environment in English and discuss environmental issues.

What's the air quality like in your city? Do you worry about climate change, or how your food is produced? You'll learn useful topics for talking about the environment in this class.

1. Air Pollution

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/mountain.webp>)

Gina: Wow! It's such a beautiful day! The sky is so blue.

Oli: I guess... It's been nice all summer, so I don't notice it as much. Maybe I'm getting spoiled!

G: I wasn't expecting it to be like this. My Dad came here a few years ago and he said the air quality was really bad.

O: He's not wrong. It used to be terrible. In summer, you'd often get thick smog covering the whole city, but it's improved greatly in the last decade or so.

G: What changed?

O: I think it was driven by people's attitudes. Ten years ago, no one was interested in environmental issues, but nowadays there's much more awareness of things like air quality and how it can affect your health.

G: Sure, but that can't be the only reason.

O: Well, no. The local government also brought in new laws and regulations. They introduced restrictions on driving in the city centre, made it illegal to use wood or coal fires for heating, and moved a lot of heavy industry away from the city. Plus, there are much tighter regulations nationally, too, like with car emissions: compared to even ten years ago, cars are much cleaner.

G: It's impressive that they could make such a big change in a short time. Ten years isn't long for these things.

O: True, but there's still more to do. It can still get hazy in winter. They're investing in public transport infrastructure, though, so I think it'll carry on getting better.

In your hometown, is the air quality good, or do you have problems? Can you remember any of the phrases you heard in the dialogue to talk about air pollution? You heard:

The air quality was really bad.

You'd often get thick smog covering the whole city.

It can still get hazy in winter.

'Air quality' is a useful phrase for this topic. You can use it with different adjectives. For example:

The air quality is terrible.

The air quality is better than it was ten years ago.

The air quality is great for such a large city.

Learn more about adjectives in this Oxford Online English lesson on How to Use Adjectives (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/how-to-use-adjectives>).

'Smog' is a thick fog, caused by air pollution. If the air is a little dirty, so that you can't see far, you might describe it as 'hazy.' Here's a question: what do you think the government, companies or individuals can do to minimise air pollution? In the dialogue, you heard several possible solutions, such as:

- The government brought in new laws and regulations.*
- They introduced restrictions on driving in the city centre.*
- They made it illegal to use wood or coal fires for heating.*
- They moved a lot of heavy industry away from the city.*

'Restrictions on driving' could mean different things. For example, London has a congestion charge, meaning that drivers have to pay every time they enter the city centre. Some cities have banned vehicles with diesel engines, while others have created large pedestrian zones. Let's practise! Here are three questions for you.

1. What's the air quality like in your city?
2. What is your local or national government doing to improve air quality where you live?
3. What do you think is the best way to reduce air pollution?

Pause the video, think about your answers, and write them down or say them out loud. If you need more help, review the dialogue and this section. There are many words and phrases you can use. Ready? Let's move on to our next point on talking about the environment.

2. Waste and Recycling

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/recycle-bin.webp>)

Oli: Whoa! What are you doing?

Gina: What do you mean?

O: You can't throw that in there!

G: Why not? It's garbage.

O: Yeah, but it's recyclable. It goes in the blue bin.

G: You mean, I have to put all recyclable stuff in the blue bin?

O: Not all. Plastics go in the blue bin, paper and card in the brown bin, and bio-waste in the green one.

G: 'Bio-waste?'

O: You know, food waste and stuff like that.

G: Is that it?

O: The black bucket is for glass and tins. Do you not recycle?

G: In my hometown you can recycle a few things, like glass, but we don't sort our garbage like this. It seems very complicated!

O: Then what, all of your rubbish just goes into landfill?

G: I guess... I've never thought about it. I just throw stuff away and forget about it.

O: It was the same here not so long ago, but now we've got used to sorting our rubbish and recycling as much as possible. It's much more environmentally friendly.

G: I'm sure you're right.

In the dialogue, we mentioned several different types of garbage. Quick question: can you remember three of them? By the way, the words 'garbage', 'rubbish' and 'trash' all have a similar meaning: they all mean the stuff which you throw away. If there is recycling in your city, you might need to sort your recyclable garbage, meaning you put different things in different bins. Generally, you can sort garbage into recyclables and non-recyclables. Recyclable garbage might include glass, tins, cans, paper, card, plastic, and bio-waste. Waste which is not recycled is often sent to landfill. This means the waste is buried in a big hole in the ground.

Sometimes, waste might end up in a dump. A dump is like a landfill, but it isn't buried, so it's just a big pile of garbage on the ground somewhere. Now it's time for you to practise. Here are another three questions for you:

1. In your city, do you sort your garbage? If so, how?
2. What waste is commonly recycled in your country?
3. What happens to non-recyclable waste?

As before, pause the video and make your answers. Practise them a few times before you continue. Let's look at our next topic on talking about the environment.

3. Talking About Food Safety and Farming

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/farming.webp>)

Gina: That book looks interesting. What's it about?

Oli: This? It's by a Japanese writer. It's about farming and how we could make farming more sustainable.

G: OK... You're a graphic designer. Why are you reading about farming?

O: It's interesting! Farming produces the food you eat. It's not like it doesn't affect you.

G: What's his idea?

O: He's basically saying that modern farming methods can produce more in the short term, but in the long term they degrade the land and end up costing more.

G: Mmm...

O: One thing he talks about is pesticide use. If farmers use pesticides and herbicides, then they create an ecosystem which depends on those artificial products, which are often harmful for the environment. If you grow food organically, using more traditional farming methods, you can grow the same amount of food without using pesticides at all.

G: So he thinks we should go back to mediaeval farming or something?

O: Not exactly. I can see you're sceptical (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/sceptical>), but I think you should read it, too. It's not just theory, by the way. He's used his ideas to set up several farms in different countries, and they work just like he says.

G: Hmm... I have been thinking about these things, actually, especially with meat. I saw a documentary about livestock farming and slaughterhouses, and it was shocking. I guess most people just buy the food and don't think about where it comes from.

O: Right, so you'll definitely like this book, too. You can borrow it once I've finished.

G: What's it called?

O: "The One-Straw Revolution (https://www.amazon.com/One-Straw-Revolution-Introduction-Natural-Classics/dp/1590173139/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3V9LE88LH23LJ&keywords=one-straw+revolution&qid=1560963407&s=gateway&sprefix=one-straw+%2Caps%2C605&sr=8-1)."

Do you think about where your food comes from, and how it's produced? Modern farming is heavily mechanised—it depends heavily on machinery, automation, as well as chemical products like herbicides and pesticides. Herbicides kill weeds, meaning unwanted plants. Pesticides kill insects and small animals which might try to eat food crops.

Farming needs to be sustainable. 'Sustainable' means that something can continue. For example, if you earn \$1000 a month and spend \$2000, that isn't sustainable. Maybe you can do that for a few months, but you can't do it long term. In the same way, some farming methods are unsustainable. In this case, farming can degrade the land, meaning that, over time, it becomes more and more difficult to grow anything.

On the other hand, some farming is organic. 'Organic' means that food is grown without using any artificial chemical products. Of course, farming isn't just about growing plants. There is also 'livestock farming': raising animals for meat, eggs or milk. Animals which are raised to provide meat are generally killed in a slaughterhouse.

What about in your country? Think about these questions:

1. Are farms usually bigger and more mechanised, or are they mostly smaller, using more traditional methods?
2. Do you think it's worth paying extra to eat organic food? Why or why not?
3. Is it important to know how your food is produced? Give a reason!

Pause the video and think about your answers. Write them down, say them out loud, or do both. Let's look at our last section.

4. Climate Change

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ice-cliff.webp>)

Oli: Do people ever talk about global warming in your country?

Gina: For sure! It's a big issue. We have a long coastline, and a lot of the land is close to sea level, so the dangers feel very real.

O: I feel like people often don't pay attention to these things until it's too late.

G: It's already happening, though. There's more flooding than there used to be, and older people, like my grandparents for example, all say that summers have got much hotter than they were 50 years ago.

O: That's kind of scary. I read somewhere that even if we cut carbon emissions to zero, global warming would continue for at least fifty years, because of the greenhouse gases that are already in the atmosphere.

G: The big topic for us is sea levels. If the ice caps melt, they say sea levels will rise by two or three metres. For some countries, that wouldn't be a big deal, but we'd lose almost half of our land.

O: I don't think any country will be immune from the problems if it continues. So, do you think there's a solution? It doesn't look optimistic from what I've heard.

G: I mean, people talk about things like carbon taxes and reforestation programs, which are helpful, but I don't think there'll be any real progress until there's true international cooperation. So far, I don't see any sign of that.

In the dialogue, you heard us talking about climate change. Can you remember climate change vocabulary (<https://quizlet.com/19281205/climate-change-vocabulary-short-version-flash-cards/>) and phrases we used to describe the causes and effects of climate change?

By the way, you can use the terms 'global warming' or 'climate change'. People use them with the same meaning. Climate change is caused by increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The main greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide, or CO₂. Sometimes, instead of talking about carbon dioxide or CO₂, people will just refer to 'carbon'. You can hear things like: 'We need to cut carbon emissions significantly.' Climate change may lead to several problems, particularly flooding caused by rising sea levels. Although there aren't clear solutions, some people suggest that carbon taxes or reforestation programs are good ways to combat climate change. A 'carbon tax' means that companies would have to pay the government if their operations released CO₂ into the atmosphere.

Let's see: can you use some of this language? Here are three questions for you.

1. Are you worried about global warming? Why or why not?
2. How would your country be affected if sea levels rose significantly?
3. What do you think is the best way to deal with climate change?

Pause the video and make your answers now! How was that? There's a lot of language in this lesson, so don't forget to review any sections that were difficult for you.

Hopefully that helped you feel more confident talking about the environment in English. Thanks for watching!

Don't forget to check out our other English Speaking Lessons (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/free-spoken-english-lessons>) for more speaking practice!