

## [Ten reasons to be cheerful, part 10: The environment](#) [1]

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Despite all the scare stories, I'm optimistic that the next generation will live on a planet that is cleaner and greener, and probably nicer to look at.

### 10. Environment

Claims are made that our cities, rivers and coasts grow more polluted by the day. In fact some areas have improved considerably. The streets of late Victorian London were awash with horse manure, with children standing at street corners to clear a path in exchange for a small coin. City air was more polluted when nearly all homes burned coal fires. The London smog of 1952 killed an estimated 12,000 people in a fortnight, with theatres closed because audiences could not see the stage. It prompted the Clean Air Act of 1956.

In the late 1970s most London buildings were black, including Westminster Abbey, the Palace of Westminster and Whitehall. They were cleaned up only when the air became sufficiently soot-free to make it last. The Thames, once toxic to fish, now bears stocks of several species. Other rivers and coastlines are much cleaner than they have been.

Even air pollution from industrial activity is diminishing in Britain and most advanced economies. New technology makes this possible, and it is the poorer and up-and-coming countries that find it too expensive. China is building new coal-fired power stations at a rate of more than one a week, and plans to do so for at least a decade. It will make sense to develop the technology for cleaner burning so that it becomes affordable.

In fact one of the biggest aids to reducing pollution is the switch to natural gas-fired power stations, since it burns much cleaner. With maybe 100 or more years of gas reserves now extractable, the switch from coal to gas will have a major impact on pollution. The switch to electric vehicles charged from gas-fired power will dramatically cut the pollution caused by engines burning petrol or diesel.

The second Green Revolution in agriculture will increase yields from acres under cultivation and bring hitherto marginal land into use. This will give the rainforest more protection than all the pledges and treaties that have hitherto been resorted to.

In all of this it is technology, rather than behavioural change, that is making the difference and which will bring results. We do not have to live more simply, just more cleverly so that we can achieve our aims while leaving a smaller footprint. I have confidence in our ability to do this.

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