

Yorkshire Funders

How can Funders Take Environmental Action?

Thursday 18th September 2025 online

Session delivered by:

- Jane Cabutti, [Environmental Funders Network](#), with contributions from Jenny Oppenheimer, Fondation Chanel

Session overview

Discover why all funders should be applying an environmental lens across their work programmes and how to quickly and easily get started.

Session Summary

Overview of Environmental Funders Network (EFN)

Environmental Funders Network is both a UK and international network.

A healthy environment is a bedrock for everything and links to virtually every other cause. Philanthropy has a unique role to play and there is so much to focus on.

EFN was set up 25 years ago by a small group of funders – Ben Goldsmith & the Goldsmith family were fundamental in this and are still involved. There were originally two aims for EFN - to increase funding and increase effectiveness.

Five years ago, a third aim was added – supporting people and organisations to create a thriving planet. This work was started in Covid times and there has been a real appetite for it – helping to grow environmental philanthropy and improve effectiveness of funding.

Pillars of Work

Pillar 1 – growing environmental philanthropy – working with people not giving to benefit the environment yet or at early stages

Pillar 2 – improving effectiveness of environmental funding

Pillar 3 – opportunities to come together and research

EFN brings people together to learn from each other, carries out research & provides 1-2-1 support and advice. There are a lot of resources on the EFN website and links to other organisations for help and guidance. They also offer in-person networking meetings and an annual retreat/conference, field trips (next is on rewilding and species reintroduction at London Zoo) and work with other networks and partners closely.

Research in last year includes:

- Where the Green Grants Went 9 – Patterns of UK Funding for Environmental Work.
- Increasing the effectiveness of environmental funder-fundraiser relationships
- Exploring the role of wealth advisors in green giving

See links in Jane's presentation to website, research papers, strategy, annual report and sign up to monthly newsletter. EFN operates an open-door policy. The only things they charge for are special programmes and their annual retreat – they are funded by voluntary membership subscription.

The Role of Philanthropy in Environmental Action

It is a common misconception that environmental philanthropy won't make any difference given the scale of problems in the world right now. In fact, the opposite is true – funding that can be delivered quickly and takes risks makes a huge difference – governments then come in and scale things that are successful. But every small change also makes a difference. There are lots of stories on the impact of environmental giving on the EFN website, also stories to inspire.

Key Trends in Environmental Funding

See 'Where the Green Grants Went 9' report on website (this report covers the year 2021-22)

Section A = Data analysis/graphs/commentary

Section B = How we can make environmental philanthropy more effective

- Environmental funding in 2021-22 is approx. 3 x more than previous report found, but it is still low in comparison to other areas.
- % of funding given to environmental causes was 3% ten years ago. This has now increased to 8.5%.
- Most growth coming from 10 really big funders, representing 80% of all environmental giving – a lot of this goes out of the UK.
- Smaller funders are really important in the ecosystem.
- Not a lot of repeat funding currently – still a bit scattergun in nature

What is meant by environmental funding? – There are 12 categories used in research (see presentation)

In the UK, Biodiversity & species preservation & terrestrial ecosystems and land use receive most money. Climate and air quality only 6th.

Less and less funding from UK funders is staying in the UK – only 17% - lowest figure ever since EFN has been doing this research. Uneven distribution also within UK – Scotland and Wales leading in per capita terms, largely due to lottery funding.

Section B – EFN looked to other funding sectors who had successfully implemented change – including far right funders in the US – there are definitely lessons from where they deploy their funding – they take huge risks, look long term (20 years not 3), funding people, policy, communications & narrative. See 2nd section of report for full details.

Opportunities and challenges for funders

Challenges - can be seen as low priority, overwhelming, not urgent – but the environment does effect all other issues and impacts on the most marginalised the worst as it's a stress multiplier – people on low incomes, ethnic minorities, those with disabilities or long-term health conditions. And these are often priority areas for funders.

Environmental issues can feel overwhelming – but it helps to keep it simple and focus on keeping fossil fuels in the ground and the switch to renewables. Then protect what we have and restore what we can and everything else flows from there.

Mitigation and Adaptation are key terms and often misused in media – see presentation for a clearer definition.

Opportunities – 1) widen your current grant criteria (e.g. if you are a health space funder, you could expand your description to include the importance of green spaces to health)

2) Develop new funding programmes

3) Support current grantees in other ways – e.g. add on funding for a green element to an existing project.

4) Policy work

5) Legal challenges – some brilliant charities doing this but not many

6) Communication/narrative change – so important, as used by the far right to great effect

Resources – see links on Jane's presentation – these include local fund examples from Manchester and Oxford.

Beyond Grantmaking

Some members on the call offer additional funding to grants given specifically for green action linked to it, no matter what the project.

Most funders are seeing the environmental aspect as increasingly important but are at different stages in their journey.

Jenny Oppenheimer @ Fondation Chanel joined the call to discuss the journey Chanel has gone on and why as a funder focused on women and girls they decided to start funding environmental projects.

Fondation Chanel (FC) is a global foundation, but the UK is treated as a standalone part of this. Their vision is a world where women and girls are free to shape their destiny. They articulate their work through three pillars 1) safety 2) economic and social autonomy and new 3) climate resilience. They work with frontline organisations, influencing peers and driving systems change.

When is gender not primary focus? Gender is not a headline cause in the global north but it should never be peripheral. Women and girls are at often worst affected by issues but also the solution providers. Climate illustrates this vividly – deepens inequalities across societies. We forget about this as funders – the combined impact of our work. Most climate grants go towards technical mitigation rather than community resilience where the women are working. Gender should be a lens that we use in the climate debate.

Funding climate resilience is about simultaneously tackling other issues e.g. poverty, health.

FC first entered the global climate space in 2022 and very early on realised that they needed to move beyond mitigation and that adopting a resilience lens would be most valuable and impactful. They have been working to integrate climate resilience into existing pillars – localised across different regions.

What does climate resilience and gender mean in the UK? When trying to research this, you find nothing about women – there is no data available. 0.2% of UK climate funding reaches women's organisations.

One of the first FC did was engage Impatience Earth to do some research in this area – report came out last week (<https://impatience.earth/2025/09/08/invisible-women/>). This is the start of building that narrative and evidence base.

If you are a funder funding around poverty, housing, benefits – you are also funding for climate and women. FC is continuing to work with Impatience Earth to uplift what the research has shown, shift perceptions of how climate links to gender and communicate this to funder community.

Q: Did you have to persuade your board?

FC is linked to the Corporate Foundation – on our board is Chief Sustainability Officer for Chanel Corporate so this wasn't difficult.

Q: How do you create a market for women's groups thinking about environmental activities? - I haven't had any applications for this but there must be groups interested

We don't have open rounds – we go out and find the organisations. Because we are already working with the demographic of women, we look for that intersection – it's a reframing. The biggest issue other than lack of data is that we want women-led projects – uplift the leadership and put the women front and centre in driving change – this has been difficult.

Q: How do we help organisations to realise that they are in the climate space as their focus is on the other (main expressed) aim of the project and 2) how can we make sure we are doing more?

You want to make visible what you are doing – an easy win may be to have in your reporting an element on the environmental impact – see what comes back – this encourages your partners to focus on this. You could develop this by a small amount of additional funding for the environmental element as an add-on to a project.

Q: We only give small pots of money – how can you make a difference?

We don't give small grants – we give large grants and offer multiyear funding. Our grassroots grants we do through regranters. But all good grantmaking practices say it's longer-term secure – smaller pots take the energy out of the organisations and work doesn't get delivered to the quality we would want for the grants made.

See Funder Commitment on Climate change – how you can use your influence even if you are unable to join – great pillars and resources to use as guidance.

Research has shown that grants of £3,600 or less generally cost the organisation that's applying more than they get in benefits.

Useful resources:

<https://divestinvest.org/>

Everyone's Environment programme from New Philanthropy Capital is a really useful resource – looking at interactions between different groups and the environment.

<https://www.thinknpc.org/influencing/everyones-environment/>

Feedback to Yorkshire Funders

If you have got any questions, feedback, top tips, links etc on any of this please get in touch as Yorkshire Funders knows our members are sources of incredible insights and knowledge that is valuable to others.

Get in touch via Alex, Alex@yorkshirefunders.org.uk