

Institution: University of East Anglia		
Unit of Assessment: 30 - Philosophy		
Title of case study: Reinterpreting the Precautionary Principle and elaborating its consequences for the contemporary 'three estates' of government, media and civil society		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Between 2000 and 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Rupert Read	Reader	1997 - to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Between 2016 and 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Rupert Read has a long track record of research in the field of environmental philosophy. Developing and building on this work over the census period, Read came to focus on the ways in which we 'value' nature and calculate risks in environmental policy but also in other areas of politics and economics. In particular, he has argued for the value of the 'Precautionary Principle' [PP] and its application in policy. Read's research reinterprets the PP to improve its effectiveness in reducing harm in situations where 'full' scientific evidence is not available. This research has challenged conventional wisdom about risk and stimulated debate among a range of stakeholders and, through direct engagement, it has had a demonstrable and significant impact on British government policymakers and Parliamentarians. It has helped them to question and improve public policy, and it has led to changes in policy frameworks shaping UK government actions as evidenced by, for example, alterations in working definitions used by The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).</p> <p>Read's work in environmental philosophy has made an influential contribution to the media, most notably the BBC (changing the BBC's policy on reporting climate change following a sustained campaign across social and print media), and to civil society campaigns (most notably Extinction Rebellion). Consequently, and through Read's public advocacy, his philosophical research has helped to shape and inform public attitudes and values, enabled challenges to established norms and practices and raised awareness of serious and irreversible risks.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Read's research reveals the ethical necessity of acknowledging the extent of ecological and climate crisis. Drawing originally on the Wittgensteinian tradition (3.1, 3.5), he developed a critique of technocratic and 'scientific' ways of thinking while proposing new ways of understanding our responsibilities to the planet and to future generations. This research led to novel interdisciplinary collaborative work with the academic economist (and former MEP) Molly Scott Cato (3.2) and with the public intellectual and specialist in Risk Engineering Nassim Nicholas Taleb (3.3). Drawing on this work, with AHRC funding for a Research Network, Read brought together philosophers and other academic specialists with stakeholders from organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Natural England, accountants and politicians. The network's research showed the inadequacy of valuing nature by reducing it to economic measures and the potential importance of the PP as an alternative to the influential 'ecosystem services' approach.</p> <p>In order to make the PP more effective, Read's work has narrowed the scope for when it comes into play, allowing for the corollary to be drawn: that the PP should be taken to <i>bar</i> any route that may reasonably be regarded as issuing in serious and irreversible risks. This argument takes into account the important <i>asymmetries</i> at play: risks of ruin (e.g. ecological collapse) should be considered weightier than opportunities for benefit, firstly, because no potential benefit, however great, can compensate for a risk of ruin or collapse; and secondly, because those subject to risk are rarely identical with those potentially benefitting from, or those making, the decision (3.3). Read's research thus reframes the PP as an insistence that such risky routes be barred and that other – often more innovative – routes be sought out (3.4).</p>		

A second insight from Read's work comes from questioning the 'scientism' (3.1) that can result if decision-making gets forced into the mould of model and evidence. Noting that many scientists are more worried about producing 'false positives' as opposed to 'false negatives,' Read highlights how this reduces and dangerously delays the chance of reckoning with potential threats (3.4). These scientists can then appear to argue plausibly against precaution, invoking 'sound science' and criticising so-called 'alarmism'. A precautionary approach can and should restructure our modes of decision-making away from the hegemonic emphasis on 'evidence-based' thinking. It is reckless to insist upon an evidence-base sufficient to motivate a proposed course of action if, by the time the evidence is in, serious and irreversible harm may have been done. Read's research applies this thinking to complex systems such as climate science (3.6) studies, where a full evidence base is even now not available, genetically modified organisms (3.3) and other novel substances. In applying this precautionary standard, Read's work with Taleb (3.3) argues that the alleged evidence-base for the safety of various proposed courses is moot since on the timescale appropriate to the decision (e.g. natural timescales) the alleged evidence is often statistically insignificant. Absence of evidence of harm is thus not evidence of absence of harm. In cases like climate science, it is the latter that should be demanded, and in its absence, precaution should reign.

3. References to the research

- 3.1** Wittgenstein Among the Sciences: Wittgensteinian Investigations into the 'Scientific Method'
R, Read (editor: S. Summers). *Routledge*. (2012). ISBN 9781138246478
- 3.2** A Price for Everything?: The Natural Capital Controversy
R, Read, M.S, Cato. *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 5:2 153-167, (2014). DOI:10.4337/jhre.2014.03.03
- 3.3** The Precautionary Principle (with Application to the Genetic Modification of Organisms).
 N.N, Taleb. **R, Read**. R, Douady. J, Norman. Y, Bar-Yam
Extreme Risk Initiative, NYU School of Engineering, Working Paper Series (2014).
arxiv.org/pdf/1410.5787.pdf
- 3.4** The Precautionary Principle Under Fire
R, Read and **T, O'Riordan**. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 59:5,4-15. (2017). DOI:10.1080/00139157.2017.1350005
- 3.5** Beyond Just Justice – Creating Space for a Future-Care Ethic
R, Makoff and **R, Read**. *Philos Inv*, 40: 223-256. (2017). DOI: 10.1111/phn.12138
- 3.6** "How to Think the Climate Crisis via Wittgensteinian Precautionary Reasoning"
R, Read (ed.) Beale and Kidd, *Wittgenstein and Scientism* Chap 8, pp133-151
Routledge (2018). ISBN: 9781138829398

Grants

- 3.7** PI: **R, Read**
 Project: "Valuing Nature"
 Funder: AHRC Network Grant.
 Project dates: November 2016 – April 2018. Grant value: GBP24,323
- 3.8** PI: **R, Read**
 Project: "Taking the Debate on Nature's Value to the Valuers"
 Funder: AHRC Follow-on Funding Award.
 Project dates: February 2019 – January 2020. Grant value: GBP39,606

4. Details of the impact

Read's arguments about the risks and challenges of climate crisis and about the power of the Precautionary Principle have challenged the conventional wisdom of Parliamentarians, policy makers and other stakeholders, informing practice and leading to changes in processes of policy formation, evaluation and decision-making. His arguments have reached a wide public audience, improving awareness, stimulating widespread debate about environmental policy planning and motivating political engagement.

Read's 'Debating Nature's Value' (3.7) AHRC-funded Research Network brought researchers together with practitioners from a wide range of groups including Friends of the Earth, Natural England and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), and resulted in a submission of evidence to Environmental Audit (UK Parliament) in February 2018. With the ICAEW as partner, the project secured AHRC Follow-On Funding (3.8) to develop impact on Parliament and on the policy process, including meetings with Parliamentarians in Westminster.

Impact on Government and Parliament

In October 2017, Read and UEA colleague Prof. Tim O'Riordan briefed key parliamentarians at the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Limits to Growth on the merits of applying the PP to the Great Repeal Bill, which would transpose EU law into domestic law as part of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The meeting was attended by twenty MPs and Lords. After the briefing, Read and O'Riordan were invited to circulate an official APPG note (5.3) on embedding the PP in policymaking post-Brexit. Together, their briefing and note had a direct influence on [REDACTED] questioning of Secretary of State Michael Gove at the Environmental Audit Committee. [REDACTED], formerly Labour's Environment spokesperson, commented (5.3):

"Dr. Read has helped me navigate the tricky waters of the Precautionary Principle in the last few years, by providing briefings and, in particular, with his presentation to the Limits to Growth All-Party Parliamentary Group, which helped me prepare for the tough line of questioning of Secretary of State, Michael Gove, that I undertook soon after that at the Environmental Audit Committee".

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

While directly advising Government, Read also presented his research to the House of Lords in a series of three briefings, commissioned by the APPG on Agroecology (5.4). This led to his drafting [REDACTED] speech in a key debate on Brexit, trade and environmental principles, in May 2019. In [REDACTED] words (5.3):

"[Read's] tireless work on the [Precautionary Principle] has greatly helped my own work (e.g. in the speech he drafted for me in the key Lords debate on the topic) and the work of other Parliamentarians".

The compromise settled on by the House of Commons was very similar in nature to one Read had called for in a blogpost (5.2) that appears to have influenced the Secretary of State in the same way Read's APPG note had previously. This interpretation of what happened is directly supported by [REDACTED] testimonial (5.8b) on Read's influence upon him:

"Rupert Read's work has been a lodestar in offering a joined-up 'green' philosophy. His work has been especially important to me in setting out a rationale for the retention of the

Precautionary Principle as Britain leaves the EU. In particular, the report that Read co-authored in 2017 on this matter influenced my thinking (and alerted me to key sources) for how best to retain the Precautionary Principle in the post-Brexit environmental architecture”.

[REDACTED] This was the first declaration of a climate emergency by a national Parliament in the world and was the first huge success of XR towards attaining its demands.

[REDACTED] sums up the ways that Read has given specific technical help to Parliamentarians *and* had a broader impact upon the entire debate (5.3):

“Rupert Read has become a ‘go to’ thought-leader for all things precautionary. And, in this era of ecological emergency, there could be little that’s more important. Read’s way of formulating the Precautionary Principle helps bring out how decisive the Principle is – or should be – when it comes to existential threats, such as climate, especially, now presents. His written and oral presentations to the APPG Limits to Growth on the Precautionary Principle helped me and Parliamentary colleagues to get clear on the strong salience of the Principle to the wording of the ‘Great Repeal Bill’ in particular: i.e. to what it would take to prevent the Principle from being gutted by the Brexit process. This in turn helped me clarify my thoughts in the same ballpark when it came to questioning the Secretary of State (Michael Gove) on 1 Nov. 2017, in the Environmental Audit Committee. These are just examples; I could give others. Read’s advice and thinking in this domain is ongoing and I expect to be availing myself of more of it in the coming years, especially (though not only) in relation to the post-Brexit environment”.

Read’s influence has spanned the entire political spectrum. [REDACTED]

Impact on the BBC

In the summer of 2018, as Read’s work on the PP was becoming more influential, he led a campaign for the BBC to change its policy on reporting anthropogenic climate-change: specifically, to give up its policy of using climate-deniers as ‘balance’. Read argued that it was reckless to pretend that the debate over climate was still ‘wide open’, pointing out that, even if it were, precautionary considerations are decisive given there is an existential risk in play.

Read’s tweet on this went viral: it was retweeted 42,000 times and seen by 8,000,000 people (5.6). Read was commissioned to write an article for *The Guardian* (5.6), explaining what had happened. Drawing on his existing research and impact-activities, Read’s article presented a strong case for the utility of the precautionary principle in policymaking; the article was shared 10,000 times (5.6) and viewed approximately 1,000,000 times.

The BBC then reached out to Read in several ways, [REDACTED]. This led to Read co-ordinating a major multi-signed letter on the topic (5.6), also published in *The Guardian*, and again featuring the PP prominently in its reasoning for why it is reckless and inappropriate to ‘balance’ ‘debates’ on dangerous anthropogenic climate change with climate deniers. The open letter was co-signed by climate scientists and public figures, including Jonathon Porritt, Peter Tatchell, George Monbiot, and elected Parliamentarians from Labour, the LibDems and Greens.

Read's letter resulted in the BBC changing its policy (5.8c, 5.8d): a month later, Fran Unsworth, BBC director of news & current affairs, issued a briefing note saying, "*Climate change has been a difficult subject for the BBC, and we get coverage of it wrong too often*" (5.6). The new advice from the BBC told staff: "*You do not need a 'denier' to balance the debate*", exactly what Read's campaign had demanded earlier that summer. [REDACTED] (5.8c), now the BBC's leading wildlife programme-maker, commented:

"It's common-knowledge across the BBC that Prof. Rupert Read played the pivotal role in getting the BBC finally to stop seeking 'balance' from climate-change-deniers, in 2018. In this matter, Read has been not only an intellectual showing leadership on climate and precaution, but one who has turned that leadership into significant impact on the world beyond the academy. Like many others at the BBC, I'm grateful to Read for that".

Impact on civil society campaigns and public understanding

Read's thought-leadership on precaution has influenced XR itself (5.8a): he got the PP highlighted in XR's science-communication (especially its recent document Emergency on Planet Earth), and in the main XR talk "*Heading for extinction and what to do about it*", which is a template talk given repeatedly on video and in person to different audiences.

Both directly through his own work (appearing on Radio 3's *Freethinking* and The World Service's *The Forum* to discuss precaution) and through his work with XR, Read has been able to have an impact on public understanding. He has appeared as a panellist on flagship BBC programmes such as *Question Time* and *The Today Programme*. Furthermore, through a series of viral YouTube videos he has reached a wide audience of nearly 1,500,000 people explaining and promoting understanding of both the risks of climate breakdown and the importance of the PP. As noted already by [REDACTED] in her testimonial, quoted above, it is evident how Read has thereby impacted upon an entire climate of public opinion.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Read's "Brexit and Trade" report that first set out how a green Brexit could be undertaken.
- 5.2 Read's "Brexit and Environment" article calling for the modification in the scope of the PP that Parliament, by way of the Secretary of State for the Environment, later adopted.
- 5.3 All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Limits To Growth documents: Testimonials from MPs who are APPG on Limits to Growth members; documentation of APPG members' questions for the Secretary of State; "Understanding & strengthening the PP, in the context of the Brexit negotiations" Rupert Read and Tim O'Riordan.
- 5.4 Three briefings on the PP commissioned by Rupert Read for the APPG Agroecology.
- 5.5 The draft Environment bill (Clause 56) which has been influenced by Read's research.
- 5.6 Tweet on why the BBC should change its then-policy on 'balancing' climate-realists with climate-deniers, which has been shared/liked over 100,000 times, including analytics; Rupert Read opinion article published in *The Guardian* on BBC policy, multi-signed letter in *The Guardian* organised by Rupert read calling for the change in BBC policy to stop 'balancing' with climate-deniers, and news article reporting BBC acknowledging climate change reporting has been wrong to include climate change deniers.
- 5.7 Video of meeting between XR and DEFRA: discussion of the PP at 41 minutes.
- 5.8 a) XR Scientists b) Secretary of State for the Environment (2017-2019), c) BBC Nature programmes; d) former BBC Director of News, e) Senior Specialist, Strategic Evidence Unit, Environment Agency contact details provided to REF panel.
- 5.9 'Times Higher' and Bank of England blog articles on Read's applied research.
- 5.10 Workshop Summary produced by Senior Specialist, Strategic Evidence Unit, The Environment Agency, 22 February 2019.