

## Solar power to sustainable food: Cambridge Festival confronts the climate crisis from lab to living room



Image: Coastal ecosystems | credit: Dr Thomas Worthington

**The climate crisis, artificial intelligence, energy reform and community action will take centre stage at this year's Cambridge Festival, with a programme that moves from the geopolitics of geoengineering to the practicalities of heat pumps – and from Himalayan plastic innovation to the future of English wine.**

From 16 March to 2 April, events across the festival come together to make a clear and compelling case: the climate emergency is no longer a distant scientific abstraction, but a defining force reshaping technology, policy, neighbourhoods and everyday life. The question running through the programme is not simply what is going wrong, but whether the solutions we need are already within reach.

The conversation begins with some of the most urgent and contested debates in climate science.

On 18 March, [Climate repair: Hope or hype?](#) confronts the growing interest in geoengineering. As global temperatures continue to rise, proposals such as solar radiation management and ocean-based carbon removal are gaining traction in policy circles. A group of leading thinkers and experts will examine whether such interventions represent a necessary complement to emissions cuts, or a dangerous distraction that risks delaying systemic change. The panel includes Tom Heap, BBC presenter on Radio 4 and Countryfile; Oliver Morton, The Economist energy and environment editor; Amanda Burson, British Antarctic Survey; Clara Botto, University of Cambridge Centre for Climate Repair; and Jack Stilgoe, professor in science and technology studies at University College London.

That same afternoon, [Regulating AI for Climate and Nature](#) shifts the focus to another fast-moving frontier. A panel of speakers will ask whether existing environmental regulation is fit for

an era of energy-hungry data centres and rapidly expanding AI systems. Can policymakers manage environmental risk while harnessing AI's potential for climate modelling and adaptation? With a **keynote from Yu-Ting Kuo, corporate vice-president at Microsoft**, where he leads the company's Agent AI development. Additional contributions are from researchers connected to the Alan Turing Institute and the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, including Richard Turner, Professor of Machine Learning, Professor Lynn Dicks, Nick Scott and Giulia Trojano.

Two days later, on 20 March, the spotlight turns to solutions already at hand. Mark Z Jacobson, professor at Stanford University, will present his new book ***Still No Miracles Needed*** (Cambridge University Press, Jan 2026). Jacobson argues that wind, water and solar technologies – supported by storage and electrification – are sufficient to eliminate fossil fuels. He is critical of continued reliance on fossil gas, carbon capture and nuclear energy, and will outline the modelling behind 100% renewable transition plans that helped inspire the non-profit The Solutions Project and shape debates around the Green New Deal.

If those events explore global systems, others bring the transition closer to home.

On 23 March, the documentary ***Power Station*** tells the story of a community-led solar scheme in Walthamstow, where residents installed rooftop solar panels across social housing, private homes and a local primary school. The film charts the emotional and financial hurdles of grassroots decarbonisation, offering a vivid account of what neighbourhood climate action looks like in practice. A post-screening discussion will consider how similar initiatives could be replicated across the UK.

International collaboration is at the heart of ***Plastic to Ghar (P2G)*** on 19 March, which showcases a four-year project turning Himalayan plastic waste into durable building materials and new livelihoods in Nepal. Developed by the University of Cambridge's Centre for Industrial Sustainability with partners in Kathmandu, the initiative has supported start-ups, established plastic hubs and launched a plastic innovation protocol. The event will include a documentary screening, a panel with Nepali entrepreneurs and a fundraising auction of upcycled products.

For those navigating the UK's energy transition in their own homes, ***Making energy choices: Heat pumps, solar panels, electric cars*** on 1 April promises practical clarity. The expert panel will examine how heat pumps work, what home solar and battery systems can realistically deliver and how smart tariffs and electric vehicle charging fit into an evolving grid. In a landscape crowded with marketing claims, the event aims to ground discussion in costs, infrastructure and real-world performance. With Sandra Bucci, Operations Manager for Energy, Cambridgeshire County Council; Andy Rankin, Founder and Managing Director Midsummer Energy; and Prof Xavier Moya, Dept of Material Science and Metallurgy and CEO of Barcoal.

Beyond immediate policy debates and household decisions, the programme delves into the scientific breakthroughs and long-term resilience strategies shaping a net-zero future.

On 21 March, Professor Erwin Reisner presents ***Beyond photovoltaics: Unlocking the photon economy***, demonstrating devices that use solar energy to convert carbon dioxide, biomass and plastic waste into fuels and chemicals. The session offers a glimpse of circular, solar-driven industrial systems designed for a net-zero 2050 economy.

Water security comes under scrutiny on 18 March in [Innovating solutions: Water for food futures](#), which introduces the Commission on Water for Food Futures. Building on the work of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, the initiative seeks to rethink agriculture not only as a water consumer but as part of ecosystem restoration and water stewardship.

Rachael McDonnell (Deputy Director General, IWMI), who is leading the Commission, said: “Today, 318 million people are already facing severe hunger, more than twice the number in 2019. This is not a future threat; it is a crisis unfolding now. By 2050, many more crops grown with rainfall alone will face unreliable water supplies, and over 80% of croplands could experience water scarcity if current trends continue. We are not waiting for a crisis to arrive. Fifteen years is enough time to transform food systems if we start now. It is not enough time to recover from another 15 years of delay.”

[Coastal ecosystems](#) – from mangroves to salt marshes – are the focus of a 1 April lecture by Dr Thomas Worthington, who will examine how restoration efforts are beginning to slow, and in some regions reverse, decades of habitat loss. These ‘blue carbon’ systems, vital for biodiversity and storm protection, are increasingly recognised as central to climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Climate pressures are not confined to energy grids and coastlines – they are transforming what ends up on our plates and in our glasses.

On 21 March, [The climate kitchen: Future food with a Michelin star chef Mark Poynton](#) brings together culinary and scientific expertise to ask how we can eat well in a warming world. From climate-resilient crops to sustainable proteins, the event explores how gastronomy and food policy intersect with environmental limits.

In [Wine on the edge: Climate, grapes and the future of the vineyard](#) on 2 April, speakers consider how rising temperatures are reshaping viticulture. Regions once considered too cool are producing award-winning bottles, while traditional wine-growing areas face heat stress and water scarcity. The session examines regenerative practices and new grape varieties as part of the industry’s adaptation. With Steve Hovington, The Cambridge Wine Academy, and Dr Belinda Kemp, NIAB.

As the science and politics unfold, the festival turns to storytelling and the arts to help audiences make sense of a rapidly changing world.

[Exploring climate truths through climate fiction](#) on 29 March asks how novels and short stories can counter disinformation, humanise complex science and help readers imagine alternative futures. While **Moving the Coordinates**, opening on 21 March, combines choreography, film and interactive technology to explore how bodies inhabit shifting landscapes.

Finally, on 25 March, [The Sustainable Travel Agency](#), co-presented with Cambridge Junction, offers a participatory audio performance that blends humour and reflection, inviting audiences to consider climate anxiety, escapism and responsibility in an age of environmental crisis.

Taken together, the programme presents climate change not as a single topic but as a condition shaping everything from algorithms to agriculture, from neighbourhood rooftops to Himalayan

villages. The Cambridge Festival's environmental strand asks whether technological innovation, regulatory reform, community action and cultural imagination can converge quickly enough to meet the scale of the challenge.

Further details and the full programme can be found at [festival.cam.ac.uk](http://festival.cam.ac.uk). To download a Pdf of the programme click [here](#).

## **Ends**

**The Cambridge Festival runs from 16 March to 2 April 2026.**

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**The Cambridge Festival** is the University of Cambridge's yearly showcase of ideas, discoveries and big conversations – bringing world-leading research, expertise and creativity from experts and innovators into everyday life. This year, over 360 mostly free events across four themes – Society, Health, Environment and Discovery – invite everyone to explore the global challenges, breakthrough innovations and bold ideas shaping our future.

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