Green constructive handbook

Want to give our planet a chance to overcome the triple planetary crises?

Read this and be part of the solution!

Designed for journalists, editors, communicators and more.

GRID ARENDAL

A UNEP Partner

WHY?

In a perfect world, there would be no need for the journalism of today, focussed on conflicts and crises. When you look at the front page of most news outlets, you get the feeling that everything is going wrong, that the world is spiralling into chaos.

But what if journalism was also a tool to tell people about the solutions?

We need more action to help save the planet. We need more people looking into how we can make a difference. That is why you should read this small handbook and get involved in green constructive journalism.

Do you actually know the status of the world?

www.gapminder.org

Why is environmental reporting so depressing, and can we change it?

All links and footnotes

More and more young people choose not to follow mainstream media as it makes them feel depressed[1]. News on climate change in particular makes people feel discouraged[2]. Between misinformation and news that makes people feel miserable, there might be another solution. A way forward for journalists and their readers.

It's not new

Journalism is a constantly evolving field, adopting new tools and media to engage its audience.

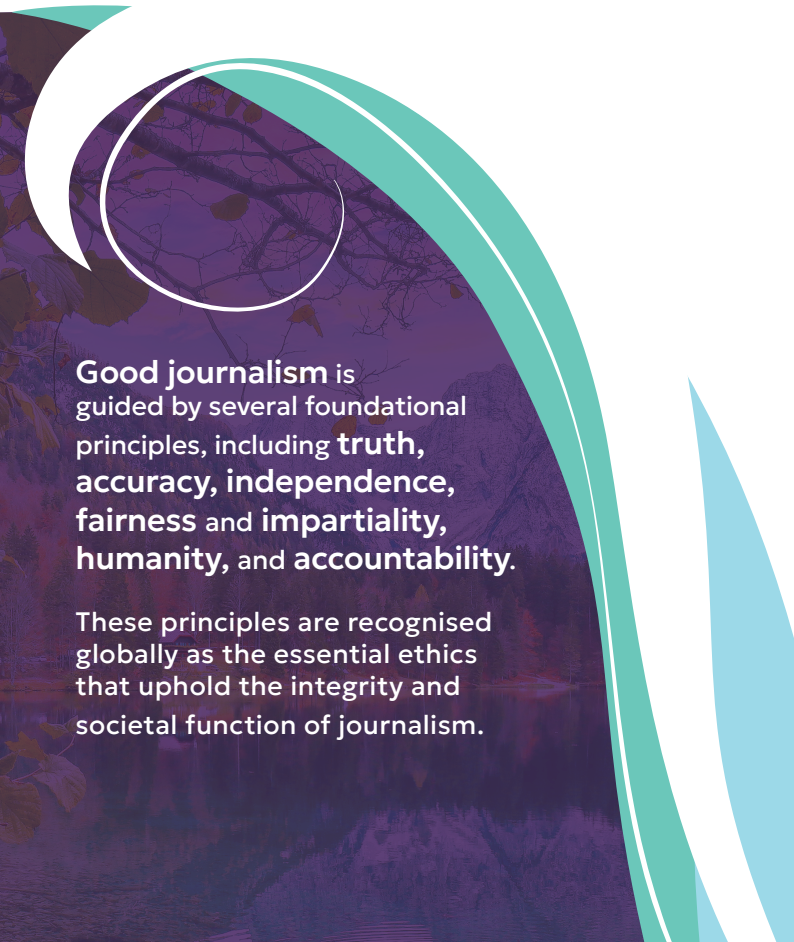
Whether it's clickbait, deep dives, video reporting, or investigative journalism, the question remains – what does the audience need? How does journalism inspire rather than fill people with despair?

This type of journalism has different names: positive, solutions, constructive. The common thread is the belief in news as a good tool that can help us understand information and enable change[3].

1. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/strain-media-overload
2. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14648849241312810
3. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464884920944741

The goal is to create a form of journalism that inspires people. A type of journalism that investigates the problems we have and tries to find new ways of solving them. Not only by finding the reason behind the problem, but also trying to figure out if others have had the same problem and found a good solution.

The model is true to the principles of good journalism, but it takes a step forward and looks to tomorrow.



Good journalism is guided by several foundational principles, including **truth, accuracy, independence, fairness** and **impartiality, humanity,** and **accountability**.

These principles are recognised globally as the essential ethics that uphold the integrity and societal function of journalism.

	BREAKING NEWS	INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM	**CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM**
Time	now	yesterday	**tomorrow**
Goals	speed	blame	**inspiration**
Questions	what? when?	what? why?	**what now? how?**
Style	dramatic	critical	**curious**
Role	police	judge	**facilitator**
Focus	drama	crooks and victims	**soultions and best practices**

Graphic based on constructiveinstitute.org/why/

Fast track to environmental journalism

All links and footnotes

What every journalist needs to know about the environment beat.

We need more journalists to start covering nature, climate, and pollution. Not because other subjects do not matter, but because they are linked to everything we do. Nature is not something ***"out there"***, but it is the future of our planet, and that depends on how we humans treat it. We can't keep pretending that our planet has no limits[4].

It can be overwhelming to try to make sense of the metaphorical jungle of environmental frameworks, treaties, and COPs, but all in all, this is about where people live. Telling a story that matters to people can help bring the action we need into context, making it relevant for readers. Get politicians to act and change systems.

We need this change now – more than ever.

4.https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html

Who's keeping track of our environment?

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the agency tasked to keep track of the status of the world when it comes to nature, climate, and pollution. This is the most important source for data and information on the state of our environment.

Have you heard of the Global Environmental Outlook? Since 1995, UNEP's flagship report has tracked the state of our planet tracking environmental trends, the impact of policies, and what the future might look like.

www.unep.org/geo

UNEP describes the triple planetary crisis as the three major, interconnected challenges of our time: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

These crises are deeply interlinked and together threaten human well-being, destroy ecosystems, and pose a fundamental risk to our home, the Earth.

What is climate change?

While the answer may seem obvious to many, the definition of climate change can vary significantly depending on the source, often fuelled by misinformation.

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These changes can occur naturally due to factors like variations in solar activity or large volcanic eruptions. However, the evidence is overwhelming: since the 1800s, human activities have been the primary driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas[5].

What is biodiversity loss?

Biodiversity loss means we are losing many kinds of animals, plants, and other living beings on Earth. This can happen when forests are cut down, resources like land and water are exploited, pollution spreads, or a new species pushes out native wildlife. When this happens, nature becomes weaker, more animals and plants are in danger, and it's harder for the environment to cope with changes[6].

5.https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change
6.https://www.unep.org/unep-and-biodiversity

What is pollution?

url.grida.no/UNEAHp11

Pollution is the contamination of air, water, and soil with harmful chemicals and waste. It damages ecosystems, undermines food and water security, and puts human health at risk. Air pollution alone is among the leading causes of disease and premature death worldwide.

The planetary boundaries framework highlights the rising risks from human pressure on nine critical global processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth

Scientists have created a framework to keep track of how we are using the planet's resources and when this crosses nature's boundaries.

The planetary boundaries are quantitative scientific limits that show at what point human activity will cause serious or irreversible harm to the Earth and its processes. If we cross these limits, nature may destabilise, making life much harder for everyone on our planet.

url.grida.no/UNEAHp112

From crisis to constructive – changing the frame

All links and footnotes

Would you interview a flat-earth believer for their opinion when writing an article about a pioneering flight around the world? If the answer is no (hopefully!), then why does traditional journalism often provide platforms for climate change deniers and sceptics to have their say?

Trusting science is a core function in our society, but some insist on debating well-established scientific facts. We already know what actions are not good for our planet, but finding solutions or changing behaviour is difficult.

Covering climate is especially depressing. For over five decades, we have known that we are heading in the wrong direction[7]. Still, as a species, we have not done enough.

7. https://www.livescience.com/humans-first-warned-about-climate-change

There is a debate among many environmental advocates about what *“went wrong”*, why we haven’t managed to convince our politicians to act. There are many theories, and many beliefs. Not focussing on *“doom and gloom”* could be the way we connect better with our audience and help them change. We aren’t the authority on what the best solution is, but we need to start telling more stories about what helps and does make a difference.

Let’s imagine a news world where the most popular story is not about a conflict, but a story about a solution that brought back clean water to a local community. About a company that decided to stop using plastic in their packaging. Or about a politician that decided not to drill for more oil …

Let’s make journalism a positive power!

The Constructive Handbook

url.grida.no/UNEAHp14

Journalism with purpose – why you should care

All links and footnotes

How to get started?

Journalists are fact tellers. They observe the world and tell us what is happening. Telling stories and learning from each other is a human trait found across history and cultures. Newspapers have been around since ancient times! Most of the world believes in freedom of the press, even though it is practised in very different ways.

When training to become a journalist, you learn the tools to tell a story and the criteria for what makes a good story. But how to become an environmental journalist is another story. Maybe you live in an area where you experience climate change in your local community, maybe you are tired of our politicians not doing enough. Whatever the reason may be, we know it can be lonely and dangerous[8]. Environmental journalists are harassed and even killed for simply doing their jobs. But we need brave journalists that keep telling the uncomfortable truths, while also seeking to find the good solutions and showing us that acting and making a change does matter.

8. https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/climate-change/article/unesco-report-highlights-growing-risk-for-environmental-journalism

There are several great organisations educating and promoting information about these issues, like the Oxford Climate Journalism Network and the Earth Journalism Network.

Safety First
IMS course for journalists investigating environmental crimes — practical steps to plan, report, and publish safely.

url.grida.no/UNEAHp17

You are not alone

Collaboration counts: Join networks for climate journalists to find inspiration, share ideas, and access potential funding opportunities. These communities connect you with collaborators and support for impactful storytelling.

Explore, for example:

- **Earth Journalism Network (EJN)** – Grants, training, and global reporting opportunities. earthjournalism.net
- **Climate Tracker** – Fellowships, mentoring, and collaborative journalism projects. climatetracker.org
- **Covering Climate Now** – A global media collaboration to strengthen climate coverage. coveringclimatenow.org
- **Oxford Climate Journalism Network** – A programme supporting innovation and peer learning. reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/oxford-climate-journalism-network
- **Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ)** – Networking, resources, and story grants (especially for North America). www.sej.org
- **International Press Institute** – IPI is a global network of journalists defending media freedom and independent journalism worldwide. ipi.media

All links and footnotes

Tools for better environmental reporting

All links and footnotes

Practical tools and training on constructive journalism.

This is the practical “how-to” chapter. It offers practical tools, introduces AI for constructive stories, and provides training to help journalists report on environmental challenges with a solutions-focused lens.

We want journalists to be more involved in environmental reporting and building optimism for the future. Because we still have time to act. We need to start by telling the stories not only about the problems, but also the solutions.

Three questions that should inspire every journalist working on environmental issues:

1. **Am I focusing on the root causes, not just the symptoms?**

   Reporting on floods, wildfires, or pollution is important - but unless we connect these events to the deeper political, economic, and systemic drivers, we risk telling only half the story.

2. **Am I holding those in power accountable for solutions?**

   Journalism is not just about exposing problems. It's also about pressing governments, corporations, and institutions to act to address the real challenges and to cooperate across borders.

3. **Am I protecting the public conversation from distortion?**

   Climate denial, false narratives, and orchestrated disinformation can derail meaningful debate. Journalists need to ask how their reporting can cut through the noise and keep facts at the center.

To contribute to democracy through
Critical, Constructive Journalism

PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC CONVERSATION

FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

COVER NUANCES

Graphic based on constructiveinstitute.org/why/

Journalism for tomorrow

Constructive journalism is:

- Aiming to be critical, objective, and balanced
- Tackling important issues facing society
- Based on facts and unbiased
- Calm in its tone
- Does not give in to scandals and outrage
- Bridging, not polarizing
- Forward-looking and future-oriented
- Nuanced and contextualized

Source: The Constructive Institute

If you have never heard about constructive journalism, we recommend you read up on this framework

The Constructive Handbook

url.grida.no/HandbookCJ

Or take one of the free online trainings made by International Media Support (IMS)

imslearn.org

Make AI your ally:

Run your draft story through the Constructive Journalism Mentor, an AI tool developed by IMS, to see how constructive it is and get tailored suggestions to strengthen your reporting.

url.grida.no/ChatGPTCJM

AI Constructive Mentor was developed by Hamoud Almahmoud during his PhD in Constructive Journalism.

Want to know what your audience really needs?

Explore the BBC's User Needs model - a practical tool for shaping stories that engage, inform, and involve people.

url.grida.no/UNEAHp24

Hope for the future

All links and footnotes

GRID-Arendal has supported journalists since 2015 with the **Investigative Environmental Journalism Grant Program,** helping journalists cover environmental crime around the world.

news.grida.no/empowering-journalists

These investigations have sparked public debate, influenced policy discussions, and raised accountability where it was lacking. Published stories reached major outlets such as CNN, Reuters, Al Jazeera, and Mongabay. By making these issues visible to wider audiences, the grants have shown how strong, independent journalism can drive change and put environmental crime firmly on the global agenda.

You matter more than you think

If you ever feel overwhelmed, or wonder whether journalism really makes a difference, here's a reminder: **it does and it drives environmental change.**

A study from the Walton Family Foundation and USC's Norman Lear Center shows that strategic investment in environmental reporting delivers real impact[9], especially on water, climate, and community resilience. By looking at hundreds of grant-supported stories, the research found that journalism grounded in local context, credible science, and diverse voices is more trusted, sparks stronger engagement, shapes decisions, and highlights solutions.

Mongabay, a global media outlet focused on nature, sees this every day. When funders back high-quality, independent journalism, it becomes a powerful force for accountability, transparency, and meaningful change.

mongabay.org/impacts

9. https://url.grida.no/WaltonFamilyComms

Staying sharp in a changing media landscape.

We hope this small “Green constructive handbook” has inspired you to try doing things differently and reminded you that nature is for everyone, and that everyone should care about it. This is our only home, and if we don’t protect it, it might not be a pleasant one soon. If we all play our part and start the change today, we believe in a planet thriving within the safe space of the planetary boundaries.

Understanding the Triple Planetary Crisis

In this handbook, we offer a concise guide to dive into and report on the complex realities shaping the environmental state of our planet. In the following section, we turn our focus to the three interconnected planetary crises: pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Each is presented as a case study, offering practical tools and suggestions to help you explore, investigate, and better understand the challenges (and opportunities!) they present.

Case study pollution

Plastic is fantastic - or is it?

All links and footnotes

Over the last decade we have produced more plastic than in the previous 50 years combined. Plastic is a fantastic product, but only when it is produced without harmful chemicals, produced to last, be recycled, and does not end up in nature[10]. We need to start imagining a world where we don't need single-use plastic products. We used to be plastic free not that long ago! From oceans to our own body, plastic is everywhere. The average human brain contains a spoonful of microplastics[11].

10. https://www.grida.no/publications/749
11. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-024-03453-1

How to investigate plastic

https://pulitzercenter.org/how-investigate-plastic-ocean

Investigate: Root Causes of Plastic Pollution

To uncover the root cause of plastic pollution, journalists should go upstream - beyond the plastic straw on the beach - to production, politics, and profit structures that make plastics unavoidable.

Publications from GRID-Arendal

Waste management in remote areas: Arctic conundrums - url.grida.no/p1265

Define the Story Angle

Decide whether your focus is local (community impacts, waste management) or global (trade, treaty negotiations, corporate power).

- **Ask:** Do I want to follow a piece of plastic, a company, a law, or a community?

Ground the Story in People and Science

- **Communities:** Report from frontline areas near production plants, waste dumps, or incinerators.
- **Scientists:** Partner with researchers studying plastic flows, toxicity, or microplastics.
- **Indigenous and local voices:** Highlight traditional knowledge and community impacts often forgotten by mainstream media.

Impact of plastic on indigenous communities

Displaced by Plastics url.grida.no/p879

Data & Tools:

Global Plastics Watch
Satellite tracking of plastic waste.
www.globalplasticwatch.org

Marine Debris Tracker
Citizen science data on collected debris

debristracker.org/data

The Global Plastic Hub
The one-stop platform for data, knowledge, and collaboration to end plastic pollution.
globalplasticshub.org

Connect to Policy & Accountability

Follow the Global plastic treaty negotiations (INC[12]) and the result, note who attends (fossil fuel lobbyists, scientists, Indigenous representatives, business coalitions)

- Track specific bills or regulations and link them to lobbying or corporate influence.

Ask: Who benefits from maintaining the plastic status quo?

12. https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution (ISP-CWP) is a new global body that brings together science and policy to guide governments in managing chemicals and waste, preventing pollution, and protecting human health and the environment.

The ISP-CWP offers journalists a critical entry point into covering the global science-policy engine behind chemicals, waste and pollution — a must-follow forum for holding production, regulation, and industry accountable.

www.unep.org/isp-cwp

Takeaway

- **Plastic pollution isn't just about litter,** it's a chemical story too. The toxins in plastics affect our **health**, **seeping into our food, water**, and **even our bodies**.
- The problem starts long before plastic becomes waste: at the point of **production**, **profit**, and **policy decisions** that make single-use plastics the norm.
- Solving the issue of plastic pollution means **shifting away from disposables**, demanding transparency, and **holding industries** across the entire plastics life cycle **accountable** for the health and environmental damage plastics cause.

All links and footnotes

Case study biodiversity

Life on Earth in Decline

All links and footnotes

Right now, biodiversity is shrinking rapidly. One million species are at risk of extinction, many within decades. Habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and overexploitation are the main drivers. Biodiversity is *"fantastic"* when ecosystems are healthy and intact - providing food, medicine, clean water, and climate regulation. But when ecosystems are degraded, society loses resilience and stability.

We need to start imagining a world where nature is valued, not depleted!

- Just one or two generations ago, diverse ecosystems were far more abundant and resilient.
- From coral reefs to forests, nature is collapsing under pressure from human activity.
- Biodiversity loss isn't abstract, it threatens food security, livelihoods, and health. **Example:** insect decline reduces pollination, threatening global agriculture.

Human Wildlife Coexistence – Royal Bengal tigers in Bhutan

https://url.grida.no/p999

How to Investigate Biodiversity Loss

Resources on Environmental Data

https://url.grida.no/gijn

Investigate: Root Causes of Biodiversity Decline

To uncover the root cause of biodiversity loss, journalists must go **upstream** — beyond visible symptoms (species decline) - to **land use**, **economic systems**, and **power structures** driving destruction.

Define the Story Angle

- Decide whether your focus is:
  - **Local:** a specific ecosystem (forest, reef, wetland) under threat.
  - **Global:** patterns of trade, industrial agriculture, or climate impacts.

Ask: Do I want to follow a species, an ecosystem, a law, or a community?

Ground the Story in People and Science

- **Communities:** report from Indigenous peoples and local communities stewarding biodiversity.
- **Scientists:** partner with ecologists and conservation biologists documenting species loss.
- **Local voices:** highlight how biodiversity loss impacts daily life — food, livelihoods, culture.

Data & Tools

IPBES Global Assessment – the definitive science-policy report on biodiversity.

www.ipbes.net/global-assessment

IUCN Red List – database of threatened species.

www.iucnredlist.org

Global Forest Watch – satellite-based forest monitoring.

www.globalforestwatch.org

Data & Tools (cont.)

GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility) – open access biodiversity data.

www.gbif.org

Living Planet Index (WWF/ZSL) – trends in wildlife populations.

www.zsl.org/what-we-do/projects/living-planet-index

Connect to Policy & Accountability

- Track the **Global Biodiversity Framework (Kunming-Montreal Agreement)** and national commitments.

www.cbd.int/gbf

- Investigate **who is driving habitat destruction** (agribusiness, mining, infrastructure).
- Examine subsidies, trade, and investment flows that incentivise biodiversity loss.

Ask: Who benefits from continued exploitation of nature?

Who pays the cost?

Takeaway

- Biodiversity is the foundation of life on Earth - but it is being lost faster than ever.
- To investigate biodiversity decline, journalists must connect **local realities** with **global drivers**.
- Investigations into biodiversity loss can reveal not only what is disappearing, but **why** - and **who is responsible**.

All links and footnotes

Case study climate

The cost of a heating planet

All links and footnotes

Right now, the world is warming faster than at any point in human history

2024 was confirmed as the hottest year ever recorded, with global mean temperatures reaching approximately 1.55°C above the pre-industrial average (1850-1900)[13], marking the first calendar year to surpass the critical 1.5°C threshold for global warming in official records.

Extreme weather events (heatwaves, floods, wildfires, and storms) are increasing in frequency and intensity.

Climate change is *"manageable"* when emissions are cut, ecosystems are protected, and adaptation is prioritized. But when fossil fuels remain dominant, climate change drives conflict, displacement, and economic instability.

13_wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level

We need to start imagining a world powered by clean energy

- Just a few decades ago, coal, oil, and gas were seen as essential. Today, renewables are cheaper and more scalable.
- A transition is possible, but is being delayed by vested interests and weak political will.
- Climate change is not a distant threat, it is already reshaping agriculture, health, and security. **Example:** in 2022, floods in Pakistan displaced 33 million people and caused $30 billion in damages.[14]

14. www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/28/pakistan-flood-damages-and-economic-losses-over-usd-30-billion-and-reconstruction-needs-over-usd-16-billion-new-assessme

How to Investigate Climate Change

GIJN's Resource Center

url.grida.no/RGIJN

Investigating the Root Causes of the Climate Crisis

To uncover the root causes, journalists need to look past the visible disasters. Wildfires, floods, and extreme weather are the symptoms. The real story lies upstream - in energy systems, politics, and finance that keep the world dependent on fossil fuels.

Define the Story Angle

- Decide whether your focus is:
  - **Local:** impacts on communities (heat, floods, fires).
  - **Global:** energy systems, corporate responsibility, climate negotiations.

Ask: Do I want to follow an energy project, a company, a law, or a community?

Ground the Story in People and Science

- **Communities:** frontline groups in floodplains, drought zones, or wildfire areas.
- **Scientists:** partner with climate modelers, meteorologists, and health experts.
- **Local voices:** show how climate change affects food, water, migration, and health.

Data & Tools

IPCC Reports – authoritative assessments of climate science.

www.ipcc.ch/reports/

Climate TRACE – independent emissions tracking.

climatetrace.org

Carbon Majors Database – tracks emissions by fossil fuel companies.

carbonmajors.org

World Resources Institute (CAIT) – global greenhouse gas data.

www.wri.org

Connect to Policy & Accountability

- Track the **UNFCCC process and COP negotiations**.
- Investigate national climate pledges (NDCs) — are they realistic or greenwashing?
- **Follow the money:** fossil fuel subsidies, carbon markets, and climate finance pledges.

unfccc.int

Ask: Who profits from delaying the transition? Who pays for inaction?

Takeaway

- Climate change is the defining crisis of our time - but also the defining accountability story.
- Journalists can uncover how **power, profit, and politics** keep emissions high and adaptation underfunded.

Investigating climate means exposing the true cost of delay - and finding pathways to solutions.

All links and footnotes

Please don't be a stranger, get in touch with us!

At **GRID-Arendal**, we work to translate environmental science into understandable narratives to make the change.

www.grida.no

This book was created in collaboration with **International Media Support**, combining our shared commitment to strengthen journalism and storytelling on the three planetary crises.

mediasupport.org

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GRID-ARENDAL
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GOOD JOURNALISM | BETTER SOCIETIES

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