

Fairy tales offer accessible ways to communicate energy research in the social sciences to help tackle climate change

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Renewables as mermaids. Credit: *Energy Research & Social Science* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.erss.2023.103100

A team of researchers, led by Lancaster University, has been developing

accessible and creative means of communicating sustainability research from the social sciences for policymakers and the wider public.

Using fairy tale characters—mermaids, vampires, and witches—as metaphors, the team, including researchers from the Universities of Strathclyde and Manchester, have sought to communicate typically complicated arguments in evocative and engaging terms.

Their paper, "'Telling Tales': Communicating UK energy research through fairy tale characters," has been published in the journal, *Energy Research & Social Science*.

Responding to some of the challenges of climate change (electricity generation, low-carbon transport, [plastic pollution](#)), the research team present three "telling tales." These "translate" existing academic research, taking inspiration from well-known fairy tale characters, to cast this research in an accessible and powerful light:

- Renewables are mermaids—alluring and attractive solutions for policymakers to increasing energy demands, but a distraction from other important routes to Net Zero, like demand reduction. Like mermaid figureheads on sailors' ships, renewables should accompany our transition to Net Zero but they should not be the only destination.
- Cars are vampires—dangerous entities that are deadly and sucking the well-being from communities by dividing workplaces and retailing outlets from homes, creating lengthy commutes. Policymakers have, until now, waved garlic at them, to control how fast and where they travel, rather than reaching for the stake and re-imagining [everyday life](#) without cars.
- Plastics are witches—a complex category that is, say the research team, misunderstood by the current witch-hunt against plastics. Though they can be harmers (e.g., [single-use plastics](#)), they also

have 'healing' properties (i.e., durable and useful materials that can substitute more damaging materials). Policymakers should work towards systems of re-use to maximize their benefits, rather than simply 'demonizing' plastics in general.

Having developed these tales, the team worked with illustrator Véronique Heijnsbroek to create a range of inspiring images.

This work responds to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) call for "transformational adaptation." This paper offers serious messages and alternative policy approaches with the aim to accessibly communicate the types of shifts that this will involve:

- Renewables, though important, are not the only measure required by a future of fossil-free [electricity generation](#). Demand reduction, though a less attractive solution, must be considered to ensure this future is possible.
- Cars are known to be deadly and dangerous, yet we have designed daily life and society around their use. More stringent measures are required when thinking of what role they should play in future societies.
- Plastics are currently demonized. Plastics are not to blame, as much as the systems of production, consumption, and disposal they are tied up with. Policies should encourage systems of reuse to maximize their benefits, rather than simply demonizing plastics in general.

"It would be easy to interpret this work as a trivialisation of research or, even, a patronisation of potential readers," says lead author Dr. Carolynne Lord, from Lancaster University.

"This is not our intention. The point is that communicating through specialist language is not adequately conveying the message to the

communities that it needs to reach. We need to start communicating our work in more accessible ways."

Dr. Torik Holmes, from the University of Manchester, adds, "Storytelling has been gaining traction in the field of energy research in the social sciences. We've built on this through the use of fairy tale characters to argue how UK policy reflects a fixation with renewables, over cautionary responses to car ownership and use, and too narrow understandings of, and reactions to, plastics."

And Dr. Katherine Ellsworth-Krebs, from the University of Strathclyde, comments, "Communicating in new and intelligible ways that combine the complexity of research with inspiring stories is important. There is now a real urgency in which transformative responses to climate change are required. Though much social science work offers potential solutions, it can do so in a way that is hard to understand by those who have the power to make change a reality."

The authors hope their concept will inspire the scientific community to recommunicate energy-based social science research in more digestible forms.

More information: Carolynne Lord et al, 'Telling tales': Communicating UK energy research through fairy tale characters, *Energy Research & Social Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.erss.2023.103100](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2023.103100)

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