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Crossing an increasingly unfamiliar landscape in Nain, Canada. Ashlee Cunsolo

Hope and mourning in the Anthropocene: Understanding ecological grief

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Neville Ellis

Research fellow, The University of Western Australia

Ashlee Cunsolo

Director, Labrador Institute, Memorial University of Newfoundland

We are living in a time of extraordinary ecological loss. Not only are human actions destabilising the very conditions that sustain life, but it is also increasingly clear that we are pushing the Earth into an entirely new geological era, often described as the Anthropocene.

Research shows that people increasingly feel the effects of these planetary changes and associated ecological losses in their daily lives, and that these changes present significant direct and indirect threats to mental health and well-being. Climate change, and the associated impacts to land and environment, for example, have recently been linked to a range of negative mental health impacts, including depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress, as well as feelings of anger, hopelessness, distress, and despair.

Not well represented in the literature, however, is an emotional response we term ‘ecological grief,’ which we have defined in a recent Nature Climate Change article: “The grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.”

We believe ecological grief is a natural, though overlooked, response to ecological loss, and one that is likely to affect more of us into the future.

Understanding ecological grief

Grief takes many forms and differs greatly between individuals and cultures. Although grief is well understood in relation to human losses, ‘to grieve’ is rarely considered something that we do in relation to losses in the natural world.

The eminent American naturalist Aldo Leopold was among the first to describe the emotional toll of ecological loss in his 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*: “One of the penalties of an ecological education,” he wrote, “is to live alone in a world of wounds.”

More recently, many respected ecologists and climate scientists have expressed their feelings of grief and distress in response to climate change and the environmental destruction it entails in places like: “Climate scientists feel weight of the world on their shoulders” and “Is this how you feel?”

Ecological grief is also a significant theme in our own work. In different research projects working with Inuit in Inuit Nunangat in Arctic Canada and farmers in the Western Australian Wheatbelt, both of us have spent a combined total of almost 20 years working with people living in areas experiencing significant climatic changes and environmental shifts.

Despite very different geographical and cultural contexts, our research revealed a surprising degree of commonality between Inuit and family farming communities as they struggled to cope, both emotionally and psychologically, with mounting ecological losses and the prospect of an uncertain future.

Voices of ecological grief

Our research shows that climate-related ecological losses can trigger grief experiences in several ways. Foremost, people grieve for lost landscapes, ecosystems, species, or places that carry personal or collective meaning.

For Inuit communities in the Inuit Land Claim Settlement Area of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, Canada, the land is foundational to mental health. In recent years, melting sea ice prevented travel to significant cultural sites and engagement in traditional cultural activities, such as hunting and fishing. These disruptions to an Inuit sense of place was accompanied by strong emotional reactions, including grief, anger, sadness, frustration and despair.

One male who grew up hunting and trapping on the land in the community of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut explained:

“People are not who they are. They’re not comfortable and can’t do the same things. If something is taken away from you, you don’t have it. If a way of life is taken away because of circumstances you have no control over, you lose control over your life.”

Chronic drought conditions in the Western Australian Wheatbelt elicited similar emotional reactions for some family farmers. As one long-time farmer described:

“There’s probably nothing worse than seeing your farm go in a dust storm. I reckon it’s probably one of the worst feelings [...] I find that one of the most depressing things of the lot, seeing the farm blow away in a dust storm. That really gets up my nose, and a long way up too. If its blowing dust I come inside - I just come inside here. I can’t stand to watch it.”



Sweeping away the dust in the central Western Australian Wheatbelt Feb. 2013. Neville Ellis

In both cases, such experiences resonate strongly with the concept of “solastagia,” described both as a form of homesickness while still in place, and as a type of grief over the loss of a healthy place or a thriving ecosystem.

People also grieve for lost environmental knowledge and associated identities. In these cases, people mourn the part of self-identity that is lost when the land upon which it is based changes or disappears.

For Australian family farmers, the inability to maintain a healthy landscape in the context of worsening seasonal variability and chronic dryness often elicited feelings of self-blame and shame:

“Farmers just hate seeing their farm lift; it somehow says to them ‘I’m a bad farmer’. And I think all farmers are good farmers. They all try their hardest to be. They all love their land.”

For older Inuit in Nunatsiavut, changes to weather and landscape are invalidating long-standing and multi-generational ecological knowledge, and with it, a coherent sense of culture and self. As one well-respected hunter shared:

“It’s hurting in a way. It’s hurting in a lot of ways. Because I kinda thinks I’m not going to show my grandkids the way we used to do it. It’s hurting me. It’s hurting me big time. And I just keep that to myself.”

Many Inuit and family farmers also worry about their futures, and express grief in anticipation of worsening ecological losses. As one woman explained from Rigolet, Nunatsiavut:

“I think that [the changes] will have an impact maybe on mental health, because it’s a depressing feeling when you’re stuck. I mean for us to go off [on the land] is just a part of life. If you don’t have it, then that part of your life is gone, and I think that’s very depressing.”

Similarly, a farmer in Australia worried about the future shared their thoughts on the possibility of losing their family farm:

“[It] would be like a death. Yeah, there would be a grieving process because the farm embodies everything that the family farm is ... And I think if we were to lose it, it would be like losing a person ... but it would be sadder than losing a person ... I don’t know, it would be hard definitely.”

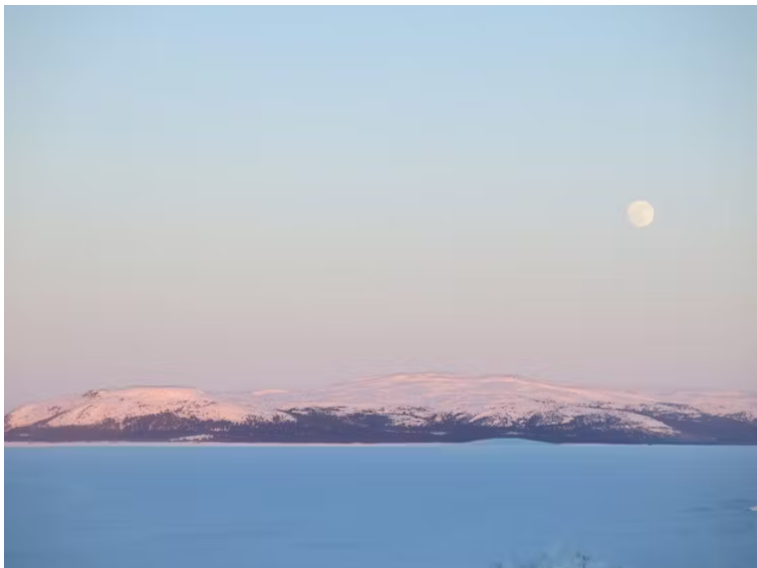
Ecological grief in a climate-changed future

Ecological grief reminds us that climate change is not just some abstract scientific concept or a distant environmental problem. Rather, it draws our attention to the personally experienced emotional and psychological losses suffered when there are changes or deaths in the natural world. In doing so, ecological grief also illuminates the ways in which more-than-humans are integral to our mental wellness, our communities, our cultures, and for our ability to thrive in a human-dominated world.

From what we have seen in our own research, although this type of grief is already being experienced, it often lacks an appropriate avenue for expression or for healing. Indeed, not only do we lack the rituals and practices to help address feelings of ecological grief, until recently we did not even have the language to give such feelings voice. And it is for these reasons that grief over losses in the natural world can feel, as American ecologist Phyllis Windle put it, ‘irrational, inappropriate, anthropomorphic.’

We argue that recognising ecological grief as a legitimate response to ecological loss is an important first step for humanising climate change and its related impacts, and for expanding our understanding of what it means to be human in the Anthropocene. How to grieve ecological losses well — particularly when they are ambiguous, cumulative and ongoing — is a question currently without answer. However, it is a question that we expect will become more pressing as further impacts from climate change, including loss, are experienced.

We do not see ecological grief as submitting to despair, and neither does it justify ‘switching off’ from the many environmental problems that confront humanity. Instead, we find great hope in the responses ecological grief is likely to invoke. Just as grief over the loss of a loved person puts into perspective what matters in our lives, collective experiences of ecological grief may coalesce into a strengthened sense of love and commitment to the places, ecosystems and species that inspire, nurture and sustain us. There is much grief work to be done, and much of it will be hard. However, being open to the pain of ecological loss may be what is needed to prevent such losses from occurring in the first place.



Moonrise near Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Canada. Ashlee Cunsolo