

# The distress caused by the prospect of an ecological cataclysm

## Alice Desbiolles,

Public health doctor and epidemiologist, co-founder of the Alliance Santé planétaire (Planetary Health Alliance).

Eco-anxiety echoes all the emotions and feelings triggered by what we see as the abusive destruction of a place or life form – human, animal or plant [1]. Eco-anxiety is therefore the expression of the link that exists between the distress of ecosystems and psychological distress, when the former causes the latter. It is a sense of worry that befalls from anticipating the future, perceived as compromised in light of the various scenarios reported by scientists such as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Although there is no apparent predisposition to eco-anxiety, the cause of which is primarily environmental, this specific form of distress may nevertheless be intertwined with other issues, whether personal (financial, family or professional difficulties) or social (social inequalities, etc.) [2]. Fear for the future of the world – in terms of how we live in it and the ways we are damaging it – is not an illness in the strict sense of the word, yet it can make people ill. However, eco-anxiety generally stems from a lucid analysis of the state of the planet and takes form because of a certain societal dysfunction. If the injuries inflicted on nature provoke a feeling of loss of meaning, or even indignation and anger, it is important not to “pathologise”

such emotions or normal reactions to undesirable events. Trying to control the conditions in which we live is a sign of good mental health. In this sense, eco-anxiety should not be considered a mental illness. Rather, it reflects a state of mind, a sensitivity to the world, a feeling of great distress caused by negative and sudden changes in the environment. It represents a fracture in the way we view the future, which we perceive as uncertain or even hostile.

## The strength of connections with nature

At present, the clinical characterisation of eco-anxiety remains vague. There is no reference to any psychological or psychiatric disorder linked to environmental change in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) or in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). A study carried out in 2013 on 132 participants showed virtually no correlation between pathological anxiety disorder [3] and concern for the environment. To identify possible pathological forms of eco-anxiety, various authors have suggested following the distinction usually made between adaptive anxiety and pathological anxiety. The pathological dimension is considered to exist when the person expresses distress that is judged to be excessive and inappropriate in relation to what would normally be expected in the face of the stressor, i.e., symptoms of intense anxiety, with a strong and debilitating impact on the individual and their activities, causing mental suffering and overwhelming their ability to cope.

## KEY POINTS

Will eco-anxiety be the illness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Surveys show that an increasing number of people are affected. The psychological impact of biodiversity loss is now an established research topic. However, unless it has extreme negative consequences on well-being, eco-anxiety is not regarded as a pathology; it can even prove to be a driving force for local collective action, motivating people to confront their fears about the future.

Eco-anxiety is certainly partially rooted in the strong ties that bind us to nature. In a way, it reminds us of our natural origins and our innate *biophilia*. The term “biophilia” comes from the Latin *bio* meaning “life” and the Greek suffix *-philia*, meaning “who loves” [4]. In the same way as phobias and aversions, we experience *philias*, i.e. positive attractions and emotions towards other species, other habitats or objects in our natural environment [5]. Being intrinsically attached to other species, it is normal to feel affected by the abuse they suffer. Biophilia helps us understand the extent to which eco-anxiety arises from a natural, physiological feeling. Deep in our gut, we identify as *Homo sapiens* who are connected to nature, rather than *Homo oeconomicus* who imagine themselves free from all ties with the natural world. Therefore, anyone who is troubled by the erosion of the wild, non-human world or aware that there is no “Planet B” will likely be affected by this state of mind and feel overwhelmed by the lack of alternatives in the future.



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The psychological impact of the decline of biodiversity is already a research topic [6]. To date, there is no epidemiological data to quantify the prevalence of eco-anxiety in the general population, or any other effects of environmental damage on well-being and mental health. Recent surveys suggest that eco-anxious people could account for between 17% and 29% of the population [7]. Distress about the disappearance of animal species is also growing [8]. In Quebec, according to the 2023 *Baromètre de l'action climatique (Climate Action Barometer)*, 54% of residents surveyed declared experiencing eco-anxiety when thinking about the ecological crisis. Compared to the

previous year, more people stated that they often or almost always felt nervous or anxious (+6 points) and fearful (+6 points) about the future of humanity [9].

Ultimately, eco-anxiety is an adaptive function for coping with an unprecedented challenge for human societies [10]. Eco-anxious individuals find constructive responses to this threat, adopting pro-environmental behaviours. In fact, aside from the emotional upheaval, rediscovering meaning in the face of peril requires an individual to reflect on their priorities, the trajectory of their life and their choices concerning studies, profession, parenthood and even housing and living space. This intimate

process means individuals question their identity and values, gradually leading them to perceive and define themselves differently.

The challenge of this journey is to avoid becoming swamped by a sense of powerlessness or overwhelmed by the course of events, with no control over the broad directions followed by our societies. The eco-anxious suffer from a form of *hubris*<sup>1</sup>, which is ineffective given the scale of the task. This thwarted desire for power, as benevolent as it is disproportionate, this ambition to heal the world, are resolutions that are difficult for an individual to take on by themselves. Like the titan Atlas supporting the weight of the heavens on his shoulders alone, one person cannot bear all the suffering of the planet.

### A driving force for change

To prevent eco-anxiety becoming a burden, it is therefore important for individuals to return their focus to the immediate environment, where they can take direct action. Getting involved in action locally and joining environmental movements are effective strategies [11]. Civic engagement has many virtues, including calming the sense of disconnection often felt by eco-anxious people. Being surrounded by people who are equally sensitive to the world and share similar concerns reinforces the feeling of belonging to a group. A united approach with a collective goal also helps individuals to feel reassured, to maintain motivation over time and to achieve a sense of authenticity with themselves and in their relationships with others [12]. Building social connections, cooperating and being part of a network are key to navigating eco-anxiety with greater peace of mind. Studies show that positive attitudes within a network of individuals encourage respect, cooperation and – by extension – happiness among the members of such networks, whether these include family, friends or neighbours [13].

When someone is feeling eco-anxious, it is also good to remember that nature is still there, wild and alive. Awakening the senses, soaking up the beauty of the sights and sounds, savouring the peaceful



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atmosphere, the clean air and the fresh, pleasant smells are all simple, comforting experiences. A good illustration of this is the practice of “forest bathing” or *shinrin-yoku*. This Japanese tradition of taking a short, peaceful walk in the forest for relaxation, recreation and meditation has a number of health benefits, such as lowering blood pressure, heart rate and stress hormone levels (cortisol or noradrenaline). *Shinrin-yoku* also helps to reduce anxiety, depression, anger and fatigue, while increasing the activity of certain immune cells, in particular NK cells (natural killer cells) [14]. These positive effects are thought to be partly linked to breathing in phytoncides, the molecules that trees release into the air. In Japan, forest bathing is recommended as part of a healthy lifestyle since 1982.

Courses of action – both individual and collective – and sources of hope are constantly emerging and are consistent with the concept of “Planetary Health”, which sees the health of humanity as dependent on the state of natural systems and respect for planetary limits. ■

1. Inordinate desire for power. (Editor's note.)

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