

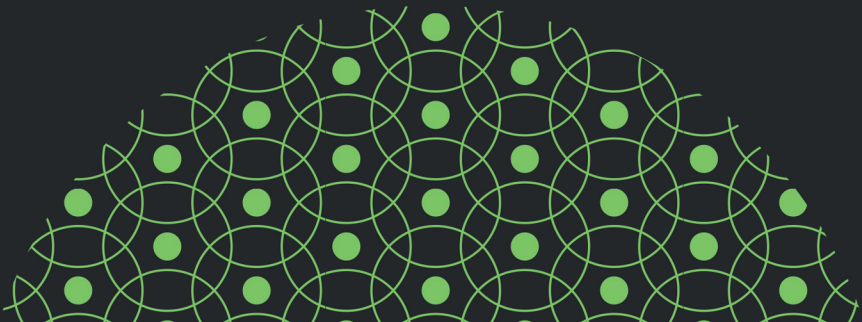


EMERALD POINTS

# ECO-ANXIETY RISING

Therapeutic Claims-Making  
in a Fearful Age

**DENNIS SORON**



ECO-ANXIETY RISING

*This page intentionally left blank*

# ECO-ANXIETY RISING

## Therapeutic Claims-Making in a Fearful Age

BY

**DENNIS SORON**

*Brock University, Canada*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

Copyright © 2025 Dennis Soron.  
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-401-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-400-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-402-8 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

1. Eco-Anxiety and Therapeutic Claims-Making	1
2. Naming and Framing Environmental Distress	21
3. An Age of Anxiety	49
4. The Ambiguous Promise of Therapeutic Politics	77
<i>References</i>	109

*This page intentionally left blank*

# ECO-ANXIETY AND THERAPEUTIC CLAIMS-MAKING

## ECO-ANXIETY RISING

The term ‘eco-anxiety’ made its first known appearance in print in the summer of 1990 in the context of a short article in *The Washington Post* by journalist Lisa Leff. Leff (1990) wrote approvingly of the steadfast water conservation efforts of activists in Maryland, whose ‘strong environmental ethic’ had been evident ‘long before eco-anxiety became a national ailment this year’. Leff’s casual allusion to the recent rise of eco-anxiety to the status of a ‘national ailment’ went unexplained, prompting current readers to retroactively venture their own proximate causes. Of particular concern to water conservationists, the previous year had not only witnessed the worst drought in the US since the Dust Bowl era but had seen the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill almost 11 million gallons of crude oil off the Gulf of Alaska. The same month that Leff’s article appeared also marked the beginning of the First Gulf War, whose ‘gushing oil and roaring fires’ (Syal, 2021) soon became a symbolic flashpoint for public fears over geopolitical instability and wanton ecological destruction. Apart from any singular anxiety-inducing event, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of mounting environmental concern more generally, with a range of issues – including acid rain, ozone depletion, clear-cut logging, species extinction, rainforest preservation, toxic waste disposal and chemical spills, among many others – garnering a new degree of political attention in the US and beyond. Seizing the moment, the 20th iteration of Earth Day in April 1990 mobilised roughly 200 million people in 141 countries behind a call to make the 1990s the ‘decade of the environment’.

While such grand appeals conveyed a certain political optimism that was soon to be enshrined at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, they also reflected a

wider shift in the role played by ecological threats in the popular imagination. Several months prior to Leff's piece, in the midst of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the winding down of the Cold War, an article in *The L.A. Times* proclaimed that 'the environment looms as the major global issue of the next decade. The threat of environmental cataclysm is replacing nuclear holocaust as the most frightening menace to civilization' (Landsberg, 1989). By 1990, the year that the newly founded Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its First Assessment Report, this looming sense of menace increasingly centred around the nascent problem of global warming. This emerging crisis, as Bill McKibben had written the previous year, portended not only an array of troubling 'concrete changes' to the biosphere, but – at a metaphysical level – an unsettling loss of 'our comforting sense...of the permanence of our natural world' (McKibben, 1989). To this extent, he argues, it had brought humanity to the precipice of 'a plunge into the unknown, fearful as much *because* it is unknown as because the world may become hot or dry or whipped by hurricanes' (McKibben, 1989).

Leff could not have foreseen how the term she offhandedly mentioned in her article would, at a very different historical conjuncture decades later, so dramatically escalate and spread in its usage. While the notion of eco-anxiety had continued to circulate informally in journalistic and activist circles, and had become the object of growing academic attention in the 2010s, it gained a new institutional legitimacy and popular cache around 2017, when it was first formally defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as 'a chronic fear of environmental doom' (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 68). Although eco-anxiety and the subsidiary notion of climate anxiety<sup>1</sup> are not listed in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the fields of psychology, psychiatry, public health, social work and the broader therapeutic community have, over the past decade, gone to great lengths to formalise our understanding of these otherwise vaguely defined 'ailments' – the pathways through which they emerge, their varied symptoms, the psychometric scales required to track and measure them, their adaptive and impairing qualities, the best strategies for treating or managing them, so on.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Given the centrality of the climate crisis to contemporary environmental debate, the terms 'eco-anxiety' and 'climate anxiety' are often used synonymously and interchangeably. This book will default to using 'eco-anxiety' in most cases, as it is a more general term that encompasses distress about the climate and other ecological challenges. It will employ 'climate anxiety' where required to achieve greater specificity, tease out a nuance or match the usage in the sources being discussed.

2 While space forbids a comprehensive account of this literature, concise overviews can be found in Baudon and Jachens (2021), Christodoulou et al. (2024), Coffey et al. (2021) and Dailianis (2020).

While influential in clarifying the terms of debate and stamping it with the imprimatur of academic, medical and therapeutic expertise, such work has been only one portion of a burgeoning popular discourse over eco-anxiety in which journalists, activists, environmental groups and a variety of other actors have participated. Oxford Languages (2019), which short-listed eco-anxiety as a contender for ‘word of the year’ in 2019, estimated that usage of the term in print and online publications had increased a remarkable 4290% in the previous year alone. Beyond the academic and clinical literature, Panu Pihkala (2020a) writes, there is now ‘a vast array of newspaper articles, documentaries, interviews, blogs and other media which discuss anxiety related to the ecological crisis’ (p. 1). By 2019, stories about eco-anxiety had become so ubiquitous across a range of media locations and formats that *Grist* magazine dubbed them the ‘biggest pop-culture trend’ of that year (McGinn, 2019). According to science communicator Britt Wray (2022a), one of the foremost popularisers of eco-anxiety discourse, ambient concern over this issue has also spawned a veritable ‘cottage industry’ (p. 3) of coaching services and niche therapies, alongside an array of bespoke self-help resources, including books, online tool-kits, compendia of everyday coping tips, workshops and webinars, retreats, discussion groups, and so on.

The dramatic growth and diffusion of eco-anxiety and climate anxiety discourse has prompted questions about whether these terms represent ‘simply a popular culture trend, a clinical disorder that needs treatment, or something in between’ (Yale Sustainability, 2023). Most participants in these debates are located in the ‘in between’ zone, averring that eco-anxiety and climate anxiety are legitimate forms of emotional distress that can become pathological in their extreme manifestations, but are essentially ‘based on an accurate appraisal of the severity of the ecological crisis’ (Pihkala 2020a, p. 14). While eco-anxiety is oriented towards ominous uncertainties surrounding the future, Michel Bourban (2023) argues, ‘it is based on solid facts about the current state of the planet’ (p. 70). It can thus be regarded as simply a natural response to the increasingly dire prognostications of climate science, as relayed through the mainstream news media, social media and other channels. In this light, the apparent rise in eco-anxiety in recent decades tracks the distance between the tentative and qualified warnings in the IPCC’s First Assessment Report in the year of Leff’s article, to the ‘final warning’ issued to humanity in its Sixth Assessment Report in 2022, with the world on ‘the brink of irrevocable damage that only swift and drastic action can avert’ (Harvey, 2023). At this historical moment, the *Handbook of Climate Psychology* (CPA, 2022) asserts, forms of emotional distress such as eco-anxiety

inevitably ‘befall those who are able to face the facts’ and can resist ‘turning away in denial or disavowal’ (p. 22).

Eco-anxiety and climate anxiety have generally been portrayed as threat responses that have a strong experiential grounding and are not simply based upon abstract scientific projections. Far from being purely speculative, Bourban (2023) suggests, they represent ‘a lucid reaction to an accurate empirical description of global environmental changes, some of which are already occurring’ (p. 70). Eco-anxiety has come to the forefront of the popular imagination at a time when the consequences of climate change and other ecological crises no longer seem prospective and ‘unknown’, but appear increasingly prominent in everyday life. As Ojala et al. (2021) argue, a historical uptick in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events and other climate-related disturbances such as wildfires, heatwaves and floods has marked the end of a time in which ‘climate change seemed psychologically distant from many people and therefore as a rather nonemotional problem’ (p. 36). While such disturbances are devastating for those who experience them directly, they can also be distressing for those encountering them vicariously. Simply bearing witness to such events, Graham Lawton (2024) suggests can feed into an ‘apocalyptic outlook’ that leaves people feeling ‘overwhelmed by anxiety about our prospective future’. In the throes of this outlook, psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe (2012) suggests, we vacillate between the impulse to take decisive action to defuse threats to our collective future and the lingering ‘anxiety that the damage is already too great to repair’ (p. 44).

This underlying sense of futility and helplessness in the face of irrevocable loss is captured well by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2012) who defined eco-anxiety as ‘the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse’ (p. 250). In comparison to the APA’s 2017 definition, Albrecht’s definition better expresses the profound sense of existential insecurity that is often laced through the term. The ‘collapse’ Albrecht references is not arbitrary or accidental, of course, but is a process that invariably brings forward questions of blame and responsibility. For some, as we’ll consider later, eco-anxiety arises from the environmental guilt of ordinary individuals and can only be reduced by a zealous commitment to reducing one’s ecological footprint – including, in extreme cases, through voluntary sterilisation or even suicide. More commonly, especially among activists and environmental groups who invoke the terms, eco-anxiety and climate anxiety are regarded as forms of emotional harm that have been unjustly inflicted upon vulnerable groups by dominant institutions that have failed to undertake needed action to avert environmental catastrophe. In this regard, as Hickman (2024) and others have underlined, they are ‘relational’ feelings

that are infused with a sense of anger and betrayal towards the irresponsibility of political and economic elites and the seeming lack of environmental urgency on the part of fellow citizens. The emotional pain of the eco-anxious is thus compounded by a sense of psycho-cultural detachment from feckless others. As journalist Brooke Jarvis (2023) writes, their ‘worries are rational and evidence-based, but they feel isolated and frustrated because they’re living in a society that tends to dismiss them’.

As their usage has spiked across a range of sites, eco-anxiety and climate anxiety have become the most popular terms invoked within the emergent discourse over the psychological harms of climate change and other environmental problems. While not novel in themselves, such concerns have acquired a new urgency in many quarters of environmental debate, from activist circles to the upper echelons of climate advocacy and research. A 2021 report by the Grantham Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (Lawrance et al., 2021), for instance, argues that deteriorating mental health for hundreds of millions of people worldwide has been an under-appreciated component of the climate emergency. By giving greater priority to mental health considerations in assessments of the costs and benefits of climate action, it argues, governments can arrive at ‘win-win’ solutions that ease distress while achieving tangible environmental improvements (p. 19). The following year, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022a) published a policy brief arguing that the psychological impacts of climate change constitute a ‘growing emergency’, exacerbating pre-existing disorders and spurring ‘the development of new mental health conditions’ (p. 1). That same year, in the second part of its Sixth Assessment Report, the IPCC (2022) for the first time foregrounded the mental health dimensions of the climate crisis. The report notes with ‘very high confidence’ that climate change has adversely affected the emotional wellbeing of populations worldwide, and that such challenges will intensify as temperatures rise and more people face ‘extreme weather events, displacement, migration, famine, malnutrition, degradation or destruction of health and social care systems, climate-related economic and social losses and anxiety and distress associated with worry about climate change’ (p. 63).

As such high-profile publications suggest, concerns over psychological vulnerability and harm have acquired significant influence as a means of framing the nature and import of contemporary ecological risks and of asserting a warrant for decisive action. While responding to ecological distress necessarily involves therapeutic support for afflicted individuals, the WHO brief asserts this is insufficient; indeed, to the extent that such distress is grounded in a realistic grasp of the planetary threats we now face, climate action itself ‘is

clearly needed to protect mental health' (p. 4). Such discussions of the psycho-emotional effects of ecological crises have led to an expanded understanding of the role of therapeutic professionals, who are often entreated to not only remedy individual suffering but to use their expertise to dismantle psychological impediments to environmental action and systemic change. As Adrian James of the UK's Royal College of Psychiatrists has asserted, practitioners can no longer remain disinterested professionals treating individual clients; indeed, they 'have no choice but to join the voices of those who are calling for urgent action and declare a climate and ecological emergency to avert a health and mental health catastrophe' (RCPsych, 2021). Along similar lines, an article in the *International Review of Psychiatry* (Li et al., 2022) issues an 'urgent call to action for all mental health professionals' to acknowledge that their remit goes beyond tending to individual mental health 'and should include advancing public understanding of the climate crisis, highlighting its impact on physical and mental wellbeing, and advocating for systemic changes to limit its impending harms' (p. 563).

Debates over eco-anxiety have echoed aspects of this 'call to action', highlighting that this growing mental health problem presents unique opportunities and challenges for therapeutic professionals seeking to address entwined forms of emotional and ecological harm. Such debates typically frame eco-anxiety not as a discrete category of individual distress, but variously as the marquee 'disease of the 21st century' (Christodoulou et al., 2024, p. 2), 'one of the major mental health challenges of our time' (Vukičević & Liu, 2024, p. e349), and 'an emotional catastrophe being visited on the next generation' (Haseley & Lament, 2024, p. 33). While acknowledging the limits of empirical research on the topic to date, Caroline Hickman (2024) argues that her experience as a clinical psychotherapist besieged with requests for therapeutic assistance makes her 'confident in arguing that eco-anxiety is an emergent mental health crisis' (p. 357) – and, indeed, one that is 'endemic across the world' and 'increasing massively' (Lawton, 2024). Given the scale and implications of this emergent crisis, an article in *Lancet Planet Health* (Cunsolo et al., 2020) asserts, 'an urgent response is needed from clinicians, public health practitioners, families, researchers, educators, and policymakers' (p. e261).

For clinicians, the impulse to respond proactively to the putative eco-anxiety crisis can quickly run up against the limits of their own training and established therapeutic protocols. While the 'need for informed professionals certainly seems more pressing than ever, as the prevalence of eco-anxiety and demand for its treatment are on the incline', Baudon and Jachens (2021) argue, little existing clinical literature 'seems to address relevant and specific interventions for eco-anxiety'. As a consequence, even well-meaning mental

health professionals can ‘feel unequipped to handle a growing number of patients despairing over the state of the planet’ and presenting with symptoms of eco-anxiety (Whitcomb, 2021). More troublingly, their lack of training and sensitisation with regard to eco-emotions, in combination with their own unacknowledged denial of the urgency of the ecological crisis, can often lead them to dismiss their patients’ fears as internally generated and disproportionate to the perceived threats from which they arise. As Jarvis (2023) writes, this reflects the plight of many eco-anxious individuals in recent years, who have reached out for therapeutic support ‘only to be told that that they were overreacting – that their concern, and not the climate, was out of whack and in need of treatment’.

While some in the mental health professions believe that familiar approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness-based therapy and psychodynamic therapy can be adapted for the treatment of eco-anxiety and climate anxiety (Dailianis, 2020, p. 53), others hold that these afflictions present a fundamental challenge to established therapeutic paradigms oriented around ‘fixing’ emotionally disordered individuals. Eco-anxiety, Hickman (2024) claims, represents a ‘clinical dilemma in practice’, because while mental health professionals must develop a therapeutic approach to support individuals suffering from it, this very process can lead them to ‘individualize and therefore pathologize what is in effect an emotionally [and] mentally healthy response to environmental problems in the world with a social and relational root system’ (pp. 357–358). In the case of climate anxiety and other socially induced mental health problems, Susan Clayton (2020) argues, professionals ‘must find a way to respond to individual problems without losing sight of the social consequences – to talk about climate anxiety as a psychological experience without implying that the causes, and appropriate responses, are intrapsychic’ (p. 5).

Indeed, to the extent that eco-anxiety is ‘an issue that has its roots not in an individual, but in wider society’ (Lawrance, 2024), its alleviation is contingent upon systemic social change. ‘Until we take forceful action on climate breakdown’, Hickman asserts, ‘eco-anxiety will keep going up. But if we stopped oil extraction and shifted to renewables, eco-anxiety would almost disappear overnight’ (Lawton, 2024). This tendency to offer a therapeutic rationale for the transition towards sustainability is most explicit in cases where collective action and systemic change are themselves presented as a type of ‘treatment’. While therapeutic interventions to help youth cope with their personal climate anxiety are needed, child psychiatrist Elizabeth Pinsky argues, they can deflect attention away from its root causes, ignoring the fact that ‘the fundamental and best treatment for youth climate distress is a rapid and just transition

from fossil fuels' (Schmidt, 2023). Given that such distress is grounded in real threats generated by a destructive socio-economic system, the Climate Psychology Alliance (2022) maintains, 'interventions to reduce suffering need to be on a systemic level rather than an individual one. Decisive global action to reduce CO2 emissions is therefore the appropriate "treatment" for eco-anxiety, not medication or interventions to eradicate the discomfort' (p. 23).

For many participants in these debates, the collective capacity for transformative action on this scale is itself contingent upon the therapeutically informed management of eco-anxiety as an emotional response that can be either activating or paralysing. In this regard, properly responding to eco-anxiety requires us 'not only to learn to respond to those with debilitating distress but also to understand how to harness our emotional responses towards positive action related to global environmental concerns' (Jarret et al., 2024, p. 1). By integrating therapeutic insights, one popular science publication argues, 'individuals facing eco-anxiety can learn to channel their fears into meaningful advocacy...The journey through eco-anxiety is ultimately a journey towards action – a call to confront the realities of climate change while fostering a sustainable, healthy future for all' (Evrin Agaci, 2024). In such instances, eco-anxiety is presented as a potentially disabling condition that needs not to be cured or eradicated, but embraced, consciously worked through and channelled into transformative action. As an article in *The Lancet Planetary Health* grandly puts it, painful feelings such as eco-anxiety may sometimes require clinical support but are ultimately 'the crucible through which humanity must pass to harness the energy and conviction that are needed for the lifesaving changes now required' (Cunsolo et al., 2020).

## ECO-ANXIETY AND THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

This short book begins from the premise that a critical sociological perspective can help to reframe and enrich the ongoing debate over eco-anxiety, in terms of better comprehending the complex range of influences feeding into this 'emergent mental health crisis' and examining its construction as a collective problem with significant political implications. A concern with social construction and cultural mediation is typically missing from this discussion, which has tended to frame eco-anxiety as a 'natural' or 'rational' response to objective threats – as 'an authentic response to external stimuli, which should be validated and mobilised for collective action' (Bhullar et al., 2022). Consequently, little consideration is given to the ways in which expressions of environmental distress emerge in dynamic relation to their