

How eco-anxiety influences climate activism and everyday life in Britain

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(Article written by Garry MacKenzie)

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Imagine living with the knowledge that the world you grew up in is about to change, and that with this change comes a great deal of unpredictability. Perhaps daily chores, like grocery shopping, no longer involve such a large range of produce. Perhaps bad weather is a serious hazard rather than merely a hindrance. Energy use is rationed, so the appliances and gadgets whose usefulness you take for granted are no longer available round the clock. And every time you drive to work, buy a product, or switch on the central heating, you're contributing to the environmental problems that have brought about those changes. Of course, governments and corporations have played a much larger role in this process. But your power to alter their behaviour is limited, whereas there might be more that you feel you can do in your daily life. You feel compelled to take a stand, however small it may be.

Worry about the environment is a feeling shared by many people today and it is easy to see why. News reports frequently speculate about the world being on the brink of catastrophic climate breakdown. Many environmental activists are driven by a desire to avert or alleviate this catastrophe. This has led to a related fear: that generations of people may be increasingly affected by 'eco-anxiety'.

For those involved in climate activism, environmental work, protests and education, it is common to experience feelings of fear, grief and anxiety about the natural world.

The phenomenon of eco-anxiety is the subject of the 'Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior' project funded by the Scottish Funding Council. Led by Dr Bridget Bradley, a Lecturer in Social Anthropology (with support from Research Fellow Dr Rika Hirose and Research Assistants Hannah Fitchett and Eleonora Ranuzzi), the project seeks to understand how eco-anxiety affects the everyday lives of those involved in climate-related work.

Lifestyle and the impacts of climate change

Much of the existing research on mental health and climate change focuses on those communities most severely affected by environmental disasters so far. But many people in Britain, as yet relatively unaffected by climate change, believe that the coming decades will be marked by dramatic upheaval and even widespread suffering as societies struggle to adapt to the effects of a new climate. Rising sea levels, food and water shortages, unmanageable changes in temperature, and mass extinction are features of an imagined

future. It is rational to look towards this future with fear. At the same time, increasing numbers of people are getting involved in climate activism – particularly young people motivated to hold school strikes, inspired by the example of Greta Thunberg. Alongside activists who have campaigned for climate justice for decades, many older people are also taking to activism for the first time: many Extinction Rebellion protestors attributed their participation in demonstrations to a desire to ensure a better world for their grandchildren. Some environmental groups advocate for a cultural approach, such as finding new stories to tell or creating new art, new philosophical frameworks and new lifestyles – all of which they hope will better equip us for the changes to come.

‘Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior’ asks how anxiety about the environment shapes perceptions about the future, family relationships, and life choices. If you live with the conviction that future generations will face climate chaos, does this reduce your desire to have children? If family members fail to share your worry, does that put you on opposing sides of a political struggle? If humanity faces an emergency that needs to be addressed urgently, are you more likely to make sacrifices (from becoming vegan to going to prison for civil disobedience) to halt the emergency?

‘Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior’ tells a story about how ordinary people in contemporary Britain relate to the

natural world in terms of what it means to grow old and to plan for the a future that exists in the wake of environmental collapse. The project asks why people choose to take part in climate activism or actions and how their participation affects eco-anxiety. It explores the different generational experiences of climate activism, including how families talk about activism and worry about the climate at home.

‘Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior’

In order to better understand the interplay of these dynamics, Bradley and her team are interviewing people across generations. Beginning with virtual fieldwork undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, their research uncovers the everyday climate concerns of parents, teenagers, and those in later life. Eco-anxiety is sometimes labelled a mental health issue requiring a pathological response. As such, it has been studied by psychologists and psychotherapists, however, ‘Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior’ shines an anthropological lens on the fears felt by many people about a future where the climate is increasingly unstable. It highlights the urgency of taking time to listen to the concerns of those who are extremely concerned about the climate crisis, and whose experiences are sometimes dismissed by the media as the behaviour of ‘anxious personalities’.

The University of St Andrews has a growing reputation as a leading centre for research on climate and energy issues. The recently-launched

interdisciplinary Centre for Energy Ethics is at the forefront of this research. 'Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior' benefits from the support and collaboration of colleagues at the Centre who are specialists in a range of fields. The project is also part of the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies' focus on health and disease, climate and energy, and the anthropology of activism. As an anthropological study of medical labels and diagnoses, the everyday experiences of anxiety, and the local and global impacts of the

climate crisis on families, activism and perceptions of the future, the project intersects with each of these topics.

'Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior' seeks to understand the emotional impacts of climate change on people in Britain today. With this understanding, we can be better equipped to face a challenging and uncertain future. Further information about the project can be found on the official [Eco Worrier, Eco Warrior](https://ecoworriersecowarriors.wordpress.com/) project website.

Find out more

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