Moving Forward with Eco-Anxiety
Acknowledge, Adapt, and Advance

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Guest Article: By: Michelle Doerr, Anavah Consulting, LLC.

Michelle Doerr, President and Founder of Anavah Consulting, LLC is a consultant, coach and facilitator making the workplace and relationships more authentic and reconnecting people with planet. In addition to her training, experience and expertise in executive leadership, facilitation, conflict resolution, and organizational development, Michelle is also a trained Wildlife Biologist and her experience in the natural resource profession and outdoor recreation aids in her understanding of the workplace needs of those that work with and for nature.

Last year, I wrote an article for The Wildlife Professional entitled "Working in a World of Wounds." In that article I introduced "eco-grief," "eco-anxiety," and climate grief as concepts we must consider in our conservation workplaces. The American Psychological Association describes eco-anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom."[1]

In the article, I wrote: "The label we use isn't as important as how we respond to these feelings. Faced with overwhelming challenges in response to natural disasters, endangered species, habitat loss, ocean acidification, feelings of hopelessness, dread, anxiety, and grief are normal."

This is a real thing for many young people. Pushing it aside is dangerous for personal wellbeing and company culture. In this article, I'll give you a few ways to move forward with this information. I'll offer some ways to acknowledge these feelings, overcome overwhelm and navigate these challenges. I am going to do my best to balance the negative and positive. Since it is difficult to parse out feelings of "eco-anxiety" from burnout and overwhelm, I am taking a broader approach to the topic here.

Background

A 2021 study of people ages 16-25 across 10 countries points to significant levels of "eco-anxiety" in young people. The report summarizes that "Respondents across all countries were worried about climate change (59% were very or

extremely worried and 84% were at least moderately worried). More than 50% reported each of the following emotions: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. More than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and many reported a high number of negative thoughts about climate change (e.g., 75% said that they think the future is frightening and 83% said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet).[2]
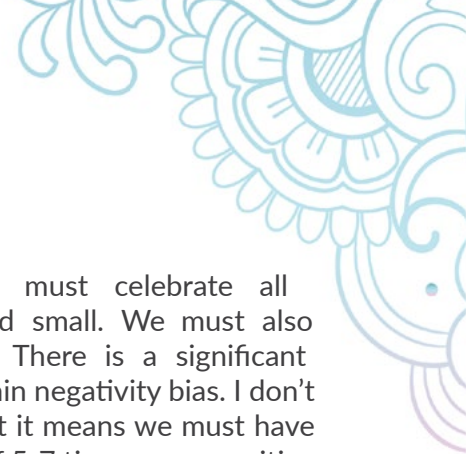
At the same time, the University of Minnesota's College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources did a study of high school students[3] and found that "90 percent of high school students say it is important to pursue careers in which they can make a difference, including addressing hunger, sustainability, environmental conservation and natural resources." In addition, "37% are interested in careers in food, agriculture, natural resources, and the environment." In other words, they desire to take up this work.

Feeling anxious and feeling highly motivated to create positive change are emotions that co-exist in many people today. Our challenge is to create workplaces where young people can thrive. Younger generations are prioritizing work-life balance and they are bringing all of their emotions into the workplace. Current conditions that focus on productivity at all costs are not likely to work well for them and may move them toward the negative emotions rather than the positive.

Acknowledge and Listen

Our first step is to acknowledge the concerns about the future are real. They need space to hold and express this reality without judgement. All their emotions, including anger and rage, must be acknowledged, and accepted. To help move from feelings and emotions, we must use the information the emotions provide. That, along with curiosity and deep listening to ideas generated by young people will inform next steps and fuel a better future for all. If you are discounting young people for any reason, you are growing the problem, not solving it.

Challenge and Success

We have to be real about the work to be done and the challenges that the work entails. If our full focus is on the problems and not the possibilities, people will continue to suffer. Don't be afraid to talk about these realities and allow people to imagine. We can only create a future that we first imagine and get excited about realizing. As Brené Brown would say, "Clarity is kindness." Be honest and transparent about the hard work ahead as well as provide clear directions for getting work done as well as for advancement.

At the same time, we must celebrate all accomplishments, big and small. We must also notice what is working! There is a significant amount of research on brain negativity bias. I don't know the exact figure, but it means we must have somewhere in the order of 5-7 times more positive influences to overcome this negativity bias. Make sure you're spending more time on celebrating, valuing people, and talking about success and future possibilities.

Data and Story

Data is important to inform our decisions, and we do well to provide data in scientific and annual reports. Stories do the rest of the work. Stories describe individual and community experiences that inspire. Data and stories are both beneficial and work well together.

Case in point. One of my colleagues and I conducted a three-part series on Creating Brave Spaces, and we have data from the polls provided during the session that indicate people were learning. About ½ of the participants completed an online anonymous feedback form. If I took the feedback alone to determine whether the series was successful, I would miss the fact that two very vulnerable stories dropped in the space, demonstrating that we had indeed created a brave space. Set goals, use surveys, and collect data, but don't let that be the only determiner of success.

When we are solely focused on data, we have a narrow image of what is really happening. The work we do in conservation is connected to many other things like environmental justice, food scarcity, and more. Make sure to tell the stories authentically, without washing (i.e., removal of anything difficult or uncomfortable).

Action and Rest

I was listening to Otto Sharmer[4], author of the book Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges, and he said that action was overrated, and stillness was underrated. Sharmer said "Action without awareness is blind – habitualized." He further stated that the opposite of action is not non-action but stillness. We need to allow the answers to emerge
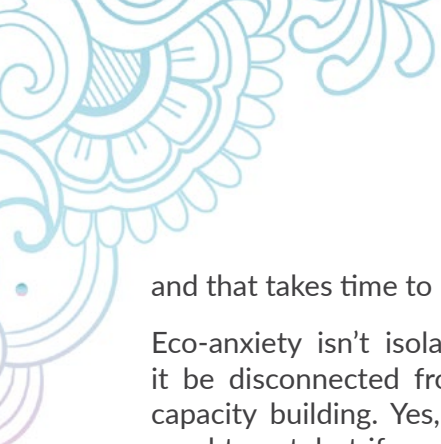
and that takes time to rest and reflect.

Eco-anxiety isn't isolated from burnout, nor can it be disconnected from personal and leadership capacity building. Yes, things feel urgent, and we need to act, but if our actions come without being present and reflective, then we may be putting more harm into the system. Thankfully, I am seeing more meetings and events start with a moment of silence or another mindfulness practice. Topics around mindfulness, compassion, reflection, and rest are becoming more prevalent in the field.

What can you do in your workplace to make space for rest and reflection that leads to more mindful action?

Well-being for all

Taking care of ourselves and each other is both a personal and professional obligation and cannot be done in our spare time only. Care and well-being must be modeled at work by the authority figures at all levels. Encourage everyone, including young people, to develop self-care habits. Encourage putting those practices on the calendar and honoring them like all other commitments we make. These practices might include exercise, play time (dance, art, music, etc.), mindfulness, and space for reflection.

Well-being practices to put in place throughout the workplace include meeting check-ins, moments of mindfulness or silence at the beginning of gatherings, pauses in events for the purpose of reflection, and minimizing the scheduling of meetings back-to-back (i.e., utilizing the 25- or 50-minute meeting timing). Consider opportunities for yoga, meditation, or other practices in groups workspaces or scheduled via video during the week. Encourage sharing of nurturing recipes or community meals. Support walking meetings. You get the idea! Invite people to share suggestions, and work with your team to come up with ideas.

Time with nature

We work in a field where one would expect we would get ample time in nature. My work in the past few years proves otherwise. Only a tiny fraction of us are getting daily time outside and a majority are getting that time only periodically. A goal can be to spend 30 minutes per day mindful with nature (whatever nature means to you). If our community isn't spending time with nature, then how are we to excite others to join us?

Here are some possible ways to incorporate nature into your workday.

- Conduct meetings outside when the weather allows.
- Do walk and talk meetings in small groups (being mindful of privacy when needed)
- Encourage working outside, especially for reflection time.
- In offices, make sure nature items abound – pinecones, rocks, plants, nature art, windows with access to nature viewing.
- Use nature items when doing introductions at meetings – ask people what they chose and why they chose it.
- Leave the office over lunch or leave at a time with the purpose of taking time outside.
- Have a message board (in person or virtual) where people can share their nature images and experiences.
- Incorporate time with nature on the agenda of your company or organization retreat.
- Encourage interactions with pets – a pet day at work or bring pets to online meetings.
- Have staff add ideas to this list.

Final thoughts

Eco-anxiety, climate anxiety, and burnout are real and may be increasing for individuals and within workplaces. We must be able to sit with emotions and the reality of the situation. At the same time, we must balance that grim outlook with inspiration from what is working and what we believe is possible. Conservation has always been capable of great things and solving complex problems – from ecosystem and habitat restoration to species population recoveries to diverse and growing recreation experiences in nature – we got this, and a key strategy will be for more of us to be doing the great work together and in ways to bring us joy. Useful hope is required in our work.

> "The world you love and rely on is right in front of you; protect it by tending it, not by raging against the things that threaten it."
>
> Sarah Jaquette Ray

ANAVAH

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References

[1] https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/03/ce-climate-change

[2] Hickman, C., et. al (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey, The Lancet Planetary Health, Volume 5, Issue 12, pages e863-e873.

[3] https://cfans.umn.edu/news/survey-careers-calling

[4] "Theory U: Leading in Times of Disruption Q&A with Otto Sharmer, PhD" as part of the InnerMBA program through LinkedIn and Sounds True.

A few additional sources, including voices from young people:

- "Is It Too Late to Save The Planet? Evidence-based Hope vs Climate Doomism" a video with Elin Kelsey and Isaias Hernandez (Queerbrownvegan that is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13XomK_ASXs)

- Clover Hogan – "Climate activist | Founder & Executive Director at Force of Nature | Researcher on mobilising mindsets for action." https://www.cloverhogan.com/ and https://www.forceofnature.xyz/

- Leah Thompson, The Intersectional Environmentalist, wrote a book by the same name and teamed up with many others toward this work. https://www.intersectionalenvironmentalist.com/

- A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet by Sarah Jaquette Ray

- Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis by Britt Way

- All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis, edited by Ayanna Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson. https://www.allwecansave.earth/

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