

## **Confronting eco-grief and eco-anxiety in the conservation classroom**

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### Session Overview

Conservation and environmental science students who spend significant time studying global climate change and other planetary crises often suffer emotional distress and anxiety related to their topics of study. This psychological impact has been referred to as “eco-grief”, “eco-despair”, or “eco-anxiety” and often has a negative impact on students’ mental health. Recent studies, including a 2017 report from the American Psychological Association titled *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate*, make a strong case that in addition to direct mental health impacts of experiencing environmental or climate-related disasters, there is an unrelenting day-by-day impact of watching and anticipating the irrevocable impacts of climate change on current and future generations. Students may be particularly vulnerable to eco-grief because as a demographic, they tend to suffer high rates of anxiety, helplessness, and frustration with the pace at which our society is currently addressing environmental crises. Given this phenomenon, what should be the role of educators in confronting eco-grief in conservation and environmental science classrooms? We will explore this question through an interactive session where we (1) review the literature on eco-grief, (2) share observations of eco-grief in students and attempts to address it in the classroom, (3) discuss the results of a survey that examines the relationship of feelings of eco-grief to environmental knowledge, attitudes/values, and behaviors among students, and (4) develop activity ideas and classroom materials to address the topic of eco-grief in our classrooms. Participants can expect to interact with other conservation educators, researchers, and students and leave the session with an activity lesson plan on eco-grief. Materials used in and produced during the session will be shared among all participants. We particularly welcome attendance and insight from students on ideas for educators to address the mental health impacts of understanding the scope and scale of the planetary crises we face.

List of session materials found at the following link:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wxJB7tE-7ZAEVm2EHZjCB2Iqn\\_T1\\_LoA?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wxJB7tE-7ZAEVm2EHZjCB2Iqn_T1_LoA?usp=sharing)

1. Pratt Presentation – Overview of Eco-grief and Session Goals
2. Lovero Presentation – Student Survey Data on Eco-grief
3. Pratt Eco-grief Lesson Plan
4. Eco-grief related literature
5. Participant Ideas for Eco-grief Lessons

Session Goals and Summary Outcomes

I. Session Introduction & Small Group Discussion. This interactive session began with an overview of literature (see Pratt presentation in google drive link above) on the phenomenon of eco-grief and a small group discussion where participants answered the following questions.

1. Have you observed eco-grief or eco-anxiety in your students? If so, what does this look like (i.e. it comes up in class, students express in office hours, it is implied in their work)?

*Summary of participant comments:* Most instructors have observed eco-grief or anxiety in their students even if they did not have this terminology as part of their vocabulary. Students express these feelings through humor in the classroom, approaching the instructor after class, describing perspectives of being born on “a fixer-upper planet”, expressing a lack of power, feeling guilt and grief, loss of hope and yet a sense of responsibility and overwhelm. Instructors also observe apathy among students who are losing hope.

2. Have you made any attempts to address the topic of eco-grief or the mental health implications of learning and studying environmental crises in the classrooms or labs in which you work and/or teach?

*Summary of participant comments:* Some instructors attempt to address this topic directly but many don't have an explicit discussion of this phenomenon. Some examples include lessons that ask students to reflect on their feelings about the environment, to connect human health including mental health with environmental health, having discussions on leadership development and meaningful action, and trying to get training on trauma-informed pedagogy. Others hope to address these emotions by providing examples of solutions, interventions, progress being made to solve problems, and discussions on the real efficacy of certain actions.

3. Do you believe your students know that eco-grief or eco-anxiety is a documented phenomenon (i.e. is this part of their vocabulary)?

*Summary of participant comments:* More than half of participants had heard of this concept but many were unsure whether their students actually knew this was a documented phenomenon or used the language of “eco-grief” to describe what they feel.

II. Role of Educators & Confronting Eco-grief in the Classroom. The session continued with a discussion of the role of educators in confronting eco-grief in the classroom and some best practices informed by research with Pratt's students and suggested by session attendees. These included:

- Balance bad news with solutions and positive developments, always ending on the positive
- Build community and create space for informal discussions
- Acknowledge emotional response & discuss mental health
- Teach coping strategies
- Share personal stories
- Share clear and meaningful individual actions with students, including volunteer or activism opportunities

## NACCB 2020 Interactive Session Report

- Promote community engagement (require it?)

A **major challenge** identified in doing this important work as instructors is that we often do not have training in things like teaching coping strategies, or walking students through mental health or psychology-related exercises.

III. Results of Ongoing Eco-grief Study at UC Irvine. The session continued with a presentation from Karissa Lovero on the eco-grief study that Pratt and Lovero are implementing at the University of California, Irvine. The presentation is linked in the google drive referenced above.

*Presentation Summary:* Previous studies have identified that broadly, environmental education does not work to engage students in sustainable behaviors. Therefore, an underlying question of this study is whether there is a relationship between environmental knowledge, environmental attitudes and values, and partaking in sustainable behaviors, and whether these relationships may be modified by a student's level of eco-grief.

We identified a strong positive relationship between a student's level of environmental knowledge and their environmental attitudes and values ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, we identified a strong positive relationship between pro-environmental attitudes and values and the frequency of partaking in sustainable behaviors ( $p < 0.001$ ). However, there was no significant relationship between environmental knowledge and partaking in sustainable behaviors. Instead, we found that increasing environmental knowledge only increases the frequency of partaking in sustainable behaviors for students who already have pro-environmental attitudes and values. In addition, the more eco-grief a student is experiencing depresses the frequency of partaking in sustainable behaviors for students with pro-environmental attitudes and values. Therefore, a student's level of environmental attitudes and values and their emotional response to environmental education in the classroom (eco-grief) are important factors in predicting the level of engagement in sustainable behaviors.

IV. Eco-grief Lesson Planning & Group Share. The session ended with participants discussing the study results and sharing ideas for eco-grief lesson plans for the courses they instruct and how learning about the impacts of eco-grief ties into overall student learning outcomes for their courses. Lesson plan ideas shared by participants are included (unfortunately, many attendees did not submit their file) below and Pratt's 80-minute lesson plan on this topic can be found in the google drive folder referenced above.

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Instructor name:  
Instructor email:  
Course name:

### Lesson overview:

Students will work through crucial conversations toolkit, then do a role play conversation with each holding opposing views (could come up with a specific wicked problem, like allocating water to a city or to instream environmental flows)

### Student Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to take part in difficult conversations about ecological outcomes, both as a listener, and in terms of carefully making their points heard.

### Lesson/Activity Details:

- Required materials:
- Length of activity:

Instructor name:  
Instructor email:  
Course name:

### Lesson overview:

In this lesson students will learn what eco-grief is, how it manifests, and why it is important to be aware of. The primary goal of the lesson is to help students identify and cope with their own eco-grief in a safe, communal space.

### Student Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to...
2. Define eco-grief and
3. Identify feelings related to eco-grief as they arise
4. Learn and apply coping strategies to process these eco-grief feelings
5. Choose coping strategy(ies) that work best for them

### Lesson/Activity Details:

- Required materials: Video on conservation relevant to course curriculum, but that evokes some emotion
- Describe ecogrief to students at start of class
- Prompt students before the video to assess their emotions during the video and whether they fall under the 'eco-grief' category, then play video
- Offer several options for activities for students to participate in to practice coping strategies.
- Ask students to choose a strategy that works best for them to apply in the future

Instructor name:  
Instructor email:  
Course name:

**Lesson overview:**

One goal is to encourage students to participate in data collection in their local environment. There are a ton of projects at SciStarter, but I am picking CalEDNA. You can combine with a lesson on the use of environmental DNA in conservation more generally)  
<https://ucedna.com/>

**Student Learning Objectives:**

1. Understand the use of eDNA for conservation
2. Collect local soil samples to send in to the project
3. Learn how to evaluate the DNA results
4. Think of a specific question they could use eDNA for.
5. ...

**Lesson/Activity Details:**

- Required materials: caleDNA kit
- Length of activity:full class, with 1-3 hour field trip to collect samples
- Homework or small group wprk to look at results
- Homework - come up with a question of their own this tool could andswer.