

Conservationists: 'Living with grief'

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The scientists and conservation workers battling to save the world's dwindling forests, landscapes and endangered animals live constantly with grief, a leading Australian conservation scientist says.

"Assailed with accounts of the loss of species and habitats many ecologists and [conservation](#) biologists may be suffering from chronic or acute grief," says Professor Richard Hobbs of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) and University of Western Australia.

"Whether it's a local or personal loss, such as a local woodland or a creature that was once abundant becoming scarce or non-existent... whether it is the destruction of something major like a rainforest, Australia's small [marsupials](#) or the decline in the Arctic ice-sheet, the people who care about these things face constant accounts of actual or impending loss and this gives rise to a sense of bereavement."

Losses of any kind – of family, home or friends or one's familiar environment – involve a need to grieve, and the people who working in the field of conservation live in a world characterised by loss, he says.

Prof. Hobbs says he was forcibly struck by impact of grief while attending the 2011 International Conference for Conservation Biology in 2011: "It was evident both in my own feelings and those of colleagues to the scientific information we were hearing," he said.

This reflection led him to compare those feelings with the five stages of

grief identified by Dr Elisabeth Kubler Ross – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. He feels these are all apparent in the feelings of those closely involved with conservation.

"For example anger is a common response to conservation issues – on all sides of the debate. And denial is often used as a buffer against unwelcome news.

"Bargaining occurs when we realise it is impossible to save everything, and we have to negotiate what can be saved.

"Depression is a constant possibility for people working to save endangered animals and landscapes as we contemplate the immensity and difficulty of the task.

"And acceptance occurs when we become reconciled to losses that cannot be avoided, and learn to live with them – although we do not acquiesce to them."

However, Prof. Hobbs also says that, apart from grief, conservation also engenders hope. "It is important to remember that conservation losses are often reversible – and there have been some spectacular success stories of rescuing [endangered animals](#) or restoring their habitat. Indeed some recent commentators have called for a restoration of hope in the culture of [conservation biology](#).

"In fact, the provision of hope is one reason I got into restoration ecology."

However, he cautions, the evidence suggests that we are heading towards or are already in an ecological 'new normal' where ecosystems may be substantially different to the past, and missing many species.

"This makes some people angry, because they are still grieving for the world we have lost – while others have cycled more rapidly through the grief stages, accepted the inevitability of change, and are trying to work out the best way forward."

There will continue to be clashes over conservation, but Prof. Hobbs believes these may in part be due to the different stages of the grieving process at which people find themselves.

"In this way, ideas about grief can help us understand some of the passions and discordant debates that go on in conservation and restoration. But we should always remember that loss can lead to new opportunities.

"Loss in ecology may lead to new, but still worthwhile, assemblages of living plants and animals. Besides lamenting what is gone, we should also rejoice in what we still have."

His views are detailed in an article in the June issue of Decision Point at [www.decision-point.com.au/imag ... dpoint_70.pdf#page=4](http://www.decision-point.com.au/imag...dpoint_70.pdf#page=4) and in a journal article: Hobbs RJ (2013). Grieving for the Past and Hoping for the Future: Balancing Polarizing Perspectives in Conservation and Restoration. *Restoration Ecology* 21: 145–148.

More information:

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