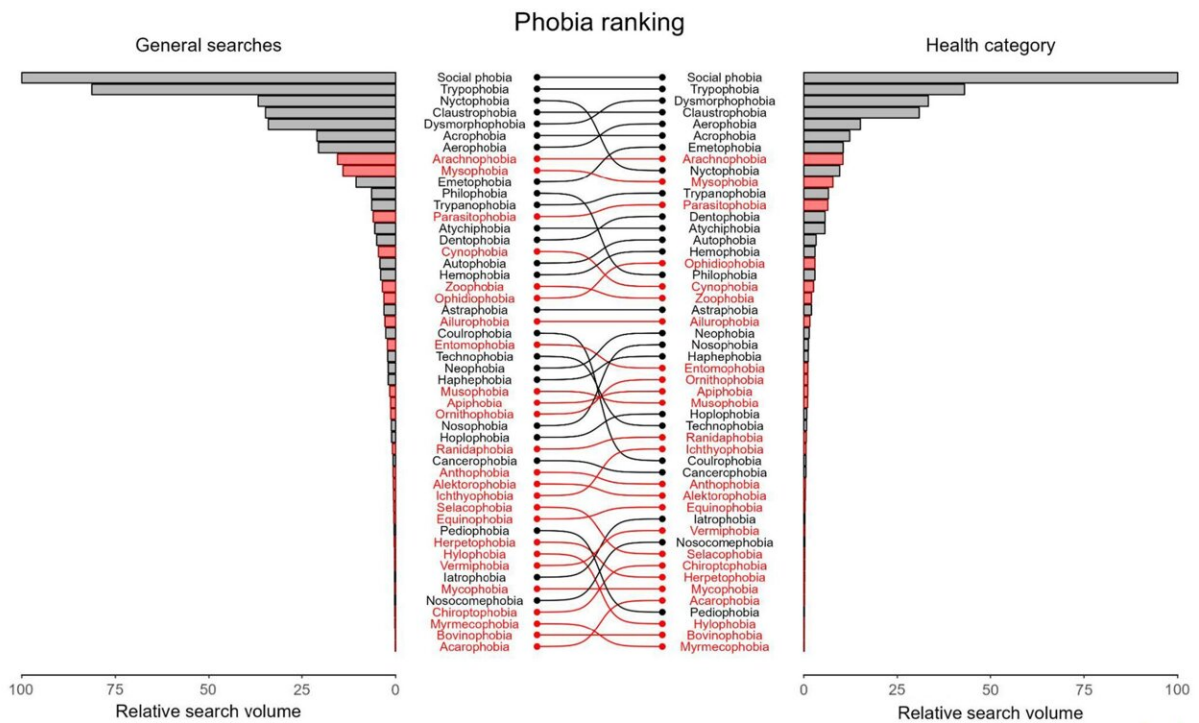


Online searches point to growing prevalence of nature-related phobias in urban populations

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Ranking of common psychological phobias based on relative search volume in the context of general (left panel) and health-related searches (right panel). Psychological phobias associated with elements of nature (biophobias) are highlighted in red. Credit: *People and Nature* (2023). DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10497

According to a new study led by the University of Turku in Finland,

internet searches indicate a growing prevalence of various biophobias across the world. Countries with larger urban populations show interest in a broader range of nature-related phobias, supporting the idea that urban living may be linked with fear and disgust towards nature.

The renowned naturalist E. O. Wilson proposed the idea that humans have an innate instinct to connect with nature and other lifeforms, a concept that is generally referred to as biophilia. However, many people also show the opposite reaction, manifesting an instinctive and sometimes even irrational fear towards certain organisms or elements of nature. Arachnophobia (fear of spiders) and ophidiophobia (fear of snakes) are generally considered among the most common forms of specific phobias in the realm of nature-related phobias, or biophobias.

"Some forms of biophobia are considered to have an evolutionary utility, as they would have helped our ancestors avoid encounters with potentially harmful organisms, but many people also exhibit fearful responses towards organisms that pose no tangible threat, potentially leading to excessive anxiety and avoidance of interactions with nature," says Dr. Stefano Mammola, an ecologist from the Italian National Research Council and co-author of the study.

"Nature-related phobias are thought to be increasing in modern societies, and while some researchers have proposed this change may be linked to a growing disconnection from nature due to urban living, the extent and drivers of such changes remain poorly understood."

This situation is partly driven by the fact that information on the prevalence of biophobias in modern populations is scarce. To address this challenge, the researchers turned to another source of information—[internet searches](#).

"The internet has become a prime source of information for almost any

aspect of our daily lives, and it is plausible that people suffering from a form of biophobia may use the internet to assess their condition and identify ways to cope with it," argues lead author, Dr. Ricardo Correia, who is an Assistant Professor at the Biodiversity Unit of the University of Turku in Finland.

The authors assessed internet search interest for 25 different forms of biophobia, and for another set of 25 other phobias unrelated with nature as a comparison group. Indeed, the authors found that interest in biophobias is increasing worldwide for 17 of the 25 biophobias, albeit at a slower pace than what was observed for other specific phobias for which searches are also increasing.

Importantly, the number of biophobias with recorded search interest on a country level was positively associated with the number of venomous species in the country and the proportion of the country's population living in [urban areas](#), but negatively associated with the growth of urban population in the country.

"Our results suggest that a wider prevalence of various biophobias is found in countries that have large and long-established urban populations," says Dr. Correia.

"These results support earlier hypotheses suggesting a link between urban living and a disconnection with nature, driven by the extinction of natural experiences. This is ultimately reflected in fear and disgust towards other lifeforms. These reactions can negatively affect people's well-being, but also have consequences for how people perceive and support the preservation of nature in their surroundings."

The research article "The searchscape of fear: A global analysis of internet search trends for biophobias" was published in a special issue dedicated to the topic of Biophobias in *People and Nature*.

More information: Ricardo A. Correia et al, The searchscape of fear: A global analysis of internet search trends for biophobias, *People and Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10497](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10497)

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