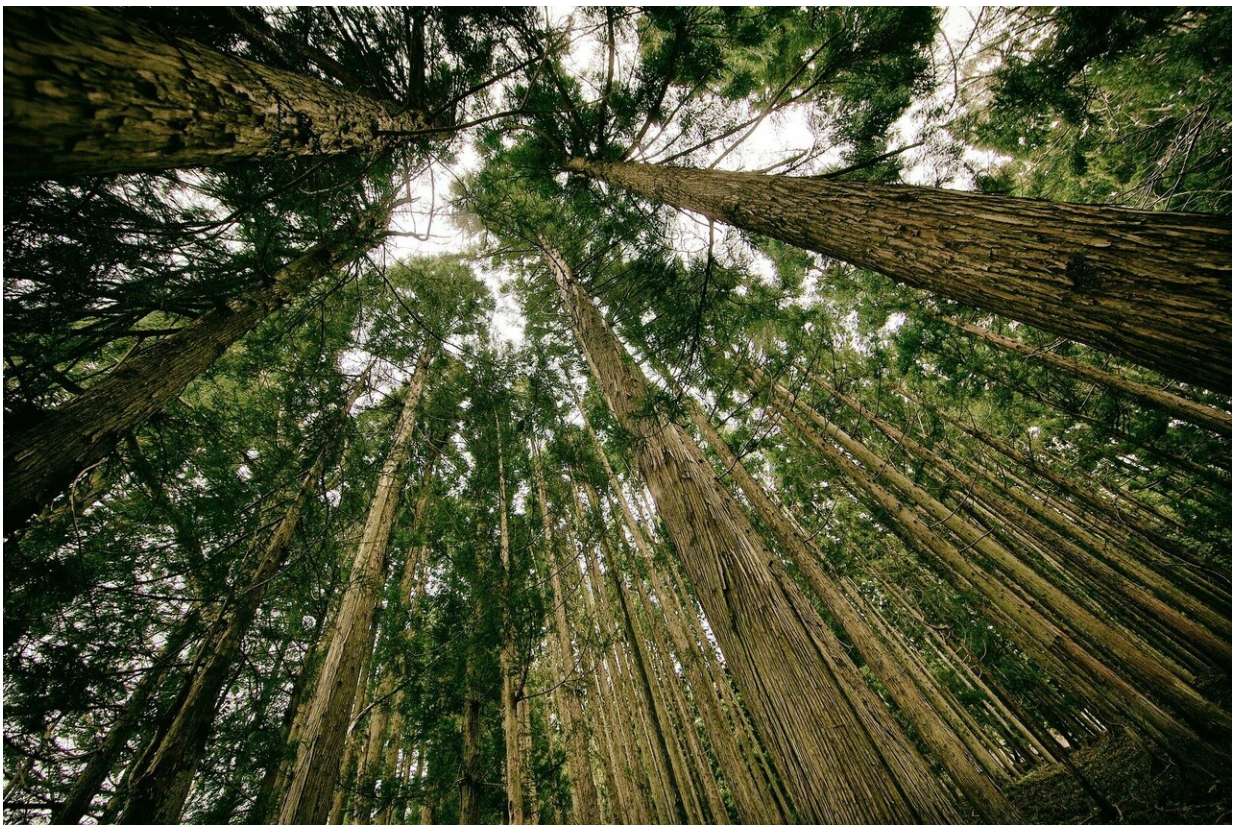


Could the good news story about the ecological crisis be the collective grief we are feeling?

November 21 2023, by Sarah Brown and Sonya L. Jakubec



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A summer of [wildfires across Canada](#) sat alongside news of [global deforestation](#), rapid [loss of Antarctic ice mass](#) and [Swiss glacial ice](#)

[depletion](#). Then, in mid-October, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service delisted 21 species from the Endangered Species Act [due to extinction](#).

The barrage of bad news stories about the growing ecological crisis may cause people to feel overwhelmed, grief-stricken, and at times, paralyzed in fear. It is understandable to seek relief from these feelings and look to good news to foster hope.

But what if the grief you are feeling is a good news story?

As university educators and researchers interested in [community health](#) and outdoor experiences, we fearlessly explore the wilderness of both ecological and human loss. Instead of burying dying, death, grief and mourning, we lean into grief—blurring the lines of human and ecological grief in our teaching and community development—as a pathway to collective resilience.

Ecological grief

The term [ecological grief](#) may conjure images of solitary grieving, as characterized by the individuated view of human experiences. Grief can, however, serve as a transformative process when it shifts the locus of anxiety from the individual to a collective sphere.

The third Tuesday in November marks [National Grief and Bereavement Day](#) in Canada. This is an opportunity to recognize that experiencing grief collectively and actively mourning as the outward expression of grief can mitigate the isolating aspects of loss.

Leaning into ecological grief through [collective mourning](#) can shift us back to awareness of our interconnectedness with each other and the planet; here we can find collective support and build collective

resilience.

In a society that is generally [grief averse](#), alongside health and psychological professions that emphasize the [individual over the collective](#), we need a unifying, relational, collective approach to our ecological grief. Compounding the issue is that much of the language we use reinforces the false separation of humans and nature or further fragments and compartmentalizes one part of the human experience from another.

Research has shown that across regional biodiversity loss, there are many everyday human experiences. Extending on this, [Nicole Redvers](#), director of Indigenous Planetary Health at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry at Western University, [suggests that patient and planetary health are ultimately inseparable](#), as are individual and collective experiences of ecological grief.

The very term ecological grief, although helpful in understanding and articulating this important experience, also arises from language that compartmentalizes ecological grief as a stand-alone experience, as though we humans are not part of our environments and wider ecologies. We are, after all, a part of nature not apart from it.

[University of Washington professor Jennifer Atkinson](#) reminds us that one of the risks of talking about ecological grief as a personal versus [social experience](#) is that we foster [disenfranchised grief](#), a loss that is personally experienced but cannot be publicly acknowledged or openly mourned.

[Social and health psychologist Weronika Kalwak](#) and [ecological emotions researcher Vanessa Weihgold](#) encourage us to [view ecological grief as a relational experience](#) stemming from environmental and [social factors](#) rather than arising solely from individual emotions of loss, fear,

guilt and shame. This shifts the psychology of ecological grief from the emphasis on individual resilience that dominates contemporary Western societies to a more relational and community approach.

Consider befriending grief the next time it visits you. Let it be a reminder that you are a part of this world.

Public mourning

[Our research](#) uncovered the way the [natural world](#), in its harshness and beauty, teaches us to grieve through personal and collective experiences of mourning. While grief may feel like an isolating experience, [public mourning of ecological losses](#) can bring us together in solidarity, [wild comfort](#) and [moral clarity](#) as an impetus for change.

Public mourning can also be a political act that signifies what matters. Let grief be a signal that valued life is being lost. Let it lead to collective and visible mourning, and to honoring these losses and remembering what we cherish and value.

Notice the many ways you may try to avoid this process, for example, by rushing to action. The grief you are feeling is part of a collective and connected experience, one that is commensurate with the [death endured within the Anthropocene](#). Mourning our losses together pushes us through numbness and anxiety toward the reality of the natural cycles of dying and death and those that humans have accelerated.

In these hard lessons, through the support of collective grieving, we can find the inspiration, resilience, and stamina needed to cope with ongoing losses and to make the changes needed. The good news is that [grief](#) changes us, and we must, indeed, make changes.

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