

UNDERSTANDING ECO PARALYSIS AND THE COMPASSION
OF COMMUNITY

by
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As the effects on the climate intensifies due to the ongoing climate crisis, the psychological toll it carries does as well. This thesis aims to explore that phenomenon and the vocabulary created within the academic world to describe it. The very rational emotional and cognitive toll that the climate crisis carries manifests into what academics have described as “eco anxiety”. The eco anxiety experienced watching environmental degradation can devolve deeper into “eco paralysis”. This paralysis burdens the individual with an emotional and mental overload that leaves them in a state of immobilized fear and inaction. This paper draws from scientific and psychological research, existential philosophy, indigenous knowledge, and personal experiences to better understand eco anxiety and eco paralysis along with how each phenomenon comes to fruition. The response to these emotions is also explored through a solution-driven lens. Specifically looking at the ways community and involvement with local environments can address the concerns of eco anxiety and avoid eco paralysis. I examine the benefits that involvement in community projects like urban farms and community gardens has not only on environmental health but also on building the emotional infrastructure needed to address real climate-related concerns. Looking to Eugene, Oregon as a case study as well as sharing a personal narrative of my experiences in the local farming community in Eugene, this paper argues that community involvement and engagement in nature is essential for fostering positive and rational worry for the environment of eco anxiety and avoiding the overwhelming fear that accompanies eco paralysis.

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Introduction:

Climate change and its rapidly escalating threats to humanity and the planet have not only caused widespread physical destruction but also taken a profound toll on the human psyche. Eco anxiety, as it has been commonly coined, refers to this phenomenon of chronic fear of the effects of climate change and global warming (Kuth and Pihkala, 2022). This anxiety is a reflection of the concerns individuals have for the environment itself along with their own physical wellbeing within their environment. Pathologizing this anxiety by diminishing it to a diagnosis might not be a correct acknowledgement considering the fear that is felt is an appropriate response to the very real threat that climate change imposes on the daily wellbeing and existence of individuals, families, and communities (Wray, 2022). From this anxiety blooms existentialism; existentialism often reveals paralysis as the consequence of freedom of choice, echoing existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that "man is condemned to be free," where the weight of responsibility leaves the individual suspended in dread (Sartre, 2007). The issue arises from this paralysis that the anxiety/existentialism creates. It is important to understand the anxieties' realistic roots within the impending threats of climate change and also the subsequent paralysis that hinders the adoption of actions to counter these threats (Innocenti, 2023). Getting involved within the environment that we fear is being taken away from us grounds the individual in the reality of the tangible. To be explored within this research is the potential solution of getting involved in green spaces, specifically community garden/ urban farm spaces. As Hartig (2009) states: "Observational studies commonly cite nature's cumulative stress-reducing or restorative effects as one plausible pathway by which residential green space might affect perceived health" (p.218) A green space is a natural area like a park, garden, or open field that provides a peaceful area for an individual to relax, play, or enjoy nature, often within cities (Taylor, 2017). Within

this umbrella of green space, community gardens/ urban farms can be included with their definitions being shared spaces in cities where people come together to grow fresh fruits, vegetables, and plants, often promoting local food, sustainability, and community. “Non-commercial type of urban agriculture includes urban community gardens, urban gardens for work training, education and kindergartens and urban gardens for recreational purposes.” (Gustavsen, 2022). Understanding the benefits of green spaces and outlining tangible actions through community garden involvement may be a solution to eco paralysis. What are these tangible actions and how can they be leveraged to alleviate this paralysis? Can the potential solution of the correlation between green spaces and the involvement in them be examined on a personal level in relation to eco anxiety and eco paralysis?

Motivations:

The motivation for this project came from both the drive to understand my own eco paralysis and the ways in which I see how my work in local farming has started to trickle in and change the ways that my eco paralysis affects me. Through my community work as a produce seller for an organic farm, I have been able to work in the community selling produce from the farm itself. This job not only allows me to spend most of my days outdoors but also see the community that this draws within the farmers market level and Eugene as a whole. Pursuing a degree in environmental science puts me at the front line of learning information on the health of the environment and the seriousness with which we take action to mitigate our negative impacts. Because of this, I am, at times, forced to absorb an onslaught of information that is disheartening. Falling into the feeling of impending doom is/was easy when staring at papers clearly outlining the problem with no clear path to action for a solution. Pulling myself out of these feelings was possible through my job outside of my courses. Through pursuing my degree in the environmental science field, I can also engage in the academic approach to better understand these issues. This job has had a positive impact on the existentialism that has come along with the increasingly stronger effects of climate change that I have personally observed and experienced, and I have been exposed to academic research explaining why that is. The passion that drove me to study this field is the same feeling that pushed me to want to share my experience and create a comprehensive academic work that verbalizes my experience, supports my feelings through others research, and offer a body of work that provides a pathway towards alleviating the eco paralysis of others looking to get involved in these efforts.

The progression of this thesis was one that I did not expect. In my early years of college, I, of course, romanticized the ways in which I would make the most out of my college career. As

the years went by, the break ups and tears and failures hitting me harder than I expected, I learned that I might not be able to create a project that I would be wholeheartedly proud of. Originally, I reached out to professors within the Sustainable Design school within UO. I wanted to look at the ways that nature and architecture interacted, the ways nature may aid or destroy a structure, and the ways a structure may do the same. As the project began to seem like more of a concept and less of a real body of work that I would be able to stamp my name on, I looked for more ways that I could create a project that reflected my morals as well as the knowledge that I had gathered through school. I was lucky enough to have advisors and professors on my side that saw what I needed to accomplish my degree and help me fulfill that. Writing this paper, I found myself questioning if this was a project I even cared about, or if it was meaningful. While I had grand ideas for projects that were not even remotely related to the work that I have created, now I realize that there was one major theme that connected my work, myself, and nature to everything that I have created. The connections, relationships, interactions, affects, and bonds that we have to nature and the community surrounding it backed all of my ideas and the final project that I have created. Focusing on that, the importance of it, and the ways in which it has changed and shaped my emotional and mental perspectives, is the meaning that I find in all of my project ideas and the final result that I have created now.

Something that I wanted to include within this project that exceeded the scope and time that I have given myself was creating my own garden space. This would be a physical way to understand the ways in which nature has shaped me and my views and the ways it has shaped my relationships and communities. While exploring ideas for my thesis, I found myself talking to people in my community outside of my academic circles. One of those circles included the people that I have met through my time working at Groundwork Organics, a local farm in

Eugene. This job gave me the opportunity to be a part of the local farming and food scene over the past several years. I was able to meet the people that were supplying local fruits and vegetables to the community, something that I know to be one of the easiest ways to make ecologically conscious choices as an individual. It was fulfilling to be on the giving end of this cycle and I learned a lot, about the ways in which it helped the community of Eugene, how so many people were not aware of the programs created to encourage local farming engagement, and how being a part of this community changed my own eco anxieties. When looking back at my experiences through the years working in the Eugene local food web for this project, I was confronted with the immense amount of paralysis I had been experiencing. Working through a degree that gave me access to information on the climate crisis left me feeling very aware of my surroundings. Being an individual that suffers from anxiety on a regular basis, I found my eco anxiety compounded with my generalized one, and I looked to the negatives of the information I was learning rather than the positives. As a result, my eco anxieties turned into eco paralysis. At the time I didn't have the vocabulary to describe this, but as I worked through college and this thesis, I was able to understand my emotions more. Reflecting on my own emotional journey, I found the connections to the farm community and how it directly is responsible for the ease of overwhelming doom my eco paralysis deluded me to feel. I found it important for myself to better understand these feelings and investigate the research that explored this relationship. To explore this and expand on the knowledge I found is the motivation I found to create my own research.

Why do we need a definition of eco anxiety?:

Is there one definition of eco anxiety in academic literature? How has eco anxiety evolved both as a word and concept? Eco anxiety as a term is relatively new, however, it has been adopted to define the feelings of anxiety that are a direct response to the declining health and wellbeing of the environment caused by human induced climate change. While scholars have widely accepted this term, the complexity of this emotion cannot be simply described as anxiety, its definitions include feelings of dread, helplessness, moral concern, and existential fear, often manifesting in forms as diverse as “practical,” “social,” or “existential” anxiety (Kurth and Pihkala, 2022). While anxiety as an emotional phenomenon is a well-studied clearly defined experience, scholars are attempting to describe and study this newly emerging experience of anxiety directly linked to climate change and environmental degradation. The interdisciplinary need for the refinement of this feeling has been a recent endeavor, but more research is emerging to define, categorize, and measure it (Coffey et al., 2021). Scholars that are attempting to narrow the understanding of this event have agreed to its direct entanglement with the environment that acts not only as a burden but an appropriate response to real and impending danger (Kurth and Pihkala, 2022). This force is both one that can create a sense of dread that hinders action but can also motivate individuals to action. The goals of this thesis are to better understand the current state of eco anxiety’s definition, the consequential action and inaction, and the appeasement of these emotions.

While eco anxiety is being more commonly accepted into the academic vernacular and common conversation, the concept is still needing considerable refinement. The emotions associated with this specific form of anxiety are a compounded one, untangling the web of reactions, sensations, and sentiments is not an easy one, especially considering this feeling is in

response to the problems of climate change itself. Researchers, such as Kurth and Pihkala, emphasize the importance of nailing down a clearly defined understanding of eco anxiety, without one, they worry that ambiguity of the term can exile it to simplicity that does not fully encompass the importance and commonality of this experience. Clearly defining it could serve to not only better understand eco anxiety itself but advance clinical trials and research to investigate the effects and potential benefits. Treatments of anxiety are specialized and narrowed down to fit the needs of an individual when one finds the right resources. Finding and creating the right resources for eco anxiety specifically is complex but important. They state that it is currently conflated with a plethora of negative emotions such as grief, sadness, anger, and guilt. Instead of fighting this conflation they proposed to accept this into the definition itself, separating eco anxiety into a group that divides eco anxiety into its multiple forms “...the label ‘eco-anxiety’ may be best understood as referring to a family of distinct, but related, ecological emotions” (Kurth and Pihkala, 2022). Within this group, these researchers put a particular importance and emphasis on what they coin “practical eco anxiety”. This form arises from uncertainty about how to act in the face of environmental threats. Through their research they dove into the struggles of eco anxiety leading to paralysis that hinders individuals towards action; however, they also discovered that “practical anxiety” often triggers proactive engagement and reflection on appropriate problem-solving. This forward-thinking emotional state is one that they aim to highlight as it can be a form of empowerment in the ecological crisis that we face that can enact real action towards a better future and relationship with the environment.

Coffey et al. (2021) performed a literature review on research that aimed to define the term eco anxiety and highlight the ways in which there is not a unanimous understanding of this term or feeling. By spotlighting the range of definitions, we can better understand the bounds of

what eco anxiety encompasses. The abundance reflects the diversity of emotions that the term eco anxiety umbrellas and pushes the narrative that eco anxiety is more than a definable emotion but a complex concept. The definitions that Coffey found can be observed to understand the ways in which academics agree and the unique takes that can add important context. Clayton (2020) defines it as “anxiety associated with perceptions about climate change, even among people who have not personally experienced any direct impacts” which features an important topic of directly and indirectly experiencing climate change. Due to the interconnected nature of the world through the internet, individuals who have not been directly affected by climate change still understand the impending nature of it and know that its effects can touch anyone. However, including the unaffected within the definition also incorporates the anxiety associated with empathy and the moral obligation of caring for others that are affected by the real and dangerous (even deadly) effects of climate change (Clayton, 2020). Clayton and Karazsia (2020) describe it more broadly as “a form of negative emotional response to climate change”. While simple, it may aid in introducing the term more commonly in an easily digestible and repeatable definition. Doherty and Clayton (2011) emphasize both indirect exposure and the scale of the feeling through their definition that feelings associated with eco anxiety are “intense emotions associated with observation of climate change effects worldwide and anxiety and uncertainty about the unprecedented scale of current and future risks to humans and other species”. This too touches on the sentiments that Clayton (2020) wanted to define, of understanding and having feelings associated with climate change regardless of impacts but creates a definition that zooms out to a global scale rather than focusing on the individual. Both perspectives are important and fall under eco anxiety’s impact. Gifford and Gifford (2016) focus on the psychological burden, characterizing it as “severe and debilitating worry about risks that may be insignificant”. While

the true length, impact, and severity of climate change is one that is still being studied and adapted, and the impacts and responses to climate change are evolving, this definition sheds light on the anticipatory feeling of eco anxiety. While some may never feel the impacts of climate change, the anticipation that anyone can be affected can be a catalyst to the eco anxiety itself. Helm et al. (2018) describe eco-anxiety as “a severe and debilitating worry related to a changing and uncertain natural environment.” This similar anticipatory feeling of anxiety is reflected, while slightly differently, in this definition as well. Pihkala (2018, 2020) adds nuance by defining it as coming from “various difficult emotions and mental states... most often an indirect impact...deep existential anxieties... a chronic fear of environmental doom... (and) a generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse.” This definition too brings into the conversation the importance that the feeling can arise from direct or indirect impacts but adds to it by saying that most who experience eco anxiety aren't actually being directly impacted. While interesting, it causes intrigue to explore this phenomenon more which is not within the scope of this thesis. Searle and Gow (2010) outline it as “excessive worry and anxiety about climate change,” while Stanley et al. (2021) condensed the definition to simply the “anxiety experienced in response to the ecological crisis.” The nuance garnered from exploring and looking into all of these definitions offers an important point: eco anxiety is a multi angled sensation, the spectrum to which this feeling can be experienced also plays a pivotal role, and the real physical effects of climate change cannot be minimized when defining as well.

The ambiguity of this definition has effects on the scholarly understanding of the term but also creates rifts within both the clinical and personal realms. Without a unified framework or solidified definition, it becomes difficult to design reliable clinical trials, compare findings across studies, or develop targeted therapeutic approaches. As highlighted above by the 9 distinct

definitions over a range of papers even by the same author, definitions can span from general anxiety to paralytic dread (Coffey et al. 2021). Having explored this, creating a definition that incorporates this spectrum may be important. The risk of pathologizing the emotion also lays into question without clearly defined boundaries to the word and could create consequences of mis treating and disregarding real practical emotions and emotional responses. For persons in the clinical field, not having a solid understanding of eco anxiety can lead them to misdiagnose, underestimate the severity of, and ignore the emotion and phenomenon of eco anxiety. This can act as a motivator for researchers to nail down the term eco anxiety, to supply a tool and definition for clinical personnel to use for the diagnoses and treatment of people that are experiencing the effects of eco anxiety. By giving a clear definition while also acknowledging the differing forms it can pave way to fully understanding the psychological, social, and political implications that eco anxiety has. Crafting clinical and social responses that recognize eco-anxiety not merely as a symptom, but also as a meaningful response to global ecological decline can also be achieved through a clearer definition.

Eco anxiety versus eco paralysis:

Looking into the specific type of anxiety that eco anxiety creates, it also uncovers the consequent paralysis that can follow. Recent research highlights the importance of emotional nuance in determining whether this anxiety results in action or inaction. Innocenti et al. (2023) investigate this crossroads and studies what they define eco anxiety as “the excessive and pervasive fear about the consequences of (climate change)” (p. 1). This specific definition that they outline in the paper is one that is short, similar to other researchers' findings. However, the most interesting aspect of this paper is their distinction and exploration of eco paralysis and its differences to eco anxiety. This paper creates an interesting differentiation and distinction between eco anxiety and eco paralysis which is not only important but crucial to explore. Eco paralysis brings to the table a new definition that magnifies the possible result that anxiety can lead to such an intense feeling of worry, dread, and hopelessness that it inhibits an individual from behavioral and action-based change in the face of environmental collapse. While this research divulges these two definitions, it shows evidence that the entanglement of eco anxiety and eco paralysis may be an important one. Creating an appropriate sense of worry for the environment can actually help combat falling victim to eco paralysis. The core findings of the paper are that while eco-anxiety can lead to eco-paralysis, worry can disrupt this pathway and enable more action-based outcomes. This finding aligns with earlier psychological literature suggesting that “(worry) is positively associated with an adaptive form of problem-solving and searching for... coping strategies” (p. 3). To appropriately enact this sense of worry, there is a need for proper and accurate education. Reframing anxiety into action is one that can be achieved, but it comes along with comprehensive environmental literature and the encouragement of critical thinking. This research dissects eco anxiety into separate categories,

similar to Kurth and Pihkala. However, it puts emphasis on the importance of understanding the difference between fear based versus worry based anxiety. While the two are intertwined, this may help understand that eco anxiety is an emotion that can be a manageable worry or a paralytic fear that metamorphizes into the form of eco paralysis.

There is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding eco anxiety and more specifically whether it can lead to eco paralysis that requires a look into the emotional and cognitive responses of an individual. Innocenti et al. (2023) research laid out the clear path that eco anxiety can result in eco paralysis. They also found that “participants with higher levels of worry did not show a correlation between Climate Change Anxiety and Eco-Paralysis” (p. 12). Distinguishing and understanding the difference between anxiety and worry can be important to stop the process of eco anxiety devolving to eco paralysis and pivot even to an instigator for change. Looking into the effects that emotional responses can have on executive function can be seen through the research of Ferreira and Monteiro’s (2018) study, which found that individuals with anxiety disorders exhibited significant impairments in executive functioning, particularly in tasks involving planning, inhibition control, and cognitive flexibility. “Individuals with anxiety disorders have a significant impairment in their executive functioning in general, which is reflected in activities of daily living” (p. 22). They found that anxiety can have a significant effect on the ability to take action which can be directly linked to the correlation between academic definition of eco anxiety and the subsequent eco paralysis that may follow. Looking at Innocenti et al. and Ferreira and Monteiro’s work together, these findings underline that eco paralysis is not solely emotional but also cognitive: it arises when the weight of eco anxiety overwhelms the executive systems needed to function and manage it. Encouraging the support of

a worry for the environment may be key in suppressing the growth of eco anxiety into a debilitating sense of eco paralysis.

Looking deeper into scientific research papers, Kricorian et al. (2022) lays out a comprehensive understanding of eco anxiety, its predictors, correlators, and potential solutions. This study conducted a nationwide survey of the United States that gathered 2,000 participants. Through this participation they were able to conduct a study that honors the complexity of eco anxiety as an emotion while also looking at it as a double-edged sword that is eco anxiety. It can be an emotion that is a psychological burden or an emotion that motivates change and encourages ecologically conscious action. The study found that 26% of respondents reported experiencing eco-anxiety, and that this emotional state was significantly associated with younger age, female gender, frequent media exposure to climate change information, and regular discussions about the issue with family and friends. This study found that the participants that reported experiencing eco anxiety were also correlated with a desire to engage in pro environmental behavior such as recycling, using public transportation, reducing energy usage, and donating to climate causes. This study also investigated the psychological toll that eco anxiety had and found that respondents with eco anxiety had significantly higher levels of sadness, depression, and cognitive interference, including difficulty concentrating and diminished enjoyment of daily life. This data gives empirical data on the divide that eco anxiety brings both productivity and paralysis. It also brings to attention the paradox of feeling a rising moral responsibility to take action for the planet while also not being able to handle the emotional burden of a worsening environment.

“Because eco-anxiety is so complex, with both positive and negative aspects, it is important to develop and identify solution strategies that will exert the greatest impact on bettering mental health while fighting apathy and retaining engagement in the climate cause” (p. 20).

Defining eco paralysis:

Like eco anxiety, there is not a clear consensus on the definition of eco paralysis, but it can be defined as a state of inaction and inhibition as a response to the intense emotion and cognitive effects of eco anxiety. While eco anxiety can enact a sense of worry that pushes an individual to take steps towards environmentally friendly behavior and actions, eco anxiety can also lead to a sense of fear. Fear can lead to paralysis, which would have the undesired effect of leading an individual to feel paralyzed, freezing them in a state of unrest and inaction. Through this general understanding eco anxiety represents a broad term to encompass the distress that the perception and effects of climate change can have, while eco paralysis represents a deeper psychological block. This block teeters on the line of a sense of obligation to better the environment one is actively watching deteriorate, while simultaneously feeling powerless to the same destruction they experience. While eco anxiety is an understudied and newly developing term, eco paralysis has even less research into its defining features. However, Innocenti et al. (2023) is amongst some of the researchers putting in work to better understand eco paralysis as a whole, its causes, and its overall effects. Their work outlines a clear correlation between eco anxiety and eco paralysis while also backing the ways constructive worry can combat the inefficiencies of eco paralysis. This research dives into the distinction between the paralyzing fear of eco anxiety and the motivation that can be derived from worry. By creating the distinctionary divide this suggests that paralytic fear is not an inevitable feeling, but rather a phenomenon that needs to be understood, a processing of fear that can either be entirely avoided or approached with comprehensive solutions. When eco-anxiety manifests as disorganized dread or emotional overload without channels for action, it becomes paralyzing. When paired with

focused concern and cognitive support, however, it can transform into motivation (Innocenti et al., 2023).

While the proceeding sense of paralysis can be adopted through a slow process, others may find themselves trapped within it rather quickly. The tools that some are equipped with to transform their worries into action cannot always be found in others. The cognitive capacity from one individual to the next is subjective and ever changing and determines the extent to which anxiety affects a person. Research into understanding the psychological reasons of these were carried out by neuropsychologists Ferreira and Monteiro (2018). Their research focused on individuals with anxiety disorders with a specific lens of executive dysfunction being highly common in these individuals and causing great impairment to the ability to act. Executive dysfunction is characterized by impaired planning, decision-making, and cognitive flexibility. They write, “Individuals with anxiety disorders have a significant impairment in their executive functioning in general, which is reflected in activities of daily living” (p. 22). When applying this understanding of the effects of anxiety on the ability to act on eco anxiety and eco paralysis, there is a clear cognitive explanation as to why some find worry to be motivating while others experience it to be debilitating. While their deep concern shows a clear compassion for the issue at hand, it hinders them from being able to take real action. In these cases, paralysis is not a failure of empathy, but the result of internal psychological and neurological overload. The mental strength required to navigate climate realities and the skills to sort facts, manage emotions, and choose how to act is simply too demanding for some, especially when unsupported. This sheds light on the importance of creating a clear infrastructure and plans not only to communicate the concern needs to be held for the environment, but subsequent action plans to support those that need help strengthening their mental and emotional states.

Looking at eco paralysis through a philosophical lens there is a clear parallel that can be drawn between it and the rhetoric of existentialist writers. The existential dilemma is articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre by stating that “man condemned to be free... he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre, 1946). This communicates the paradoxical freedom that individuals have full control over their lives while also being burdened by the immense power of choice and being held to the actions that they make. When putting this into the framework of understanding and taking action within the climate crisis, this responsibility can be crushing. With conflicting communication of values and external influences guiding them, individuals must choose how to respond to ecological collapse, knowing that their actions (or inactions) help shape the world. What Sartre describes in his work as anguish we can also compare to the developing definition of eco paralysis. There is an emotional weight of realizing that every personal choice also creates a vision of one's own moral compass and impact on the world. Eco conscious actions go beyond a simple choice that can be made but rather become an unbearable decision when the need to make moral impactful choices exceeds the emotional capacity of the individual.

Reframing eco anxiety and eco paralysis:

An important step to understanding eco paralysis is to look at it as a very rational response to a very real imminent threat, rather than a disorder that needs to be pathologized. Coffey et al. (2021) touches on the importance of understanding the rationality of eco anxiety and eco paralysis. There is a lack of conceptual clarity and a general confusion that often compares to a wide range of emotions. While these two responses fall victim to a pathologizing understanding, they are rooted in reality. Other research done by Kurth and Pihkala (2022) go even further into the reality based eco responses by categorizing a specific type of eco anxiety as “practical eco anxiety”. Eco anxiety should be seen as a beacon signaling that an individual cares about the environment. Reframing it as such could in turn motivate the individual and even cause them to feel like their distress has meaning. Mental health resources must shift from a need to get rid of eco anxiety to solutions that validates fear and grief while offering pathways for channeling them into constructive behavior. With this reframing, eco-anxiety can become a call to action rather than a cause of paralysis.

While reframing eco anxiety on an emotional level is important, it is equally essential to offer mental empowerment. Research into the ways in which anxiety impairs executive dysfunction as observed by Ferreira and Monteiro (2018) highlights why this is. This impairment that is experienced with generalized anxiety can be used to help explain the pathway to and between eco anxiety and eco paralysis. The anxiety that is stemmed from the care for the environment can lead to an individual feeling stuck due to the inability to translate concern to a coherent plan of action or steps. Strengthening executive skills could counter this dilemma and could be done through therapeutic and educational responses. Programs that teach goal setting, task management, and decision making under uncertainty can help build the cognitive

infrastructure needed for effective engagement in the climate crisis. For example, action oriented climate education that emphasizes solution based plans and personal agency can reduce overwhelm while enhancing mental empowerment. Kricorian et al. (2022) supports these ideas through their research, finding that higher levels of education are associated with lower levels of eco paralysis. By offering knowledge it can help an individual feel empowered, which can enhance their capacity to absorb information about the climate crisis and act accordingly. Empowering individuals emotionally and cognitively could be real solutions to understanding and approaching eco anxiety and eco paralysis.

Understanding the full dimensions of the existential feelings that eco paralysis brings on is important. While climate change showcases the ways in which it can bring on physical destruction, observers are faced with the survival of not only their surroundings but themselves as well. Facing the fragility of life can enact immense grief that can feel insurmountable. Responding to the climate crisis through policy and data collection can feel like a cold response to the immense emotions that arise. Finding ways to respond to these emotions through meaning making activities is important. Practices that build community such as storytelling, ritual, nature connection, philosophical reflection, and even spiritual engagement can provide an outlet for working through this despair (Kimmerer, 2013).

Among the most important solutions to eco paralysis is understanding that climate anxiety is a shared experience, cultivating a community on this shared experience can promote a sense of community that makes individuals feel less isolated and supported to handle the imminent dangers of climate change. Eco paralysis can make one reflect on the isolation that climate change brings, making people feel that their singular efforts cannot make a significant difference and ultimately that they are too small to matter. Eco paralysis can box one into the

mentality that real change is only possible through a systematic change that they do not have the power to enact. However, when individuals congregate together, this collective solidarity can give way to programs and efforts such as community gardens, climate strikes, mutual aid, or local governance that can and do make significant change. Kricorian et al. (2022) found that people who regularly talk about climate change with friends and family are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors. Having these conversations can boost individual agency and capacity through a shared understanding that eco anxiety is a shared experience that needs to be combatted through shared action. Group activities not only encourage action but can help combat the isolating feelings that eco paralysis instigates, individuals can see themselves not as isolated people in a deteriorating world, but as part of a collective striving toward environmental betterment.

The importance of community in combatting eco anxiety and eco paralysis:

While eco paralysis can strong arm individuals into an isolating experience, a lack of community supporting mentalities and programs also deepen this sense of isolation. Fielding (2022) is among some of the researchers critiquing the ways in which we educate and support through organizations. He argues that the focus has steered away from supporting values of community and now looks to prioritizing a view of yourself as a supporter of the economic world. Abandoning these community values leaves individuals feeling equally physically and emotionally fragmented. Eco paralysis when fully indulged can leave an individual fragmented in the same way, making them feel alone, insufficient, and powerless to the problems at hand. However, community involvement and engagement provide the framework of a shared burden to make the feelings more manageable. Additionally, when the efforts of caring for the planet are carried out by a group and community, those actions can feel much more meaningful. Communities, as Fielding (2022) highlights in their work, are not just a place for individuals to collectively collaborate; they are spaces of value that create meaning, encourage belonging, and cultivate a sense of hope.

While community cultivation is important for mental health support, researchers like Syme and Ritterman (2009) argue that community is a pillar of public health and a determinant of wellbeing. Their research outlines the importance of social integration and communal engagement when it comes to overall health outcomes, “for maximum benefit, physical improvements must be accompanied by improvements in the social fabric of the community” (p. 1). Eco paralysis thrives when individuals are isolated, similar to general anxiety and mental illness. To combat this, focusing on the support of the community and general engagement with others can prove to be a powerful solution. Relying on individual resilience to fight against eco

paralysis will in turn prove to be futile, if not impossible. To take steps to enact real change and foster behaviors that make motivation and decision making an easier to process, it is crucial to escape the grasp of eco paralysis. Turning to communities to create an environment that fosters repair of the individual and the environment together as one will disperse the burdens felt from eco paralysis. The research carried out by Syme and Ritterman (2009) highlights the importance of responding to eco anxiety and eco paralysis through a community based effort. Implementing this framework will support sustained and effective efforts towards leveraging eco anxiety for action and mitigating the inaction of eco paralysis.

Community offers not only emotional sustenance but also a structural remedy to the burdens of eco anxiety and eco paralysis. In Robin Wall Kimmerer's work, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she magnifies the true roots of ecological engagement as not being based on a sense of urgency but a collaboration of cooperation, gratitude, and kinship. The loop of powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt that eco anxiety and eco paralysis trap individuals in can be escaped through the lens of Indigenous knowledge. Thinking that the Earth demands our shame is a rhetoric pushed by our anxiety, rather the world is simply asking for our participation, as Wall Kimmerer writes. Her sentiment that "all flourishing is mutual" bolsters this ideology. Rather than looking at progression and growth on an individual severed experience, it is a communal process not only between humans but nature as well. Kimmerer's writings offer a solution to the paralysis that one may experience. While difficult, it is important to approach the problems of climate change with attentiveness through a slow grounded approach. The importance of her writing is the reminder that the scale of one's actions does not measure the importance of their work. Any efforts should be celebrated whether it be tending a garden or instigating legislative

change. Rather than viewing actions as a way to escape anxiety, it is an effort to connect with nature and each other.

Belonging to the nature that you care for is the core sentiments of Kimmerer's teachings. Braiding Sweetgrass looks at eco anxiety not as a mental illness that needs to be managed, but rather, an alliance between self and the natural world. Emotions that stem from eco anxiety like grief but also care are not a weakness but a sign of a deep relationship to the Earth. Community being essential to resilience is also reflected through the psychological research carried out by Kricorian et al. (2022) and Syme and Ritterman (2009). Kimmerer reminds us that the ideas of community do not stop at the human level but extend to plants, animals, and all natural systems. With her work she also encourages readers to understand the importance of offering yourself to the Earth not as a sacrifice but one of alliance: "What else can you offer the Earth than something of yourself?" (p. 38). To approach the paralysis that one feels from the climate crisis with a goal of slow and manageable approaches can combat the despair felt when thinking the only solution stems from grand gestures. Care and time offers an outlet of resistance from the despair that eco paralysis can delude the individual with.

Community building and community reliance is the ultimate response to eco anxiety. While the anxieties induced by the climate crisis can make individuals feel isolated to the point where their emotional burdens feel like one that will only be able to be dealt with on their own. In reality, this commonly experienced phenomenon can be sequestered simply by understanding that this is a shared experience. Understanding that not only has a common emotion, but a community of people with shared fears and values can play a huge role in diffusing this psychological burden. The community's asset not only being a place to feel less alone but also a way to contain the fear. The structure of community can also be utilized to distribute these large

emotions across the network of relationships formed within them. Rather than feelings remaining a solitary burden to confront, a person can neglect the internalization of emotions by turning outwards to others with shared experiences. With this support system, emotions can then be more manageable and less likely to spiral into paralysis. As Syme and Ritterman (2009) emphasize, wellbeing is intricately tied to social connections. Isolation undermines health and action.

Communities are an emotional infrastructure to support the individual when their emotional and mental capacities are overwhelmed with the emotions the climate crisis can instigate.

Communities are the infrastructure to combat eco paralysis and leverage eco anxiety.

Eugene's community building:

While not perfect, Eugene, Oregon serves as a case that has government and social programs that aim to build up and support the building of community between people and the nature that we live within. Looking at smaller scale antidotes to the world scale problem that is the climate crisis and eco anxiety is also important as community, reciprocity, and agency most often find their roots there. There are Eugene city programs that offer ways for people to transform their eco anxiety into community resilience. These programs make way for meaning by making an emotional support system through the education, involvement, and betterment of the ecosystem. These programs reflect many of the values that this paper explores, most notably relational accountability, empowerment, and the empowering nature of shared morals. Looking at these can serve as a conversation to how other communities might also offer outlets for escaping eco paralysis and answer the cries of eco anxiety.

The Climate Action Plan 2.0 (<https://engage.eugene-or.gov/sustainability>) that Eugene has in place is a governmentally suggested plan that aims to enact a policy document that supports community rooted solutions to the climate crisis. Acknowledging the importance of community created a foundation for this policy that distributed responsibility and built agency within the city. Inviting residents, businesses, and institutions of Eugene to participate in the process of pivoting Eugene's impact and behaviors towards the environment, the plan aims to avoid the isolating burden of individuals acting in the climate crisis. The creation of this plan not only stemmed from early versions that wanted to address the concerns of climate change; it also was developed through extensive community engagement ensuring that the plan reflected the concerns of Eugene's population. Being an environmentally conscious and socially cohesive plan is the central goal of this plan and was achieved through an equity panel and extensive

community outreach (KCBY, 2020). The panel and outreach efforts acted as a way for marginalized and impacted groups of the community to be able to have their voices heard. This plan combatted the sense of overwhelming doom that an individual can face through an inclusion into plan and action building through the support of the community and the city alike.

Beyond Toxics (<https://www.beyondtoxics.org/>), a nonprofit working in Eugene, wants to foster and support communities through environmental justice. The onslaught of traumas that marginalized communities face is compounded by the disruptions of the climate crisis, dealing with environmental harm, economic imbalances, and systematic neglect all at once. Within these communities and these experiences, isolation and shouldering the burdens of eco anxiety can lead to overload and eco paralysis. The social and relational crisis that follows the climate crisis is a key issue that is addressed by Beyond Toxics. Their goal to maintain and support the communities already in place in Eugene is an admirable focus that is central to the sentiments of this paper. They also echo the concepts shared in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Kimmerer, fostering mutual growth and reciprocity and moving away from the ideology that environmental activism is a solo mission but rather a shared collaboration of ideas and relationships to yourself, your community, and the Earth. Beyond Toxics creates a space for inclusion and empowerment through their politically and emotionally motivated climate justice, surrounded by the focus of supporting community efforts, especially communities who have been previously ignored (Beyond Toxics, 2024).

Within the local food network, Eugene's farmers market and local farm programs showcase a system that can combat eco paralysis as well. Supporting local farms and encouraging residents to eat locally, the Lane County Farmers Market also offers another unique opportunity for community building. Artists and food trucks are also encouraged, creating a

sense of a flourishing community that, through consistent attendance, can build relationships that would not have been created otherwise. Bringing together the diverse population of Eugene through these markets shuns a city fueled by isolation. While some may view farmers' markets as economically unattainable, Eugene confronted this issue by offering a multitude of financial support programs within the market. One of the most notable being the acceptance of SNAP/ EBT for the payment of produce at the market. Double-up food bucks, as well ties support to the state level and is the result of activism that started at the local level (Keeler, 2025). There are also additional programs that offer free financial assistance simply by showing up and recording your attendance at the farmers market through “Bucka Bucka Bucks” which gives a free \$5 to eggs or protein each market, as well as “Little Lettuce” tokens that are given to children to use on anything of their choosing each time they visit (Lane County Farmers Market). This community engaging environment fueled by local foods and arts creates a space to learn and support sustainable practices. Involvement in the market itself is encouraged by the city through their Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP). It can seem daunting and even financially unattainable to be a part of a city run market, but FMPP offers mentorships and helps reduce those market barriers for local farmers and artisans. The support of local communities, specifically built off the basis of supporting local farms and encouraging sustainable choices, reinforces the sentiments that responsibility and connection to the land are vital to combatting eco paralysis and addressing the concerns of eco anxiety.

While beyond the scope of this paper to compile the programs and communities that Eugene has in place, a compiled list of website links of some of those resources is provided below. This offers a resource list that can act as a guide for readers to begin their own journey to getting informed on the ways they can get involved ecologically on the Eugene scale.

Online Resources:

- <https://www.beyondtoxics.org/resources/>
- <https://www.lanecountyfarmersmarket.org/>
- <https://www.eugene-or.gov/496/Community-Gardens>
- <https://www.cascwild.org/about-us/volunteer-opportunities/>
- <https://friendsoftrees.org/eugene/>
- <https://www.eugene-or.gov/1128/Neighborhood-Involvement>
- <https://www.eugenetoolboxproject.org/>

Conclusion

Understanding eco anxiety and the eco paralysis that can follow on a deeper level is crucial to looking at it as a rational response to enacting a communal fight against the climate crisis. The empathy felt for the environment through eco anxiety pushes individuals toward the wanting of ethical engagement in nature, communal repair of the planet, and collective meaning. Eco paralysis emerges when emotional burden, cognitive capacity, and grief for the environment overwhelm the individual. Looking to that paralysis as simply a negative will only result in more roadblocks to action or change, instead viewing it as a signal that we are entangled with the emanant reality of the world in distress. Whether viewed through the existential demand of Sartre's freedom and responsibility, the psychological insight of worry as a buffer against immobilization, or the relational wisdom of Robin Wall Kimmerer's reciprocity ethic, one thing is clear: healing from eco paralysis requires turning toward, not away from, the world and from each other. Building an infrastructure of community with the people and nature around us, ensuring the possibility of a more prosperous future. While we can look at the world around us as one in collapse, we can also choose to commit ourselves to our morals. Knowing that our anxiety stems from our care for the planet, we can see that the work is not to escape our eco anxiety but to leverage it into solidarity and action.

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