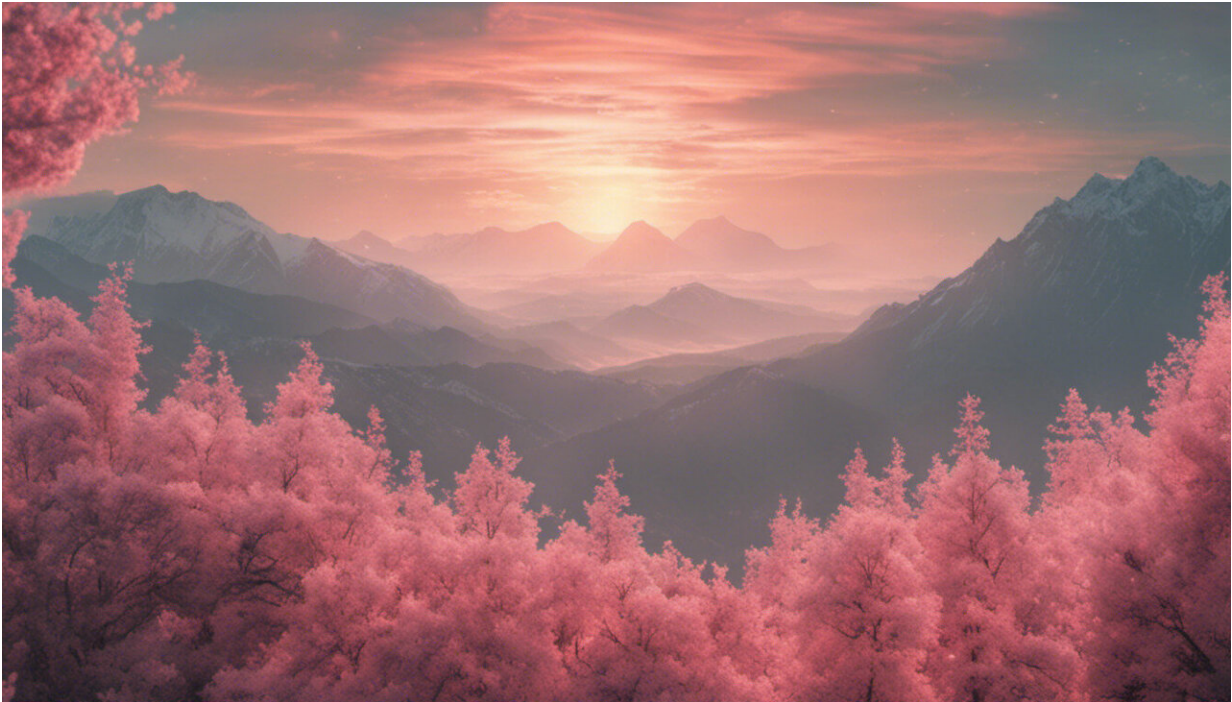


Rising eco-anxiety means we should address mental health alongside food security

January 10 2020, by Laxmi Prasad Pant



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For over a quarter of a century, United Nations climate negotiations have failed to reach a legally binding treaty. For instance, the failed 1997 [Kyoto Protocol](#) was modeled after the success of the [1987 Montreal Protocol](#), which legally required all nations to phase out chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), a chemical used in refrigerators and air

conditioners.

Eco-anxiety—the difficult emotions caused by [environmental conditions](#) and knowledge—[is on the rise](#). [Global mean temperatures are rising, as are sea levels](#). Eco-anxiety will further rise if non-binding agreements, such as the [2015 Paris Agreement](#), don't succeed.

An Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the impacts of global warming predicts that if the current trend of global warming continues there will be [a major climate catastrophe within our lifetime](#). More than 11,000 scientists from 153 countries warn that [climate change is threatening ecosystems and humanity](#). Biologists fear the [sixth mass extinction of species](#). According to the [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#), currently, one million species are at risk of extinction.

Our [food systems](#) have become vulnerable due to [the loss of biological diversity of plant and animal species](#): we are anxious about hunger and [food security](#), safety and fraud. As a researcher who examines just and sustainable transitions in [food](#) systems, I clearly see that climate change puts additional pressure on already vulnerable food systems and populations.

There is no shortage of commitments and declarations. Governments at different levels across the world have been declaring a climate emergency—[over 1,000 jurisdictions and counting](#). On June 17, 2019, the Canadian House of Commons [passed a motion to declare a national climate emergency](#).

Escalating fear and anxiety

The declarations of climate emergency might help to increase the mobilization of financial and human resources for climate actions.

Additionally, the use of wartime language can exacerbate fear, panic and depression among those who are already vulnerable to other sources of anxieties. These sources include anxiety arising from chronic food shortages and ethical production and consumption.

Eco-anxiety can further [exacerbate food anxiety](#), which has been provoked by [a range of food scares, food poisonings, distancing of food supply chains, hunger and farming crises](#).

Disrupting food systems

The IPCC [Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#), to which I have also contributed, recommends eating less red meat. This report estimates that livestock, crop, fertilizer and fossil fuel use in agriculture account for about 21 to 37 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

[Canada's Food Guide](#) recommends reducing meat, egg and dairy consumption in favour of plant-based protein sources. In Canada, [agriculture was responsible for about 10 percent of national greenhouse gas emissions, the largest share coming from livestock](#).

Nearly [70 billion animals are slaughtered for consumption annually](#). Eating more plants can achieve benefits for the planet as well as [human health](#). The 2019 Food Policy for Canada [promotes low-carbon, climate-resilient and less wasteful food systems that also support local economies and jobs](#).

A [low-carbon](#) food future will [clearly disrupt employment and jobs in industrial food systems](#). One way to secure a sustainable and just food future could be to promote agroecology, [which combines science and social movements to transform carbon-intensive industrial agriculture into low-carbon and climate-resilient food systems](#).

Finding hope

Eco-anxiety should be recognized and addressed as a social practice together with other sources of anxieties, including food anxiety. We should avoid isolating or blaming those who are affected by it. And people are increasingly refusing to live in a constant state of fear. As a result, climate anxiety has sparked mass movements across the world, like [the school strike for climate](#) and the [Extinction Rebellion](#).

We need to reframe eco-anxiety to emphasize hope in the midst of human tragedy, social collapse, existential threats and climate catastrophe.

People who are anxious about [climate change](#) can benefit from facilitated engagement in [climate](#) science. The Environmental Health Clinic at New York University provides [a space to talk about climate concerns and prescribe local climate actions as a social practice of reducing eco-anxiety](#).

Despite high stress and depression, [Canadian farmers hesitate to seek help because of social stigma](#). We obviously need a new generation of competent fighters, [science engagement professionals](#) and community development workers in record numbers. We also need to [mobilize mental health counselors, psychotherapists, learning circles and support groups](#).

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