

ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

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Hi I'm Janelle Baker.

I'm an environmental anthropologist and ethnobiologist at Athabasca University. In this video I talk about ecological grief.

I do participant observation and ethnographic interviews to learn about Indigenous people's wisdom about the environment. I especially like to learn about stories, names, and uses of plants. I also love to learn about how to procure and process bush food and how these activities relate to cultural identity. This interest stems from my happiest times in my childhood picking berries and smoking fish with my Métis grandparents.

A large part of my research is in collaboration with Bigstone Cree Nation Elders and land users about their food sovereignty, while being faced with large-scale natural resource extraction in their traditional territory in the oil sands region in northern Alberta, Canada. My doctoral research was on bush or wild food contamination from oil sands companies. I still do this research, but I am also urged by Elders to look at the effects of an increase of logging in the region. Especially because the logging companies spray glyphosate during reforestation. The companies want to create a monoculture, or single species forest of harvestable timber, and so they remove competing species and therefore reduce biodiversity. But the plants that they are targeting, are mostly important cultural food and medicinal plants.

This is an example of how ecological grief can come from a wide range of sources. We often think about it in terms of climate change, but it can also be linked to dramatic changes in landscapes and places, or even the spraying of pesticides on bush tea, making people anxious about whether their traditional medicines are still safe to consume.

In a 2018 article on ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss, in the *Journal Nature Climate Change*, authors Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis provided a comprehensive definition of ecological grief. They said it is the "grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change." Ecological grief is a natural human response to ecological degradation or destruction.

A lot of Elders experience "solastalgia" or a sense of home-sickness on the land where they grew up, because it has changed so drastically in recent years. Industrial development and climate change are major forces of changes the landscape. So, people experience mourning and grief from loss of landscapes and species, and many people also have anxiety about what's to come.

Personally, I have had to take breaks from learning about climate change, as there have been times when I have been hearing about current and projected habitat and species loss and it keeps me up at night with anxiety. It's not just the science, but also witnessing the changes that First Nations Elders have seen in their traditional territories in their lifetimes and the grief that they experience that is alarming to me.

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https://pressbooks.pub/responsiverelationships/chapter/preferred_futures/#baker1

In “In Defence of the Wastelands: A Survival Guide,” *nehiyaw* (Cree) writer Erica Violet Lee says that “To provide care in the wastelands is about gathering enough love to turn devastation into mourning and then, maybe, turn that mourning into hope.”

Being out on the land with friends and family or simply going for walks in nature helps me to feel more positive. We are going to increasingly need strategies for coping with ecological grief.