

Climate changes are leading to 'eco-anxiety,' trauma

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It is difficult right now to contemplate issues other than battling COVID-19. However, we must not lose sight of another worldwide crisis that, unless we confront it head-on, will be with us long after the pandemic is behind us. That crisis is climate change. Increased susceptibility to pandemics is likely to be a consequence of it. Unlike pandemics, climate change poses an even more long-term and pervasive existential threat to both our mental and physical health, and our existences. Many more of us who live in Australia now fear that climate change is upon us and here to stay.



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Droughts, no stranger to Australians, often are punctuated by dramatic floods, and we are now dealing with extended summer seasons filled with bushfires. We are experienced in managing them. These fires are usually limited to a few different states, so fire crews typically help one another out as they are controlled and extinguished. Australians pull together with great community spirit and resilience under these circumstances.

But the last two fire seasons have been different. They have become unseasonably long, more severe, and often uncontrollable and overwhelming. We have experienced two uncharacteristically prolonged droughts, more recently creeping across most of our continent. Last spring, wild fires took hold very early and were ubiquitous, increasing during the unusually high summer heat. Climate change already had worsened our accustomed pattern of droughts, fires, and floods.

Meanwhile, the Australian federal government repeatedly ignored advice from highly respected meteorological, environmental, scientific, and economic experts.¹

Warnings from experts

The state fire commissioners had formally warned our government of increasing vulnerability via climate change to bushfires. This occurred in the context of government inaction, lack of national

investment (for example, insufficient water bombing equipment), and the absence of national preparation for the predicted catastrophic fire season. Prime Minister Scott Morrison declined to meet with them, minimizing the role of climate change. He provided no extra resources, emphatically leaving the responsibility to state governments.²

Distinguished economist [Ross Garnaut](https://www.rossgarnaut.com.au/) <<https://www.rossgarnaut.com.au/>> concluded that Australia could lead the world in renewable energy production and harness it for industries and employment, if only the government chose to invest in our ample renewable sources. Sadly, our conservative government and its corporate sponsors maintain an addiction to fossil fuels, arguing that they protect employment. Meanwhile, the economic “trickle-down” benefit from massive coal and gas exports has been illusory. Socioeconomic inequities have widened, with profits favoring the mega-rich, while mining automation takes jobs.

With the fire emergency crisis at its height, Mr. Morrison sent his energy minister to the [U.N. Madrid Climate Change Conference](https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/) <<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/>> with the goal of preventing meaningful CO₂ reductions, in collaboration with Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.



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The sustained drought and desiccated vegetation, the escalating fuel load growth, and early hot weather led to super-hot fires, with catapulted ember attacks and fireballs falling from the sky, which burned down thousands of homes and incinerated livestock. The fires led to numerous human fatalities and overloaded hospital burn units. The unprecedented fire season duration and uncontrollable fires exhausted voluntary fire crews. There have even been fires in cool damp rain forests – the usual refuge/reservoir of endangered flora and fauna species.

The simultaneous droughts, unusual heat, and pervasive smoke also badly affect major cities, and intense fires terrorized the entire nation. Consequently, regional firefighting teams were unable to help other regions. Huge, unquenchable fires created spiraling micro-weather systems, with

thunderstorms spitting dry lightning, sparking new fires and twisters, tornadoes, and updrafts hurtling heavy fire trucks into the air, which caused terrible injuries and death to fire crews. Ultimately, the federal government had to supply large-scale sea and air evacuations, and call up military reservists for civic duties.

Mental health implications

In 2007, Australian Glenn Albrecht defined “solastalgia <<https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/5974175/albrecht-puts-a-name-to-environmental-pain/>>” as the emotional pain, existential distress, loss, and grieving derived from rapid and severe changes in one’s geophysical environment or familiar habitat.³ Studies now support its existence worldwide in communities suffering great environmental change, indicating its contribution to climate change’s psychosocial impacts.⁴ Mental health studies also recognize the reality of “eco-anxiety,” defined as “a chronic fear of ecological doom” for self, family, community, future generations, and our planet.⁵

Other climate-derived psychiatric consequences include trauma, which leads to lifelong consequences for survivors of fires; grief associated with lost lives, homes, and livelihoods; posttraumatic hyperarousal; hypervigilance, re-experiencing, and rekindling; anxiety; depression; substance misuse; and long-term cognitive impacts of poor air quality. These effects are all borne from anticipated and actual loss, uncertainty about the future, and distrust in the capacity of leadership to aid recovery or prevent future recurrences. The Australian government has [announced <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/emergency-health-management/bushfire-information-and-support/australian-government-mental-health-response-to-bushfire-trauma>](https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/emergency-health-management/bushfire-information-and-support/australian-government-mental-health-response-to-bushfire-trauma) commendable, but long overdue, funds for psychological first aid, counseling, telepsychiatry, and support for developing community cohesion and resilience for first responders, young people, and badly affected rural families and communities. However, those efforts do nothing to prevent the ongoing shift of resources away from rural community mental health services, which results in severe depletion of community mental health teams, often in the very locations and communities that are suffering most from bushfires. This forces affected communities to rely on less reliable and time-limited telehealth assessments and other online services conducted by strangers, rather than more familiar and engaging in-person services – thus betraying community expectations of continuity of care and support.

While we observe our country’s path to a fateful rendezvous with an rapidly accelerating climate emergency, we can only hope that Australia and the world beyond can awaken to its reality, immediacy, extremity, and persistence and to the compelling need for serious constructive

responses. It is finally dawning on the easy-going and complacent Australian public that climate change is here to stay, fully formed, as a runaway, spiraling vicious cycle – unpredictable and uncontrolled. This is not “the new normal”: It can only get worse, unless and until the nations of the world move collaboratively beyond their denial to ensure the survival of the planet and our species.

So, rather than just exemplifying a tragic casualty of rampant climate change for the world, maybe we can transform this catastrophe into an opportunity to collectively wake us up. Only then, can Australia ultimately become a positive example of developing a full national awareness of the reality and severity of the threat. Hopefully, we Australians will then commit ourselves to a full share of the global effort needed to effectively address our climate’s dire last-ditch warnings to us all.

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