

# Environmental Grief®: Hope and Healing

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## **Abstract**

Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, landslides, killer storms and a recent tsunami illustrate the awesome power of Mother Nature. We pollute, destroy, reshape our planet and eliminate animal habitats and ecosystems in order to fit our needs and make room for more people. This research focused specifically on one ecosystem that is declining due to human interactions - the southern resident killer whale population in Puget Sound. There are three main causes for the decline of these whales: loss of food resources, toxic pollution, and boat traffic. The researcher theorized that people who were conscious of the plight of these whales would react to their decline by experiencing *environmental grief*®, the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or man-made events. This is a unique form of *disenfranchised grief*, which is grief that is not openly accepted or acknowledged in society. The research question asked, How do members of the American Cetacean Society react to the decline of the southern resident killer whale population, and are their reactions consistent with environmental grief? An historical perspective and literature review were developed to include the Gaia Theory and the subjects of deep ecology and the ecology of grief, to establish a foundation for environmental grief. The heuristic method of research was used, probing into the lived experiences of eight people. Co-researchers were interviewed and asked to share their reactions and experiences related to the decline of the southern resident killer whale population. Themes emerging from these interviews included anger, frustration, depression, sadness, hopelessness, and helplessness - all consistent with reactions of environmental grief. For many, naming their reactions validated the feelings they had experienced for some time. As social scientists, it would behoove us to support people who are reacting to environmental grief whether we are working with lay people or professionals.

Key words: Environmental grief, grief, loss, coping, validation, healing, disenfranchised grief, Gaia theory, killer whale

## **1. Introduction**

Grief is the reaction to loss. When we speak of grief, it is usually in regard to the death of a loved one. Grief can also be a reaction to many other losses that occur in life. The losses of a job, a house, or even the experience of having a friend move away are also associated with grief; however, these kinds of losses are not often considered in discussions of grief. Grief is very individual: How one person reacts could be very different from how another might react.

Grief manifests itself in many ways, including the following: feelings such as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, fatigue, and shock; physical sensations, such as tightness in the throat or chest, dry mouth, lack of energy, and shortness of breath; cognitive responses, such as disbelief, confusion, and sometimes a sense of the presence of the deceased; and behaviours such as disruptions in sleep or appetite, crying, dreaming of the deceased, loss of interest, and social withdrawal.

Grief can also express itself in social and spiritual manifestations: problems functioning in an organization or family and difficulties with interpersonal relationships; and spiritual issues, such as searching for meaning, anger, or hostility toward a religious figure.

There are many forms of grief, including anticipatory grief - the reaction to losses associated with an impending death, which may include past, present, or future losses during the dying process; complicated grief - "A significant minority of bereaved persons will experience substantial impairment in their social and occupational functioning for many months following the loss, accompanied by marked symptoms of emotional numbness, disbelief, purposelessness, futility, insecurity, and a sense that a part of the self has died";<sup>1</sup> uncomplicated grief - a healthy, normal response to loss; and disenfranchised grief - grief that a person experiences for a loss that is not acknowledged by society.

## **2. Environmental Grief**

*Environmental grief* is the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or man-made events. For purposes of this study, we conclude that environmental grief builds on the research of Dr. Ken Doka<sup>2</sup> regarding disenfranchised grief, including the following elements: *The relationship is not recognized*. In our society, most support is given to people who have lost family members, such as parents or children, people to whom they are closely related. The many losses that occur but are not acknowledged are those in which the relationship to the deceased is that of friend, life partner, or homosexual life partner or lover. *The loss is not acknowledged*. Perinatal deaths, abortion, or placing a child for adoption are all examples of losses not

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acknowledged by society. Another loss is pet loss, which is now becoming more recognized as society becomes increasingly aware of the roles that animals can and do play in our lives. Other losses include the loss of a job, which can also contribute to the loss of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-respect. Doka also mentions infertility as a loss in adulthood causing a sense of loss not only that one's body has failed but also that dreams of having a child are shattered, which can also lead to the loss of a relationship. *The griever is excluded*. In some cases, a person may disenfranchise herself or himself from the grief. In these cases, the person is not seen socially as being capable of grief. For example, parents may exclude children from learning about the grieving process or experiencing the grieving process because the parents don't believe the child capable of grief. Children may then disenfranchise from their own grief because that is what they believe is right, given their role in the family. *The circumstance of the death is questionable in some way*. If there is a suicide in the family or a death from AIDS, for example, there is often a stigma involved that precludes the survivors from feeling support for their grief. These circumstances influence the very nature of the grief reaction and at times cause the griever to inhibit her or his grief responses.

Doka also mentions that many losses might have occurred in the past, such as a divorce or the end of a relationship, but when someone learns that an ex-spouse or an ex-friend has died, that loss may still cause a grief reaction because there is now an end to that given relationship. "Even though loss is experienced, society as a whole may not perceive that the loss of a past relationship could or should cause grief reactions"<sup>3</sup>

Oftentimes, when an experience is labelled or named, a certain validation comes with it. People want to know that what they are feeling is real, valid and acknowledged. The term *disenfranchised grief* has brought great validation to people who have felt as though they were ostracized by society for having an abnormal grieving process. Similarly, the guilt and shame many women faced after having an abortion was increased by the lack of support they had from society. The idea of disenfranchised grief

offered validation to these women and opened up support groups for people dealing with this type of grief.

The term *environmental grief* was developed to put a name to the grief that many environmentalists and others who are concerned about the plight of our environment are experiencing. Jane Goodall has expressed her feelings eloquently:

The emotions triggered by the death of a chimpanzee I have loved are different again from those that overwhelm me whenever I think of the vanishing wildlife of the world, of animals shot by hunters, snared by poachers, starved by the encroachment of farmers into their feeding grounds. I am angered, as well as saddened, when I think how hard it is to help them. The sight of a rhino killed for his horn is terribly distressing. It brings tears to my eyes, but the tears are part rage because we seem unable to stop the slaughter.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Gaia Theory

In 1961, Dr. James Lovelock, a British atmospheric chemist, was invited to be an experimenter with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on its first lunar instrument mission. At that time, NASA was investigating the possibility of life on Mars. NASA had difficulty finding experts in the field regarding life on Mars, so they had to settle for people who were experts regarding life on Earth. Soon after Lovelock began work on a lunar probe, he was promoted to designing instruments to analyze the surface and atmospheres of planets.

In 1972, Lovelock published a paper suggesting that life on a planet would have to use the atmosphere and oceans to produce raw materials for the products of its metabolism. The gases in Earth's atmosphere are in a persistent state of disequilibrium, but a look at Mars through infrared telescopes revealed that the atmosphere was dominated

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by carbon dioxide and was not far from the state of chemical equilibrium, strongly suggesting that Mars was lifeless. NASA scientists continued to investigate in hopes that they would find life on Mars or on our other neighbour planet, Venus.<sup>5</sup>

Lovelock created quite a stir with conclusions that ultimately led to his development of the Gaia hypothesis.<sup>6</sup> *Gaia* comes from the Greek word meaning *earth* or *Earth Goddess*. The Gaia hypothesis states that the Earth is a self-regulating living organism. Lovelock realized that science in the 1960s looked at our world from a reductionist point of view, meaning that it was seen from the bottom up, which did not take into account the chemical compositions of the climate of the earth.. When he had the opportunity to view Earth from the top down, he realized that the atmosphere of the Earth was a living part of the whole organism, that Earth itself was a living organism. Looking at the planet from the top down was not a new approach. Lovelock writes that physiologists, engineers, and inventors have investigated from the top down for some time.<sup>7</sup>

Lovelock has written extensively regarding the fact that the Gaia theory has not been accepted by all sciences as yet, but it has become more mainstream.<sup>10</sup>

Although Lovelock developed the Gaia theory and he found that many environmentalists agreed with it; he did not always agree with the direction environmentalists were taking in regard to protecting the planet. Environmentalists at the time appeared to be more concerned with human rights. "If, in caring for people, we fail to care for other forms of life on Earth then our civilization and we will suffer."<sup>11</sup> Environmentalists, it seems, have to find a balance between the needs of humans and the need to protect our planet without excluding one from the other.

According to Lovelock, once more than 70% to 80% of the tropical forest is destroyed, the remaining forest will no longer sustain its climate, meaning that the whole ecosystem will collapse.<sup>12</sup> If that is the case, and we continue to destroy the tropical forest, it will not be long

before the tropical forests vanish and the people in those regions find themselves living in a desert. Lovelock expressed it this way in 1999:

It is not enough to be concerned for people; there is no tenure for anyone on this planet, not even for a species. If we do not recognize our responsibility to our planet we may not as a species ever reach our allotted span. So let us be moderate in our ways and aim for a world that is healthy and beautiful and which will remain fit for our grandchildren as well as those of our partners in Gaia.<sup>13</sup>

The Gaia theory introduced an awareness not seen in science previously, an exposure to a relationship more conducive to the health of our natural world. Lovelock had his share of critics, but a number of scientists opened their eyes to a new view of the world and to science as a result of his work.

When science views the earth as a living organism, then we can also accept that humans are a part of the interconnectedness of life on a living earth. There is already much information regarding the interconnectedness of the living earth among many indigenous cultures, but science tends to ask too many questions and wants to probe deeply without an awareness of how much damage that probing can cause the earth.

At one time in human history, when we were hunter-gatherers, humans lived with nature, not separate from it. We did not think ourselves superior to nature but connected to it. As science advanced, we became observers of nature, rather than being a part of it, seeking out how to make nature work for us. If we can again view our earth as a living organism, then perhaps we will feel more inclined to live with it and not as though the earth was a never-ending faucet of resources for our use. Steven Fenwick put it this way:

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To view the earth as a complex, self-regulating, living being gives new impetus to the need for ecological protection. If ecosystems are vital parts of the earth organism, in many respects analogous to organism, then the death of these ecosystems may eventually lead to the death of the planet, or at least to the extinction of humans, since humans appear to be the major threat to the rest of planetary life.<sup>14</sup>

Through the work of Lovelock, scientists now maintain that the Gaia theory has become serious science. Richard Leakey notes that field biologists traditionally believed that the interactions among species within ecosystems were important in maintaining stability.<sup>15</sup> That belief was based more on intuition before the Gaia theory was developed. Field biologists as well as other scientists are now able to accept what was originally intuition thanks to the emergence of the Gaia theory “that everything has a part to play in the emergence of the whole.”<sup>16</sup>

#### **4. Interconnectedness**

Rory Spowers, freelance writer and broadcaster, writes that the common thread that unites much of science today is the recognition of the interconnectedness in nature of all life.<sup>17</sup> This new paradigm in science “shares the same vision as the ancient mystics, suggesting that there are no boundaries between the individual and the rest of the universe.”<sup>18</sup>

Knowing that we are connected to the earth and all its inhabitants, we must now learn to be conscious of our actions toward our environments. Field biologists, ecologists, botanists, and biologists appear to have been conscious of their actions on the planet. Most often, people in the fields of biological sciences are drawn to that field because of a love for the environment.

Ecologist Phyllis Windle wrote about her connectedness to nature not only as an ecologist but also on an emotional level.<sup>19</sup> In 1990, she read an article regarding the dogwood trees that were dying due to a fungus that had been killing dogwood trees since the 1970s. Dr. Windle did not realize

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that her reaction to the demise of the dogwoods would be so strong. She related her reactions to those of grief, but added,

Our external, as well as our internal worlds, may make environmental losses difficult to grieve. We have almost no social support for expressing this grief. When I sit beside a hospital bed as a chaplain, I expect people to cry about the unwelcome changes they are experiencing...Their tears (and sometimes my own) are a sign of work well done. Honest conversations about grief that come quite naturally at a bedside are far more difficult at a lab bench or conference table. Thus, it is harder for me to speak freely about my grief for dogwoods with ecological colleagues than with fellow chaplains.<sup>20</sup>

There is now a name that describes and validates her grief - *environmental grief*. She and her colleagues can share their grief while they continue to educate those who are not aware of the connection to nature. This is the first step toward *healing* our environment.

##### **5. Deep Ecology**

Bill Devall and George Sessions credit Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and mountain climber, with coining the terms *shallow ecology* and *deep ecology* in the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Shallow ecology describes the more human-centred version of ecology that was mainstream at the time; it placed the needs of humans over the needs of nonhuman species. Shallow ecology had more to do with economic well-being, with what the environment could do to make humans more comfortable. Deep ecology, on the other hand, involves looking out for the welfare of the whole system of life, including nonhuman species. The philosophy behind deep ecology is that it is a long-term process of change for most people, awakening an environmental ethic, a land ethic, taking into account that humans are equal to the rocks and rivers, for example, that we are not



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better than other species or things on this planet. As Aldo Leopold has written,

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.<sup>22</sup>

Environmental grief is a part of deep ecology as we awaken to our own understandings of the loss that we as humans are perpetrating on this planet. Humans need to ask themselves deep questions about change in order to preserve life on earth. Deep ecology has a strong foothold in environmental activism, where it is understood that there is also a strong reaction to environmental grief.

Some people cannot see that there is any hope in saving this environment. They perhaps believe we have destroyed too much of the earth to heal from our wounds. Deep ecologists are working not only to save our planet but to shift our consciousness to awaken people to the beauty that nature holds for all of us, if we choose to be her equal.

#### **6. Hope**

Thankfully, many people believe there is still hope for saving our planet. For example, despite all the destruction that she sees, Dr. Jane Goodall remains hopeful that humans will soon learn that we must nurture nature and no longer continue to destroy it.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, our environmental grief can turn to a state of healing. It is interesting that when people share their grief with one another, it seems to allow others to open up and share as well. In that case, they are also sharing their hope because they have just educated another person about the effects humans are having on our environment.

Dr. Jane Goodall began her research of wild chimpanzees on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in 1960. Her study has become the longest field study of any animal species in its natural surroundings. Dr. Goodall has seen firsthand the destruction of our environment as she returns to Gombe

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National Park where she began all those years ago. Gombe has changed a great deal, yet Dr. Goodall remains hopeful that our world will be preserved:

There are many signs of hope. Along a lakeshore in Tanzania, for example, villagers are planting trees where all the trees had disappeared. Women are taking more control over their lives, and, once they become better educated, then the birth rate begins to drop. And the children are being taught about the dire effects of habitat destruction. There is the terrible pollution around the world, the balance of nature is disturbed, and we are destroying our beautiful planet...But in spite of all this I do have hope. And my hope is based on three factors.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Goodall explains the three factors on which her hope is based. First, she states that more companies are “greening” their operations and that people are now much more aware of what we are doing to the planet, more aware that we all must be responsible if we want to save our environment and our descendants. We can learn to live in harmony with nature by using our brains and problem-solving capabilities.

Second, Dr. Goodall discusses young people and the energy they are bringing to the protection of our environment and to social actions. As young people become aware of the problems that are now their heritage, they want to make our “wrongs” into “rights.”

The third reason for hope is “the indomitable nature of the human spirit.”<sup>25</sup> Because Dr. Goodall travels almost 300 days out of the year, she meets interesting people along the way who show her that there is hope, that people can dream the impossible dream and still attain it. As she says,

So let us move into the next millennium with hope, for without it, all we can do is eat and drink the last of our resources as we watch our planet slowly die. Instead, let

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us have faith in ourselves, in our intellect, in our staunch spirit. Let us develop respect for all living things. Let us try to replace impatience and intolerance with understanding and compassion. And love.<sup>26</sup>

Alexandra Morton has been researching whales for 25 years. I met Ms. Morton almost 20 years ago at a fund-raiser for the American Cetacean Society. She was sharing stories of her research with killer whales in British Columbia. She told about one trip when she and her husband found themselves on the water in a little dinghy with the fog rolling in. They didn't know it at the time, but they had drifted into the shipping lanes. Apparently, as they were beginning to fear the worst, a pod of killer whales came to them and led them to shore.

Ms. Morton described in her book *Listening to Whales* an opportunity she had to meet Dr. Jane Goodall. Ms. Morton asked Dr. Goodall if she "had hope." Dr. Goodall explained that she did have hope, mostly in our children. Ms. Morton thought of her own children and realized that there must be hope for our species, if only for the sake of her children. She writes,

Chronicling the passage of whales has led me to an understanding that we, as a species, now stand at a crossroads. We can face the possibility of our own extinction and work to avert it, or we can follow the more traditional path of earth's organisms and fall blindly over the edge. If there's one trait that characterizes human beings, it's the will to survive. This, I believe, will motivate us to work *with* the natural world rather than oppose it, which is all we need to do to give the children of earth-of all species-the opportunity to thrive.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Marc Bekoff is an author and educator who works with Dr. Goodall and her program Roots and Shoots, the Jane Goodall Institute's

international environmental and humanitarian program for young people. The primary mission of Roots and Shoots is to foster respect and compassion for all living things.

Dr. Bekoff writes in *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions and Heart*,

It is essential that we do better than our ancestors, and we surely have the resources to do so. Perhaps the biggest question of all is whether enough of us will choose to make the heartfelt commitment to making this a better world, a more compassionate world in which love is plentiful and shared, before it is too late...I believe we have already embarked on this formidable and necessary pilgrimage. I deeply feel the movement, a pulsating tidal wave, coursing through my body and deep in my heart. My hope and optimism lead me in no other direction.<sup>28</sup>

Scientists with a great deal of experience in the field and in education continue to have hope for our future. It might be more difficult for adults to change their behaviours, so science seems to be relying on the young, in hopes that they will be taught and made aware of the need to protect the environment from the very start. Change is not as easy as some might believe, but it is the only hope for our planet.

#### **7. Healing**

As stated earlier, environmental grief is the term that validates all the emotions of despair, hopelessness, and anger. Joanna Macy discusses the “despair work” she has created. It is similar to grief work, but she states that one does not have to accept the loss, given that the loss has not yet occurred and is “hardly to be accepted.” She does write, however, that

despair cannot be banished by injections of optimism or sermons on “positive thinking.” Like grief, it must be

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acknowledged and worked through. This means it must be named and validated as a healthy, normal human response to the situation we find ourselves in. Faced and experienced, its power can be used, as the frozen defenses of the psyche thaw and new energies are released. Something analogous to grief work is in order.<sup>29</sup>

In grief work, it is helpful for the bereaved to accept the reality of the loss. Doing grief work doesn't necessarily mean that one must accept the reality of the loss, but for healthy growth and healing, accepting the loss is helpful when the bereaved is *ready* to accept.

#### **8. Conclusion**

In the case of environmental grief, when I first considered the idea, my concern was whether or not *I* was crazy. Was I the only person in the world who was grieving over the plight of our environment? I coined the term after reacting to the loss of marine mammals, especially whales. I also realized that when I read the news online about the increased logging in the Amazon or snowmobiles polluting Yellowstone National Park, I was reacting to environmental grief. Everything that we as humans are doing to the environment, the sheer destruction without any thought about the consequences of our actions, has caused me to react to environmental grief. My concerns were validated by the responses and reactions of the co-researchers, particularly when writer/scientist Leigh Calvez stated that she felt she was alone in her thinking. "I think it's incredibly helpful to give this grief a name. It helps me to hear a term like that. It helps me feel that I'm not crazy, that I'm not alone."<sup>30</sup>

The term *environmental grief* was never intended as a label to explain to people that they are reacting to grief over loss of the environment. It is intended to validate feelings and, hopefully, to call people to action to make a change in the way they live so that all beings on this planet can live as a whole system.

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Educating ourselves and those around us is the key to making us conscious of our actions toward the environment. It is important not to judge others who are not as conscious. I do not condone any violence against another person in order to make that person understand what she or he is doing to the environment. We must be peaceful among ourselves if we want to make peace with nature.

### Notes

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2. Ken J. Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* (Champaign, Illinois: Research Books, 2002).
3. Ibid, 11.
4. Jane Goodall, "Digging Up the Roots," *Orion* 13 (1994): 21.
5. James E. Lovelock, "Gaia as Seen Through the Atmosphere," *Atmospheric Environment* 6 (1972): 579.
6. James E. Lovelock and E. Margulis, "Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere: The Gaia Hypothesis," *Tellus* 26 (1973): 2.
7. James E. Lovelock, "The Environment Now and the Gaian Perspective," in *The Spirit of Science from Experiment to Experience*, ed. D. Lorimer, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 129–148.
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11. Ibid, 4.
12. Ibid
13. Lovelock, 1999, 148
14. Steven Fenwick, *The Dreaming Earth: Foundations for a Process-Oriented Approach to Ecopsychology* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 1998), 88.
15. Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

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  17. Rory Spowers, *Rising tides: A History of the Environmental Revolution and Visions for an Ecological Age* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002).
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  19. Phyllis Windle, "The Ecology of Grief," *BioScience* 42 (1992).
  20. Ibid, 363, 366.
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  22. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 171.
  23. Jane Goodall, "My Three Reasons for Hope" [article online] (2001 accessed 17 November 2003; available from <http://www.janegoodall.org/jane/essay.html>; Internet.
  24. Ibid, para. 2.
  25. Ibid, para. 6.
  26. Ibid
  27. Alexandra Morton, *Listening to Whales: What Orcas Have Taught Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 305.
  28. Marc Bekoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 199.
  29. Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1991), 16.
  30. Leigh Calvez, in interview with author, October 2002, quoted in Kriss Kevorkian, "Environmental Grief: Hope and Healing" (PhD diss., Union Institute and University, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2004), 64.

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