Addressing Climate Anxiety in Youth Environmental Organizations and Programs

BEST PRACTICES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO PROMOTE YOUTH MENTAL WELLBEING

Prepared by Zachary Zeller

With support from the National Wildlife Federation

Executive Summary

Overview

Climate anxiety is an emerging concern, especially for today's youth. While this trend is observed in the general population, there is relatively little information or research on how climate anxiety manifests in organizations that specifically coalesce around youth climate and environmental empowerment. This report took the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the largest conservation education and advocacy organization in the United States, as a specific case to consider the state of mental health principles in youth programming. Based on interviews with NWF employees and coupled with the current state of research and best practices, this report finds unique opportunities for youth climate organizations to improve mental health particularly through youth empowerment, mental health best practices, and community building.

Key Takeaways

- Today's youth are uniquely positioned to experience adverse mental health consequences from climate change.
- Youth with a passion for environmental issues may be particularly vulnerable to climate anxiety.

- Increasingly intense impacts from climate change will increase the need for greater mental health awareness and training.
- Youth climate organizations have a unique opportunity to minimize climate distress and promote greater participation from youth.

- Adults in youth organizations are role models for youth, and should model good mental health practices.
- Youth climate organizations have a responsibility to ensure that both adults and youth are supported with adequate mental health resources.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the National Wildlife Federation Graduate Student Research Fellowship program for supporting this research and their continued dedication to youth empowerment.

Additionally, the support of Marley Hauser, David Corsar, and Courtney Cochran during this fellowship was greatly appreciated.

The participation of interviewees was a key focus of this work. Special thanks are given to Simone Stewart, Elissa Teles Muñoz, and Hanna Træland Rostøl.

Correspondence

For further correspondence, please contact the author at zeller.zachary.c@gmail.com

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Introduction

The impacts of climate change are far-reaching and expected to significantly disrupt life for all demographics. Still, certain populations have disproportionately felt these impacts, often while contributing the least to climate change in the first place. Of particular concern are youth, who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change while simultaneously set to face a larger quantity of climate impacts over their lifetime. Children and youth are directly exposed to climate change through climate-related disease outbreaks, malnutrition due to drought and famine, increased domestic violence after extreme weather, conflict and displacement, and worsened school performance due to heatwaves and school closures.

Additionally, children and youth can be indirectly impacted by climate change by observing changes and loss to their environment or through the media. Simply observing the impacts of climate change can elicit intense psychological responses in children. In response to climate change, researchers have identified a a host of negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and grief. Other responses include guilt, shame, betrayal, rage, frustration, shock, and isolation.

Today's youth are at the forefront of a global climate crisis, and are already feeling the impacts. A Lancet survey of 10,000 youth (16-25 years old) across 10 countries found that a majority of participants were extremely worried about climate change, with 84% responding as at least moderately worried.

Climate anxiety refers to feelings of distress as a result of the state of the climate crisis. It is on the rise, especially among youth.

For the purpose of this report, climate anxiety will be used to refer to the broad range of negative emotions that may be experienced in response to awareness of climate change. However, it is important to note that a host of emotions associated with climate change can exist. In addition to anxiety (defined by excessive worry, sleep disturbance, irritability, and bodily responses), climate grief (the feeling of grief in response to anticipated or already lost species, landscapes, and ecosystems) and solastalgia (the negative feeling of losing one's home environment) have been observed as prominent emotional responses to climate change.

Numerous studies considering populations from different age groups, countries, and backgrounds have found that these emotions are occurring as a result of climate change.

Without the proper support, those suffering from these emotions can experience worsened mental health outcomes and reduced life satisfaction. However, it is important to draw a distinction between traditional mental health disorders and those that arise in response to climate change. Research has largely advocated against pathologizing climate anxiety in the same way that anxiety disorders are. Climate anxiety is a rational response to the state of the world, and should therefore be treated as such.

This research considers the emerging best practices for understanding, treating, and assisting youth suffering from climate anxiety.

Climate Anxiety in Youth Environmental Organizations

Youth Environmental Organizations and Programs (YEOPs) occupy a unique role in mitigating and responding to climate anxiety. YEOPs can broadly be defined by the following characteristics:

- Youth-led or focused on serving youth (including the K-12, high school, university, and young professional age-groups)
- Extracurricular (either taking place outside of or adjacent to traditional classroom settings)
- Voluntary
- Focused on climate/environmental education, leadership, and capacity development
- Structured and organized to achieve a mission or goal

YEOPs can include volunteer organizations, after-school clubs, leadership academies, youth-advisory councils, and fellowships. Examples of YEOPs at NWF include EcoSchools US, Earth Tomorrow, and EcoLeaders, to name a few.

YEOPs often attract environmentally-motivated youth, providing them opportunities to learn about and engage in environmental action. As spaces in which environmental interests are nurtured and encouraged, this can promote positive youth development. However, since climate anxiety is typically higher in young people and those who care about the environment, YEOPs are likely to attract a doubly vulnerable population.

This is an essential issue for YEOPs for a variety of reasons. At a basic level, YEOPs have a responsibility to protect the health and safety of the populations they serve, including their mental and psychological well-being. Furthermore, emotional responses of frustration and hopelessness can lead to burnout and apathy among youth, leading to reduced engagement with YEOPs, reducing their impact and reach.

On the other hand, YEOPs have a unique opportunity to nurture and support the next generation of climate leaders by providing a constructive outlet for these emotions, unleashing the immense potential of young people in addressing the climate crisis.

To support the next generation of climate leaders, YEOPs need to understand their unique role in mitigating youth climate anxiety and promote best practices throughout the organization.

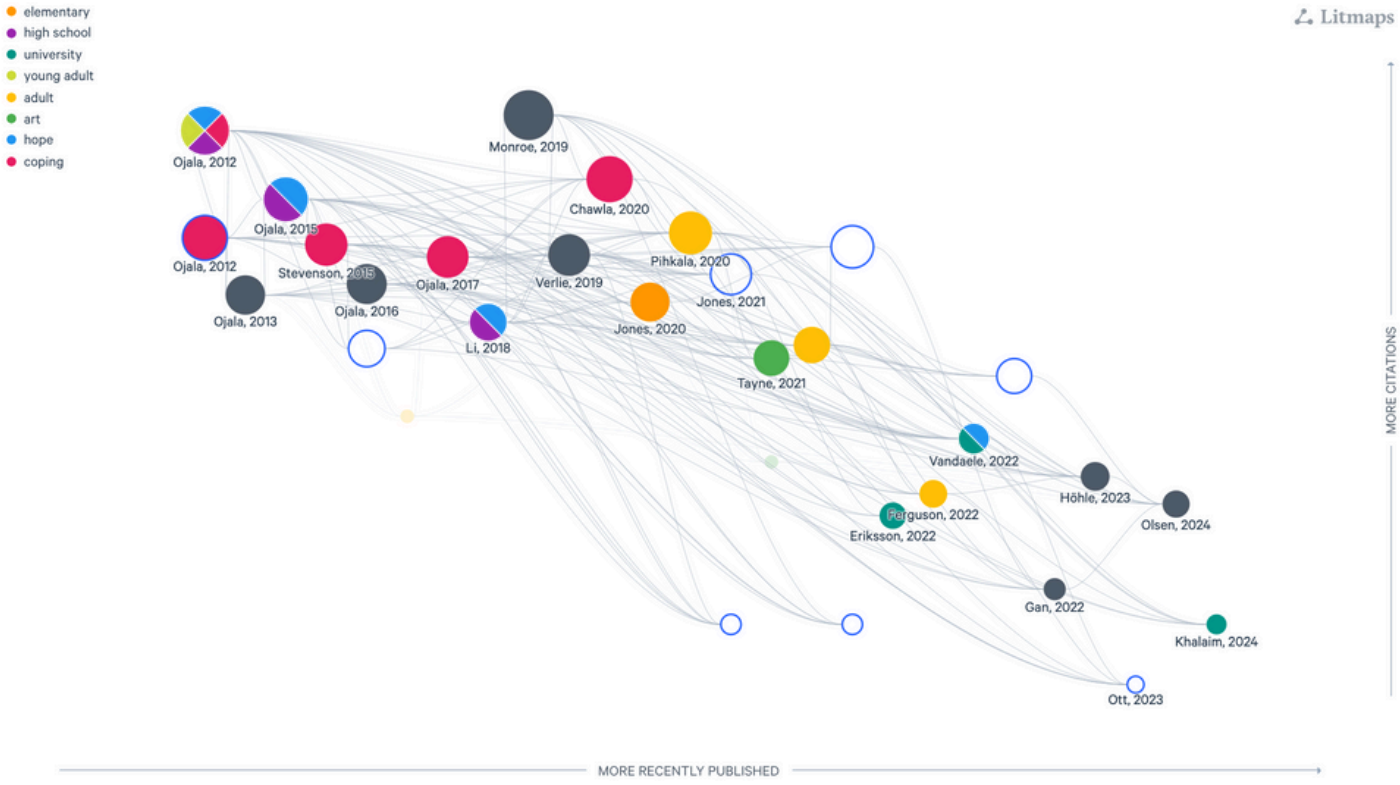
Scope of Research

This review aimed to understand the current state of research on climate anxiety in YEOPs, particularly through best practices, organizational policies, and training.

An initial literature review was conducted to scope any literature that addresses climate anxiety in YEOPs. Since YEOPs are a broad category, searches included the terms: “Environmental Organizations”, “Climate Organizations”, “Youth Capacity Development”, “Youth Programs”, and “Environmental Education” alongside the terms “Climate Anxiety” and “Eco Anxiety”.

To supplement this review, a series of interviews were conducted with NWF employees (2, based in the United States) and an external environmental educator (1, based in Europe). All interviewees were identified based on their work with climate anxiety advocacy in youth organizations. Unfortunately, a lack of available interviewees highlights the need for more collaboration between the fields of mental health and environmental youth activism. Additionally, there was limited representation from the global south, indicating a need for greater resources and capacity development in this region. Nevertheless, these interviews provided a beginning point for an under-researched field.

These exploratory interviews were conducted in order to find recurring themes and practices relevant to youth mental health and climate anxiety. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and provided a basic introduction to on-the-ground practices and experiences with youth climate anxiety. Of particular interest was to find opportunities and needs for best practice guidance and further research. Emergent and recurring themes were later cross-referenced with existing literature to provide up-to-date guidance for youth organizations.



A visualization of the initial literature review. Conducted using Litmaps. (2024). Litmaps (Version 2025-01-16) [Search tool].

Findings

Based on the interviews, three strong themes emerged. Namely, these were the role of extreme weather events, social media practices, and community building as drivers and mitigators of climate anxiety. Interestingly, there were clear differences between the interview in North America and the interview in Europe, indicating that regional differences could play a role in developing mental health best practices and considerations for youth climate organizations. For example, in the European context, extreme weather events were not identified as a major driver of climate anxiety.

The 3 themes were then further researched in the literature to understand any existing best practices or guidance around them. This was accomplished by reviewing the literature based on terms related to the theme. This search is summarized in the table below.

Extreme Weather	"Extreme Weather", "Disaster Risk Reduction", "Natural Disaster"
Social Media	"Social Media", "Doomscrolling", "Media"
Community	"Community", "Peer"

While not exhaustive, these 3 themes open the door to better understanding the policies and practices that were identified as most relevant to NWF. Major relevant findings for these are summarized below.

Community Building

As networks of concerned and motivated individuals, YEOPs provide the building blocks for a community built on mutual interests. Not only is this generally healthy and beneficial for youth development and trust building, but it reduces the emotional burden of climate anxiety. A study of 18-35 year old students in the U.S. found that engaging in collective climate action (but not individual climate action) provided a buffer between climate anxiety and major depressive symptoms.

Community building may be particularly beneficial in mitigating both climate anxiety and climate change itself. Research on adults in Germany has shown a positive association between loneliness, social isolation, and climate anxiety. On the other hand, another study found that Australian adults who self-reported high levels of social-connectedness were much more likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior. While these findings are based on adult populations, they present the importance of social connectedness and community as strong foundations to promote emotional resiliency and environmental action.

Both interviewees working within the National Wildlife Federation mentioned the importance of having a like-minded community to share strong emotions with when it came to climate anxiety. This was true both for youth and adults in the organization. In this way, community can offer therapeutic benefits by providing opportunities for communication and emotional validation. For adults, discussions with colleagues who shared similar concerns was seen as a way to have one's feelings validated without focusing too heavily on helplessness. When it came to fostering community for youth, youth in NWF programs expressed gratitude for the opportunity and a sense of relief, mostly as a result of not feeling alone in their anxiety. Unlike adult discussions, which were reported to come together more organically, youth-centered discussions were formally structured and moderate by adult leaders. A facilitator of these "climate conversations" reported that they functioned as both a therapeutic and community-building exercise.

Notably, it was open and honest conversations involving emotional support and understanding that fostered a strong sense of community among youth, even if they only met periodically and in a virtual format. This indicates that NWF could promote opportunities for open and productive youth discussions even for remote programs.

Extreme weather events

Periods around extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, wildfires, and floods, were noted as particularly stressful times for both adults and youth according to the interviews with NWF employees. In discussion with the European interviewee, such events were not reported as particularly distressing, likely due to reduced occurrence of extreme weather in comparison to the United States, which during the period of this study saw the major ecological disasters of Hurricane Milton, Hurricane Helene, and the Palisades wildfires.

When considering the spectrum of impacts from climate change, extreme weather events cause both direct impacts, such as loss of life, injury and damages to the built environment, as well as indirect impacts to the natural environment and community. Research shows that periods around extreme weather events are particularly distressing for youth who are susceptible to long-term disruptions to important social systems in the aftermath of a disaster. While many youth will "recover" after a disaster, some go on to develop chronic issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety.

Naturally, it is important to understand how adults can limit distress during this period and maintain some sense of normalcy. One interviewee recalled an experience working with children in a school setting before Hurricane Milton. She noticed that youth were picking up on the sense of "doom" coming from adults in the classroom setting, due to their inability to maintain their emotions. While Hurricane Milton was, undoubtedly, a distressing period for both adults and youth, the interviewee noted that youth were highly susceptible to adult emotions, even if those emotions were not immediately helpful or productive.

Firstly, adults should not hide the truth of what is happening from youth, but instead find age-appropriate ways of discussing the reality of extreme weather events. For example, during a hurricane, for younger age-groups, it could be beneficial to highlight the basics of what to expect (i.e. loss of power, fallen trees, and thunder) as well as how to prepare for these events. Older age groups may benefit from learning more severe consequences (i.e. injuries, destruction of property, and population displacement) but without an overly-negative or threatening tone. Naturally, discussions on these topics should also be context-dependent in addition to age-appropriate. For example, youth living in regions affected by wildfires should be more aware of immediate impacts and how to prepare for them. On the other hand, those populations that are less directly affected could learn more about ways to assist those affected.

In addition to communicating the reality of extreme weather and their consequences, adults have a responsibility to model healthy behaviors and avoid unhealthy behaviors. Ironically, to promote healthy emotional resilience in youth, adults will likely need to improve their own coping skills and mental health practices. This raises the importance of youth organisations providing resources for adult mental health opportunities in addition to youth mental health guidance.

By acknowledging the reality of extreme weather and its consequences in an age-appropriate way, adults can be honest with children without overburdening them with stress. It is important to remember that periods of extreme weather already have the potential to be highly distressing for both children and adults. Furthermore, in addition to reducing negative feelings around this time, youth climate organisations can play a role in promoting beneficial behaviors and confidence by involving youth in disaster preparedness and response.

Youth involvement in disaster risk reduction (DRR) is an emerging area of interest, and offers the potential for youth to have more agency, improving mental health outcomes. For example, a cohort of high school students that took part in a disaster recovery leadership program in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina reported higher self-efficacy and reduced symptoms of trauma compared to their peers. Not only did their participation in the program benefit their own recovery, but they were involved in community recovery activities, such as organizing a Hurricane Katrina remembrance day, creating a school flower garden, and making a hurricane preparedness pamphlet. Similar programs can be found across the world and for age groups ranging from high school students to graduate schools. Youth are increasingly being considered as valuable stakeholders in disaster risk reduction and policy implementation due to their technological savviness and motivation to address climate change.

This poses a unique opportunity for YEOPs to develop programs and opportunities for youth involvement in disaster risk reduction. Since they already cater to a population that is aware of the impacts of climate change (and therefore, potentially at higher risk of climate anxiety), there are greater opportunities for engagement and youth development, while also offering a targeted opportunity of mental health support for those likely to be affected. Depending on available resources and capacity, potential organizational efforts can range from targeted, local leadership programs to platforming youth at international conferences. In either case, youth play an important role here, both as a population at high risk of extreme weather events, and a population with immense potential and stakeholder value. YEOPs should therefore treat their experiences and input with unique respect.

Social Media

The impact of excessive social media use on youth mental health is a highly discussed topic. However, relatively few studies have considered the connection between social media and youth climate anxiety. The few studies that do address this topic find that increased exposure to environmental content on social media is associated with higher levels of climate anxiety, particularly among boys. In turn, this anxiety increases the likelihood of participation in environmental action. However, only moderate levels of climate anxiety lead to pro-environmental behavior, while high levels of climate anxiety are associated with decreased environmental action. Supplemental research has also found that students who obtained environmental news from social media had higher anxiety than those that found it from traditional news sources.

Ultimately, research on this topic is in a nascent stage, creating a difficult situation for YEOPs in their use and promotion of social media. On one hand, sharing environmental news has been shown to increase climate anxiety. On the other hand, moderate levels of climate anxiety can increase self-efficacy beliefs, leading to more empowered and engaged youth. While the research may be divided in some concerns, certain consumption patterns clearly have negative impacts. For example, "doomscrolling" or the process of consuming a large amount of negative content repetitively, is shown to have negative mental health impacts. Two interviewees working at the National Wildlife Federation brought up doomscrolling as a recurring pattern that they observed during times of negative environmental news. Ironically, they mentioned that they noticed this pattern firstly among adults, and had concerns that children would pick up this behavior. This highlights the need for adults to model and instill healthy behaviors around social media. For environmental and climate focused organizations, this is particularly relevant, as adults in these settings are often (and admirably) deeply sensitive to environmental news, and are more likely to engage in behaviors such as doomscrolling. However, it is essential to remember that youth often look up to adult leaders in these organizations, and frequently emulate their behaviors.

At the organizational level, YEOPs should incorporate mental health practices into their social media strategy. Best practices include moderating overly-negative messages (i.e. doom, dread, and disaster) to avoid extreme anxiety. Additionally, since "healthy" amounts of climate anxiety can lead to greater environmental motivation, youth organizations should generally couple environmental messages with opportunities for engagement. In the case of the National Wildlife Federation, this could look like advertising youth-focused programs to get involved in.

In addition to minimizing climate anxiety, social media platforms can themselves be used to promote emotional resiliency. For example, an interviewee mentioned that their organization deployed a social media campaign to educate youth on how to avoid burnout in the activism space. Additionally, social media can provide a platform for community building, sharing "good environmental news", and teaching health coping mechanisms.

Cross-Cutting Themes

When researching common themes associated with climate anxiety, some recurring topics emerged in the literature. These were largely best-practices for adults, educators, and caretakers to employ to support and affirm youth anxiety in healthy ways.

Don't pathologize climate anxiety

Many authors caution against the pathologization and medicalization of climate anxiety. Rather than being an individual psychological or mental problem, climate anxiety is a normal and logical response to the reality of the climate crisis. In fact, anxiety plays an adaptive role, by alerting society of potentially dangerous situations. By individualizing the problem, there is a risk of downplaying the severity of climate change.

Acknowledge reality

Even if it were possible to shield children and youth from the knowledge of climate change, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that they have a right to know. In 2023, the Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that:

"Children have the right to access to accurate and reliable environmental information, including about the causes, effects and actual and potential sources of climate and environmental harm, adaptive responses, relevant climate and environmental legislation, regulations, findings from climate and environmental impact assessments, policies and plans and sustainable lifestyle choices." (UNCRC).

Adults, parents, and teachers can not withhold information about climate change. Rather, they have a responsibility to ensure that this information is age-appropriate, and constructive rather than overwhelming.

Instill (realistic) hope

Climate anxiety is often defined by hopelessness for the future. However, climate anxiety can not simply be solved by installing a superficial and overly-optimistic hope. Rather than ignoring or alleviating negative feelings, which requires disengagement from climate action and advocacy, meaning-focused hope acknowledges negative feelings while moving the subject towards their values and beliefs, and refocusing on positive trends.

A study of youth volunteers for environmental causes found that subjects utilized a variety of cognitive strategies to promote hope alongside existential worry. Ojala believes that hope is not an antidote to worry, but a complementary force that can deepen meaning-making in the face of major existential threats.

Conclusion

The impacts of climate change are far-reaching and expected to significantly disrupt life for all demographics. Still, certain populations have disproportionately felt these impacts, often while contributing the least to climate change in the first place. Of particular concern are youth, who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change while simultaneously set to face a larger quantity of climate impacts over their lifetime. Children and youth are directly exposed to climate change through climate-related disease outbreaks, malnutrition due to drought and famine, increased domestic violence after extreme weather, conflict and displacement, and worsened school performance due to heatwaves and school closures.

Best Practices at-a-glance

Extreme Weather

- Discuss potential impacts and preparedness.
- Involve youth in disaster risk reduction (DRR).
- Provide extra support as needed.

Community

- Encourage collective action over individual responsibility.
- Foster youth involvement, participation, collaboration.
- Establish long-term alumni and check-in opportunities.

Social Media

- Discourage negative habits such as doomscrolling.
- Moderate negative environmental news.
- Provide opportunities for involvement.

Cross-Cutting

- Don't pathologize, medicalize, or individualize.
- Instill realistic hope and avoid superficial optimism.
- Acknowledge the scope of the problem.

Recommendations and Opportunities

- Policies
  - Organizations should include clear guidance for employees and members on how to address youth mental health.
  - A mental health task-force or working group in the organization can advocate for better policies to address mental health.
  - Existing policies advocating for youth protection and safety can be revised to include mental health principles and responding to climate anxiety.
  - Language and messaging should be streamlined to limit negative messages that lead to distrust of adult leadership or feelings of helplessness. This includes an overemphasis on urgency, placing responsibility on younger generations, or pathologizing health levels of climate anxiety.
- Trainings and Resources
  - Organizational leadership should pursue opportunities for members and employees to receive training in climate-focused mental health practices.
  - Existing trainings, workshops, and meetings should incorporate best practices and open dialogue on climate anxiety to increase organizational awareness.
  - Organizational leadership should evaluate and integrate resources into existing programs. Relevant resources such as art therapies, meditations, books, climate circles, and films have been promoted by the Climate Mental Health Network and are freely accessible. Additionally, the Youth and Environment Europe Eco Emotions Resource Pack provides expert-developed materials relevant for educators and leaders to implement.
- Programs
  - Programs involving youth in disaster risk reduction can better mitigate the negative impacts of extreme weather events, while also contributing to community rebuilding efforts.
  - Existing programming should offer youth the opportunity to open up about their emotions related to climate change.
  - Furthermore, fostering a sense of long-lasting community through community-building exercises should be a strategic priority for youth programs.
  - Providing opportunities for youth to express their emotions in constructive and creative ways (through a poem or art contest, for example), can open up the conversation about mental health in a lighthearted way.
  - Funding for future programs that are either focused on mental health principles, or strongly incorporate them can be pursued, especially as this topic becomes more popular and pertinent.
- Further research
  - As networks of highly-trained individuals, environmentally-motivated youth, and responsible leaders, youth climate organizations are at the forefront of research into climate anxiety and youth mental health.
  - Organizational leadership should consider ways to further contribute to an emerging understanding of this topic.
  - Further collaboration between environmental and mental health professionals should be considered as a way to promote this topic.