

Being blue won't save the planet, so why not acknowledge the grief, then take action?

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By **Judy Benson, Special to The Day**

Call it environmental grief, eco-anxiety or climate despair, a gloomy pall is pervading many people's attitudes about the state of the natural world these days.

"I'm one of the most eco-anxious people I know, but I've really been working to try to cope with it," said Hailey Baranowski, 20, who is in her junior year at the University of Connecticut with a double major in Environmental Science and Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

At times, she said, learning about the latest environmental disaster — be it wildfires, devastating hurricanes or species extinction — left her so overwhelmed she would start to shake and cry. As she learned to channel her feelings toward taking positive actions, dealing with the losses became easier. Those actions include studying for a career working for the environment, an independent study with the UConn Climate Corps on a Pollinator Pathway project in Preston, and leading hikes to encourage other UConn students to appreciate nature.

"It makes a big difference to me that I'm doing what I can," she said.

Like Baranowski, UConn senior Benjamin Harnish also realized that getting involved in working for the environment was the best antidote to the constant worry he was feeling about the state of the planet. A creeping sense of paralysis that anything could be done to help heal all the human-caused damage started to fade. Promising recent advances in nuclear fusion energy spur his optimism.

"It can cause some depression for sure," said Harnish, 24, who is majoring in Environmental Science and working on an independent study through the UConn Climate Corps on a New York City project to help flood-vulnerable communities. "But I know there's a way to fix it. That keeps me grounded."

A third UConn student, Zachary Boudah of Stonington, tempers optimism about solutions to the climate crisis with doses of reality — such as staying aware of how

disadvantaged communities are already being severely impacted, and the responsibility of wealthier nations to make major changes in resource-intensive lifestyles.

“I don’t want to drown in the glass half full,” said Boudah, a sophomore who is student body president at the Avery Point campus in Groton and works part time at Mystic Aquarium. With a double major in English and political science, he hopes for a career in the non-profit sector working on environmental policy.

“Hope can come out of grief,” he said. “I’m hopeful we will figure this out.”

For some, avoidance of the topic altogether has become a common strategy, but that just leads to disengagement and a loss of any sense of agency about making a contribution. Pamela Bedore, assistant professor of English who teaches environmental literature courses at Avery Point, said youth especially crave opportunities to talk about how they feel about what’s happening in the environment. This became obvious, she said, in 2017 after UConn added an environmental literacy course requirement for all students.

“We developed 100 E-courses,” said Bedore, referring to the classes created in various departments to fulfill the environmental literacy requirement. “Students started telling us that these courses were really making them anxious, that all the information was hard to process. It made us realize that we do need to attend to the affective aspect of this. This is a real issue.”

Finding hope in “Cli-fi”

In her classes, she assigns climate fiction, or “cli-fi” readings that often have dystopian or apocalyptic themes. She then leads them in discussions about whether the book left them feeling more or less empowered and asks, ‘where is the hope?’ The author’s act of writing the book, she tells them, is itself an act of hope and activism that the message of the story will spark awareness and motivation toward change. History, too, she notes, offers valuable examples of episodes when humanity faced annihilation, but persevered.

For Juliana Barrett, coastal habitat specialist at Connecticut Sea Grant who also teaches the Climate Corps class at UConn, understanding what is and isn’t under an individual’s control — and acting on it — are key to both her and her students staying optimistic and engaged despite the daunting environmental challenges. When her class delves into the topic of effective climate communication, she encourages them to see that using catastrophic language often just causes people to

simply shut down. Instead, effective messages convey that yes, the future is uncertain and always has been, but we can all use the limited power we have to make change, especially in our own communities. Whether that's adopting a vegan diet, shopping in thrift stores, promoting renewable energy or planting trees, everyone can do something.

“Hiding from the changes won't help me at all,” Barrett said. “I see where there are actions being taken and people who care very deeply, and the students I work with are the ones who are interested in getting out there and actively doing something.”

Professor Derek Turner, who teaches environmental philosophy classes at Connecticut College, said he, too, is inspired by students who see climate change as an opportunity, but also encounters students struggling with what the future holds.

“I sometimes have students who say, ‘let's go. I want to be part of saving the world,’” he said. “But it's also more common for kids to say that they're not going to have children, because of what it means to bring people into the world with climate change.”

Personally, he feels pessimistic but still committed to doing what he can to preserve and protect nature. Hope isn't necessary to motivate action, he believes.

“In motivating action we ought to think about duty—doing it because it's the right thing to do, not because we're hoping for some outcome,” he said.

In her recent book, “Learning in the Age of Climate Disasters: Teacher and Student Empowerment beyond Futurephobia,” retired high school history teacher Maggie Favretti of Mystic advocates a different approach to combating the negative mental health effects of environmental crises. Active engagement in projects that build a sense of belonging to a community, make a positive impact and provide a means of expressing emotions, she believes, are critical for youth and adults alike to escape feeling overwhelmed by dread.

“Regenerative learning and relationships that build resilience are the only path forward,” she said.

Faith in God and the inspiration of what others are doing to make a difference keeps the Rev. Denise Cabana, priest-in-charge of St. James Episcopal Church in New London, from getting depressed about the state of the environment. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, while painful, also revealed a hopeful

message, she said. During the lockdown, smog cleared in notoriously polluted cities, wildlife became more active and many people rediscovered the joy of getting outdoors.

“That gives me hope that we can change course,” she said. “None of us are being asked to save the world by ourselves, but if all of us choose one part, we can make it work.”

The students, professors and community leaders interviewed have all found unique ways of understanding and coping with the sadness that can come with caring about the natural world these days. But they share a deep connection and appreciation for the beauty and diversity of Earth formed by profound experiences in places near and far. Whether that’s on a favorite trail near home, the Redwoods of California or the Swiss Alps, time spent outdoors is a constant source of renewal and inspiration.

“I spend hours outside. It’s what I do to relax,” said Barrett.

One moment that especially fed her soul happened about five years ago while traveling to National Parks in the West. Hiking with one of her two sons, they came upon an alpine garden in full bloom at Grand Teton National Park. Overwhelmed by the expanse of colors on the mountainside, they returned later that day with her husband and other son so they could all share it. The sense of awe Barrett now carries with her helps her stay committed to doing what she can, an important part of the strategy advocated by Roger Gottlieb in his essay, “Living with Environmental Despair.”

Gottlieb, philosophy professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, suggests that cultivating a strong, caring relationship towards nature can be the foundation for coping effectively with the reality of the environmental crisis. If people love nature just as they do a dear family member hospitalized with a serious illness, he writes, they can both appreciate and protect its beauty as much as possible, while also mourning what is being lost.

“The truth is that we do not save a tree or sparrow by being unhappy,” he writes. “Along with our reasonable and deeply felt fear and grief, can we appreciate, just as deeply, that the universe has existed and that we got to be alive?...If we can, then despair will be real and potent, but will not dominate...It’s enough...for us to continue, for as long as we can, to both celebrate and protect it.”

Judy Benson is the communications coordinator at Connecticut Sea Grant, located at UConn's Avery Point campus, a federal-state partnership organization that advances resilient communities, healthy coastal ecosystems, environmental literacy, and sustainable aquaculture and fisheries. Learn more at: seagrant.uconn.edu.