

GOOD NATURED EP 2

CAROLINE HICKMAN



**GOOD
NATURED**
A PODCAST SERIES FROM
CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

Sofia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges. In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more.

I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

Julia: And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place. We know that these are quite hard times and everyone needs to have a bit of a pick me up so we're hoping that these conversations will inspire you.

Julia: Hey everyone! Today we're really excited to be with Caroline Hickman. Caroline is a lecturer at the Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath. And she is a psychotherapist looking into issues such as eco-anxiety. She's worked with young people for 25 years so she's had a very long career working with children and other young people.

Sofia: She's also a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance so she's been on the Executive Committee of that since 2009, and she is a podcaster herself. She has a podcast called Climate Crisis Conversations, Catastrophe or Transformation so you can look that up if you enjoy the conversation today, which I'm sure you will.

Julia: One thing that you might not know about Caroline is that she is doing a PhD at the University of Bath. She's researching children and young people's relationship with

nature and feelings about the climate and the ecological crisis, both in the UK, the Maldives and the South Pacific as well.

Sofia: So she's basically really looking at communities that are already affected by issues such as rising sea levels and seeing how climate change is really impacting on them. We wanted to talk to Caroline because this term of eco-anxiety has been in the news a lot lately. And I think that it's becoming a lot more widespread in the public's understanding of, uh, environmental issues.

Julia: That's definitely a topic that we really wanted to dive in because as Sofia just said, it seems that more and more people are experiencing it. And we've seen lots of young people taking to the streets and protesting to get the government to act against climate change, but also kind of expressing this grief and this despair that they have in terms of their future when it comes to climate change. So we were really keen on having a bit more background and a bit more info about that specific topic.

Sofia: You might be a little surprised to be hearing from an expert on grief, on an optimism podcast. But part of optimism is recognising the situation that you're in and being able to accept these harder feelings and work through them. And a lot of Caroline's work is about that. And actually, Caroline is going to give us various tips to explain how we can use that eco-anxiety to do various things through our work and our careers. So keep listening to find out what these tips are!

THE INTERVIEW

Sofia: Hi Caroline, just to start us off, do you think you could tell us a little bit about what eco-anxiety means?

Caroline: Yeah, sure. I suppose first I would say it's not actually a new condition it's been around for 40-50 years, really, but very niche originally, perhaps only being really experienced by climate scientists, conservationists, environmentalists, activists who are knowledgeable about the sort of deteriorating state of the world. They are increasingly becoming anxious that despite them raising the alarm and producing research on this, that they weren't really being listened to.

So the anxiety was certainly located in that very specific group 40-50 years ago. Now, we're seeing it widespread. We're seeing it go into the public domain. We're seeing broader groups of people become aware. Members of the public who perhaps have already, had a bit of an interesting conservation or environmental activism, but now are feeling extreme anxiety. So the first thing is to give you that kind of historical sense of it.

The other thing to say really early on is that it's not just anxiety. I think anxiety is the gateway emotion as you become aware of the sort of deteriorating state of the world and the planet.

And as you see the news in the Amazon, in Australia, the floods in Indonesia, then you're going to become anxious. You can't not become anxious. It's a quite emotionally healthy response to what's going on in the world. When you look at it. But as you become anxious, then you're going to move towards other feelings, perhaps fear, perhaps anger, perhaps frustration, perhaps the kind of disbelief that the government doesn't seem to be doing something, or people don't seem to be doing something and that can trigger a whole range of feelings like depression and despair and grief and loss. I think there's a lot of loss for people, particularly when they think about extinction of species. And then often, I hear in parents a lot of guilt and shame, and a lot of sense that actually we should have done something sooner- particularly feeling that in relation to their children and younger people.

And particularly with youth activists saying that we need to act now, that this is urgent, and then feeling that nothing is really being done. So when people talk about eco-anxiety, it really isn't just anxiety. It is an absolutely emotionally healthy response to what's going on in the world. It's not a pathology, it's not a mental illness. It's a sign of empathy and compassion as well. People who care will inevitably feel some anxiety.

What you don't want is for people to get stuck in that anxiety. I don't want it to sound like I'm saying it's a brilliant thing because obviously you don't want people to suffer too much. And so what we need to be doing is talking to people about how to process those complex feelings and move through the anxiety, through the kind of other more complex feelings such as depression or despair and loss towards action. There is a way through that, but you can't leap straight from anxiety to activism or action. That's bypassing the more deeper, complex feelings.

If we miss out on those deeper, sad feelings, then what often happens is people burn out. So you have people like environmental activists who just get delusional and despairing and exhausted and burn out quite quickly because they think quite reasonably and rationally that if we tell people the truth and we give them the data and we give them the science and give them the evidence, people will take action. But of course they're feeling really confused that people aren't taking action.

Julia: That's really interesting and actually I think that's something that activists are getting more and more aware of. I think these discussions around burn-out and how you can take care of your mental health as well are taking place more

and more commonly within the activism spheres. So I was just wondering, you've been working as a psychotherapist for almost 25 years and what exactly triggered your interest in the whole topic of climate change and eco-anxiety?

Caroline: Well, I was always obsessed with Jacques Cousteau when I was a child. So I was always just fascinated by the underwater world and always wanted to learn to dive. And I did, I learned to scuba dive and then became a diving instructor. I worked in Egypt for two years and I started to notice the change because I was spending every day underwater.

I was really noticing the impacts on the corals, the impacts on the fish. And because that was my day to day environment, it started to really show me how much things were changing. Before that I'd been environmentally aware but I hadn't really, living in the UK I hadn't returned in London at the time I hadn't really noticed what was happening. So I was aware, but not aware and we talk about that as a kind of disavowal as a defense in psychotherapy terms where you're sort of aware of things with one part your mind, and you can dismiss them with the other parts of your mind. You think: 'Oh yeah, this is getting bad, but it's not that bad yet. Right?' So you're able to push away some of that alarm and that concern.

And then 20 something years ago I was embedded underwater for over two years and it really came home to me. And I came back to the UK and went back to work as a psychotherapist. And then thought, no, I need to do something. I'd also have been speaking with people out in Egypt, about what they were noticing and feeling quite alarmed and quite anxious about what we were doing to our marine environment and thinking, well, actually we're culpable in the West. We're culpable and we just kind of turn a blind eye to this and actually we need to be talking more about this.

So I realised I could make a difference, bringing the psychology into that environmental awareness. And I found the Climate Psychology Alliance group, which was wonderful because you suddenly feel there's other people having the same conversations, sharing the same concerns. And then you realise you can be useful, that there's ways that you can be useful as a psychotherapist to this. So I started researching six years ago, how young people and children feel about the climate emergency.

Because interestingly at the time a few people said to me, six years ago, 'that's a bit niche. Nobody's going to be that interested in that. Right?' Obviously the world's changed a bit in the last five, six years. So there's been a rapid speed of awareness of change of understanding maybe six years ago when I started this, it was only small groups that would have been interested and now today everybody's interested pretty much. So that's been my kind of journey.

Now I think of myself as a climate psychologist or a climate psychotherapist. I help the Climate Psychology Alliance develop therapeutic support. We're running workshops for teachers, for counselors and therapists to enable them to start to develop a climate aware practice as therapists and to start to meet the psychological needs of the population. So it's gone from research back into practice.

A lot of my individual psychotherapy work now is with adults and with young people, helping them deal with their eco-anxiety, but also helping them deal with things, feelings like grief and guilt and helping parents learn how to talk to their children and support their children.

So it's really evolved into a whole practice. That's fascinating because I, I kind of assumed that, you started with the psychology aspect and then got into everything that was linked to the environment and the climate, but it's actually completely opposite. You really came through first this understanding of environmental challenges and then got into it. I think eco-psychology has been really interesting to lots of psychotherapists who from childhood have had a sort of natural leaning towards the environment and the natural world. So I think a lot of children grow up with that inherent empathetic relationship with animals and with the environment and don't necessarily disconnect from it.

And then as you grow up, people either tell you to be quiet about it because you can be a bit ashamed around it or you turn it into your career, right? So you become an environmentalist, you become a natural scientist because that's what's at the center of your world. There's a lot of people I think for whom, like myself, it becomes slightly on the side, but it's always been there. And then if we can find ways to bring it back in later, I think we do and certainly eco-psychology and climate psychology really allows us to integrate those things so it means you're practicing in a much more holistic way.

It means that psychotherapy, it's not just about the individual, it's about the individual in relation to their environment because climate anxiety is not just an individual problem. It's also due to their concern about the environment that people are coming in and talking to me as much about their grief about the fires in Australia as they are about their concerns about their marriage.

So they're moving between personal concern, environmental, global, collective concern and back again. I think people are shifting a lot in the way they're learning to talk about this and are feeling less isolated because the more we talk about it, the more people are given permission to talk about it, and then they feel better. Because they think: 'Oh, I'm

not the only one that is feeling terrible grief because of the koala bears'. But actually, maybe I don't want to sound overly optimistic, but I do think there is something transformational and positive and optimistic about that. This is giving us opportunities to heal some of those splits in this relationship with the environment. And the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis isn't giving us many gifts, but maybe that is one.

Sofia: Based on everything you've been saying it seems really important for conservationists to integrate both this rational and this emotional side. So why is that important and how can we do it?

Caroline: The reason we need to have the head and the heart together is because wisdom lies in the middle of those two. And if you think of those two as incompatible, think of them as like oil and water. If you put oil and water or oil and vinegar in a bottle together and shake it, they'll separate out. But if you put sugar or honey into that mix and shake it, it will emulsify. So wisdom in the middle of the head and the heart is compassion and kindness and understanding. We need to have deep kindness and compassion, and then stand for each other, but also extend that compassion and empathy and understanding for the others, the other species, the natural world who are disenfranchised, who don't have a voice and who cannot show us their suffering.

I mean they do show us that suffering, if we can bear to look or if we can hear them. And one of the reasons why a lot of children and young people are really feeling the heat, the pain of this and why these strikers are really outspoken and speaking about grief and despair and anger is because they haven't separate it out, that sense of connection with the natural world in the same way as a lot of adults feel that they've got to, not all adults do, but a lot do.

A lot of children, I think, are living closer to that empathetic relationship with the other, with other animals. So we shouldn't be surprised when children are really speaking out clearly about the unfairness and the injustice of what's going on in the world at the moment. And children haven't learnt that injustice is something we all have to get used to as adults and I'm so glad they haven't!

And you know, those of us that are still sort of fighting social injustice and environmental injustice we've not forgotten either. At the moment, I've started talking to people about the need for both external activism and internal activism. External activism is really important. It's absolutely essential for our sanity and to take action to save the world, but we also have to match that with an emotionally oriented internal activism where we're developing emotional resilience.

We're deepening our capacity to deal with that mix of emotions that I've just been talking about. Because if we just project all of that externally out into the world, we're forgetting we're leaving ourselves behind. Number one, we're human. And because we're human, we're part of the world so this isn't just something that's happening to somebody else out there. It's happening to us. And if we can feel that empathetically and compassionately, it will actually fuel our capacity to take sustainable action over the longer term, and it will help prevent burnout. It moves you into a more meaningful, deeper connection with the work that you're doing so you can then tolerate despair, tolerate the bad days because the bad days actually have meaning. It seems it's as important to feel determined and passionate and engaged and to fight this as it is to collapse and sometimes feel that grief and that loss. Both are equally important.

Julia: So as you said, it's a very healthy response, but at the same time, it can be very paralyzing or that grief and that anxiety. So what tools can young people use to actually use it to move forward? Is there anything they can do?

Caroline: Well, first and foremost, I think you need to have somebody like me. But it doesn't have to be me, but somebody like me. And I think that is the first thing that has to happen because you need to be supported in recognising that it's not fair and that it's not your responsibility, but I think we can then start to act together.

I'm certainly speaking a lot with youth activists about how we can work together to meet with groups of young people to help educate. We're going in schools a lot, we're developing street schools, working with Greenpeace, we're supporting teachers in learning about how to work with children and bring this into schools. I'm working with teachers in schools about how to find ways to talk with even very young children about this.

What you do with young children is you don't talk about the impact on them directly cause that's going to be too scary. You talk about the impact on a creature that they love. Ask them what their favorite creature is. And then you can start to research and educate them around what impact will climate change have on that creature?

And then you can lead them into understanding and learning about that. But not too directly. You don't want to be talking to six year olds about the extinction of the human species, because that is just going to be way too scary. It's pretty scary for us, right? We certainly don't want to go there with six year olds, but you can definitely talk to them about the pressure the other animals are feeling, but also how we work with those other animals.

Sofia: What makes you optimistic about the future and the role different people have to play in it?

Caroline: I'm really very optimistic about a number of things. Certainly watching young people find their voice, develop agency and realise that they can make a difference is phenomenal. Watching parents come to terms with the fact that they have to shift their parenting style. I've been talking with groups of parents about parenting in the Anthropocene, which is not that catchy and maybe sounds a bit scary. But you need to parent slightly differently right now because you can't promise your children that everything will be alright, because it won't be.

You can't parent in many of the ways in which you wished you could have in the past but what you can promise your child is that you will be there with them. So I'm always optimistic about the capacity of human beings to find ways to work together creatively and to heal rifts and heal divides creatively and imaginatively and passionately and determinately. And we often will only do that when we're really up against it. So we are, I think, really up against it right now. I'm hoping that we find some ways through this together.

Certainly the work I've been doing with the children in the Maldives has just been completely inspiring to me. And whenever I have a rotten day, I think of them and I think: 'Oh my gosh, there's absolutely nothing on this Earth that I should feel depressed or exhausted about'. So I'll give myself a half an hour to be depressed and exhausted and miserable and then I get back up and get out there because these young people are facing this today. So I think they are inspirational!

The climate and biodiversity emergency, nobody is going to be saying, 'Oh, this is okay that this is happening'. Nobody in their right minds would say that, but I am able to hear and to feel in myself sometimes. I'm not completely sorry that this is happening because there are some good things coming out of this. I'm wishing we hadn't had to go about finding those things this way. And I'm hoping that we can kind of find more practical technological solutions to start to mitigate and stop some of the worst effects of this. Of course I am and there's some reparative healing, which is global, which is cultural, which is intergenerational, which is a privilege to be part of.

And it's a false argument when we talk about optimism versus pessimism, I don't think either is the way forward. I think it has to be a bit of both, but actually I don't think we need to be pessimistic. I think we need to be realistic and that realism may sometimes be painful or depressing or difficult to bear or difficult to face, but that doesn't mean that we should throw out some optimism.

In the Climate Psychology Alliance we talk about having hope, but we talk about radical hope and not false hope. And not that some miracle or just technology will save us or planting trees will save us. None of those things on their own will save us and it's already too late anyway Vanuatu. And it's too late for the Maldives. So we have to shift out of that kind of stuff, slightly sort of narcissistically entitled Western, industrialized mindset that says it's only saving us. That's important! We've already lost other countries and we need to face the reality of that and make amends.

I think another group that is really seen at the forefront of all of these issues is conservationists. They are trying to protect species and ecosystems that they are seeing getting degraded or disappearing in front of their eyes. So they're highly impacted by all of this.

Julia: Are there any ways that they can power through all that eco-anxiety to keep moving forward?

Caroline: The last thing I would do, and this isn't meant critically, is suggest to someone they power through it. That's the last thing I would do because you'll burn out. And in order to do that, you are cutting off those that part of yourself that feels despair. And patience, depression and grief and sadness and hopelessness.

So I would say find the power in your hopelessness. Find the passion and the ruthless determination in your despair and actually dig deep. Paradoxically by doing that, you find the capacity for sustainable activism. Because that's how I generate my rage and my determination and my capacity to speak with empathy, but also to speak through pain and speak through despair. And that means people hear me because I will speak through those emotions and I speak as though they were mine because they are mine. And it means then that your words have more impact so you don't want to split off a part of yourself just because it's painful. It's a bit like trying to live your life with your left arm, tied behind your back. You're far more effective if you've got two arms in the first place. You're far more effective if you are using your pain and your rage and your grief effectively.

In order to learn how to do that, well, we can support you in learning how to do that. If we bring that back to conservationists. I think as a group, you're absolutely right, you're on the front line and I think you tolerate the pain far more than the vast majority of the public because you're motivated through your heart to do something, to help others, to help other species. So you're putting yourself in that extraordinarily painful place in order to expose yourself to the impact. And that hurts. And I personally find the impact of looking at that incredibly painful. So I think you have to learn self-compassion, you have to learn to be supported. You have to learn that your vulnerability is actually your

greatest strength. And your uncertainty and your grief, if you find ways to incorporate that into your work, will actually give your work more impact and more power and more people will listen to you. But you don't want it to dominate. You don't want it to take over. So you need support. So talk to the Climate Psychology Alliance, we will give free psychotherapy to conservationists who are completely trashed by the work you're doing. You have to find other people to help absorb that pain and that grief and that rage so that you're not having to either suppress it or deny it to keep going, right or power through. No, don't do that. Turn that into your most powerful weapon. And be aware that you're just doing an amazing job, frankly, and we really need you to keep going.

Sofia: So speaking of conservation, this is a question that we ask everyone who comes on the podcast. It's a little bit cheeky or silly, but if you had to choose one organism to make a case for on this planet, what would it be and why?

Caroline: I'd probably save whales but I would try and bargain with you and ask to save all marine species. I'd probably be trying to bargain really hard and ask for sharks, whales, and dolphins and turtles. And then, I probably can't pick one.

Sofia: I mean, it's not a hard sell with me, obviously. I'm a marine biologist. I want all marine animals to be alive! Thank you so much for speaking with us. I think that was a really fascinating conversation about this relationship between hope and grief. Which needs to come first and how they can coexist, because we all need to try to find this delicate balance in order to be able to move forward and try to create the kind of world we would like to see.

Caroline: You're really welcome. And thank you because it's really lovely for me as well, to have the opportunity to talk about these things in this way, with people who understand. So it's nice from my side too.

Julia: Well, that's amazing. Thank you so much! We really had a great time chatting to you and you've definitely given us lots of food for thoughts.

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Sofia: What a wonderful conversation! I feel that I now have a much better understanding of eco-anxiety and grief, but also the ways in which we can actually turn those maybe harder feelings into sources of empowerment and positivity.

Julia: Totally! And I think it was really interesting as well to hear about how it's actually so widespread and the fact that it's a healthy response. I think often in the narrative, it

comes about as if it's almost a pathology or a mental illness. And actually, I really liked the fact that Caroline said it's a sign of empathy. It's actually a really good thing to experience. So that was really interesting.

Sofia: Absolutely! And this idea that sometimes we just need to feel the loss and the grief, right? And that actually squashing them down is taking a lot of energy and so acknowledging them and working through them can actually get you to a much more empowered place and a place where you are much more capable.

Julia: Definitely. And also the fact that compassion and kindness needs to be the link between the head and the heart when she went through through that metaphor that she's used, I thought that was quite empowering as well, just knowing that we need to have compassion, not just for each other, but also for the other, which sometimes can be nature. In some situations, adults can be seen as putting it too much as the other. And I think maintaining these links with the natural world is really important.

Another aspect that I found really inspiring during our conversation with Caroline is also the fact that as she mentioned, young people are really finding their voice. We've really seen it with the Youth For Climate Strikes. And that by itself is such an interesting development because I think that's really this group of people who are developing agency and who are really keen on pushing governments to take action. And even at the current times where we are (lots of people are stuck at home in lockdown) it's very inspiring to see that they actually keep doing the digital strikes every Friday and that they're still keen on making a difference and really pushing in terms of climate change and what the governments need to do.

Sofia: Absolutely! I think having this potential for collaboration between psychologists and conservationists is really exciting. It's not something that we think about often enough. It's not a connection that comes up often enough, at least in my experience, but I think that it's one that can be so fruitful.

Julia: I think we'll definitely see more connections between these two groups in the future. So really looking forward to seeing how that develops.

Sofia: And that's it for this episode! We really enjoyed talking to Caroline Hickman and if you did as well, then you can always look up her podcast. You can look up her work-please look up the Climate Psychology Alliance.

Julia: We hope you enjoyed this episode, make sure to subscribe and follow us on Apple Podcast and Spotify if you want to be notified of upcoming episodes. And of

course you can also rate and review on Apple Podcast and that helps other people find us.

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