

REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

HOPE IN DISCUSSING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Rachel Yoho

The narrative is changing, albeit slowly. “Climate change” terminology is sliding into “climate crisis.”¹ Environmental issues are at the forefront of national and international news. However, every day in the life of the environment feels like one step forward and at least one step back. Progress gained stands alongside profound loss.

Whether it’s on the news or right outside our door, we can find negativity about the environment all around us. Recently, I sat awake in the middle of the night and watched an incredible lightning show from the window. It quietly passed by with flash upon flash. At the time, I thought nothing more than it was a spectacular display of energy. In the morning, I found that, just forty miles away, this same storm’s accompanying tornadoes devastated several suburbs. The tornadic activity in the area was exceptional and forecasted to continue. Although individual events are difficult to attribute to climate change, these shifts are likely signs of the future.²

Environmental news and rhetoric have transformed a significant portion of climate change denial into a sense of fatalism and hopelessness. The constant barrage of loss, destruction, and extinction, along with the seeming inevitability of deleterious climate change, can create a vortex of learned helplessness from which it’s difficult to escape. It’s both fatigue and a form of propaganda. If we can’t stop the tumbling boulder, these voices scream to just step out of the way and watch it roll.

As a scientist, I’ve studied many environmental topics, including waste treatment, clean energy technologies, and how we

communicate. The emotional pendulum accompanying staying current in my work—or following general societal discourse—repeatedly disrupts how I interact with the world. The boulder grows. The frequency of the interactions increases. Just like the invasive honeysuckle creeping ever closer to my home, the potential for learned helplessness grows nearer. It’s a constant struggle to create balance.



Honeysuckle

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In the classroom, current events provide a perfect opportunity to create additional relevance through showing connections in environmentally focused courses. Yet I struggle. The connections are straightforward, relevant, and intellectually stimulating. They're convenient to find and use. However, I wonder about the implications of what I bring into the classroom. Am I projecting the emotional fatigue of yet more stories of gloom, even if they connect with the discussion topics? Should I more actively curate and artificially balance the types of current events included to create a more even or perhaps positive outlook? Or is the role of education to inspire by focusing solely on the good?

In the work of Swaisgood and Sheppard, the field of conservation biology provides a valuable model to follow when discussing hope.³ Perhaps we need more than that in environmental discussions. Anyone studying the natural world, from the microscope to the ecosystem, is an observer of some form of change. And what we see is so often in the direction of increasing entropy, heightened uncertainty, and more frequent natural disasters. Beyond this, we're also humans who have complex interactions with society and the natural world. We're participants, educators, speakers, communicators, and, importantly, bearers of constantly modulating hopefulness or helplessness.

I can ponder creating an intentional balance in environmental current events connections as I walk around my neighborhood. Inevitably, I end up picking up the signature detritus of our time—bits of plastic carelessly discarded or blown from their intended location. My time spent in this convenient outdoor location becomes just a version of nature, with the drone of landscaping services going about their work, signs for chemical application dates on lawns, non-existent recycling bins, and enormous dark SUVs zipping past. Perhaps my once-calming outdoor break and ritual isn't enough. The location itself reinforces several environmental challenges. The walking becomes just exercise, rather than filling any sort of deficit by spending time in nature.⁴

Reconsidering the classroom, I wonder if I'm doing justice to the environmental connections in everyday life and current events. Am I effectively using Swaisgood and Sheppard's "language of hope"? They recommend intentional incorporations of hope into the scientific culture and norms of the practitioners in their areas. Among other recommendations, they also discuss the importance of time in nature.⁵ I'm concerned that my neighborhood nearly fails that classification. Instead, I turn my focus to my classroom practices.

After studying the communication of climate change and energy technologies in education, I understand the challenge.⁶ Evidence-based practices are necessary to research. In the case of bringing environmental current events into the classroom, however, putting evidence-based practices into action becomes difficult. I'm watching the boulder pick up speed down the hill.

In recent work on climate change and human health, I considered the different factors that I could discuss. The direct impacts of climate change on health, like extreme weather and heat waves, are straightforward to discuss, while some of the indirect impacts are as well.⁷ Crop yields, disease outbreaks, and vector populations, as well as social conditions more broadly, economic prosperity, and the built environment are complex topics, yet they pose relatively few difficulties in education. Instead, what I decided to focus on were the less discussed impacts of climate change and human health—topics like allergens and mental health.

What I found was that I wanted to focus on the areas that were not acknowledged or well understood. Educationally, this presents a challenge. It's difficult to say that "I don't know" or "we don't know." Unfortunately, the key is often that we don't know *yet*. When I brought mental health and climate change into my work, I found it compelling to note that these "tertiary effects" are not widely recognized.⁸ Projections question whether climate change, as an important systemic multiplier, may be close to the same level of acknowledgement as primary and secondary effects (like natural disasters and diseases) by 2050.

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Plastic debris from the author's neighborhood

I found that I could incorporate certain concepts that I occasionally use in environmental discussions into the work. These might include biophilia (the love for nature), nature deficit disorder (the non-clinical theory that less time in nature is detrimental), solastalgia (distress caused by unwanted changes to the home or local environment), and ecosystem services for mental health (generally local resources) or deeply held socio-cultural environmental values (for example, religious practices or cultural mythologies).

Even as I considered all this about climate change and mental health, I found that I wasn't thinking about my own experience. It was easy to frame the discussion as concerning some vague "they." *They* may experience solastalgia. *Their* area has certain ecosystem services that include potential mental

health benefits. Or, less vaguely, exacting case studies may reveal investigations and build evidence in the discussion, but remain separated from the personal, making it easier not to think about the abstract concept of the boulder rushing down the hill. My line of thinking wasn't yet connected to my lived experience beyond the academic. However, when I turned to my local area, the environmental current events became more negative—tornadoes, floods, crop failures.

The amorphous forces urging the boulder onward are fading. More frequently, I find hope in the broad discourse. Leaders, activists, scientists, and policy wonks are acknowledging the environment and working to create a more sustainable future. More people are concerned with environmental issues—particularly climate change from a broad perspective—than have

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been in recent years.⁹ The number of hands reaching up to slow the boulder is increasing.

I know that humans have incredible power to destroy. The Anthropocene has documented this well. Yet I also see the inherent spark of change for the better. Humans have the ability and the means to interact productively with our habitat. The strikes and demonstrations of the youth climate movement show the spark that may earn the youth of today the title of “greatest generation” someday. Just as the World War II Greatest Generation was shaped by complex socio-political forces, long-term war, economic turmoil, and rapidly changing technology, the late Millennials and Generation Z are reshaping activism, education, and heightened awareness of our only habitat. Similar to those during other critical periods of youth activism in history, their voices are strong. So, too, are the older voices. The intergenerational relationships are building. Key players are recognizing the role of the environment in our collective future.

More than this, recognition of the complex intersections of environmental issues with social justice, human health, and mental health is increasing steadily. Policymakers are recognizing the need and setting the stage for comprehensive environmental action around the world. Grassroots activism is combining with top-down governmental action. Social justice and environmental justice are aligning in the dominant narrative pushing for action.

Perhaps any environmentally related classroom needs its own set of guidelines for hope when discussing environmental topics. Covering current environmental topics can be emotionally taxing. However, seeking and including these connections can enrich the discussion and learning experience substantially, while overlooking them can create a dilemma. Swaisgood and Sheppard provide guidelines for the field of conservation biology with respect to “hope,” but I primarily focus on authenticity—asking myself about whether the example’s inclusion creates an authentic connection and learning experience,

adding relevance to the class. *Is the current events topic important to mention? Am I being authentic from my own lived experience in my reactions and teaching by using this material?* Through this reflection, I can analyze my response to events from my various lenses—professor, scientist, and community member.



I also spend time reflecting on the reasons for the choice. *Does the example or connection include a next step forward for the environmental discussion? If not, can I?* Through a focus on next steps or broader impacts, the example builds additional relevance. I can attempt to create a culture of realism, next-step action, and hope. Finally, I acknowledge the primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts of the environmental current event topic and the resulting future outlook on and actions spurred by environmental issues. Unfortunately, environmental challenges and issues do not exist in a vacuum. Connections with environmental justice, social issues, social media trends, or pop culture are both realistic and build an additional layer of authenticity in the classroom. Perhaps explicit guidance on analyzing multifaceted environmental issues may help students create similar understanding and connections later.

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I realized that I've found my hope. It wasn't necessarily in the space around me. It wasn't contained in the majority of the news. Instead, this hope lies in the changing narrative, the vast number of voices, and the action across demographics. The hope is now creating action and a feedback loop—this time, a valuable one. While the time I've spent reflecting on my use of environmental current events returned me to near where I started, now at least I'm acknowledging the struggle. I don't need to create balance in the classroom; I need to be real. As a scientist and educator, I can implement evidence-based practices, create inclusive learning environments, and most importantly, be authentic about my own struggle with hope. Perhaps, like the fortune cookie I opened earlier today said, hope does actually spring eternal. I just need to consider where to look.

Photo Credits: Rachel Yoho.

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NOTES

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