Futility and Environmentalism: Affective repertoires and the imposition of limits

Helen F. Wilson

Abstract

Drawing on debates concerning crisis-laden horizons and the affective modes and narrative templates of environmentalism, the paper examines claims about how the feel of the affective present might or should be organised. To do so, it focuses on the appearance of futility in seabird research and conservation to consider what it reveals about injunctions to act and jarring encounters with crisis. Caught between futility's capacity to both enliven and flatten, the paper examines the contentious nature of futility's public utterance and its persuasive expression, to ask what futility does to the grip of ideas and claims about how things ought to be done. Taking leave from debates on how to stave off paralysis in an era of extinction and loss, the paper focuses on what it feels like to dwell in a refigured present in which futility becomes a corporeal condition. In doing so, the paper reflects on how limits can impose themselves in ways that are not addressed in debates over what constitutes good or bad affect or appropriate forms of address. It finishes by raising questions about what happens when researchers become responsible for stoking negative affect.

Keywords seabirds; extinction; affect; loss; environmentalism

Already Too Late

How should we respond to this present era of extinction and loss? What impressions should it make? And what underpins the inspiration to 'do something – anything – to stop what might be inevitable'?[1]

When undertaking research on seabird extinction and coastal heritage, I interviewed several natural scientists involved in undertaking annual surveys of seabird colonies along Northern European coastlines. Counts play a crucial role in the classification and cataloguing of endangered species, which are further channelled through different social institutions to become expressions of 'collective concern'.[2] Monitoring data is used to gather understanding on annual variation and long-term changes, while also helping to identify connections between different species and a range of pressures. It was during one of these interviews that futility came up. I was mid-way through a set of questions around accelerated decline and intersecting threats – overfishing, climate change, predation, plastic – and keen to know what the scientist thought were the most pressing issues. His response was short, and he dismissed the question with a shrug. For him, it didn't matter. As I returned to some of the debates that have been occupying the scientific community, he offered a clarification: it didn't matter because 'it's over'. It was already too late; the future was determined and all action was futile. Struck by the finality of this response and what I perceived to be a lack of purpose, I wondered what he considered his role and motivation to be. For him, this was easy to answer: he documents the decline.

This encounter betrayed an assumption about imperative agency, the familiarity of injunctions to act, and the assumed role of scientists, while the flatness of the scientist's response prompted a reflection on the affective modes that typify environmental work.[3] It left an impression and several months later I recounted this exchange while at a local debate on environmental enchantment and the urgency of crisis in the North of England. For some, the interaction was unsurprising. Greeted with a shrug of resignation, it was just another account to add to the general 'doom and gloom' and the growing sense of impending, insurmountable loss. It was an account that was in line with predictions that some seabirds, once populous,

could disappear from coastlines within the next fifty years and one that readily confirmed all too familiar classifications of endangerment. For those that regularly storied disappearance by mobilising the 'enumerative power' of red lists, catalogues and graphs with downward trajectories, it was hardly new (*Imagining Extinction*, p61).

For others, however, the scientist's position marked a dangerous precedent. Of key concern was whether the man was a public spokesperson and if so whether people would be persuaded by his futility. Surely, given the man's presumed credibility and the deference shown to scientific testament, this statement risked rendering their activism and public engagement useless in a context where the repetition of emergency and crisis has normalised the need for 'precipitous intervention'.[4] It was unclear whether their outrage was a response to having their own sense of surety destabilised, whether it confirmed a tendency to focus on future tipping points that obscured present deterioration, or whether it was a reaction to a perceived dispassion or dereliction of scientific duty. Perhaps it was a combination, but what was notable was that, while exasperated by the scientist's statement, their frustrations were not necessarily about the sentiment or his sense of futility, but rather his public articulation of it and his failure to prescribe action. While futility has its origins in the Latin *futtilis:* that which easily pours out or is leaky, hence untrustworthy or useless, here, the chief concern was that futility itself might be leaky, that it might be a disposition that could be easily catching or persuasive, that it might have an unintended *affective grip* that risked undermining the ideological footing and appeal of their own work.

At the same time, a debate was happening around David Attenborough's new wildlife series, *Dynasties* (2018), which raised questions about the presenter's brand of environmentalism, the series' perceived lack of political critique and the line between education and

entertainment. The five-part BBC documentary series followed the 'secret lives' of five 'charismatic, captivating animals as they fight for their families against the odds'.[5] Promising dramatic scenes and a new form of wildlife filmmaking, Attenborough described the programme as offering the public a 'relief from the political landscape which otherwise dominates our thoughts'. While not necessarily a complete escape, Attenborough's suggestion that the programme might provide some relief for viewers 'bombarded with Brexit, Trump and other grim news'[6] offered a diagnosis of the public mood and pointed to a lack of appetite for further doom and crisis. In a context where people were continuously confronted with gloomy forecasts and 'goings-on' the presenter's point was simple: too much alarmism is a turn-off. The public mood is sombre enough.

Attenborough's assumed position as a commentator and reader of the public mood replicates an ideological structure of social order and authority, while depicting a passive audience that is subjected to a general gloom. As Nicole Seymour has argued, accusations of 'doom and gloom' have historically shaped derision and public animosity toward mainstream environmentalism, which has been accused of mobilising specific affective appeals in a desire for certainty and 'neat narratives' about the future. As she suggests, 'we need look no further than the derisive phrase "gloom and doom", so often lobbed at reportage on environmental problems by audiences of all political stripes, to understand the role of affect'.[7] Indeed, recognition of this public derision and prevailing stereotypes can be detected in Attenborough's insistence that the series was not an 'ecological programme', not 'proselytising' nor 'alarmist' (*David Attenborough*).

Like many others that have highlighted the risks of emotional paralysis and the sense that stories and images of decline can only do so much, Attenborough insisted that repeated

warnings about destruction, climate change and extinction are counterproductive. In response to criticism that his messaging was not political enough or overt enough about the serious and structural threats faced by the species that he narrates (including the tendency to abstract 'moral duty') he underlined the value of 'wonder' in an interview for the *Observer*. In short, if people can see the wonder of nature they are more likely to care for it, and if they care for it they are more likely to take action to save it (*David Attenborough*). While Attenborough's explanation conformed to the expectation of functionality – that the series, however much of a relief from the political landscape, might spark necessary change, for the environmental commentator George Monbiot, Attenborough's characteristic reliance on the wonder of nature was not only misplaced but a form of deception. In a corresponding opinion piece for *The Guardian*, Monbiot lambasted the focus on wonder and the depiction of pristine environments to suggest that it not only lends itself to complacency but actively obscures existential threat and the structural conditions that drive it.[8]

For Monbiot, this obscurity was made worse by the knowledge that Attenborough had recently been voted one of the UK's most trusted public figures, thus elevating the potential ramifications of *Dynasties'* so-called 'deceit'. This critique of Attenborough's (mis)use of authoritative power sidesteps a wider reflection on whose voice is accorded significance in these debates, especially in the media, but these debates are far from novel. The relationship between (scientific) education, entertainment, affect and aesthetics has been the source of extensive handwringing since natural history became not only a site of education but tasked with engendering an appreciation for nature capable of rousing public interest in conservation and fragile ecosystems.[9] Before developments in photography, habitat dioramas that offered powerful and intimate encounters with 'distant untouched lands and exotic animals' were designed to provide such an 'accurate illusion' of a window onto nature that they would

compel people to 'act'.[10] Yet an emphasis on aesthetics and their affective appeals was accused of distracting from the pedagogical purpose of displays and placing too much trust in visitors 'to perceive the scientific and social lessons embedded in … exhibits' (*Life on Display*, p63).[11]

Of course, these debates about how best to engage audiences and diverse publics in matters of the environment are not only ideological, but largely irrelevant if there is nothing to be done – when direct action or political response is no longer considered sufficient or where the battle is considered 'already lost'.[12] So, what is at stake in these opening examples? They speak to a set of debates about the affects, sensibilities and tactics that tend to characterise environmentalism and its affective appeals, along with assumptions about what environmentalism – and environmental communication – should look and feel like (*Bad Environmentalism*). They reveal how (in)action is anticipated and point to a set of expectations about how things ought to be done. Offering a starting point for examining the relationship between affect and ideology in the context of environmental crisis, they concern not only the affects that are seemingly central to mainstream environmentalism and the grip of ideas, but how an interest in the strengthening of affective appeal might be considered ideological or to reveal ideological subtexts that both shape and confirm how the role of environmentalism is understood. They demonstrate a concern for how environmental messaging might organise the feel of the affective present and shape capacities to act and while the seabird scientist is differently positioned to Attenborough or Monbiot, in the reactions to his claim that 'there is nothing to be done' it is possible to detect an expectation of address that is shaped by convention. His flat assessment of futility was awkward – in leaving no room for action, whether it be to avert catastrophe, improve the world, or simply make us feel better, his claim that there is nothing to be done refused a functional message,

which not only created ambivalence but, for those working in the field of conservation, risked stoking ‘bad affect’.

My examination of the relationship between affect, futility and environmental ideas takes a broad definition of environmentalism as its starting point and speaks to the blurred line that exists between science and environmentalism. This is an environmentalism that, as Heise suggests, has not only tended to focus on core issues – biodiversity loss, climate change and resource extraction – but comes from a very specific history and set of ideological commitments: a concern for the destruction of nature that arose following the birth of western industrialisation and the moral duty to conserve it. Crucial to this understanding of environmentalism is the establishment of societies for the protection of nature at the turn of the nineteenth century, which subsequently laid the ground for modern environmental movements. Beyond a particular history, Heise is instructive in demonstrating how this brand of environmentalism has come to be characterised by the repetition of common tropes and tactics, which are intended to guide political action and convince an audience of the necessity of concern. This includes a reliance on familiar ‘story templates’, which connect an awareness of nature’s value (and inherent beauty) with a ‘foreboding sense of its looming destruction’ (*Imagining Extinction*, p7). For Seymour, these templates are further typified by an affective range or stance that not only includes ‘doom and gloom’ but tends towards ‘guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness and wonder” (*Bad Environmentalism*, p4). In this vein, while Attenborough presented wonder as a vital alternative to despair, it is possible to understand wonder and despair as two sides of the same coin, making wonder part of the same affective repertoire that has come to characterise instructive forms of environmental communication (p18). There may be debate around what constitutes an affective norm or an

appropriate affect, but that story templates are designed to instruct how an audience should think and feel is clear.

The familiar tropes and affective repertoires that characterise mainstream environmentalism and its concern for crisis-laden horizons point to a particular worldview, which excludes the many worlds that are already over and the many people who don't have full access to the world that is under threat.[13] The failure to ask 'whose world is ending?' is a point that I will return to, but what follows is a reflection on futility and the affective appeals of environmental/scientific communication, which comes out of research on human-avian relations and seabird conservation in the UK and Norway, with a specific concern for what is left unsaid. In focusing on futility as affect, it concerns those affects that diminish one's capacity to act and that resist affirmative recuperation or redemptive conversion – anxiety, fear, dread, exhaustion, indifference, or hopelessness – to ask what the feeling of futility does to the grip of ideas and claims about how things ought to be done. Beginning first with debates on how to stave off paralysis and the promise of ethical witnessing, the paper then examines what it feels like to live in the undertow of crisis and what this means for injunctions to act.

Affective Repertoires in Negative Times

When it is widely claimed that we are living in 'negative times' futility might be considered apt.[14] Indeed, when it comes to seabirds, it would be difficult to argue that the picture isn't bleak. As a family of birds, seabirds are the most vulnerable to extinction globally, a threat that has been brought to attention through an array of literary concepts, aesthetic genres, story lines, and expressions of collective concern (*Imagining Extinction*). As such, and as key

indicators of marine health and environmental change, seabirds have not only become barometers for 'whole oceans'[15] but, in times of environmental crisis, valuable to think and *feel* with. Cliffs once filled with their raucous cries are now defined by their absence, while conceptual and linguistic attempts to reckon with altered realities have homed in on the experiences of silence that have followed their disappearance.[16] Seabirds have appeared as 'ghost species' in ruminations on the 'spectral' quality of extinction,[17] as well as experiments in place writing that adopt alternative literary modes to address contemporary environmental relationships. Their 'mysterious lives' away from land have been treated with awe, nostalgia and sorrow, positioning seabirds as 'true' figurations of the 'wild',[18] while, through the figure of the Great Auk, they have become a cautionary tale of species confined to 'taxidermied existence'.[19] As plastic excess is added to environmental agendas globally, seabirds appear in images that centre its deathly qualities and the synthetic 'burdens' that spill out of and 'lurk among' oceanic bodies.[20] These images thus implicate spectators in potent narratives and networks that draw on aesthetic conventions of horror, revelation and the macabre (*Green Letters*).

The mobilisation of negative affect that has shaped encounters with seabirds is mirrored in myriad other environmental crises that are intimately connected to the ocean. As Shewry suggests, when turning to the ocean or the 'bleak contexts of contemporary environmental life', hope might appear rather more like disengagement or denial than anything else.[21] When confronted with the garbage patches and microplastics that have become 'queer kin'[22] or any number of the seemingly insurmountable issues that disrupt ecosystems and the conditions for survival in the ocean – human trafficking, acidification, toxic algal blooms, unprecedented heating, deep sea dredging, frontier drilling, industrial fishing, or oil spills –

one might experience a creeping sense of futility. And as Goldberg so aptly put it, 'when we ask about the sea, we are querying the state of the planet'.[23]

The emotional extremes of coral reef science are especially instructive for what they say about affect and the grip of ideas in the seemingly 'bleak' context of oceanic conservation, while also illustrating the blurred lines that exist between scientific and environmental communication. As is the case with seabird population declines, when it comes to the bleaching of coral reefs there is a similar sense that a catastrophic future is inevitable. Indeed, it was the exposure to altered oceanic ecosystems and the sense of irredeemable loss that led Braverman to look at the alternation between hope and despair that increasingly 'tracks' different approaches to coral conservation and its affective appeals.[24] Like seabirds, corals have become 'good to think with' (*Coral Whisperers*, p11) and are often presented as an 'early warning system' that offer an alarming account of ocean health (*Coral Whisperers*, p10). Calamitous predictions of mass death and bleaching events alongside multiple stressors paint a bleak picture and an order of magnitude that might leave you 'gasping for air' (*Coral Whisperers*, p31). Along with concerns over the general state of coral science, and the dropout rates of marine biology students (a concern that is also present in seabird ecology), depression, paralysis, trauma, anguish, breakdown and burnout are common to stories of intimacy with accelerated death. Futility appeared when small gains and local protections were pitted against the overwhelming impacts of the politically intractable issues of ocean acidification and climate change. Here, as is the case with seabird research, it might be said that a gap has opened up between the magnitude of the problem and the insignificance of possible action.[25]

Tsing's concern that, in their tendency to invest in catastrophic predictions for the environment, researchers can become complicit in restricting available alternatives and the relevancy of struggle, has been cited by multiple scholars as a reminder of the responsibility that comes with stoking affect.[26] This line of argument suggests that, in their insistence on inevitable trajectories, scientists, researchers and public commentators have the capacity to create a palpable and convincing sense of futility that leaves little room for recovery. This was certainly the feeling in the room during the discussion around seabird futures and 'what was to be done', but it was also a sentiment that was evident in Braverman's interviews, especially in discussions concerning the hopeful end of the hope/despair 'pendulum' (*Coral Whisperers*). Reflecting wider concerns about the presence of 'doom and gloom' narratives in environmental research and the associated risk of apathy and depression, the hopeful end of Braverman's coral science 'pendulum' represented a concerted effort to eschew despair and inject positive thinking. Here, the development of the #oceanoptimism movement presented hope and despair as a choice. If you circulate good news stories and talk about positive things you can loosen the feeling of paralysis, while also working to counter what might be considered a 'hegemonic discourse'. In this context, hope is an orientation that is actively cultivated, which stands in contrast to the despair that grips and paralyses – or sends you straight to the bar (*Coral Whisperers*, p40). I'll return to this notion of choice and what it denies, but for now it is worth staying with this turn towards hope for what it says about the knowing, self-conscious deployment of affective appeal and the capacity to affect.

How one staves off self-paralysis has become an urgent question.[27] Within the #oceanoptimism movement, there is an effort to elevate the positive and circulate the good, but for others the question is not necessarily about choosing between one or the other but rather asking whether it is possible to acknowledge crisis and the enormity of threatened

extinction, while going beyond tragedy, nostalgia or despair (*Imagining Extinction*). In reality, Braverman suggests that it is far more realistic to suggest that hope and despair coexist, while people frequently move between the two (*Coral Whisperers*). However, what remains absent in discussions concerning the affective appeals of environmental messaging is the question of capacity. If burnout has come to define our age, and depression, dread and trauma arise from sustained intimacy with expressions of accelerated death, then how might those that feel the grip of such negative affect orientate themselves otherwise?

Ocean optimism is about staving off the paralysis that pessimism is thought to produce, but elsewhere, rather than limiting trauma's capacity, there is an interest in asking how expressions of environmental crisis might enable devastation to become an opportunity for change. Here, Kaplan's account of trauma offers an excellent example of recuperation and a similar set of questions around affective capacity.[28] At a time when the opportunities for encountering so-called future crises are ubiquitous, whether they relate to political dystopias or extinctions, Kaplan suggests that such opportunities can circulate 'panic affects' in the public sphere capable of producing a state of 'pretrauma'. Panic affects exacerbate a generalised sense of dread, which is distinct from trauma as belated experience in that it arises from dark and disastrous imaginaries of the *future* (*Climate Trauma*, p10). While there are echoes of Attenborough's concern about the impacts of a gloomy political landscape and 'too much alarmism' on the affective grip of ideas, Kaplan suggests that the traumatic imagining of a catastrophic future could carve out a space of ethical possibility. If films and fiction enable a glimpse of what might become, they could spur people into action to prevent and resist its actualisation, thus recuperating dread and its negative affects. What this action looks like is left underdeveloped, but rather than focusing on the memory of the past and the confrontation of 'what must never happen again', Kaplan contends that 'ethical witnessing of

the planet's future catastrophe' and 'what must never take place' (*Climate Trauma*, p21) should, under the right conditions, prompt a reflection on what is required to avoid its realisation.

This account of pretrauma doesn't acknowledge the catastrophes that have already happened. It also doesn't allow for a more radical reflection on what other worlds might be possible, or what life beyond one's current attachments might look like,[29] but what it holds in common with the previous examples of affective appeal is a set of assumptions about functionality, and what guides political action and enlarges a public's capacity to act. Within the story templates of environmentalism, such a preoccupation with pretrauma's function, or redemptive qualities, demonstrates why those affective conditions that are far more ambiguous tend to be side-lined. This is a concern that is central to Seymour's notion of 'bad environmentalism'. Drawing on the recent interest in affect across the social sciences and humanities, Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* turns to queer theory for its deployment of 'dissident and contrarian affects' (*Bad Environmentalism*, p18) to examine environmental works – art, activism and discourse – that challenge the mainstream's hegemonic narratives and affective sensibilities. Absurdity and irony become the central focus of Seymour's endeavour to foreground so-called 'bad affective modes' (*Bad Environmentalism*, p228), named as such because they lie outside of the repertoires most closely associated with mainstream appeals and the production of attachment. Further examples include 'irreverence, ambivalence, camp, frivolity, indecorum, awkwardness, sardonicism, perversity, playfulness, and glee' the deployment of which, she suggests, demonstrates not only a rejection of normative forms of affective appeal, but the very tenets of environmentalism, which rest on assumptions of reverence, knowledge and functionality. Instead of documentaries or films that instruct their audience in how they should think and feel, she documents flat affects that

leave their audience unsure of the core message, stilted and awkward frames that prompt nervous laughter, and absurdity that refuses to revere the subjects of natural history documentaries. To use Bosworth's term, in recognising that there is a 'generic affective infrastructure' that guides environmentalism, such a queer concern with environmentalism's affective appeal is about challenging hegemonic affects to ask how things might be otherwise.[30]

As Seymour argues, irrespective of the outcomes of 'bad' affective appeals and their response to the current moment, they reveal much about mainstream environmentalism by unsettling expectation and creating ideological ambiguity. Just as the scientist's flat delivery of futility created ambivalence on account of its lack of a recognisable affective appeal (was he sad, despairing, despondent, numb? Was he *for real*?), bad environmentalisms expose normative templates at the point of their disruption. Despite acknowledging shared ground between different environmentalisms, Seymour concludes that, ultimately, mainstream environmentalism and 'bad environmentalism' do not have the same aims: 'their affective and attitudinal differences are matters not merely of approach but of fundamental philosophical and political divergence' (*Bad Environmentalism,* p28). To follow Seymour, the assumption that environmental art, communication or production should be assessed according to its transformational potential falls into the trap of desiring neat resolutions to problems that are inherently messy, thus replicating the prescriptive tendencies and ideological investments of mainstream environmentalism.

A concern with messy, ambivalent ways of relating to ecological destruction can be seen in Donna Haraway's concern with storying, which is particularly notable in her call to 'stay with the trouble'.[31] In the context of ecological destruction, Haraway's project critiques 'self-

certain' ways of knowing for lacking a respect for difference and finitude (*Staying with the Trouble*, p41). A commitment to 'staying with the trouble' becomes a form of resistance to a futility that already posits that the future is over at the same time as critiquing an 'unthinking hope' in a future that will bring fixes. Both futility and unthinking hope are considered abstract futurisms that can only produce 'sublime despair' or 'sublime indifference' (*Staying with the Trouble*, p4) and thus risk becoming intrinsically deadening as a result.[32] 'Sublime despair' is unambiguous and experienced as a form of certainty that closes down all other options. In this vein, staying with the trouble is not only a rejection of self-certain pedagogies but a call for a different way of inhabiting the present and is a form of labour in that it involves actively resisting the temptation to overcome unease or doubt. As Haraway puts it 'staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (*Staying with the Trouble*, p.1).

There are some tensions here with how the notion of staying with what troubles is presented as the antithesis to redemptive narratives.[33] Staying with the trouble is still an injunction to act and a commentary on what is required if a better future is to come. There is nothing to say that being truly present won't reveal forms of hope that had otherwise been overlooked, or that staying with the trouble won't diminish in such a way as to make persistence impossible. As part of such a project or commitment, how do we make space for the negative that resists the reknotting of 'broken threads', the suturing of gaps? (*Negative Geographies,* p19) or the functional requirements of environmentalism? And what does it really feel like to stay with the trouble?

Living in the Undertow

Scientists have been accused of fixating on inevitable, bleak horizons and downward trajectories, but Braverman nevertheless notes that their task is tough in a context where they are increasingly expected to become spokespersons at a time of political disinterest: 'they must both witness their beloved corals dying out and at the same time narrate this death to the world. They must be careful not to sound too gloomy lest their warnings be labelled alarmist, nor too hopeful, lest they be dismissed as Pollyannaish or even as denialists' (*Coral Whisperers,* p16). The responsibility that comes with acting as a spokesperson is not only an intimate task, but one that comes at a time when the expectations and requirements of scientific communication are changing.[34] Having to witness the death of what they love, the task of those included in Braverman's study is not simply a matter of reportage, but rather anticipating how their message and affective tone is likely to be received.

As the notion of staying with the trouble gains prominence, and discussions continue to focus on the affective appeal of environmental rhetoric and the affirmative recuperation of negative affects,[35] it is worth considering what it feels like to *really stay* with the trouble. In his analysis of climate catastrophe through different aesthetic forms and expression, Richardson[36] argues that so-called future crises that have featured in the works of scholars like Kaplan are already 'traumatically affecting'. 'Jarring, rupturing, disjunctive encounters with future crisis in the contemporary moment' (*Climate Trauma*, p1) have consequences for lived experience. Put simply, while it is claimed that impending dread and the witnessing of potential trauma might instil people with a sense of responsibility capable of averting a catastrophe that is yet to be realised, such an ethics fails to really address what it is like to live

in the ‘undertow of a catastrophic future’ where the relationship between aesthetic experience and lived existence is far more complex (*Climate Trauma*, p2). Encountered in the present, ‘threat is felt as an affective fact’ (*Climate Trauma*, p3) even while it remains in the ‘domain of the potential’ as a ‘background hum’ or predominant feeling. Thus, drawing on Massumi[37], the threat of future catastrophe is both ‘not yet here and already doing damage’ as it refigures the very meaning of the present and its ontological foundations. What is pertinent here is the question of capacity, and whether the ‘panic affects’ that ‘become a part of subjective worlds’, to use Kaplan’s terms (*Climate Trauma*), prohibit the kind of ‘ethical witnessing’ that might otherwise recuperate such affects.

The refiguring of the present and its ontological relations is captured by Whitehouse’s notion of ‘anxious listening’, which emerged from his research on the relationship between bird sounds and everyday life.[38] Unlike the all-too-familiar accounts of silent springs and altered soundscapes that tell of the disquiet and shock that accompanies the disappearance of familiar ‘companions’, an ‘anxious semiotics’ points to *potential* loss as much as it points to actual loss. Changes, fluctuations, earlier or later birdsong, even increased avian numbers or new arrivals *might* signal ‘human culpability’ or disruption, climate change, avian flu, toxins or habitat destruction. What Whitehouse’s anxious semiotics captures is how bird sounds and cries are interpreted and perceived in uncertain ways as a result of future imaginaries and threat. These uncertain interpretations can have profound consequences for one’s sense of place and ongoing experience – they can inflict deep injury. (There are similarities here with what Celemajer has described as a form of ‘anticipatory nostalgia’ – looking at the world around you ‘as you can only look upon what you fear you may never see again’.[39]) In my own research on seabirds in the North East of England, the seasonal return of Newcastle Upon Tyne’s pelagic gulls and their distinctive cries is widely celebrated, the cacophony of

which has become synonymous with the city's quayside since the birds established a colony there in the 1980s.[40] The cries of the kittiwakes – a pelagic species of gull considered globally vulnerable to extinction – announce the return of spring, confirm a sense of place and transport people to the coast. But for others, the calls prompt reflections on the shift of a pelagic bird from cliffs to city, their declining numbers at the coast, and what is disturbed and unravelling elsewhere, thus becoming a background sorrow or anxiety that cannot be shut out. As Nicholson observes, a bird's cry can be eerie if the listener perceives there to be something more to it than a mere biological mechanism. The seabirds cry, when heard in the context of climate catastrophe, can take on a new meaning, which, while never fully grasped, can be full of sadness nonetheless (*The Seabirds Cry*).

With the ongoing presence of avian flu in wild bird populations (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A (H5N1)), this feeling of threat was evident along the coast of Northumberland in the summer of 2023, where the anticipated return of seabird colonies was mixed with dread. Quite distinct from the more familiar accounts of joy and celebration that tend to characterise migratory return, as a condition of corporeal experience dread can weigh heavy and deplete. For those that work with seabirds and had spent the previous year following biosecurity protocols and collecting up the bodies of the birds they had spent years monitoring, the arrival of spring and the return of seabird colonies was shaped by the anticipation of further tragedy. Trauma can leave a hole, tear through places, and sever connections (*Negative Geographies*). As with the anxious listening identified by Whitehouse (*Listening to Birds*), time spent with colonies in the shadow of avian flu is shaped by uncertain interpretations. Hyper-vigilance to the potential presentation of what *could* be neurological symptoms, twitches, subdued birds (perhaps?), fewer numbers, abandoned or unoccupied nests, lower breeding success (does it seem quieter to you?). Or perhaps the gaps that are starting to

appear have more to do with the unprecedented sea temperatures that have been recorded in the seas around the UK and Ireland. It is difficult to grieve for birds whose absence cannot be resolved.[41] Under these anxious conditions, the joy of a bustling colony – which is often described as a tonic to stories of silent coasts – is laced with the threat of potential transmission in a context where proximity can kill. Just like the adult birds that feed their young with plastic, it is surely a cruel irony that the intimacies so central to the breeding success of a colony are the very thing that expediates the spread of the virus. As the breeding season comes to an end, so the dread of return begins anew.

As Goldberg notes, talk of 'extinction events' implies a discrete happening rather than something that is part of 'an incessant process of erasing the ecology of life' (*Dread*, p154). Returning to Braverman's point about the scientists that witness, it is worth considering what 'chips away' or 'banishes involvement'[42] in a context where dread registers as 'the emergent inkling that a future has closed down' (*Dread*, p154). Exhaustion, weariness, burnout and forms of anxious anticipation can alter one's capacity to affect or ability to (re)orientate. As Rose et al. put it, bodies can fail 'because they are exposed to a world that affects them in a manner where they cannot affect back' (*Negative Geographies*, p19). Exhaustion, for example, is primarily defined by what it is not or what it can deny, including optimism. It changes one's capacity to affect and be affected and manifests in a 'spectrum of bodily experiences' (*Liminal Geographies*, p142). Drawing on studies of chronic fatigue, Bissell's account of exhaustion is a reminder that discussions about the affective tone of environmental messages and the work of (re)orientation tend to assume or invoke those with an unhindered capacity to affect. In asking how we might move beyond despair it is necessary to recognise despair as a corporal condition that 'gets under your skin'. If burnout and depression are

really understood to be the conditions of our age, then what implications are there for the stoking of affective appeal upon which various environmentalisms seem to rely?

Here Albrecht's concern with earth emotions, and in particular, his notion of 'solastalgia' is helpful.[43] With its origins in 'nostalgia' and basis in two Latin roots – solace and desolation – Albrecht described solastalgia as:

> the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest in an attack on one's sense of place. It is characteristically a chronic condition, tied to the gradual erosion of identity created by the sense of belonging to a particular loved place and a feeling of distress, or psychological desolation about its unwanted transformation. In direct contrast to the dislocated spatial dimensions of traditionally defined nostalgia, solastalgia is the homesickness you have when you are still located within your environment (*Earth Emotions*, p38-39).

This description of chronic, ongoing loss is comparable to the traumatic stress and depression described by coral scientists, and the ongoing melancholia they feel when witnessing profoundly negative changes to the environments they worked in (*Earth Emotions*, p78). In Whale and Ginn's reflections on the disappearance of sparrows, this experience of grief or mourning demonstrates how, rather than manifesting as a simple 'subtraction', the disappearance of birds produces 'haunted and spectral places' where grief can arise from the knowledge that treasured landscapes were once a place of avian flourishing.[44]

Such grief and the erosion of identity was evident during the debate on environmental enchantment in the North of England with which this paper began. Highlighting the significance of personal knowledge and attachment to place, one audience member expressed feeling despondent and alienated by environmental work that encouraged people to wonder at the area's natural beauty. Having grown up in the region, with intimate knowledge of its hills and trails, she saw only desolation: spaces that had once been 'teeming with life' but that do so no more. For her, any environmental work that chose to obscure such disappearance in the name of building attachment to nature, was guilty of the kind of deceit Monbiot had diagnosed.

Key here, is the emphasis on the chronic nature of negative lived experience and a consideration of what lingers and unravels – the ongoingness of loss. While avian flu, coral bleaching or wildfires might be considered ruptures or conceptualised as 'eventful', a concern with their ongoingness situates them within a wider experience of erasure. Despondency arises from the persistence of wicked problems and while Albrecht accepts that this feeling is unlikely a new phenomenon, he nonetheless points to the growing ubiquity of its experience as climate change becomes a 'global stressor' (*Earth Emotions*, p40).

Futility as Release

The ubiquity of despondency or the loss of hope, not only demonstrates the need to take withdrawal seriously, but highlights how the capacity to affect and be affected can be taken for granted in debates concerning the affective appeals of environmentalism. While attempts to unsettle normative templates for thinking and feeling create ideological ambiguity by disrupting the presumed functionality of environmentalisms, assertions over the grip of ideas

and what is to be done (and how) can feel detached from corporal conditions. In this context, and moving beyond the analysis of cultural production and artefact, it is worth asking: What are the consequences when researchers are charged with the task of stoking affect?

The obligation to offer a note of hope in times of crisis is well documented. In the aftermath of the Australian fires in 2019, Celemajer wrote of her encounter with a journalist who spoke of the grief that people in the cities were feeling about 'all this death' and asked whether Celemajer might offer them 'some reason to hope'. Taken aback by the expectation of assurance that was at odds with her experience, she noted her uneasiness with its deployment in 'the mouth of a culture that assumes that progress and improvement ought to be, and will be, both endless and guaranteed' (*Summertime*, p133). Having taken part in diverse forms of public engagement around seabird research, I have begun to anticipate a similar pattern of questioning that nearly always finishes with a question of hope. Engagement follows a familiar narrative arc: it draws an audience in, builds attachment, talks of threat and then outlines what can be done. Faced with a demand to finish on a lighter, more positive note, public question and answer sessions frequently demand a take-away 'hopeful story'. It is never entirely clear whether the hopeful finishes are about sustaining the audience's capacity for *something* that is never fully articulated – an assumed capacity for action of sorts – or whether it is about simply ensuring that nobody leaves these events feeling bad, but the gap between the feeling of bleakness and the rehearsed messages of hope feel increasingly dissonant in a context of burnout.

The intention here is not to undermine hopeful endeavours or to convince others of the futility of it all (a point that Celemajer is also clear on), but rather reflect on how 'limits can impose themselves' (*Negative Geographies,* p4) in ways that aren't addressed in discussions

concerning the stoking of affective appeal and the grip of ideas in diverse environmentalisms. In an essay on political depression, Osbourne acknowledges this limit, while also underlining the freedoms that might arise from accepting that a struggle has been lost (*For Still Possible Cities)*. In this vein, futility can be both flattening and enlivening. While I would caution against the assumption that bodily exhaustion is always political, futility can be a release, a moment to consider what's next, or what life beyond one's current attachments might look like, while detachment itself can be a means of self-preservation. Yet even here, it should be acknowledged that not all withdrawal or experience of banished involvement can be framed in such useful terms.

The inevitable trajectory depicted by the scientist that I began with might be readily taken as an example of the kind of futility critiqued by Haraway, which posits that 'the future is already over' and that the present is always another step towards disaster (*Staying with the Trouble*). It might also be taken as an example of complicity in undermining environmental struggle or scientific work. But this is only the case in a context where struggle is focused on increasing numbers, sexual reproduction, or an attachment to conservation that is already doomed to fail. Indeed, if we begin from the premise that there is nothing to be done, Parennãs asks whether we can 'expand our imaginations to envision other ways of living and dying at the temporal and spatial brink of extinction' (*Decolonizing Extinction*). It might at least allow a return to the question with which I began for a deeper reflection on its significance: what underpins the inspiration to 'do something – anything – to stop what might be inevitable'? (*Decolonizing Extinction*, p9).

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Helen F. Wilson is Professor of Cultural Geography at Durham University. Her current research explores the ethical questions and challenges that are posed by species on the move with a particular interest in the socio-cultural dimensions of more-than-human cities. She is author of *Robin* (Reaktion, 2022) and her second book *Encounter* is forthcoming with Routledge.

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