



The impact of climate anxiety on individuals' acceptance of conservation policy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Climate change is an impending threat that can lead to negative emotional responses. One of these responses is climate anxiety, which is characterized by chronic worry about the future and can be both adaptive and maladaptive. Previous literature states that climate anxiety can be adaptive and a helpful coping mechanism, as it can lead to environmental action. However, previous research does not relate this phenomenon to conservation policy. Thus, this paper aims to explore the impact of climate change anxiety on individuals' acceptance of conservation policy. **Methods:** This paper uses reflexive thematic analysis to analyze journal articles and policy briefs related to the topic. This entails coding each source and identifying the main themes found in the data to determine patterns and identify key themes in the chosen sources. **Findings:** The findings state that ecosystem conservation is crucial and leads to nuanced emotional responses when climate change is not mitigated. Moreover, environmental action is found to be a coping mechanism that alleviates climate anxiety due to its social aspect. Finally, individuals play a significant role in conservation policy, yet their support is contingent on their trust in the government. **Conclusion:** Climate anxiety can lead to environmental action in adaptive coping and can increase the likelihood of support for conservation policies if it is deemed effective. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This paper concentrates on conservation policies' possible support within individuals afflicted with climate anxiety if it helps them alleviate their negative affect, and is an effortful but low-cost effort.

KEYWORDS: climate anxiety; conservation policy; eco-anxiety; eco-emotions; policy support.

1. Introduction

Climate change is an impending threat that will shape the next generation's future. Its impact is already significant, as mentioned in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2022 report, which states that the rise of the planet's temperature must be limited to 1.5 °C in accordance with the Paris Agreement to prevent irreversible damage to the climate. The IPCC is not the only organizational body that has been tracking climate change, as the International Disaster Database (2021) also reports that within their data spanning from 1970 until 2020, the cases of environmental hazards have increased exponentially, with 50% of them starting in 2003 and affecting approximately five billion people. There is no doubt that these ecosystem changes have a significant effect on people, specifically on their health. This health risk of climate change is mentioned in the IPCC's sixth assessment report (2022), which states that climate change leads to not only physical health struggles such as diseases caused by air pollution, but also negatively impacts mental

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health, such as the loss of livelihood from destroyed habitats and extreme trauma from natural disasters.

One of these mental health challenges that are present due to climate change is climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety, which does not have one robust definition, thus making it a difficult variable to study (Von Gal et al., 2024). Before considering the definitions of climate anxiety, it is imperative to understand anxiety itself first. Anxiety, at its core, is an evolved adaptive response, stemming from humans' need to protect themselves from aversive stimuli such as natural predators (Clayton, 2020). Corr (2010) build upon this definition by stating that anxiety is multidimensional, as it has nonconscious features — specifically for its evolutionary purposes, such as quick decision making to avoid danger and being overly wary of threats — and has conscious elements — the acknowledgement of the anxiety itself. Thus, the nuanced nature of anxiety must be considered when discussing climate anxiety to fully comprehend how it can influence behavior. Earlier research on climate change emotions, or eco-anxiety, termed this phenomenon of emotional distress solastalgia, referring to the chronic distress people experience in response to negative environmental change (Albrecht et al., 2007). However, a modern definition of this phenomenon has arisen due to the everchanging nature of the climate, as Clayton et al. (2017) define climate anxiety as the chronic fear of environmental fate, which is exhibited through anticipating future problems and threats, rumination, and constant worry. In their development of a climate change anxiety scale, Clayton & Karazsia (2020) also found that climate anxiety is an adaptive response, in line with general anxiety, and related to negative states of affect. When it becomes maladaptive, it can lead to functional and/or cognitive impairment. However, climate anxiety is not necessarily pathological, as it can be a reasonable response in relation to the degree of distress (Tam et al., 2023). Thus, put simply, climate anxiety refers to negative emotions that may arise when faced with the reality of climate change and can become maladaptive when it is disproportionate.

Climate anxiety is a significant phenomenon to study, as it has substantially impacted the youth. Clayton (2020) reports that 57% of teenagers are afraid of climate change. Additionally, in 2019, there were student protests in 125 countries demanding action against climate change, demonstrating that the youth are anxious about their future (Wu et al., 2020). This indicates that not only are they wary of their future, but young people are willing to take action to show their support. The global nature of younger generations being worried about their future due to climate change is further supported by Hickman et al. (2021), whose data came from ten countries with over 10,000 participants, who found that young people are distressed about the state of the climate and are increasingly pessimistic about their future. As the youth are one of the most vulnerable groups of people affected by climate change, as it will shape their future, the fact that they fear it is indicative of its significance.

Though there is a plethora of literature on climate anxiety, research shows different perspectives on the significance of eco-anxiety on behavior in a broader view. For instance, Hignell et al. (2024) found that negative emotions can lead to activation of collective action if their success reduces the negative impact of people's actions. This is supported by Innocenti et al. (2023), who state that climate anxiety is a functional adaptive response as it encourages people to participate in positive environmental behaviors (PEBs). Thus, people who experience climate anxiety are likely to perform collective action if they believe it will lead to tangible results. Moreover, a study of climate anxiety in China, India, and the United States found that cognitive-emotional impairment due to climate anxiety was a predictor of pro-environmental behavior (Tam et al., 2023). This indicates that, unlike other studies that focus on single countries, the impact of climate anxiety on PEB is a global phenomenon. However, Poonamallee (2025) argues against the idea of negative affect being helpful, as they assert that chronic threat responses being activated from constantly experiencing fear and worry can lead to paralysis or defensiveness. Thus, more urgency behind the climate messages is less likely to inspire PEBs. It is important to note, though, that their study focuses solely on emotion-focused coping, and did not consider problem-focused coping. These two types of coping differ as problem-focused coping deals with the root cause of

negative emotions, while emotion-focused coping takes on a more mindfulness approach, where it attempts to alleviate the aftereffects of negative emotions. Lorenzi et al. (2007) agree that using emotion-focused coping when dealing with climate anxiety can lead to denial. Yet, other literature contends a problem-focused coping perspective helps people cope with climate anxiety as it can help them be more resilient and develop greater social ties and a heightened sense of meaning (Clayton, 2020). Hence, negative affect in relation to climate change can be beneficial when people's mode of coping is problem-focused, as it can alleviate their worries and they believe they are making a meaningful change.

Though climate anxiety is linked to environmental behaviors, those behaviors can refer to a range of acts from recycling to using electric vehicles to reducing or abstaining from animal products. Some, such as adopting a vegan diet, are more effortful than others like using reusable products. However, environmental action takes many shapes; hence, this report focuses on conservation policy support to see how it is influenced by people's climate anxiety. Conservation policy is defined as a policy aimed at conserving or restoring a declining species, a community, an ecosystem, or a natural or semi-natural site (Meinard, 2017). Conservation policies are also one of the main goals of sustainable development, which focuses on preserving the environment from negative environmental impacts (Insa et al., 2010). An example of conservation policy is the European Natura 2000 Habitat Conservation Policy, which focuses on trying to restore an area occupied by a habitat of community interest (Insa et al., 2010). A distinct illustration of conservation policy can be seen in the United Kingdom, where current policies focus on voluntary change by reducing energy use by individuals, which is encouraged through economic incentives and subsidies. However, previous environmental action does not equal voting attention, as Tobler et al. (2012) state that they are influenced by different factors. Thus, even though previous literature stipulates that climate change anxiety can lead to environmental action, it does not necessarily mean it will be linked to conservation policy support.

As previous studies focus on climate anxiety and environmental action, or policy support in general, it is critical to specifically discuss conservation policy. This specific policy type was chosen as it is a specific example of environmental behavior that impacts many people at once and considers the behavior of individuals and their governing bodies. Though, previous literature stipulates the relationship between climate emotions and environmental action, very few illustrate how this pattern would affect climate policy acceptance. Understanding this relationship is significant as it can bridge the gap between the people and policymakers to enact meaningful change in climate change mitigation. Thus, led to the creation of the research question, How does climate anxiety impact individuals' acceptance of conservation policy? By linking research about climate anxiety to tangible conservation policies, this framing can also lead to suggestions for policymakers to enhance support from the people. Thus, this paper aims to further elaborate on how climate anxiety impacts conservation policy support. Specifically, this paper examines how climate anxiety relates to environmental behavior and whether eco-emotions shape support for climate policy, as well as the implications for policymakers and the broader public. These results can later be beneficial to policymakers to get greater insight into how policy support is impacted by people's negative affect that arises due to climate change.

2. Methods

As there is a lack of previous literature on climate anxiety and its link to support for conservation policy specifically, a qualitative analysis was chosen to explore what has recently been written about both climate anxiety and conservation policy acceptance and investigate if there are any patterns that link the two. Reflective thematic analysis (RTA), which was developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), was chosen as the data collection and analysis method for this paper due to its feasibility and limited bias. RTA is a type of thematic analysis where the researcher's interpretation of the dataset and theoretical assumptions of the data are analyzed through codes. Moreover, it is an inductive analysis technique, where the codes created are reflected on the data itself, unlike deductive

analysis, where themes are identified first to guide data collection. These methods let researchers reflect on the data collection method, as themes identified may change throughout the process, making it easily flexible. This makes it so that even if a researcher has a specific perspective on the topic, their codes cannot be easily influenced, making it so the data shapes the writing and can be in flux.

This paper follows the procedure of the six stages of RTA, as outlined in Byrne (2021). The first phase is data familiarization. This started with an initial search on Google Scholar about climate anxiety and its key terms. For instance, terms such as climate anxiety, eco anxiety, policy support, and climate action were present throughout the preliminary skim of approximately ten journal articles. Though there is a plethora of sources regarding climate anxiety, for the chosen sources, depth was prioritized over breadth to recognize clear patterns in the data. Moreover, focusing solely on journal articles lacked insight into the relationship of climate anxiety with existing conservation policies. Hence, the source type expanded to include policy briefs. Once the source types were chosen, the quantity of each source to be used for the data needed to be determined. To ensure a comprehensive investigation of the data, the quantity of sources was decided to be six journal articles and three policy briefs. The inclusion criteria for the journal articles were peer-reviewed articles to guarantee quality and were found through searching on Google Scholar and the University of Queensland Library website using key terms such as climate change anxiety, climate anxiety, eco anxiety, and any of these terms + policy support. To find the policy briefs, conservation policy brief was searched on Google, and the focus of the briefs was on internationally recognized institutions, mainly the United Nations and the World Wildlife Fund. These types of data sources for policy briefs are essential to ensure that these policies are of high quality and have a realistic impact on the designated countries. Moreover, the briefs also had to address how the policies would influence the public in their implementation, not solely the role of the governing authority. For instance, an ideal policy brief would include not only the procedure of implementation, but also how such implementation would impact the livelihood of those affected. Thus, a skim of appropriate sources was done first before deciding if it was relevant for this research. An important exclusion criterion was that both the journal articles and the policy briefs had to be from within the last five years, as climate change is a constantly evolving issue, necessitating a shorter time range. The chosen sources, including the policy briefs and journal articles, are summarized in Appendix 1.

The second phase in RTA was generating codes. This entailed reading each source and highlighting important information, such as definitions, important results in studies, and any other data that can help answer the research question. From this initial coding, an average of 85 excerpts was identified from the six journal articles, and an average of 54 excerpts from the three policy briefs. Then, each chosen extract was scanned, and comments were made to decide which ones were most relevant, further filtering the data to only focus on what is most important. For example, an extract was excluded if it focused on the logistics of policy implementation or the procedure of a study, as the analysis of the data was prioritized for the data. Through this first extract refinement, 113 excerpts were identified to be analyzed. Consequently, each of the extracts and their comments was input into a Google Sheet and organized based on their source. The third RTA phase was generating themes. Once all the sources were analyzed, each comment and extract was color-coded into groups with similar keywords or goals (i.e., engagement, coping, etc.), where each color correlated with a subtheme. This led to the identification of 13 different subthemes, which are presented Figure 1. Next, each of the subthemes was grouped based on similarities to find overarching themes in the data. These common features were found through either similar term, such as climate anxiety, and/or having the same focus, such as implications of eco-emotions on policy making and the role people play in policy implementation were grouped into one theme as they both focus on policy. This phase is when the reflexive nature of RTA was useful, as before data collection the focus was solely on climate anxiety and/or eco-emotions and policy acceptance, but analyzing the extracts made it apparent that

including psychological factors (i.e. distrust in authority) that could hinder policy acceptance that are unrelated to climate anxiety would be a crucial subtheme.

The fourth phase is reviewing the themes and ensuring they were able to help answer the research question. This was done by going through each subtheme and identifying two or three extracts that were deemed most relevant to decide what finalize the name for each subtheme. For example, in the previous phase, one of the subthemes was named negative impact without policy but after sifting through the extracts, the subtheme needed to be more specific, so it was renamed negative impact on people without conservation policy. Hence, the link to the research question was clear. Afterward was the fifth phase where the themes were named based on terms that were common throughout the subthemes. For instance, the subthemes that focused on climate anxiety were categorized into one, but climate anxiety as theme is vague and does not give insight to the research question. To make a clearer theme, the extracts of the subthemes all related to environmental behavior and/or coping, which led to the creation of the theme name: environmental actions as a means of coping with climate anxiety. A similar process was done for each grouping of subthemes, forming three main themes: emotional causes and impact of climate change, environmental action as a means of coping with climate anxiety, and the implications and impact of conservation policy. Lastly, phase six entails producing the report, where the order of themes should be established. This was done with a top-down approach by identifying which themes were more general about climate anxiety, to then narrowing it down to the subthemes that were specifically about conservation policies. Hence, the order of reporting results will start with emotional causes and impact of climate change — laying the foundation of our data with more general information. The next theme reported will be environmental action as a means of coping with climate anxiety, as the data becomes more precise but lacks the link to conservation policy. Finally, the report will end with implications and impact of conservation policy, as it hinges on tangible conservation policies and how the rest of the data can impact policy making.

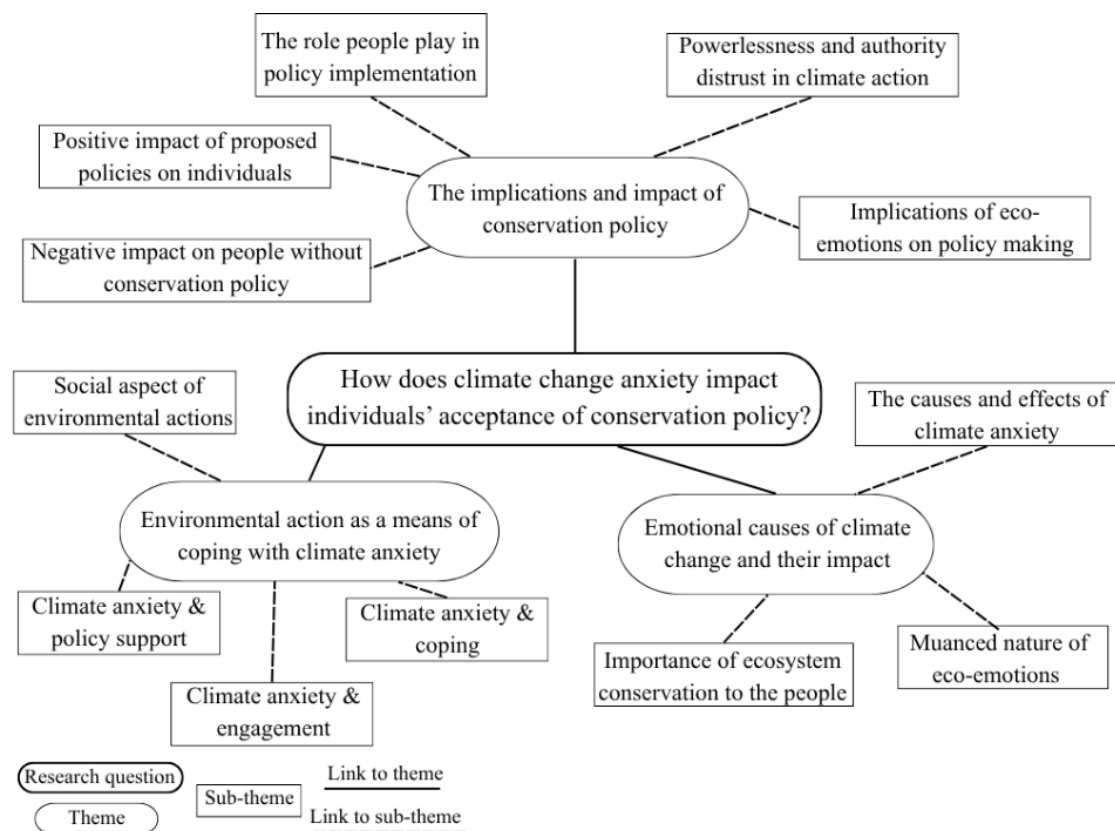


Fig. 1. Thematic map of themes and subthemes

3. Results and Discussion

In this investigation, reflexive thematic analysis was used to examine how climate anxiety can affect people's acceptance of conservation policy. Nine sources were analyzed during this process — 6 journal articles and 3 policy briefs. From this inquiry, 13 subthemes were identified and led to the generation of three main themes: emotional causes of climate change and their impact, environmental action as a means of coping with climate anxiety, and the implications and impact of conservation policy. Overall, the data shows that conservation policy acceptance is influenced by people's level concern towards the environment, if supporting the proposed policy meaningfully minimizes their climate anxiety, and the acknowledgement of eco-emotions in the policies themselves. These results are summarized in Appendix 2 and the themes are presented in detail in the following subsections.

3.1 Emotional causes of climate change and their impact

The first theme — emotional causes of climate change and their impact — captures how climate change has a profound impact on emotions, which can impact people's behavior. By first emphasizing the significance of their emotional reactions, it can later justify their reaction and coping mechanisms throughout later themes. Within this theme, there are three subthemes. The first subtheme illustrates how the importance of the ecosystem to the people is paramount, though its significance is not as apparent. The environment plays a multifaceted role in people's lives, as the World Wildlife Fund et al. (2022) mentions that ecosystems [that] cover 18% of the total land area of [Indonesia] (34.5 million hectares) play a critical role in supporting climate resilience by providing more than one service to people and infrastructure. Thus, many people are directly impacted by environmental changes, it affects their finances and other parts of their livelihood. This sentiment is also communicated in Lang et al.'s (2020) policy brief as they state that the forest provides income and livelihoods for millions of people. As the chosen policy briefs mention the importance of the ecosystem to people, both directly and indirectly, emotional responses regarding the degradation of the environment are inevitable. Thus, if people have intense emotions regarding climate degradation, then complying with behavior to mitigate it — such as supporting conservation policy — is a possibility to reduce the negative emotions associated with it.

As emotional responses to climate change are not unfounded, it is important to understand their importance. This is the focus of the second subtheme, which delves into the nuanced nature of eco-emotions. These affective responses, also called eco-emotions, include climate anxiety or eco-anxiety. Many of the chosen journal articles discuss its severity, however, it is important to explore what the data define as climate anxiety. The symptoms of climate anxiety are similar to general anxiety, characterized by affective symptoms, rumination, behavioral symptoms, and anxiety about one's negative impact on the planet (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). Thus, its pathological nature in this exploration is supported. Moreover, climate anxiety differs from other eco-emotions as Kurth & Pihkala (2022) state that it is principally 'forward looking' in the sense that it tends to be concerned with decisions or issues that one currently faces or that are on the horizon. Therefore, general anxiety typically leads to rumination about past, present, and future behavior, but climate anxiety focuses more on the future, and people are hopeless about its existence. Though previous literature focuses on the significance of climate anxiety on environmental action, Sciberras & Fernando (2021) state that it may not be the best emotion that shapes environmental action because while eco-depression, and especially eco-anger, showed positive relationships with action on climate change, eco-anxiety predicted lower action, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different negative emotional states. Though there a range of negative eco-emotions, climate anxiety remains the anchor in the chosen sources on emotional responses. Hence, it remains the focal emotion throughout this investigation.

To fully comprehend climate anxiety, it is essential to identify what causes it, so steps can be taken to mitigate its impact, as is the goal of the third subtheme — the causes and effects of climate anxiety. There are many factors underlying climate anxiety, but the pattern shows individual traits as being most common. For example, Kurth & Pihkala (2022) mention that those with pro-environmental values or a strong environmental identity are more inclined to feel anxious in the face of environmental threats. This supports the idea that those who already have an affinity for the environment are more likely to be worried about climate change than those who do not. Another factor that is linked to developing climate anxiety is a high level of concern towards the environment, as individuals who exhibit this trait are more likely to perceive changes in the ecological environment, and thereby more susceptible to eco-anxiety (Qiu & Qiu, 2024). These factors are significant because there is a higher likelihood that a person who has strong concerns and environmental values not only experiences eco anxiety but uses it to commit to environmental actions to protect the it. The effect of climate anxiety is clear, as Kurth & Pihkala (2022) write that the idea that eco-anxiety brings responsiveness to environmental threats makes predictions that are supported by research in psychology. They also wrote that feelings of anxiety about the dangers of climate change are seen as important sources of motivation to get—and stay—involved. For this subtheme, it can be concluded that climate anxiety is influenced by traits such as environmental values, which can motivate them to be involved.

From the chosen sources, it can be ascertained that the environment is important to individuals and its deterioration can lead to significant emotional responses such as eco-anxiety. This is supported by previous literature, as Clayton (2020) argues that climate change emotions are distinct because the worry people have is rational, but they are not able to adapt, as it is an ongoing global threat. The selected journal articles also mention how these emotional responses may be due to people's environmental values and lead to effective action. Ogunbode et al. (2022) somewhat support this as they state that negative emotions can lead to political action but also be harmful to well-being. Thus, eco-emotions are a double-edged sword, as they can be motivating but can also negatively impact people's mental health. This is why it is imperative to understand how to mitigate the negative impact of eco-emotions and uplift their positive impact on environmental action motivation.

3.2 Environmental action as a means of coping with climate anxiety

The second theme — environmental action as means of coping with climate anxiety — highlights how people deal with negative emotions regarding climate change and the implications of those actions on policy support. Four subthemes were identified within this theme. The first subtheme identified, climate anxiety and engagement, focuses on what people do once they intend to address their negative eco-emotions. Several journal articles state that some individuals afflicted with climate anxiety seek out more information about climate change to assess their options. Sciberras & Fernando (2021) mention this especially in adolescents with high persistent and increasing worry [who] had higher levels of societal engagement, which arguably are important steps towards acknowledging and responding to climate-related threat. This insinuates that even younger people who can easily seek out information will do so to respond to the climate threat. Subsequently, those who continually search for environmental information are more open-minded about the issue because individuals who experience anxiety in the face of news stories challenging their views on contentious topics engage in more—and more open-minded— efforts to learn about the issue (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). Additionally, Brosch (2021) states that negative affect was predictive of individual willingness to engage in climate change mitigation behavior. Hence, the consumption of information itself not only makes people more able to discuss the issue with others but also makes them more inclined to act. Thus, seeking out information is not only important to help alleviate the issues of climate anxiety, but it also helps them improve their critical thinking abilities as they start to read more. This suggest that those more likely

to support conservation policy are well-informed about the topic — who tend to have climate anxiety.

Another subtheme, climate anxiety and coping, concentrates on how negative emotions regarding climate change can impact behavior through people's selected coping mechanism. Sometimes, coping may not lead to beneficial behavior for the environment, as Whitmarsh et al. (2022) state that children who cope through de-emphasizing the seriousness of climate change, using avoidance and denial as coping strategies, tend to be less engaged in pro-environmental behavior and report lower levels of negative affect. Hence, the behavioral consequence of addressing coping information is not always beneficial, as some may actively avoid and deny their climate anxiety. However, ignoring the issue does not mean that the impacts of climate change will disappear; thus, this emotion-focused strategy does not in the long term, as the problems that triggered the negative emotions in the first place are not dealt with. Despite that, not all coping mechanisms avoid the issue as pro-environmental behaviors like climate activism [can] offset the impact of cognitive-emotional impairment from eco-anxiety on depressive disorder symptoms (Qiu & Qiu, 2024). Thus, prioritizing acts that can definitively mitigate climate change not only benefits the environment but also helps people feel at ease knowing that what they are doing is meaningful. The positive emotional impact from individuals' environmental behavior is also supported by Brosch (2021), who mentions that the importance of anticipated affect and emotions as intrinsic motivators of sustainable action. Thus, not only does participating in climate action alleviate people's anxiety about climate change, but drives them to continue, further mitigating the negative impact of climate anxiety in a circular pattern. From these articles, it can be said that coping mechanisms are not alike, and focusing on more tangible actions to mitigate climate action is conducive in alleviating climate anxiety, rather than underplaying the intensity of the threat.

Expanding on environmental actions as a coping mechanism for climate anxiety, the third subtheme — social aspect of environmental actions — investigates how its effectiveness can be enhanced. One pattern revealed in the data is that people also do environmental actions because people behave pro-socially because the act of helping others results in a positive emotional experience that rewards and reinforces the behavior (Brosch, 2021). Thus, not only does environmental action reduce climate anxiety by giving tangible solutions to the root cause, but it also enhances positive emotions, which further reinforces the action, leading to a positive prosocial behavior loop. Moreover, some people engage in environmental action because it provides a sense of belongingness, as Ágoston et al. (2022) state that those who did environmental actions not only felt a sense of belonging and received emotional support, but also helped each other to develop pro-environmental behavior, shared new tips, and took on the role of environmental activists. Thus, these articles together present the idea that environmental action is not only a positive coping mechanism for dealing with climate anxiety, but the benefits of these actions extend to more positive emotions and finding a community where people gain emotional support.

Now that these sources have identified that climate anxiety leads to environmental actions, which previous literature has already stated, it leads to the next subtheme — climate anxiety and policy support. One of the journal articles states that both negative and positive emotions impact policy support as public support for climate policies was found to be strongly predicted by affect as well as by emotions such as worry, interest, and hope toward climate change (Brosch, 2021). This indicates that emotions play a significant role in an individual's willingness to accept a certain policy, which should not be disregarded by policymakers, as it can reduce resistance to policy acceptance. However, a majority of the data focuses on the influence of negative emotions predicting policy support, as Sciberras & Fernando (2021) mention that worry about climate change and climate action within the domains of support for climate policies and public action. Moreover, eco-anxiety also makes people more willing to participate in implementing relevant policies (Qiu & Qiu, 2024). Thus, not only does climate anxiety lead to greater climate mitigation policy support, but people are inclined to follow through on their vote. From the articles, it can be gathered that many emotions influence policy support, but negative emotions have a greater sway

compared to positive emotions and are more indicative of their behavior in regards to proposed policy.

From these extracts, two reasonable conclusions can be made about this theme. First, those who have negative emotional responses to climate change tend to engage more with environmental information and participate in environmental action as a means of coping. This pattern is supported by Innocenti et al. (2023), who state that positive environmental behaviors as a coping mechanism are helpful as they reduce the cognitive effects of climate anxiety, but climate anxiety also harms self-efficacy and expands on negative thoughts about the state of the world. This supports the previous judgment that though negative emotions have a positive impact on behavior, their negative emotional effects cannot be ignored. Second, the positive effect of environmental action to cope with climate anxiety is magnified by its enhanced social aspect and can influence policy support. This aligns with previous literature, as social change leading to sustainability can be enhanced by educating others to create important values in the community (Lorenzoni et al., 2007). Thus, the social values gained by participating in environmental action are important enough that they argue that it must be continued to lead to a more sustainable future. The social aspect of environmental action is present in young people because their environmental engagement is based on social influences (Ojala, 2012). This indicates that even though environmental action leads to more social belongingness, as stated in the selected sources, if others see people partaking in these actions, they will be more likely to also contribute, further mitigating climate change impacts.

3.3 The implications and impact of conservation policy

Much of the data explains climate anxiety and its impact on environmental action, but it is critical to relate these findings to conservation policy, which is the goal of the final theme — the implications and impact of conservation policy. A closer examination of this theme revealed five underlying subthemes that are distinct yet interconnected. The first subtheme — negative impact on people without conservation policy — focuses on tangible conservation policies as they can give insight into why these policies are beneficial to people. World Wildlife Fund et al.'s (2022) policy brief writes that their policy on improving infrastructure is needed in Indonesia as the impacts to people and roads from worsening climate hazards like floods, droughts, erosion, and coastal storms will be worse if these areas are deforested or degraded. The lack of effective conservation policies can have significant consequences on people. It is not solely about loss of habitat, but also the destruction of forests around the world can increase contact between humans and nonhuman primates and the transmission of diseases from animals to humans (Lang et al., 2020). Lastly, Fachine et al. (2025) write in their policy brief that having a standardized policy amongst the European Union regarding peatland and wetland conservation can reduce biodiversity loss, which significantly contributes to climate change. Though all these policies have different aims, they all concur that without their proposed policies, climate change will worsen. Thus, it can be assumed that if conservation policies, such as those in the selected policy briefs, are not implemented, then they can have negative direct and indirect effects on people.

Expanding on how conservation policy is necessary to mitigate climate change, the second subtheme titled the role people play in policy implementation, concentrates the responsibilities the general public have in upholding these policies. This is mentioned in the chosen policy briefs as Fachine et al. (2025) state that farmers play a large role in their proposed policy as the government needs to step up public and independent advisory support to help farmers adopt agro-ecological practices, with a focus on sustainable management of peatlands and wetlands across Europe. Thus, with the introduction of their policy to protect wetlands and peatlands, the farmers will also have more access to information about how they can do more to mitigate the damage to their lands. Moreover, one conservation policy mentions a top-down approach as the policy should be applied comprehensively across all levels of planning, starting from the national level down to

provincial and to district levels (World Wildlife Fund et al., 2022). Thus, people aside from those in authority play a large role in implementing these policies, which can influence people's support of them.

One commonality within the policy briefs is how their proposed policies positively impact individuals, which is the goal of the third subtheme — positive impact of proposed policies on individuals. For example, Lang et al. (2020) mention that their policy is inspired by The UN Economic Commission for Africa and the Government of Ethiopia [...], [which] did stimulate green jobs, improve community livelihoods, enhance the health of rural women and girls, and build climate resilience through nature-based solutions to deforestation. This indicates that conservation policies are multifaceted as improve people's habitat and also provide jobs to increase their income. The proposed policies not only improve people's lives, but can also help people adapt better to the ever-changing nature of climate change, as the World Wildlife Fund et al.'s (2022) policy mentions that theirs will provide significant opportunities to enhance adaptive capacity for people and improve road resilience through restoration. Hence, conservation policies have numerous benefits for people besides the obvious ones that the general public may not consider.

The fourth subtheme — powerlessness and authority distrust in climate action — focuses on how despite the positive effects of conservation policies, many are apprehensive about supporting policies as they are skeptical the authority's role in climate action. This is mentioned in the selected journal articles as Qiu & Qiu (2024) state that individuals [who feel] betrayed by those weak and lagging governmental responses are faced with increasing negative emotions. Thus, people need to believe that the conservation policy will lead to tangible solutions, especially if previous propositions were lacklustre or non-existent. Additionally, the negative impact of disdain for authority leads to powerlessness coupled with a lack of trust in, and accountability from governments, which impacts climate anxiety in the youth (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). This idea of powerlessness in people who want to make impactful environmental change is further supported by Ágoston et al. (2022), who state that people experience system maintenance guilt and become helplessness of being unable to quit in a bad system, and also believe that it is too late to act, so they accept the inevitable. This cements the idea that inaction from the government not only creates a sense of betrayal in people but also makes them less willing to participate in climate action, as they believe their individual actions are insignificant compared to the damage inflicted by authorities. Hence, from these extracts it can be concluded that even though people have climate anxiety and may participate in environmental action, their support policies are also hinged on their trust and faith in the government to effectively make changes to mitigate climate change.

From the data, a final subtheme emerged — the implications of eco emotions on policy making. These sources suggest that policymakers can use eco-emotions to their advantage, as Brosch (2021) mentions that researchers, practitioners, and policy makers should aim to leverage [eco-emotion's] potential to tackle one of the most fundamental challenges of our time. This indicates that environmental policies cannot be removed from emotions that arise due to the deteriorating climate. Thus, that context needs to be taken into account when developing climate policies. Moreover, policy makers need to directly acknowledge the issues as ecological emotions, when collectively acknowledged and directed, have the potential to galvanize a form of activism that is deeply rooted, sustainable, and imbued with care for the community and our environment (Qiu & Qiu, 2024). This suggests that when people's emotions are considered in policy creation, they are more willing to take part in its implementation as they believe their needs are being heard. These articles have concluded that eco-emotions are a significant phenomenon that cannot be ignored when it comes to making policies and has implications for their eventual support.

From these extracts, multiple conclusions can be made regarding this theme. First, conservation policy is important to implement as it has a positive impact on the environment and the people. This relates to the goals of conservation that Meinard (2017) mentioned, which are restoring both ecosystems and communities. Furthermore, policymakers need to take into account people's negative perception of the government and

authority figures and the significance of emotional responses when creating policies to boost support. This aligns with previous literature, as Wu et al. (2020) state that policymakers need to mitigate the effect of climate anxiety on both short and long-term mental health of the youth. Moreover, Stanley et al. (2021) share the same sentiment as they argue that the success of specific climate policies depends on how people's emotional responses are framed in those policies. Climate anxiety can be identified as one of the specific emotions that affect policy support, as Smith & Leiserowitz (2013) argue that anxiety, at its core, is a debilitating process of risk assessment, and climate change is a public risk. Hence, it would be reasonable that anxiety plays a role in risk perception, especially for something as significant as climate change. Thus, if policymakers want to create an effective conservation policy, they need to consider people's emotions not only in its creation but also in its implementation.

3.4 Inter-theme discussion

These three themes — emotional causes of climate change and their impact, environmental action as a means of coping with climate anxiety, and the implications and impact of conservation policy — when considered together, depict a meaningful story on how eco-emotions and their factors can be linked to conservation policy support. The first theme mentioned factors that lead to climate anxiety, which were identified as environmental values and concern, as mentioned by Kurth & Pihkala (2022), who state that those with pro-environmental values or a strong environmental identity are more inclined to feel anxious in the face of environmental threats. This leads to an explanation of how climate anxiety influences environmental action. However, how eco-anxiety affects behavior is heterogeneous as various degrees and types of these emotional states, as well as the different mindsets related to them, affect behavior in different ways (Ágoston et al., 2022). One such action is recycling, which is negatively predicted by climate anxiety as it is a behavior that is carried out by many and made quite convenient by local councils (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). This infers that not all environmental actions are considered tangible solutions to climate change mitigation. This is because positive environmental behaviors entail a degree of effort, whereas behaviors that were not predicted by climate anxiety were those that could be carried out with more ease (Whitmarsh et al., 2022).

Thus, if policymakers want to evoke more support for conservation policy, they need to ensure that the behaviors people will need to undertake to fulfill the policy are effortful enough to meaningfully alleviate their climate anxiety. Hence, policymakers need to find the middle ground — actions that are effortful enough to be deemed helpful, but not too effortful that they significantly inconvenience people. This aligns with previous literature, as Tobler et al. (2012) state that supportive climate policy as low cost compared to restriction, leading to higher perceived climate benefits, which is a strong predictor of supporting policies. Moreover, worry is the strongest predictor of support for national policies and is more motivational regarding climate action, and leads to more helpful coping (Smith & Leiserowitz, 2013). Worry is one of the emotions connected to climate anxiety, thus its impact on policy support is supported in the context of this discussion (Hickman et al., 2021). Thus, negative emotions in response to climate change, also considered climate anxiety, play a significant role in people's willingness to support proposed conservation policies.

3.5 Limitations and suggestions

While this study provides more insight on the topic of climate anxiety and conservation policy acceptance, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, qualitative data in its nature is inherently subjective; thus, it is impossible to rid any bias in the interpretation of the selected sources. For instance, this research actively attempts to take a more global perspective on this topic, but the researcher may still be influenced by their cultural beliefs towards climate change. Moreover, the data is somewhat skewed, even though various

countries, such as Indonesia, the UK, and Australia, are represented in the chosen sources; it is still not representative of the global phenomenon that is climate change. Additionally, another limitation in this paper is the use of eco-anxiety as an overarching term for negative affect as a result of climate change. However, this does not consider the complexities of negative emotions, as Smith & Leiserowitz (2013) found that both worry and fear are discrete emotions related to climate anxiety, but worry is a stronger predictor of policy support, whereas fear plays a role only if the threat of climate change feels personal. Thus, by not considering the nuances of negative emotions, some of their plausible impact on policy support may be lost. Another limitation in research is that it focuses solely on negative eco-emotions, where previous literature mentions that positive emotions can also lead to environmental action. For instance, Ojala (2012) mentions that positive reappraisal as a form of hope has led to increased awareness about climate change and motivates greater environmental action. This sentiment of positive emotion playing a role in environmental action is supported, as hope is a guide for behavior that shapes the way people react to their environment (Wang et al., 2018). Thus, to demonstrate how eco-emotions impact environmental behavior and conservation policy support, all types of eco-emotions should be examined. Moreover, though the research question is framed as an identification of cause and effect (i.e., climate anxiety leads to policy support), due to the qualitative nature of this paper, a definitive sequence of actions cannot be determined. For example, Kurth & Pihkala (2022) found that environmental values lead to anxiety, but they also argue that anxiety leads to greater involvement, which builds environmental values. Though a reasonable illustration of the relationship between climate anxiety and policy support was identified, there may be other factors that were not considered in this analysis that affect this relationship.

To expand more on these findings, it would be useful to use other qualitative techniques, such as semi-structured interviews found in Wang et al. (2018), to gain a more personal perspective on climate anxiety. For instance, interviews could be conducted about their on their degree of climate anxiety and any other related eco-emotions, and also asked if they would support a proposed conservation policy. Their answers could give greater depth to the relationship between eco emotions and policy support, as it gives a more individualized account of other emotions besides climate anxiety considered. To further reinforce the relationship between climate anxiety and policy support, a correlational study could also be conducted on this topic by analysing the relationship between climate anxiety using Clayton & Karazsia's (2020) climate change anxiety scale and a measure of policy support, and could consider other factors such as environmental values or positive eco-emotions. For example, a questionnaire asking people to rate their self-reported climate anxiety (adapted from the climate change anxiety scale), their environmental concern or values, and whether or not they would vote for a proposed climate policy. The results could serve as a foundation for this qualitative data and give a more comprehensive perspective on climate emotions and conservation policy acceptance.

4. Conclusions

The influence of climate anxiety on individuals' acceptance of conservation policy has been explored through reflexive thematic analysis of six journal articles and three policy briefs. In summation, the deterioration of the environment leads to significant emotional impairment, such as eco-anxiety, and can be due to people's environmental values, leading to environmental action. Moreover, people who experience climate anxiety are more likely to seek out climate information and engage more in the topic, which can motivate them to participate in environmental action to cope, and its effects are enhanced by social belongingness and could lead to policy support. It was also found that conservation policies are significant to support both the environment and the people who live in it, but the emotional impact of climate change should be considered in policy creation. It is also essential to consider that many people do not trust the government in handling climate

change mitigation, even if they experience climate anxiety, so policymakers need to boost their accountability to gain more support from skeptics.

From this paper, it has been established that emotional responses such as climate anxiety influence environmental behaviors; thus, answering the research question posed at the beginning of this paper. This is because climate anxiety can lead to more support for conservation policies due to their effectiveness in mitigating climate change, which will meaningfully alleviate their anxiety. Thus, this paper can be used to inform policymakers about what people think about climate change and influence not only the creation of the policy itself, but also how information about it is spread to do as much as they can to reduce the impact of climate change. An ideal conservation policy, as supported by the findings of this paper, would consider the significance of climate anxiety by proposing climate actions that can be done with considerable, but not too much, effort in individuals, but also make meaningful strides in collective action, so people who are climate anxious believe it will lead to tangible change.

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Author Contribution

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly to check grammar, punctuation, and spelling. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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