

Eco-Anxiety and Willful Ignorance: Cognitive barriers to Pro-Environmental Behaviour

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Abstract: *As ecological crises intensify, individuals increasingly experience eco-anxiety- the persistent fear associated with environmental degradation. This paper considers eco-anxiety and associated feelings as a necessary and normal reaction to evidence-based information, and the ecology we live in. The phenomenon was analysed with respect to the Willful Ignorance displayed by the subjects to maintain an affective-behavioural-cognitive comfort. A sample of 75 subjects were collected of all genders and age ranging from 19 to 60 years. Hogg's Eco Anxiety Scale was administered along with a qualitatively derived Willful Ignorance Questionnaire to measure the relationship between these phenomena. Pro-Environmental Activism was analysed using qualitative methodology. Subscales of Eco Anxiety were correlated with factors of Willful Ignorance to surmise that Affective Anxiety results in advocacy-type activism, while Rumination, Behavioural and Personal impact-based Activism resulted in small-scale and large-scale movements. Significant relationship was found among deniers and subscales of Eco-Anxiety, evidencing that participants reject information about the ecology to conveniently remain anxiety free, ergo avoiding climate action. The paper aims to reframe eco-anxiety as a shared, actionable signal for a better climate and psychological harmony rather than a pathology.*

Keywords: climate change, eco-anxiety, pro- environmental behaviour, willful ignorance, eco-activism

1. Introduction

Eco-anxiety and willful ignorance represent two interrelated yet distinct psychological reactions to the intensifying climate crisis, creating a complex interplay that influences behaviour, affect, and cognition. With CO₂ levels reaching new record highs, February 2026 being confirmed as the fifth warmest February globally in recorded history (WMO, 2026), alarming rising of sea levels, wildfires, heatwaves in the Asian Peninsula, extreme cold in the northern hemisphere with a third lowest record of Arctic sea levels in history (Climate Bulletin, 2026), the “development” based projects undertaken by governments at the cost of natural resources and trees---the climate crisis is a pressing matter that many individuals feel anxious over. Previously, the attempt at climate-related anxiety was analysed from a pathological standpoint; the present study aims to situate the anxiety as a climate-conscious endeavour taken by population.

Eco-Anxiety

Eco-anxiety, defined as a persistent fear or distress regarding environmental degradation and climate change, has surfaced as a notable mental health issue worldwide (Rajamani & Iyer, 2024). The concept is not merely a pathological concern and a chronic fear of environmental doom (Albrecht, 2011) but rather a logical, reasonable reaction to scientifically substantiated threats (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). The American Psychological Association recognized this recently emerging construct of mental health as a chronic fear of environmental doom characterized by a range of emotions, including *grief*, *worry*, and *guilt*. While some scientists attempt to reduce the negative adversities of climate-related anxiety, such as Insomnia and Eating Disorders (Tavolacci, & Ladner, 2025), researchers agree that the lack of feeling distress over the environment may not be a sign of well-being. The distress caused by Eco-Anxiety may result in activism, personal changes and global

movements, which are imperative to a healthy society. Using plastic-based utilities while being aware of the non-biodegradable properties of the material may cause cognitive dissonance. Many therapeutic devices are being used by counsellors to battle the distress on a clinical level. Recent systematic reviews affirm that eco-anxiety includes affective symptoms such as anxiety and depression, cognitive patterns like contemplating ecological doom, and behavioural expressions such as avoidance or activism (Boluda-Verdú et al 2022; Hogg, Stanley & O'Brien, 2024). Research indicates that eco-anxiety can act as a motivating factor for pro-environmental behaviour (Verplanken, et al 2020), with longitudinal studies revealing that individuals with elevated levels of eco-anxiety are more inclined to participate in both private-sphere actions, such as reducing consumption and public-sphere activism (Pavani, Nicolas, & Bonetto, 2023; Ballew et al, 2024) relating to the larger systemic causes of climate change. The distress caused by Eco Anxiety results in activism, personal changes, and global movements, which are imperative to a healthy society.

It is also worth noting that portions of the population may face the worst effects of the climate crisis, which may influence their understanding and urgency in feeling Eco-Anxiety as well as Eco-Anger. Gender, Age, Class, and Race all play a role in the perception of Eco-Anxiety. People with disabilities, people with mental illnesses, the Global South, people living in poverty, the youth, the tribal population, people living in coastal regions etc., may face the direct impacts of the Climate Crisis in a much more severe manner. Demographic study of these phenomena divulges significant and interesting trends. Young populations report notably elevated levels of eco-anxiety, with many voicing apprehensions regarding reproduction and dietary choices due to environmental anxieties (van den Broek, 2023; Rajamani, & Iyer, 2024). Marginalized groups frequently endure heightened distress, as they confront both disproportionate environmental challenges---such as eco

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racism---and restricted agency in decision-making processes (Jimenez Gomez Tagle & Vito, 2024). Cultural context also influences expression, with research conducted in various regions- from the Philippines to the UAE- unveiling both universal and culturally-specific forms of eco-anxiety (Takshe, 2022; Aruta, 2024). Studies show that more young people feel overwhelmed by climate change, pollution, and the loss of natural resources, resulting in feelings of helplessness or urgency to act regarding the planet's future (Valero, 2025). Their activism often includes movements focusing on climate justice, sustainability practices, and a push for policy changes, reflecting their deep-seated worries about the ecological crisis (Allen, 2023).

While a number of activists adopt more sustainable lifestyles, such as reducing waste, using public transportation, eating plant based, avoiding AI tools; Many also feel the responsibility to advocate for policy changes on a government level, global movements as well as more radical forms of activism that forces the systemic and elite of the world to pay attention. This has resulted in participation in strikes, protests, and community initiatives aimed at protecting the environment (Gosai, Sharma, & Mankodi, 2024). The climate conscious also engage in personal means to lessen their carbon footprint, for instance, many choose to adopt minimalism, which encourages reducing consumption and waste. They also advocate for upcycling and second-hand shopping as alternatives to buying new products. The "zero-waste" movement has gained significant attention, with many young people seeking to eliminate waste from their lives entirely. Food based personal activism is also on the rise with more youth adopting a vegan lifestyle than ever before with a record of 30million individuals across the globe attempting Veguary in 2026, a movement where individuals attempt to eat only plant-based food for the month of January. (Vegan News, 2026).

Research by Hogg et al., (2021) has aided the understanding of Eco- Anxiety by identifying key dimensions:

- 1) Affective Symptoms: Feeling anxious, worried, or unable to control worry about environmental problems.
- 2) Rumination: Being unable to stop thinking about future climate change and other environmental issues.
- 3) Behavioural Symptoms: Experiencing difficulty sleeping or other daily life disruptions due to these thoughts.
- 4) Anxiety about Personal Impact: Feeling anxious about the effect of one's own behaviour on the planet.

Advances in measurement have enhanced our comprehension of these constructs. Instruments such as the Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale and Climate Anxiety Scale have been modified for use across numerous languages and cultures, demonstrating consistent four-dimensional frameworks that include affective, cognitive, behavioural, and functional impairments (Rodríguez Quiroga, 2024; Hogg, Stanley & O'Brien, 2023; 2024). These instruments facilitate a more accurate evaluation of when eco-anxiety transitions from adaptive concern to clinical distress that necessitates intervention (Lykins, 2023). And may also provide necessary therapeutic measures to prevent inaction and pathological duress.

Willful Ignorance

Willful ignorance- an intentional evasion of information that could potentially disrupt one's worldview, comfort, or behavioural habits. Economic and psychological studies characterize willful ignorance as the deliberate decision to remain uninformed, frequently to safeguard self-image while pursuing self-serving interests (Dana, & der Weele, 2026). Meta-analytic findings substantiate that willful ignorance significantly diminishes altruistic behaviour across various contexts (Vu et al, 2023). The psychological process driving this avoidance is consistent with Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1964) when climate information provokes intense negative emotions such as guilt, despair, or a sense of powerlessness, individuals negate the assimilation of such information to preserve psychological stability (Martin et al, 2023). An example of the cognitive dissonance-based willful ignorance could be that despite the knowledge of the non-corrosive properties of plastic, some individuals are unwilling to make efforts on a personal basis to avoid plastic consumption, thereby altogether negating their responsibility by claiming ignorance of global plastic waste statistics. Scholars have surmised that the influx of information results in "Eco-Paralysis"- a condition where anxiety does not incite proactive measures but rather results in crippling helplessness (Innocenti et al, 2023).

Researchers claim that an approximate 40% of the population chooses to remain uninformed about the consequences of their actions on others. This lack of knowledge also reflects in a reduction in altruistic behaviour, a notable 15.6%. (Vu et al, 2023). Cognitive dissonance is described as the uncomfortable feeling experienced when there is a discrepancy between one's actions and one's values (Festinger, 1957; 1964). Epistemically, one could infer that those who deliberately ignore information suspect the harmful consequences of their actions and choose to evade the negative feelings associated with said actions (Kirfel, et al, 2023). From a judicial perspective, studies promote that willful ignorance should be more punishable than unintentional ignorance (Sarch, 2018; Bnefsi, 2024). With regards to the impending doom of the climate crisis and ecological decline, willful ignorance stands as a powerful reminder that the choice not to know can be as consequential as the pursuit of knowledge itself.

Several critical factors contribute to the mediation of the phenomenon of Willful Ignorance:

- 1) Perceived Efficacy
- 2) Social Identity and Political Ideology
- 3) Type of Persuasive Message

Perceived efficacy is crucial. Individuals who are convinced that their actions can affect change are more inclined to transform eco-anxiety into positive behaviours instead of succumbing to willful ignorance (Aruta, 2024) and the inaction of eco paralysis. This aligns with existing study on pro-social behaviours and research on what leads to bystander effect (Latané, & Darley, 1968; Darley & Latané, 1968). Social identity and political ideology have a significant impact on how information is processed. Research indicates that political orientation is a strong predictor of attitudes towards climate solutions, with

ideological beliefs frequently taking precedence over scientific consensus (Clulow, 2021). A large number of right-wing supporters in the United States of America prefer denying climate change (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020). The manner in which climate communication is framed is of great importance. Alarmist messages that highlight catastrophic outcomes without providing actionable solutions can provoke defensive reactions and lead to information avoidance (Bellehumeur & Carignan, 2024) and willful ignorance. In contrast, relational metaphors that focus on connection and agency demonstrate a greater potential for engagement without causing debilitating distress. This aligns with existing literature on persuasion and attitude change (McGuire, 1996)

Recent neurocognitive models offer insight into this occurrence. Studies on attention mechanisms indicate that individuals experiencing high levels of eco-anxiety demonstrate distinct patterns of selective attention towards climate-related information, (Mathers-Jones, & Todd, 2023). The notion of "willful inattention" broadens this perspective, wherein individuals intentionally withdraw from visually and logically evident environmental threats in order to avoid negative emotion (Wojtowicz, 2025; Orquin, 2025). The studies show below-baseline attention to pertinent stimuli, enabling individuals to maintain deniability regarding their involvement in environmental damage despite credible evidence.

Intervention strategies must tackle all aspects of this psychological phenomenon. In the context of eco-anxiety, therapeutic methods such as Morita therapy- focusing on accepting anxious feelings while directing attention towards purposeful actions—show potential (Raile, 2024). Community-oriented interventions that enhance collective efficacy and offer tangible action pathways can convert anxiety from a source of inaction into a driving force for change (Dauvergne & van der Ven, 2025). Concurrently, addressing willful ignorance necessitates creating psychologically safe environments for engaging with information, where individuals can confront challenging truths without experiencing moral condemnation or feeling overwhelmed (Vu et al, 2023). This requires a shift from information-deficit models to strategies that recognize emotional complexity and foster resilience.

The interaction between eco-anxiety and willful ignorance illustrates a fundamental human conflict: how does one react to daunting threats that undermine our sense of agency, identity, and future. It is pertinent that instead of perceiving these as solely personal psychological challenges, they should be recognized as valid, responsible, socially contextual responses to systemic crises. Successful solutions necessitate both individual-level assistance for emotional regulation and collective-level changes that reinstate authentic agency and hope, evidenced by a strive for systemic change. As the effects of climate change escalate, promoting psychological resilience while breaking down structural obstacles to action becomes ever more critical—not only for mental well-being but also for the survival of our planet.

2. Significance of the Study

Rather than a pathological analysis for eco anxiety, eco grief, eco guilt etc, one could argue that worry about real threats to the future of the planet and sustenance is a normal, even healthy reaction to the logical statistics of environmental science. The World Meteorological Organisation publish many alarming statistics. The years 2015–2025 were the warmest 10-year period ever recorded with 2024 recorded as the warmest year ever. Approximately 90 percent of the ocean surface experienced at least one marine heatwave in 2025. Global mean sea level has risen by approximately 11cm since 1993. According to the Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2026, the world has endured more than 9,700 documented extreme weather events between 1995 and 2024 resulting in the death of more than 832,000 people. While it is imperative to aid the population in maintaining well-being, it should not be advised to ignore the real imminent issues faced by the earth and its inhabitants. Inaction during this 11th hour may result in the extinction of the planet. The goal of present study is to focus on the Willful Ignorance that people exhibit to avoid feeling Eco-Anxiety and associated feelings. The lack of Eco-Anxiety and urgency may be a coping strategy to avoid Behavioural, Affective and/or Cognitive Dissonance. The paper has attempted to devise a scientific understanding of why a portion of the population does not feel the psychological effects of climate change, as well as the activism or action-based approach employed by the portion of the population that does feel the distress.

3. Method

Procedure and Measures

The study was conducted in a mixed methodology format. Structured questionnaires were utilised to capture subjects' experience regarding Eco-Anxiety triggered by the climate crises. Pro-environmental behaviour was studied using a structured questionnaire as well as an open-ended question; The responses for the open-ended question were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Pro-environmental activism and willful ignorance dimensions were identified from the study.

The Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale (HEAS-13)

HEAS is a 13-item self-report questionnaire, a comprehensive psychometric measure of eco-anxiety developed by Hogg et al. (2021) by using a mixed-methods approach. The scale is designed to measure four subdimensions namely (a) affective symptoms, (b) rumination, (c) behavioural symptoms, and (d) anxiety about one's negative impact on the planet. Some sample items were, "not being able to stop or control worrying"; "feeling anxious about the impact of your personal behaviours on the earth". The subjects were asked to record their experience on a four-point Likert scale ranging from (0 = not at all to 3 = nearly every day). The HEAS-13 scale and its subscales have been proven to be psychometrically sound. The reliability statistics of the scales and sub-scales were calculated, and an alpha coefficient of $\geq .90$ shows that the scales were internally consistent. Test-Retest reliability was found to range between .75 to .90. Concurrent and Discriminant Validity was well established (Larionow et al.,

2024), and a mediocre three-week intra-class correlation, ranging from 0.47 to 0.56. (Turkarslan et al, 2023) was seen

Eco Activism Scale vs Willful Ignorance Scale

The concept of Willful Ignorance is target-specific, a particular scale with regards to Eco-Anxiety had not been previously attempted, therefore a questionnaire was developed by the authors of the paper to measure the phenomenon. The items were drawn from analysing available literature of previous studies of both qualitative (Ágoston et al, 2022) and quantitative (Pihkala, 2020; Larionow, 2024) nature. The themes that emerged after analysing the literature on eco-anxiety and pro-climate/ecology behaviour (Mateer et al, 2022) were: (a) direct public activism, items like “I engage in community activities for the environment (e.g. beach cleanups)”, (b) Knowledge sharing items like “I tell other people to stop using plastic straws” and advocacy, items like “I engage in online activism by sharing important news and statistics.”

Some respondents preferred not to act. Analysing the responses to avoid pro-environmental behaviour fits the phenomenon of *Willful Ignorance* (Reher, Gotz & Gross, 2025). Few items were created for each area of ignorance. Some items are prepared to capture the factors of non-ignorant responses. Sample items are “I am not personally responsible for climate change”, “I do not have the resources to advocate for the ecology”. “I tell other people to stop using plastic straws”. The subjects are asked to record their response with a four-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). There were 21 items in this scale. The responses to open ended questions were coded theme wise. The data from both quantitative and qualitative studies were factor analysed. The result shows that the reason for the responses follow three themes, they were, (a) voiding action to minimise the personal inconvenience, items like, “Using environmentally safe

products are inconvenient and expensive”, (b) voiding for social approval reasons, items like, “I fear that activism will isolate me from society”, and (c) Denial, items like, “climate crisis is a myth”.

Participants

The sample consisted of seventy-five respondents of both sexes contacted through social media announcement and word of mouth in March 2026 by reaching out to the educated population that was supposed to be climate sensitive. 60 per cent of respondents were women and 40 per cent were men. The mean age of the respondents was 30.11 (SD= 11.22) years and ranged between 19 years and 60 years. In the sample selection process, we included only educated persons as a criterion. In the sample, 5.3 per cent were higher secondary educated, 20 per cent were graduates, 66.7 per cent were post-graduates, and 8 per cent had a doctorate. 10.7 per cent were living in rural areas, 26.7 per cent were from semi-urban areas, and 62.7 per cent were living in urban areas. As for Eco-Activism, 38.7 per cent of respondents identified themselves as eco-activists and are involved in one type of activism or another.

No other exclusion criteria were used. The participation was voluntary, and they were informed about the nature of the study, no personal or sensitive information was sought. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and research ethics was followed.

Analysis

The Pearson’s correlation coefficient is used to establish the relation between the eco anxiety scale and its subscales and its relation with the wilful ignorance scale.

4. Result and Discussion

Table 1: Eco-Anxiety sub-scales by Wilful Ignorance Factors

Environmental Behaviours	Sub Scales of Eco-Anxiety			
	Affective symptoms	Rumination	Behavioural symptoms	Anxiety about Personal Impact
Willful Ignorance				
Avoidance (personal inconvenience)	-0.197	-0.125	0.026	-0.182
Avoidance (social approval)	-0.189	-0.173	0.163	-0.122
Denial	-0.351**	-0.291*	0.040	-0.263*
Pro Eco Behaviour				
Public activism	0.209	0.247*	0.380**	0.257*
Advocacy	0.320*	0.433**	0.210	0.380*
Knowledge sharing	0.244*	0.169	0.162	0.184
Personal practice	0.142	0.083	-0.016	0.197

** p < 0.01

* p < 0.05

Table 1 shows the correlation between eco anxiety sub-scales with factors of willful ignorance. The affective symptoms were negatively correlated with denial of eco crises ($r = -0.351$, $p < .01$) and positively correlated with knowledge-sharing factors of willful ignorance. Similarly, rumination was negatively correlated with denial ($r = -.291$, $p < .05$). Rumination was positively correlated with public activism ($r = -.237$, $p < .05$) and Advocacy ($r = .433$, $p < .01$). Denial was negatively correlated with anxiety about one’s impact on the planet ($r = .263$, $p < .05$). Behavioural symptoms and anxiety about personal impact were

positively correlated with public activism ($r = .380$, $p < .01$) and ($r = 0.257$, $p < .05$). Advocacy was correlated with affective symptoms ($r = .320$, $p < .05$), rumination ($r = .433$, $p < .01$), anxiety about personal impact ($r = .380$, $p < .05$) and not with behavioural symptoms. Affective symptoms was positively correlated with knowledge sharing ($r = .244$, $p < .05$). Pro ecological behaviour at the personal level, such as reducing plastic bag usage, not littering in the street, and reducing petrol consumption etc were not significantly related with eco anxiety sub scale dimension.

5. Discussion

Denial of Eco Crises was negatively correlated with affective symptoms, rumination symptoms, and anxiety of personal impact, but it did not impact behavioural symptoms significantly. Although not statistically significant in present study, Avoidance was negatively correlated with Affective, Ruminative and Anxious about personal impact subscales of Eco-Anxiety, evidencing that Willful Ignorance is aiding the population to ignore, dismiss and ergo not feel Eco-Anxiety.

The deniers of eco crises, those who believed that such crises were myths and media created frenzies, exhibited a significant inverse relation with affective, rumination, and anxiety about personal impact. This reinstates that participants willfully ignore the existence as well as any news about eco crises. One surmises, based on the insignificant correlation with behaviour, that the choice to remain ignorant is made in order to avoid action and therefore continue to live a convenient life. Living in a society that is largely oblivious to the current threat of ecological doom may lead one to feel that action in a pro-ecological manner warrants reduction from others.

Noteworthy evidence is present in the positive and highly significant correlation in Public activism and Behavioural symptoms of HEAS-13 as well as the Advocacy and Rumination Symptoms. Proving that the eco-anxious population is active in pro environmental activism, to the best of their capacity.

Denying eco-crises and believing that such news are media created myths are prototype of willful ignorance. Cognitive Dissonance is experienced when two contradictory beliefs are held by an individual as well as when the behaviour and the values of an individual do not align. This uncomfortable, anxious feeling that warrants change in the belief system or the action of a person is not always easy. One faces many challenges when choosing to act in ethical ways. Historically, civil rights activists, anti nazi sympathisers, freedom fighters were ostracised from society. However, society would not bear the fruits of freedom and rights today if advocates did not question the system. Despite eco activists' attempt to create a better future for the earth, there will be pushback from the majority and a deliberate pressure to fit in and live a convenient life. The study evidence that Advocacy is practised by those who display affective symptoms, rumination and anxiety about personal impact, but not behavioural symptoms. One can conclude that those who do not advocate for ecology may be avoiding the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. Willful Ignorance is used to achieve this comfort and convenience.

Personal practice in the eco care, such as not using plastic bags, not littering in the street, etc., was not correlated significantly with any of the eco anxiety sub-scales. Which indicated that public action needs stronger concern than private practice, especially in pro-ecological behaviour. It is worth investigating whether private practice may be driven by civic sense. Private measures reported by the participants are small scale movements. "Using public transport whenever I can", "I don't litter and urge close family members to do the same" are low effort actions. Activism

and protests are meant to be inconvenient and "annoying". Prominent example in recent times include when two climate activists belonging to Just Stop Oil throw tomato soup on Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London (Mathiesen, 2024). The normally distributed population views such types of activism as too extreme and prefers to use smaller, everyday methods.

The findings of the study display an interesting pattern of action-based behaviour in those with climate anxiety. The population seems to lack affective symptoms, but display high rumination, display some behavioural symptoms and anxiety about personal impact. Those who refrain from performing large scale activism but seek and share knowledge and information with others display high in affective symptoms but lower levels in all other factors of eco anxiety. The results can be dissected as emotion-based activism may be an attempt to inculcate similar emotions in others while rumination and behaviour-based anxiety focus on personal action.

The research aims to propound an academic discussion on activism and a cognitive explanation for those who avoid information that may lead to activist type behaviour. Lack of eco-anxiety as well as a lack of action despite experiencing some levels of climate anxiety acts as evidence for Willful Ignorance and the associated Cognitive Dissonance. These phenomena help us understand why the population may be inactive with regards to and deny climate crises. However, it is necessary to note that the ecological crisis is drastically worsening every year. Inaction at this 11th hour may lead to climate collapse. Labelling Eco-Anxiety as a pathology may avert people from acting on these anxieties, at the same time it is important for mental health practitioners to focus on forward movement and healthy coping for such anxieties so as to battle hopelessness-based inaction.

6. Conclusion

With the impending climate crises and influx of disastrous news surrounding ecology every day, feeling Eco-Anxiety and a willingness to pro-environmental behaviour is a normal, healthy, and essential feeling. Instead of pathologizing Eco-Anxiety, psychological scholars and mental health practitioners must strive towards maintenance of a healthy mind which aids in pro-environmental activism, policies and private practices. While present study uses a limited sample, the necessity of analysing eco-crises with deliberate and willful choice to remain ignorant is crucial to cognitive ethics and eco psychology. Pro-ecological activism is employed by a portion of the population that feels affective, ruminative, behavioural and personal impact-based anxiety regarding the ecology. While some strive to undertake personal small-scale steps, others resort to community, city scale, and policy-change levels of activism. Further research can focus on the affective, behavioural and cognitive bases that aid in activism, towards a healthy climate stature, towards a population that may facilitate, use public and systemic practices to battle the growing eco crises.

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