

Article

Attuning to Loss: Contemplative Ecology and the Practice of Mourning Damaged Landscapes in the Veluwe

Evanne Nowak

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, School of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands; a.l.e.nowak@vu.nl

Abstract

Ecological degradation is accelerating worldwide, yet the losses of species, ecosystems, and landscapes often remain socially and culturally unmourned. This article explores how contemplative ecology may offer a pathway for engaging with ecological grief. Drawing on the case study of Lab Landschapspijn Veluwe in the Netherlands, it examines how contemplative practices—such as contemplative dialogue and contemplative walking—can help participants attune to ecological loss in degraded landscapes. Using heuristic inquiry and interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study investigates how participants perceive and articulate tangible ecological losses and their emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. The findings show that contemplative practices can function as forms of contemplative witnessing, making ecological loss more perceptible, grievable, emotionally acknowledged, and relationally processed. Contemplative practices may foster an open-ended engagement with ecological loss; an orientation that allows grief, wonder, uncertainty, and care to coexist without demanding immediate resolution. Therefore, contemplative ecology may cultivate the emotional, existential and relational capacities required to remain engaged with ecological crisis.

Keywords: ecological grief; contemplative ecology; ecological mourning; ecological loss; ecological chaplaincy; Veluwe; contemplative dialogue; heuristics

1. Vignette

“The oaks and the beeches in the Netherlands might not survive the end of this century. Rising temperatures and depleted, contaminated soils could make conditions too harsh for them.” This remark was made by the Dutch biologist Arnold van Vliet whom I interviewed three years ago during a public lecture on seasonal shifts and climate change at the ARTIS Groote Museum. Living in the Veluwe—the largest nature conservation area in the Netherlands—for the past four years, surrounded by oak and beech forests, this statement lingered with me and heightened my awareness of ecological decline around me. Media reports increasingly describe the ecological deterioration of the Veluwe in alarming terms: “Fields full of dead oak trees: the Veluwe is on the brink of disaster” ([Megens 2021](#)), “From birds to oak forests: nitrogen is killing life in the Veluwe” ([Schuttenhelm 2021](#)), “Nitrogen is destroying the Veluwe forests” ([Omroep Gelderland 2020](#)). According to ecologist Hans Siebel, 30–40 percent of the region’s summer oaks have already died as a consequence of nitrogen pollution ([Geuze 2016](#)).

Since hearing Van Vliet’s remark, I have begun to move differently through the forest. My gaze drifts upward more often toward the canopy, noticing whether branches appear full or sparse. I imagine possible futures: trees collapsing one by one, hollowed beech



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avenues, silent forests. I cannot unsee it, and yet I see it always. A constant vigilance hums beneath my skin, a quiet unease, a restless fear mingles and co-exists with feelings of belonging and the joy of living here. Am I the only one who wanders through these forests with feelings of grief and anxiety? How do people learn to perceive ecological loss? A curiosity about the dynamics of witnessing ecological loss started to grow, a longing to share my feelings and questions with my neighbors, and a desire to build a community of care.

2. Introduction

Environmental anthropologist Thom van Dooren raises a pressing question in the context of accelerating ecological decline:

What does it mean that, in this time of incredible loss, there is so little public (and perhaps also private) mourning for extinctions? Why do the last expressions of so many species leave this world unnoticed and unmourned? (Van Dooren 2014, p. 140)

In the years since Van Dooren posed this question, a vast growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship has explored the phenomenon of ecological grief and mourning. Leading authors Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis define ecological grief as “grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, p. 275). Ecological grief situates itself as part of a wider spectrum of ecology-related emotions and feelings, and it is especially connected with sadness (Pihkala 2024, p. 2).

However, ecological grief goes beyond only emotional responses and feelings. Scholars increasingly argue how ecological grief can be understood as a reasonable, embodied, relational and affective experience that can transform ourselves, our spiritual worldviews, and our communities, as well as relations amongst humans and more-than-human others (Barnett 2021; Chaplain 2025; Cunsolo and Ellis 2018; Dean 2023; Van Dooren 2014). Yet ecological grief is not a given, even in contexts of severe ecological degradation. Joshua Barnett stresses we should understand it as a learned practice, a “skill”:

If and when we register more-than-human losses as meaningful losses, if and when we publicly express our grief, we should not regard these acts as givens. Such acts of mourning are, rather, remarkable accomplishments. (Barnett 2021, p. 30)

In this article, I therefore seek to understand what conditions enable people to recognize and mourn ecological loss. I will build on the concept of contemplative ecology as a vital yet relatively underexplored pathway for engaging with ecological loss that may help to sensitize us to the ecological wonders and wounds around us. Theologian Douglas E. Christie has done foundational thinking, building a theory of contemplative ecology. In his book *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, he defines this as “an understanding of spiritual practice that places the well-being of the natural world at the center of its concerns, and an approach to ecology that understands the work of cultivating contemplative awareness as critical and necessary to its full meaning” (Christie 2013, p. xi). Christie argues furthermore how the mystical–contemplative traditions are critical to our engagement with an “ecology of loss” (Christie 2024). In this article, I will examine how practices such as contemplative dialogue and contemplative walking may enable people to attune to ecological loss and to articulate and explore feelings of grief and care toward damaged landscapes.

The analysis is based on a case study of the project Lab Landschapspijn Veluwe (Ecological Grief Lab), a four-day participatory project organized in the Veluwe region of the

Netherlands. I organized this four-day project together with biologist and philosopher Dirk Hilbers, artist Anje Jager and audiomaker Kitty Munnichs in the spring of 2025. The project invited local residents to explore experiences of ecological loss through contemplative practices, dialogue, and shared encounters with degraded landscapes.

Drawing on heuristic inquiry and interpretative phenomenological analysis, I will investigate how participants perceived ecological loss, how they articulated emotional and existential responses to these experiences, and how contemplative practices shaped these processes of attuning, witnessing and mourning. By examining these dynamics, I seek to contribute to emerging scholarship on ecological grief and environmental humanities. I will argue that contemplative ecology can offer a meaningful pathway for engaging with ecological loss by cultivating attentiveness, relational awareness, and communal practices in which ecological grief can be expressed, explored and held.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Mourning

Scholars in the environmental humanities increasingly argue that mourning ecological loss is not merely an emotional response but a crucial ethical and cultural practice. Van Dooren understands mourning as a way of reorienting and relearning our place in these times of extinction, as he points out that:

The work to be done here, first and foremost, is the task of “getting it” that these deaths of individuals, of species, matter, that the world as we know it is changing; and that new approaches are necessary if life in its diversity is to go on. In this context, learning to mourn extinctions may also be essential to our and many other species’ long-term survival. (Van Dooren 2014, p. 143)

Mourning is then a most necessary and active learning process of engaging with ecological losses, as Van Dooren argues that “learning to mourn might offer us a way into a fuller understanding of our living planet, of what it means and why it matters” (Van Dooren 2014, p. 144). Central to this process is the question of grievability, a concept developed by philosopher Judith Butler and later extended to environmental contexts by Cunsolo (Cunsolo 2017; Willox 2012). Grievability refers to which lives or entities are recognized as worthy of mourning: who or what we are (not) grieving for defines who we are and what relationships we consider as important. In an era of climate change and extinction, the category of ungrieved and ungrievable entities includes according to Cunsolo the permanent loss of biodiversity and changes in lands (Cunsolo 2017, p. 174). She therefore argues that extending the concept of a mournable body beyond the human is of the utmost importance.

Environmental humanities scholar Joshua Tray Barnett further develops this idea through the concept of “vigilant mourning”, which he describes as an ongoing practice of attentiveness to ecological loss. This refers to mourning as unresolved, unfinished and active process, “a practice of tarrying with our grief, of remaining awake to those beings and ways of being on earth which have already been lost and of staying alert to those which today find themselves under threat of erasure” (Barnett 2021, p. 14). Vigilant mourning is vital and necessary, “a state of wakefulness and alertness, attending and attuning, observing and protecting, guarding and keeping” (Barnett 2021, pp. 14–17). In this way, grief goes beyond just an emotional response and “becomes an ongoing state, a context for living” (Craps et al. 2025), an “ongoing conversation that accompanies us throughout life” (Weller and Donahue 2026, p. 12).

So what is needed to truly “get it”? What is at stake? Barnett argues we need rhetorical practices of naming ecological losses, developing sensory and embodied awareness and enhancing the visibility of species that have gone extinct and slow losses that go unnoticed

(Barnett 2022). Environmental humanities scholar Marzia Varutti explores obstacles and opportunities for voicing publicly our ecological grief (Varutti 2024). She points out:

“We need to be able and willing to: *perceive* and acknowledge the loss; pause to make sense of it, *understand* its significance and implications; allow ourselves to *feel* it, and *share* those feelings with others as part of ritualized mourning practices.” (Varutti 2024, p. 556)

Varutti argues we need “ecological skills” in order to be able to make these big stretches in our empathy and awareness, such as creativity, intimacy, sensitivity, sensory attunement and the willingness to be moved (Varutti 2024, pp. 560–61). However, being moved by ecological loss is often a painful and complicated experience, as various scholars of ecological grief point out.

3.2. Ecological Grief

In this article I understand ecological grief as a valuable emotional response to ecological loss that is often a long-lasting, layered and complex experience. These experiences often involve both tangible and intangible dimensions of loss. Losses of species, landscapes, and ecosystems, which can be perceived with the senses, can be understood as tangible losses (Pihkala 2024, pp. 6–8). Tangible losses are closely connected to intangible losses, which are more abstract and sometimes symbolic and can have existential characteristics. Such intangible dimensions include a loss of mental and emotional well-being, loss of connection to others, loss of making sense of the world, and loss of meaning or hope (Tschakert et al. 2019). As these intangible dimensions are not so obvious, various scholars point out that these experiences are often a form of disenfranchised grief, meaning that these losses are not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Pihkala 2024, p. 14). In multiple ways, ecological grief can thus be understood as a deeply disrupting, existential experience.

Various authors express that it is problematic if this emotional distress caused by ecological degradation remains private, unnoticed, silenced, pathologized, muted or treated as an individual rather than societal issue (Barnett 2022; Cooke et al. 2024; Cunsolo 2017; Kretz 2017; McCarroll 2025; Varutti 2024). Hence, they argue we need collective practices and spaces to engage with ecological losses. Environmental philosopher Lisa Kretz points out we need community mourning, as this can foster an emotional solidarity in which people recognize we are not alone in our mourning nor are we alone in our anger towards ecological injustices and the absence of sufficient responses (Kretz 2017, p. 274). Thus, when we publicly and collectively mourn ecological losses, we normalize, validate and legitimize those feelings. Grieving together enables a certain learning that feelings of grief and anger are legitimate responses and addresses ways to learn to speak about this—an “ecological grief literacy” as it is called by environmental scholar Anna Cooke and colleagues (Cooke et al. 2024).

Various scholars within environmental humanities and chaplaincy studies describe how lament can be a fruitful concept in describing the spiritual process in which people can share and explore their personal struggles concerning climate change and ecological loss (Doehring and Cowen 2025; McCarroll 2025; Phillips et al. 2023). Human geography scholar Cathine Phillips and colleagues who explored practices of lamenting trees understand lament as an individual and collective process involving an interweaving of feeling, accounting for, sharing and placing loss that holds others to account (Phillips et al. 2023). It is an “acknowledgement of broken and yet somehow continuing ties” with the living world (Phillips et al. 2023, p. 2368). It involves mourning as well as celebrating and protesting in which joy, gratitude, love and appreciation accompany grief, anger and blame. Chaplaincy scholars Doehring and Cowen (2025) conceptualize lamentation as an ongoing, open-ended

process, involving a certain interplay between spiritual dwelling (sharing moral distress and spiritual struggles that people witnessing climate crises may experience) and spiritual seeking (rethinking values) that stimulates one to reconnect with oneself, community and the earth. Feeling immersed, held, and part of this living earth should help one to be able to open oneself to the vastness and deep pain of ecological loss and our complicity in it (Doehring and Cowen 2025; McCarroll 2025). Lamenting the earth should involve then embodied practices of presence, grounding and compassion, in order to open oneself to experiences of awe, love and reverence. Such practices include storytelling, breath work, journaling, poetry or walking in nature. According to pastoral theologian McCarroll (2025), this is where spiritual–religious traditions can play a vital role: they invite us “to turn toward our losses through lament, to express the fullness of love in absence, and to honor the gift of life in all its forms” (McCarroll 2025, p. 12).

The most established (spiritual) practice dealing with feelings of ecological grief is the “Work that Reconnects” of renowned eco-Buddhist Joanna Macy. In this practice, participants are encountering their gratitude, grief and wonder for the more-than-human and are invited to reengage with the world more deeply (Macy et al. 2014). Another important methodology is the place-based practice “Radical Joy for Hard Times” of writer and ritual designer Trebbe Johnson in which communities are invited to attune toward ecological harm and losses and seek to create rituals for wounded landscapes (Johnson 2018).

Various authors within the environmental humanities and chaplaincy studies thus argue that we should build practices, skills and rhetorical conditions in order to learn to voice, express, share and bear this grief. It requires to increase our capacities to notice, recognize and understand ecological losses, rhetorical practices to voice our grief and ritual spaces and embodied capacities to explore and hold these feelings. They call for fostering communities of care, for fostering intimacy with the more-than-human, nurturing the quality of our attention, and the courage to open oneself up to existential and emotional dimensions of facing loss, vulnerability, interdependency, and complicity. This resonates with scholars within contemplative and spiritual studies, who are calling such thinking, postures and practices a contemplative or spiritual ecology (e.g., Christie 2013). In the next paragraph I will explore how contemplative ecology can be a spiritual pathway for mourning ecological losses.

3.3. *Contemplative Ecology*

In the last decade, leading scholars in multiple wisdom traditions are seeking how contemplation as a way of thinking and practice can respond to these times of ecological loss. While contemplation carries different meanings across spiritual and cultural traditions, renowned Catholic theologian, poet, and monk Thomas Merton, whose life and work centered on ecological and contemplative living, defines it as:

Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. (Merton et al. 2010, pp. 15–16)

Merton further describes contemplative living as a way of engaging everyday life through conscious attention to relationships. Such attentiveness, he argues, deepens our sense of connectedness and communion with others and can become a transformative force that gives meaningful direction to human experience (Merton et al. 2010, p. 6). Hence contemplation has a strong relation with action or even activism: contemplation as a “response to a call” and “a deep resonance” to engage with the world more deeply (Merton et al. 2010, pp. 15–16). Contemplative practices—including journaling, silence, prayer, walking, and contemplative art—cultivate awareness, compassion, presence, concentration,

and wisdom (Komjathy 2017, p. 68) and are intended to foster growth, integration and transformation (Sultan 2024, p. 41).

By bringing ecology into dialogue with contemplative thought and practice, Christie has developed the concept of “contemplative ecology”. Drawing on early Christian desert monastic traditions from Egypt, Syria, and Asia (e.g., the desert fathers and mothers), as well as contemporary monastic practices and the ecological writings of, e.g., Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard, Christie proposes a contemplative approach to ecological thought and practice aimed at restoring a sense of the earth as sacred (Christie 2013). Over the past decade, contemplative ecology has increasingly emerged as “a critical dimension of efforts to think about how to respond to ecological crisis with spiritual and ethical depth, courage, groundedness, clarity and integrity” (Christie 2024, p. 123). Central to this approach is the practice of slowing down. Rather than rushing towards solutions, contemplative ecology “engenders a capacity to sit with the brokenness of our world and our systems” (JCS Editor 2023). In doing so, it cultivates reflective awareness and sensitivity to place, encouraging deeper attentiveness to more-than-human relationships and the ecological crises unfolding around us. Contemplative practices train the senses, so we can perceive what lies beyond an array of binaries such as mind/body, human/animal, nature/culture, self/world, and activism/reflection. Its hope is that precisely this praxis of silence and stillness, attuning, unknowing, wonder and witnessing, can lead toward different and new patterns of knowledge and action (JCS Editor 2023). Therefore, this approach may help us to “show up” and “stay with the trouble”, as renowned ecofeminist Donna Haraway urges us to do: to courageously confront the complexities and discomforts of the present, acknowledge ecological damage, and embrace our deep entanglements with other living beings while continuing to work toward a livable future (Haraway 2016).

In seeking a route towards contemplatively relating to the more-than-human, Christie describes several pathways based on ancient monastic traditions and spiritual practices. I will describe three of these practices, as I hold them to be valuable for this article: “penthos”: the gift of tears; “prosoche”: the arts of attention; and “topos”: placemaking.

3.3.1. Penthos: The Gift of Tears

Christie argues we are called to attend to and reckon with an “ecology of loss”; according to him, we need to learn to find a way to speak honestly about all we are losing and what this loss means to us (Christie 2013, p. 84). Christie describes the attentive practice of dwelling in grief and tears as “penthos or katanyxis”. These Greek terms refer to a “profound piercing of the heart” and a paradoxically joyful form of sorrow and penitence (Christie 2013, p. 74). Christie writes that tears signal a willingness to confront both one’s own fragility and the brokenness of the world: to mourn what has been lost or is at risk of being lost, while remaining open to the possibility of renewal, regeneration, and enduring inner transformation (Christie 2013, pp. 76–77). A contemplative practice of mourning fosters then a sense of being alive and awake to the beauty and fragility of nature:

Tears for lost places, for a whole lost world of possibilities. Also, tears born of gratitude for what has been, for what might yet be retrieved and restored. Tears as a source of renewal. Tears as gift. (Christie 2013, p. 74)

The ancient practice of *memento mori*, the cultivation of an awareness of one’s mortality, finitude, vulnerability, meant “coming to feel the fragility and preciousness of existence, learning to live continuously against a horizon of ultimacy” (Christie 2013, p. 76). He stresses that the contemplative work of opening up a space of silence—a space where the feeling for the living world can be rekindled and where the concern and grief over what has been lost can be held and honored—is of the utmost importance (Christie 2024, p. 123).

3.3.2. Prosoche: The Arts of Attention

The ancient Christian contemplative tradition, with its deep commitment to the simple practice of “prosoche” or attention, offers according to Christie one important resource for helping us recover a more encompassing vision of the whole—a way of learning to “see into the *life* of things” (Christie 2013, p. 147). It is about a fuller way of seeing and living in the world, attending to what is visible and what is not visible, with joy, awe and vigilance. This practice is not so much of learning to see the world but “also what it means to see and know the self *within* the world” (Christie 2013, p. 146); thus, learning to see is also about significant deepening of self-knowledge. Christie calls this a “contemplative gaze”: open, aware and loving (Christie 2020). This resonates with the work of Johnson, who also calls such an encompassing, empathic quality of attention “gazing” (Johnson 2018, p. 69). According to her, gazing is a very particular kind of looking: open and receptive to what one encounters, it lingers. To gaze is “to sit and take in what there is in a spirit of friendly curiosity” towards feelings and thoughts that are being evoked. Johnson argues that it can be a first step towards rebuilding relationships with the living world: “Gazing at a wounded place leaves us open to the full reality of what surrounds us and what waits” (Johnson 2018, p. 69).

3.3.3. Topos: Placemaking

In seeking language and practices that can help us to situate ourselves more carefully and thoughtfully within the world, Christie proposes a contemplative practice of “place-making”. This is “the imaginative work of beholding, inhabiting, and cherishing the particular places where we live” (Christie 2013, p. 105). From this perspective, contemplative ecology is about cultivating a sense of place; about learning to pay attention, breaking habits of inattention, and learning a place in its full force. Learning and gaining ecological knowledge is important to this. This resonates with the concept of “placefulness” as conceptualized by contemplative ecology scholar and ecological chaplain Jason Brown. He defines this as “the contemplative practice of attending to what is and what is arising in our places, especially during troubled and dark times” (Brown 2023). It involves learning to know a place from an ecological as well as cultural perspective, e.g., its histories, and the unfolding of the seasons and cycles. Placefulness is about a deep emotional and existential involvement with place: it asks us to witness, resist and grieve the changes that are likely to happen (Brown 2023).

3.4. Towards Contemplative Practices of Mourning Damaged Landscapes

Mourning is thus a way of opening ourselves up to, understanding, acknowledging, affirming and honoring the significance of all living beings. A conscious, moral and spiritual process of learning and transformation to accommodate a changed reality. I thus understand the task of “getting it” as an intimate and spiritually transformative pathway in which love and pain for the world merge while getting more attuned to the fragility and interdependency of our web of life. A contemplative engagement with an “ecology of loss” asks us to attend to tangible ecological losses and explore its intangible dimensions—a deeper attention to our own relationship to it. It thus requires a deepening of ecological knowledge as well as self-knowledge. It involves encountering spiritual feelings of hope, hopelessness, fear, loss of meaning, etc. Learning to speak about ecological grief is breaking with cultural norms of what counts as a grievable entity. It is about acknowledging and validating grief which is often disenfranchised. It thus requires a particular safety and building of trust, a community of care.

Contemplative ecology is bound to place: it is about seeking a deep emotional and existential involvement with place, breaking habits of inattention, and learning a place

from an ecological and personal perspective. However, attending to ecological loss is not easily done. It asks for a willingness to attune to, perceive and acknowledge ecological losses. It requires communal practices of slowing down and stillness to understand and make sense of these losses and to allow ourselves to feel it. Furthermore, we need to share those feelings with others as part of ritualized mourning practices.

In developing a case study, I therefore seek to develop a communal practice of tending to landscapes and ecologies that have been modified and degraded. First, I will focus on attuning to tangible losses, to invite participants to gaze upon, linger with and witness the changes that are happening, and explore what intangible dimensions and feelings and questions these losses evoke, in order to see if we could make these entities grievable. As contemplation is in essence about resonating with a deep wonder for existence, I will build room for silence and stillness. Furthermore, I will not narrowly focus only on the pain and brokenness, I will also give room to expressions of wholeness, beauty, love, wonder, joy and awe.

4. Methods and Materials

In this paragraph I will reflect on my positionality and describe the methodology and materials of this research.

4.1. Positionality and Methodological Approach

This research is grounded in the understanding that knowledge production is always situated and relational. As Haraway argues, all knowledge is situated, embodied and partial and therefore inherently subjective (Haraway 1988). Thus, a researcher always shapes the research by bringing themselves into the research setting and seeing with their particular eyes. In this study, my involvement in the research setting was both personal and methodological.

Living in the Veluwe forest region and co-organizing the project examined in this study with my neighbors, I was closely embedded in the social and ecological context under investigation. Rather than seeking distance from this position, the research embraces this entanglement as part of its methodological approach. The study therefore adopts a relational heuristic inquiry, a qualitative methodology that foregrounds the researcher's personal engagement with the research topic (Moustakas 1990; Sultan 2019, 2024; Preiser et al. 2021). Heuristic inquiry is particularly suited to exploring complex experiential phenomena such as ecological grief. It is a phenomenological approach where the researcher acts as an active participant. The method emphasizes immersion, reflexivity, and interpretative engagement with lived experience. Rather than positioning the researcher as a detached observer, heuristic inquiry recognizes that understanding emerges through a process of interaction between the researcher, participants, and research context. In this sense, the research question became what heuristic researcher Nevine Sultan describes as a "lingering presence," shaping how I engaged with the project and interpreted participants' experiences (Sultan 2019). The research process therefore involved not only observation and analysis but also facilitation, participation, and reflection.

My role within the project was consequently multifaceted. I participated as project designer, facilitator of the contemplative dialogue, participant in the activities, observer, and researcher. These overlapping roles inevitably shaped the research setting and the interactions that unfolded within it. Rather than attempting to eliminate this influence, the study acknowledges it explicitly and reflects on its implications in the heuristic reflection presented later in the article.

This approach aligns with broader developments in sustainability research that emphasize relational and participatory methodologies. As sustainability transitions scholar Rika

Preiser and colleagues argue, researchers working with complex socio-ecological challenges are increasingly moving away from the role of neutral knowledge extractors. Instead, they take on roles as “facilitators of relations and curators of transformative spaces” (Preiser et al. 2021, p. 631), highlighting the importance of relational heuristics in sustainability research. In this sense, the research process itself can become a space for experimentation, learning, sharing, network building and knowledge co-creation.

4.2. Case Study: Lab Landschapspijn Veluwe

The empirical material analyzed in this article is drawn from the project Lab Landschapspijn Veluwe (Ecological Grief Lab), a four-day participatory project organized in the Veluwe region of the Netherlands in the spring and summer of 2025. The project was developed collaboratively by a small interdisciplinary team consisting of the author, biologist and philosopher Dirk Hilbers, artist Anje Jager, and audiomaker Kitty Munnichs. The initiative aimed to create a space in which local residents could explore ecological loss in the landscapes they inhabit and reflect on how these changes affect their emotional and ethical relationships with place.

More specifically, the project pursued three main objectives:

1. Attuning to ecological loss and the feelings this evokes.
2. Increasing ecological literacy regarding issues such as nitrogen pollution, climate change, and biodiversity decline.
3. Fostering a community of care by creating spaces for dialogue about how to live ethically within landscapes undergoing ecological degradation.

In operationalizing the concept of ecological grief, the project used the Dutch term “landschapspijn”, which can be translated as “landscape pain”. In the Dutch dictionary this word is defined as “a poignant feeling or deep ache someone experiences when witnessing the impoverishment of a landscape—for example, due to the disappearance of plant, insect, and bird species” (Algemeen Nederlands Woordenboek 2026). Using this concept allowed for exploring local, regional, place-based experiences and expressions of ecological grief.

4.3. Participants

In total, twenty-five participants joined the project. Most participants lived in or near the Veluwe region and had some form of personal or professional connection to the landscape. Participants were recruited through an advertisement in the local newspaper and through LinkedIn and could sign up through the project website (Lab Landschapspijn 2026). The key question asked to potential participants in this advertisement was: “Do you feel worried about the decline of the Veluwe, or don’t you even notice?” In this way we were seeking people who felt a certain curiosity to learn more and, in line with Varutti’s argument on opportunities for mourning ecological losses, a “willingness to be moved” (Varutti 2024).

Participants represented diverse backgrounds and professions, including biologists, artists, philosophers, educators, an arborist, and individuals involved in local sustainability initiatives. Levels of ecological knowledge varied considerably, ranging from participants with little formal knowledge of ecological processes to those with professional expertise in fields such as biology and environmental management. Their motivations to join this initiative ranged from the need to share emotional concerns, a curiosity to learn about ecological decline, and interest in the interdisciplinary approach of the project.

4.4. Data Collection

This article focuses on activities conducted during the second day of the project, which was dedicated specifically to exploring ecological loss. Fifteen of the twenty-five

participants attended this part of the program. During this day, participants engaged in two contemplative practices designed to foster attentiveness to ecological loss: contemplative dialogue and contemplative walking.

Data was collected through recording the contemplative dialogue, fieldnotes on the contemplative walk and unstructured interviews. The interviews were carried out by Kitty Munnichs at the end of the day, furthering stories and experiences that arose during the dialogue and the walk. I will describe both activities.

4.5. *Contemplative Dialogue*

Contemplative dialogue stems from the “spiritual exercises” of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the religious order the Jesuits. Ignatius described a detailed practice of sacred listening and spiritual conversation (Austin 2023). Contemplative dialogue emerges as a practice of intentional speaking, deep and receptive listening, silence, openness and wonder. Contemplative dialogue is about creating a field of presence, building a flow of coherence, seeking shared meaning, listening deeply to learn what we think as a collective, intentionally listening for new possibilities to emerge.

Contemplative dialogue is meant to be non-threatening, a safe place for open sharing. It is not outcome-oriented; the focus is on listening rather than formatting a response to what another is saying. The pace of conversation is slower in contemplative dialogue than in most other conversations, involving a structured pause after each participant has spoken in order to receive the impact of another’s words, a pause in reverence of “the sacredness of another, his/her thoughts and feelings” (Dominican Sisters of Springfield 2017).

In contemplative dialogue, participants practice three skills of dialogue: contemplative listening (listening that is “inwardly quiet and reverently present”), contemplative speaking (speaking from our center, briefly, what really matters and what arises in the moment) and intentionally creating a “we-space” by listening to each other and building on one another’s thoughts, “a space where our focus is not on the I, not on the self, but on what’s between us” (Dominican Sisters of Springfield 2017). Contemplative dialogue is therefore “a means of readying the ground for collective transformation, for helping shift from I to WE, from individualism to communion” (Dominican Sisters of Springfield 2017).

In the weeks preceding the dialogue, participants were asked to photograph a place where they experienced “landschapspijn” (ecological grief) and to write a short reflection explaining why they chose that place and what ecological changes they perceived there. During the dialogue session, participants presented their photographs and read their reflections aloud. Each contribution was followed by a moment of silence before the next participant spoke. This rhythm of speaking and silence was intended to slow down the pace of conversation and encourage attentive listening. After all participants had shared their photographs and reflections, two additional rounds of reflection and sharing followed. Participants were invited to identify images or statements that resonated most strongly with them and to articulate what these responses evoked in them. In the final round, participants reflected on what insights they would carry with them when encountering landscapes of ecological loss later that day.

4.6. *Contemplative Walking*

The second activity involved a contemplative walk through areas of the Veluwe where ecological tensions and losses are particularly visible. The selected route passed through landscapes shaped by multiple competing land uses, including nature conservation areas, military training grounds, and intensive livestock farming.

Participants were invited to walk in silence for approximately thirty minutes while observing the landscape carefully. They were asked to notice what is happening in these landscapes and what they experience as “healed” and “damaged/broken”.

Following the silent walk, participants gathered to share their observations and reflections. Each participant then selected a specific element of the landscape—such as a tree, plant, or patch of ground—to observe more closely. They were invited to spend time attending to this element and to make a drawing or sketch that captured their observations and emotional responses.

4.7. Data Analysis

The collected material was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach that focuses on how individuals make sense of significant experiences in their lives. IPA is characterized by double hermeneutics: participants attempt to interpret and articulate their own experiences, while the researcher interprets these interpretations in order to identify broader themes and patterns within the data (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). The analysis involved several stages of iterative engagement with the data, including repeated listening to recorded dialogues, reviewing written reflections, and analyzing field notes and interviews. Through this process, themes were identified regarding what participants perceived ecological loss to be and how they perceived it, how they articulated emotional responses to these changes, and how contemplative practices shaped their experiences of witnessing and mourning ecological degradation.

The results presented in the following section therefore combine participants’ narratives with interpretative analysis, situating these experiences within broader discussions on ecological grief and contemplative ecology. In order to secure privacy, the names of participants are altered through pseudonymization.

5. Results and Discussion

The contemplative practices described above created opportunities for participants to attune to ecological losses in the Veluwe landscape and to articulate emotional responses to these experiences. The analysis revealed two main dimensions of ecological grief: participants’ accounts of ecological loss and the dynamics of grieving that emerged while witnessing these losses together. These experiences involved tangible ecological losses, as well as intangible emotional, existential, and moral dimensions.

5.1. Experiencing Ecological Loss

5.1.1. Tangible Losses: “It Has Become So Quiet”

Many participants described how they perceived the ecosystem of the Veluwe as increasingly “out of balance”. They pointed to visible ecological losses associated with drought, nitrogen pollution, and biodiversity decline. These losses were often noticed through subtle shifts in color, vegetation, and sound. Participants described observing dying birches, beeches, and summer oaks, as well as the gradual “grassification” of heathlands where grasses and invasive mosses replace traditional heath vegetation. Such transformations were often described through sensory impressions. As Marjo addresses: “It looks as though a fire has swept through the area: it is grey and bleak instead of colorful and vibrant.” Several participants remarked that certain areas of the Veluwe had become “quiet,” “monotone,” or even resembled a “green desert.”

Multiple participants felt a strong sense of grief over the presence of specific species that benefit from the nitrogen pollution, such as invasive mosses (*Campylopus introflexus*) or moor grasses (*Molinia caerulea*) that disrupt a certain balance in the ecosystem. Witnessing

these disbalances evoked mostly a sense of sadness, disturbance and powerlessness. For example, Henry is severely triggered by the fast-spreading Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) in his estate:

Along its edge, in the fringe between forest and field, Japanese knotweed has been spreading for a few years now. From two places it advances at breakneck speed: through the clay pit, all the way into the shed, where it even splits concrete. I feel powerless. Will it soon take over my food forest, oppress the vegetable garden? Will it displace the native plants that attract so many butterflies and beetles? Some mornings, all I see is this exotic species. Not the landscape, but its grip on it. It is invasive, even in my thoughts.

His story reveals the chronic and ongoing dimensions of ecological grief. Environmental theologian Panu Pihkala has done extensive research on eco-emotions and identifies various types and dimensions of ecological grief. Through his lens, such ecological losses as described by Henry can be understood as “non-finite loss” and the grief it is causing as “chronic sorrow”. Chronic sorrow is characterized by experiencing constant and unavoidable reminders of the loss (Pihkala 2024, pp. 18–20). As environmental grief scholar Kriss Kevorkian writes: “The loss [producing ecological grief] is ongoing without a foreseeable end and there are constant reminders of what has been lost and the potential of what will be lost with time” (Kevorkian 2019, p. 222). Just like Henry, it can be experienced by feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. These feelings are not a permanent state of despair, although it can feel like a persistent sorrow. Chronic sorrow can be experienced in a periodic resurgence of intensity, through unavoidable triggers (Pihkala 2024, p. 20).

Participants expressed multiple and paradoxical feelings and questions accompanying these losses. As Henry continues about his ambivalence towards the Japanese knotweed in his garden:

At the same time, I find its enormous vitality endlessly fascinating. Introduced by Siebold around 1830, the knotweed waited almost two centuries in the shelter of the botanical garden until global warming created conditions in which it could roam. The young stems taste like asparagus. The flowers attract bees and hoverflies. Perhaps I should not fight it, but embrace the pain.

The stories of the participants reveal they feel ambiguity towards the objects of loss, as well as how they should make sense of their experience. Their experiences resonate with how philosophers Gleizer and Velasco (2024) describe these ambiguous dimensions of ecological grief as multidimensional. Participants’ reflections are pointing to the past (what was lost and when?), the future (what will be lost and will it recover?), cause and effect (what is normal, how did loss occur, and what are the consequences for other species?), guilt (whose fault was it?), and agency (what can I do?). These accounts demonstrate how ecological grief can be understood as ambiguous loss, as ecological losses may be ongoing, unending and ambivalent, producing many kinds of ambiguous losses. As Pihkala writes: “Many creatures, features, relations and things are currently partly lost and partly not, and there can be great uncertainty as to whether they are completely lost.” (Pihkala 2024, p. 10). According to Gleizer and Velasco (2024), this ambiguous nature of ecological losses can disorient mourners so they cannot navigate their grief leading to “feelings of being frozen, halted, or stuck in the grief process, living with both the presence and the absence of what is lost” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, p. 279).

5.1.2. Intangible Losses: Spiritual Dimensions

Beyond these visible ecological losses, participants frequently described more intangible dimensions of loss. These experiences were closely tied to participants’ personal relationships with specific places in the Veluwe landscape they walk, cycle, or horse ride

regularly or where they contribute to regenerative initiatives. Many participants spoke about gardens, forests, or fields they had visited for many years and that had become meaningful places of refuge, rest, recreation or inspiration. For example, Anne shared how “the stripped-down landscape, withering, discoloring: it affects me, because it is the place where I like to retreat.” Lotte elaborates in detail how the garden of her holiday cottage has severely changed and how it has become simultaneously “a sanctuary as well as a painful reminder of what is lost”:

“Over the years it has also become so quiet: hardly any insects, few butterflies—thankfully still storks, buzzards, barn owls, wrens, lapwings, cuckoos, occasionally a spoonbill, and hares. (...) At first glance it looks like a paradise, and I love this place. But at the same time I know all too well what I no longer see and no longer hear. The fact that I cheer inwardly at every bird I hear and every bumblebee, wild bee, or butterfly that visits my native flower garden says it all. The sadness has settled under my skin. I know too much, miss too much, feel guilty about everything I do, and have come to hate the indifferent.”

Such experiences reveal how ecological loss can disrupt relationships between people and places that have long provided sources of meaning and belonging. As environmental psychology scholars [Holli-Anne Passmore and Ashley Krause \(2023\)](#) argue, threats to nature can also be experienced as threats to meaning, since people often turn to nature for comfort, coherence, and a sense of continuity. Theologian Dorothy [Dean \(2023\)](#) similarly emphasizes the existential and spiritual dimensions of ecological grief, asking: “Who am I if the earth that was my solace is irrevocably changed?” [Johnson \(2018\)](#) likewise stresses that beloved places are not merely physical locations but also emotional and spiritual landscapes that hold memories and shape people’s sense of self. When such places are damaged, individuals may experience this harm as deeply personal:

So when it is subjected to injurious treatment, it’s you, too, who are under assault. Not just once, either, but over and over and over again. You suffer knowing that you can no longer depend on this loved place to embrace you. ([Johnson 2018](#), p. 3)

Environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht has acknowledged this deep disruptive experience of living surrounded with ecological loss, by coining the word “solastalgia” ([Albrecht 2019](#)). He understands solastalgia as the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change. Albrecht writes how one’s sense of place can feel deeply disrupted or even “attacked” through ecological change: “that which should be a source of comfort flips into something threatening, making the occupant feel uneasy and anxious” ([Albrecht 2019](#), p. 36). These feelings of alienation and existential loss can be heard in the story of Jan, a retired biologist, who shared intimately how he was missing butterflies deeply, and how his relationship with the Veluwe has changed fundamentally:

I find the image here rather impoverished. It is the plants that I miss, species that I know and think: why are they not here now? I realized today how much I missed them. All those little plants are gone. And there are so few flying insects left. Especially butterflies, I miss them terribly. (...) I realized today I push my emotions aside. Or I try to put things into perspective: nature will survive, maybe in a hundred or two hundred years it will all be different again. But still, I miss it. It feels impoverished. As if you were used to eating all sorts of wonderful things, and now you’re left with nothing but fries. The spark of life is slipping away.

For Jan, these absent butterflies and plants remain vividly present. Following renowned anthropologist Anna [Tsing et al. \(2017\)](#), such disappearances can be understood as the “ghosts of the Anthropocene” ([Tsing et al. 2017](#), p. G2): traces of ecological relations that continue

to haunt human experience even after species decline or disappear. Anthropologist Maryse Carbo and colleagues argue how ecological attentiveness enables people to sense these ghosts as embodied memories that live on after disappearance (Carbo et al. 2025, p. 57).

It is remarkable how Jan resists the attempt to rationalize the loss. Rather, he acknowledges how deep and spiritual the loss is by noting how “the spark of life is slipping away”. It resonates with what philosopher Vinciane Despret writes so eloquently on the disappearance of living beings:

When a being is no more, the world narrows all of a sudden, and a part of reality collapses. Each time an existence disappears, it is a piece of the universe of sensations that fades away. (Despret 2017, p. 2020)

These accounts show how participants grieve not only individual tangible losses. Rather, such losses reveal that altogether something bigger, fundamental and more encompassing gets lost. Pihkala calls this a “loss of lifeworld” (Pihkala 2024, pp. 28–30). The concept of lifeworld originates in phenomenology and refers to how individuals or groups experience and relate to the world around them. Lifeworld refers to “the lived experience and the resulting “world” of creatures amidst other creatures, in combinations of natural environment and built environment” (Pihkala 2024, p. 28). Lifeworld loss can occur both at the individual level, through the loss of hopes, dreams and familiarity with landscapes as they were once known, at the cultural level through the disruption and loss of relationships and cultural practices within the landscape, and at the ecological level, where relationships among species and ecosystems become disrupted, harmed, degraded, or lost. An example of lifeworld loss at the cultural level can be found in participants’ reflections on changing relationships with other people. For example, Wilma shared:

I am grieving not only the loss of nature, but also the connections that once felt effortless and self-evident, and that have now become complicated when we differ too much in how we respond to the climate and environmental crisis.

This illustrates that ecological loss may also disrupt social bonds and shared worlds of meaning and belonging, particularly when ecological concerns are not equally recognized, acknowledged or acted upon.

5.1.3. Intangible Losses: Moral Dimensions

Participants’ accounts of ecological loss frequently included moral and ethical dimensions. Several participants, particularly those with ecological expertise or professional engagement with environmental issues, expressed frustration, anger, or indignation when reflecting on the human activities contributing to environmental degradation. They point to large, intensively farmed, monotonous fields where too much nitrogen is used, addressing the absence of life and warnings about the death of ecosystems. For example, Peter shares a photo of the land he co-owns and works as a volunteer as part of a regenerative farm that used to be part of a conventional farm:

Lots of poison, lots of artificial fertilizer, lots of energy, and now the land is poor and dead. It gives me that feeling of loss; farming against nature is very hard work and everything gets ruined. There are no worms in the soil and occasionally a gladiolus pokes through the grain as a relic of such fine cultivation.

Retired biologist Jan feels grief at a site where agriculture and nature collide, a field where maize and potatoes are being grown surrounded by forests:

It pains me because I have seen many such transitions between extensive agriculture and nature in the past with a much greater wealth of birds, plants and insects. It illustrates the conflicting interests between farmers and nature conservationists.

Arborist Fabian is appalled by an estate where a large oak tree stands in the middle of a bright green meadow:

These meadows in front of the country house are leased by a farmer, who wants to generate sufficient financial return from them. The result: for a long time, manure has been injected into the fields, far beneath the oak's canopy. As a consequence, there are few wild herbs left in the meadows, and the oak runs the risk of dying prematurely. That even in a place like this, financial yield is considered more important than returns in other values shocks me. In my view, aesthetics, history, and biodiversity should together carry greater weight. Perhaps the worst part is that we (farmers included) have become so accustomed to this that it no longer even happens consciously.

Such reflections reveal how ecological grief can be intertwined with experiences of moral distress, spurred by a confrontation with opposing values (Banwell and Eggert 2024). More than the pain of seeing a dying tree, depleted soil or absence of life is voiced—it is the frustration and pain of being able to see and recognize the consequences of long-term harmful policies. These policies and practices of manure injection and nitrate pollution can be understood as a form of “slow violence”, following environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon, a “delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Nixon introduced the term to address the often-overlooked, insidious, long-term consequences of human actions on the environment that are deeply embedded in “business as usual.”

These experiences of ecological grief reveal a certain alienation and loneliness that come with recognizing the absurdity and destructiveness of agricultural practices and policies that are normalized. The ability to see that it should not have to be like this is a deep feature of chronic sorrow—“a painful discrepancy” between what was supposed to be and what has happened (Pihkala 2024, p. 18). Hence the grief participants express can be understood as disenfranchised grief, causing chronic feelings of loneliness and alienation.

5.2. Dynamics of Grieving

Witnessing degraded landscapes and listening to accounts of ecological loss evoked a variety of reactions among participants. I will explore the most recurring responses: overwhelm, empathy, hope, resistance, uncertainty and wonder.

5.2.1. Overwhelm—“It Is Unbelievable”

Multiple participants share how they sense a mixture of overwhelm, ambiguity and shock as they start to notice ecological losses. They express a sense of bewilderment and helplessness, not knowing where to begin to oversee the complexity of the ecological ruptures and the vastness of ecological loss, sharing questions and concerns on potential far-reaching consequences. For example, Martijn reflects on what he has learned through listening to others: “The potential loss of the oaks and beeches that might not survive the end of this century: it’s unbelievable. I cannot accept it.” He elaborates how he understands oaks as being of great importance for the cultural landscape, for our stories, our poetry, and the imagination. Fabian discerns after a long silence: “It’s shocking how much has been lost. And what else are we going to lose?” He argues that it is not only a sense of grief for the loss of specific species he feels, rather he fears that we might face a collapse of ecological systems, a shattering of the web of ecological relations that sustain life.

Carbo et al. (2025) argue how ecological loss is elusive; it is hard to grasp and hard to notice. Arguing how ecological loss is everywhere and nowhere at the same time and how these losses are happening on all scales, they propose to frame ecological loss as a hyperobject as conceptualized by Morton (2013):

Ecological loss is a global phenomenon that manifests itself in local happenings. However, it is “nonlocal,” because local manifestations of ecological loss on their own do not equate to the hyperobject. Only the loss of ecological beings in different local manifestations turns ecological loss into a hyperobject. This is what gives ecological loss its elusive character and spatial complexity; it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. (Carbo et al. 2025, p. 53)

Witnessing ecological losses communally through sharing photographs and stories of loss, bringing together different local manifestations of climate change and nitrate pollution, reveals an altogether more systemic pattern of disruption, spurring an awareness of how deeply we are surrounded and entangled with ecological loss and how much feelings of worry, grief, and alienation are amongst us.

5.2.2. Eco-Empathy—“Are You Still Alive?”

In multiple expressions, participants showed a willingness to be moved. Participants voiced a strong empathy with the more than human, concerning, e.g., how animals may be struggling because of persistent drought, noise pollution, or obstruction of habitats through fences. Such empathy is an active attitude, which can be heard in the expression of Wilma:

I feel “landschapspijn” (ecological grief) especially when I see dead trees. I often look at trees and ask myself: are you still alive? Especially in spring. And then I try to spot new leaves, so they can tell me they are still alive.

Having a dialogue with damaged trees reveals how Wilma understands trees as subjects. This resonates with Christie who writes how genuine, attentive mourning for losses beyond the human might be a counterforce against the “a deeply ingrained habit of seeing the natural world as an object, a thing somehow detached from our own lives” (Christie 2013, p. 71). Cunsolo argues we should recognize plants, animals and insects or entire ecosystems as “fellow vulnerable beings, capable of suffering” (Wilcox 2012, p. 147). Ecopsychology scholar Ariel Burgess understands expressions of ecological grief as expressions of deep-felt eco-empathy, in which we mourn the ecological as the ecological: “I am an ecosystem emphasizing with another ecosystem” (Burgess 2025, p. 75). Understanding ecological destruction as suffering, a shared pain and vulnerability, can be a pathway to open ourselves to “ecoempathic connections” (Burgess 2025, p. 76). She argues that rekindling and nurturing compassion or ecoempathy is of the utmost importance, as it can motivate one to act and foster a sense of gratitude for shared life on earth (Burgess 2025, p. 78).

Furthermore, participants expressed a compassion towards the suffering of others, validating the fear and grief that is being expressed, acknowledging how others are losing a sense of trust, belonging and joy while being in nature and how this moves them. This is important in the work of mourning to be done, as Christie notes that one needs to “allow yourself to become vulnerable to the suffering of others” (Christie 2024, p. 132).

5.2.3. Hope in Communally Witnessing Ecological Loss

Multiple participants express how sharing feelings over ecological losses and being together in caring, vulnerability and sharing empathy for the living world evokes a sense of hope. For example, Babs feels consolation in the realization she is “not alone” in her pain, while Jessica concludes: “pain which is shared gives me hope.” This resonates with McCarroll (2025), who argues that acknowledging and sharing grief in community can become “acts of hope” in the face of ecological loss. Psychotherapist Francis Weller stresses that we deeply need each other to encounter these feelings, as (ecological) “grief is an intensely interior process that can only be navigated in the presence of community” (Weller 2015, p. 116). These reflections of participants affirm that mourning ecological loss can unite, and—in the words of Judith Butler—has a “we-creating power” (Cunsolo and

Landman 2017, p. 12). However, it was not only what was said, which evoked hope among participants. Multiple participants stressed how being together in a shared silence spurred a sense of strength. Like Lea:

The silence during the walk today sank deeply into me. It gave me an incredible sense of strength, walking together like that in silence. Knowing that we all share something similar: that we feel the pain of the landscape, and that we want nature to stop declining so rapidly, and to be restored.

Christie writes how it can be a deeply consoling and transformative experience in being together in silence and stillness with a community of trusted others. Such a stillness, according to him, is a necessary climate for opening yourself to that mystery, for responding to it, and for learning to live within it. “Here in this abyss of silence, you begin to recover a sense of yourself as part of a larger whole and find that you can no longer live apart from others” (Christie 2024, p. 138).

Others addressed that practicing presence, communally nurturing a particular quality of attention to the living world, made a profound impression on them. As Henry shares: “The moment that sticks with me most is the circle on the military terrain, when we listened in silence to the first raindrops falling—after almost a month of drought—in an almost desolate and parched landscape.” These expressions resonate with McCarroll (2025) who argues that in addition to acts of mourning, turning to the “Earth as Home” through practices of presence, attention, gratitude and awe are at the heart of sustaining hope. For example, Martijn and Wilma had lingering worries about the possible extinction of beeches and oaks with them during the walk:

Martijn: “When I sat there—with my butt into the sand—I become one with that (dead) tree. One with the landscape. Then the sadness falls away, and it becomes a deeply peaceful experience simply to be there with the tree, to be there in the landscape.”

Wilma: “Well, we went for a walk today on the edge of the Veluwe. And I was really struck by all the trees I saw that had died. And yes, that affected me deeply. Then we came to a field with so much open space. And there I could take a deep breath and feel like I could breathe again, so to speak. Feel the sun, and regain a sense of hope for a moment.”

These accounts of Wilma and Martijn express a sense of co-regulation, a deep feeling of being part of life and this earth. Doehring and Cowen write how “co-regulation with spaces and species” can be an important spiritual practice in which one can experience awe, gratitude and “the sense of being held within trustworthy relational webs beyond oneself” (Doehring and Cowen 2025, p. 14). It is this sensibility that Christie writes about as a sustained spiritual-ethical practice: “Here one senses the mysterious process by which an encounter with the minute particular can open out into a feeling of being part of something larger, part of the very life of things—and by which the boundary between inside and outside becomes porous and fluid and the distinction between what is alive and not alive begins to fade” (Christie 2025, p. 13).

5.2.4. Resistance and Binary Thinking: “I Don’t Want to Feel This”

Some participants expressed how it felt too painful, difficult and “heavy” to listen to these accounts of loss. For example, Marjo shared honestly: “Actually, I don’t want to feel this, this shared grief.” She was not alone; multiple participants shared how a sense of ambivalence or even resistance emerged on how to relate to feelings of grief of themselves and others. These expressions of resistance revealed a strong binary: between “positivity” and “negativity”, enjoying and suffering, grieving and action. I will explore these experiences of binaries.

Some participants were surprised or even disturbed by the sensitivity and grief of others and by their ability to recognize and experience loss. They realized they were

themselves enjoying the landscape and did not have the “burden” of this knowledge or memory. They expressed a fear of losing their ability to feel the joy of being in nature. Jessica expressed a “relief” that at the end of the day she was still able to feel more feelings of joy than of sadness and worry. Peter expressed how he was happy to be able to have “switched off” his “nagging gaze” and had a pleasant experience of enjoying the beauty what still remains.

Multiple participants expressed a binary between grieving and taking action, questioning the value of attuning to grief, stressing that we must take action. As Selma states: “Embracing landscape pain, nonsense! We are the defenders of what is dear to us!” And Babs wonders: “Feeling the pain and embracing the loss. Or learning to act?” Others expressed a binary between negativity and positivity, hope and despair, like Lieke:

Because I can’t handle so much negativity, I am keen to explore landscape “hope”. Learning to let go and to be determined and hopeful. Responding to a new reality and being more conscious of everything you register. Not knowing what is no longer possible, but what is possible.

Looking at our despair was thus painful, difficult and its value contested. However, it is critical as various authors understand mourning as an act in itself which is not opposed to action, “rather it is the foundation of any sustainable and informed response.” (Van Dooren and Rose 2017, p. 376). These accounts of participants show a “wrestling with the tensions of being unsettled”, which according to Brown is precisely the work that needs to be done, when we come to try to love landscapes and ecologies that have been modified, degraded or destroyed (Brown 2023). As Macy writes: “We have to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be, for no healing can begin until we are fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze” (Macy 1991, p. 4). She addresses that we should move beyond dual thinking: “Who cares if you’re optimistic or pessimist, hopeless or hopeful. The main thing is that you’re showing up and that you find ever more capacity to love this world” (Tippett 2010).

This grieving is indeed not easy, as Christie describes it as a kind of struggle “to learn to see a place, take it in, and respond to it” (Christie 2013, p. 10). The practice of attention according to him requires a commitment, courage and a willingness to reckon with oneself. Recovering a sense of “loving awareness” of all living beings thus goes together with opening ourselves to a “painful awareness” of all that we are losing (Christie 2020). However, such awareness according to Christie can be “the source of a renewed commitment to risk ourselves in the work of reparation and healing” (Christie 2024, p. 124). Grief becomes then “sacred work”, a powerful form of “soul protest”, nurturing an “affirmation of life” (Weller 2015, p. 113).

5.2.5. Open-Endedness: “I Have No Answers, I Keep Thinking”

Several participants described their experiences of ecological grief as open-ended and unresolved. Rather than arriving at clear conclusions or solutions, they expressed a sense of ongoing questioning about what might get lost and how to respond to ecological change. As Fabian reflected: “Nothing is ever static; change is inevitable and timeless. But what is acceptable and what is not?”

However, this sense of active and unresolved grief is critical to the work of ecological mourning in order to keep engaged with it, as Barnett stressed in his theory of a vigilant mourning (Barnett 2021). He warns against prematurely declaring endings, stressing the need to hold precisely that tension between paralyzing and demotivational certainties and grounded hope for unknown possible futures. Holding this tension can be understood as deep contemplative work, as Christie argues that it is about such staying with ambi-

guilty and holding space for the unknown, denying neither endings nor possibilities for redemption and restoration:

We do not know what endures. We do not know how to orient ourselves to a world in which death seems always to have the last word, in which it seems everyone is ultimately lost to us. Still, the hope of redemption and restoration persists. Honesty in the face of the endless ambiguity of existence will necessarily mean living with some measure of uncertainty and doubt whether it is possible to even imagine such restoration.” (Christie 2013, p. 311)

5.2.6. Wonder and Beauty

Various participants expressed how attuning to ecological losses evoked a sense of wonder, wholeness and awe, or stressed the importance to be able to continue to see beauty despite all the ecological losses. Jessica, for example, described being deeply moved by a severely damaged birch tree that nevertheless continued to grow:

The power of nature was the phrase that came up for me today. Yes, I just feel that, in all the—well, I don’t know if I would call it pain, but the worries that exist and that I also see, and that are very justified—there is an optimism that I truly feel. I find it simply incredible how nature fights back and finds a way. (...) Today I also drew a tree, and it was broken, cracked open. And then there were many branches, and none of them had any leaves at all. But somewhere at the top of the tree there was still one branch, and it had many leaves on it. And I thought: yes, that one apparently still managed to fully grow and flourish. Yes, in that I truly see the power of nature.

Her reflection illustrates how encounters with damaged landscapes can evoke both grief and admiration for the resilience of the more-than-human world. Even within landscapes marked by ecological degradation, participants sometimes discovered moments of beauty and meaning. Weller argues that such experiences are not trivial but essential. Finding beauty, gratitude, and intimacy with the living world—even amid ecological crisis—can help sustain openness to life (Weller 2015, p. 106). Yet some participants also reflected an ambivalence towards experiencing joy and beauty. Some worried that enjoying damaged landscapes might imply they would surrender to and accept its degradation. For example, while walking through the grassified heath some participants reflected how in a way they experienced deep beauty as it “looked like the African savannah”. Johnson writes about how finding beauty in damaged places can be uncomfortable as it raises many questions. Her argument reflects this sentiment of these participants very well:

If I’m grabbed by beauty in a place of waste and ruin, what should I do with it? Ignore it? Disdain it? Welcome it? If I do acknowledge it, am I now guilty of accepting circumstances that, pre-beauty, were thoroughly unacceptable? Am I colluding with a view that what happened here is not so bad after all? (Johnson 2018, p. 99)

Other participants stressed they noticed imagination and hope in the stories of others, e.g., in their gardening, volunteering, project and professions. For example, Henry recognized “all kinds of ideas and initiatives to imagine a different kind of landscape, another world that we can at least still imagine.” Jan discerned that “we need to recognize the decline everywhere around us, while a simultaneously need to keep seeing what beauty remains. And above all, we need to be open to contribute to improving, healing and recovering work.”

Various authors express that we need precisely such engagements with ecological grief that reflect a certain spiritual openness and ability to hold a paradox: to have space for anguish as well as deep love and trust and room to join reparative efforts (Christie

2013; Doebling and Cowen 2025; Johnson 2018). They stress that we need to move beyond polarities and explore ecological losses with compassion and curiosity. Christie calls this “practicing paradise”: “the capacity to imagine the world—even amidst the anguish we feel at its brokenness—as whole, as luminous and revelatory, in order to learn again to inhabit it with tenderness and care and to contribute towards its renewal” (Christie 2013, p. 303).

6. Heuristic Reflection

In this section, I reflect on how my immersion in the research project shaped the research process and its outcomes. Within heuristic inquiry, the researcher’s personal involvement is not considered a limitation but a constitutive element of the research process. As Sultan argues, heuristic and contemplative research methods often emerge from autobiographical experience and from the researcher’s own commitments to contemplative practice. At the same time, she warns that such commitments may result in confirmation bias, as researchers may be inclined to interpret new information in ways that reinforce their existing beliefs about the value of contemplative approaches (Sultan 2019; 2024, p. 48). She therefore urges scholars to reflect on how these assumptions shape their research.

Throughout the project I experienced both confirmation and disruption of my assumptions. On the one hand, I felt a strong sense of comfort, relief, and intimacy in the communal sharing of ecological grief. Witnessing ecological loss together created moments of connection and recognition that seemed to affirm the value of contemplative practices for engaging with ecological grief. On the other hand, I also encountered experiences of estrangement as participants did not always perceive the same ecological phenomena as losses, nor did they relate to grief in the same ways.

Several methodological tensions emerged during the facilitation of the project. One recurring question concerned the relationship between knowledge and perception: Should participants first be informed about ecological degradation in the landscape, or should they be encouraged to immerse themselves in the landscape without prior framing? In other words, how do cognition and emotion interact in shaping what participants notice and how they interpret ecological change? This tension became visible when participants interpreted the same landscape differently. As Joyce reflected: “If I don’t know what I’m seeing, can I be sure that I’m feeling it correctly?” Participating biologists reflected how they struggled to know if and when to intervene with others in their expressions of loss, e.g., when to correct incorrect assumptions of (future) ecological losses and how to respect feelings of grief despite incorrect information or uncertainty.

As a researcher I sought to direct participants’ attention as little as possible, allowing them to immerse themselves in the landscape and enable feelings and reflections to emerge organically. However, as the project designer I simultaneously carried normative aspirations. I hoped that participants would learn to recognize ecological degradation and become emotionally affected by these losses. This dual role generated an internal tension between facilitating open-ended exploration and implicitly wishing for particular outcomes.

At times I wondered whether participants were encountering ecological loss deeply enough for the experience to become transformative. My discomfort became particularly visible when some participants expressed a desire to “make peace” with ecological losses or to “move on.” Statements such as “everything always changes” or “we need to embrace the new” initially felt contradictory with my own wish to “stay with” the pain of ecological loss. This reaction reflected my implicit assumption that ecological grief should be felt deeply and sustained in order to become transformative, as religion and ecology scholar Lisa Sideris points out:

For grief to do its work—for its transformative power to effect change in the mourner that reflects the magnitude of the loss—there must be a genuine reckon-

ing with the irreplaceable nature of what is lost. Moving too quickly to closure, or seeking something new or different to replace the loss, may distort the grieving process or obstruct its transformative work. (Sideris 2020, pp. 3–4).

However, other grief scholars conceptualize “moving on” as part of the process of mourning. Drawing on Worden’s theory of grief, Pihkala argues that mourning involves a dynamic movement between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented tasks, in which people seek to relate to ecological losses and a climate-changed world. Pihkala defines this task as follows: “Find a way to continue bonds with the more-than-human world while embarking on the rest of one’s journey through life” (Pihkala 2025, p. 13). Key ideas are then about adjusting, moving on, and seeking new roles and relationships, as people need to continue transforming and growing amidst various socio-ecological crises (Pihkala 2025, p. 17). Following this line of thought, the expressed desire to move forward can therefore be understood not as rejection of grief, but as a form of adaptive integration.

These tensions also revealed the importance of recognizing the plurality of ecological grief. Scholars have emphasized that experiences of ecological loss are always partial, situated, and diverse (Chaplain 2025; Mihai and Thaler 2023; Verlie and Neimanis 2023). People encounter ecological change through different histories, knowledges, and sensibilities. As ecofeminist sociologist Blanche Verlie and colleagues argue, witnessing ecological crisis requires “many bodies together, with different knowledges, different archives, and different experiences” (Verlie and Neimanis 2023, p. 128). From this perspective, disagreement, dissonance, and critique should not be seen as obstacles but as essential elements of collective engagement with ecological loss. Environmental humanities scholar Jessica Chaplain similarly emphasizes that people do not experience grief in the same way. Rather, it involves a dwelling with resonances, difficulties and differences: “It is one thing to feel the loss. It is another to feel one’s own grief in relationship to the grief of others” (Chaplain 2025, p. 119). Witnessing and mourning with a diverse group of people demands then a “curiosity and care for the situations of others, as we then start to notice patterns, choke-points, repetitions, absences” (Verlie and Neimanis 2023, p. 128). This includes giving room to dissonance and disagreement, as political theory scholars Mihaela Mihai and Mathias Thaler warn how public grieving can undermine dialogue and inclusivity when (ecological) grief is valued above critique and contestation (Mihai and Thaler 2023, p. 1388). They argue how social learning and transformation through mourning can only happen when feelings of grief are contextualized and questions of responsibility are addressed.

Another methodological reflection concerns the potential limitations of practices of attentiveness. Verlie and colleagues warn that methods of attunement re-center the individual knower if they are not complemented by broader narratives and forms of knowledge (Verlie and Neimanis 2023). Practices of contemplative attention should therefore be accompanied by explicit stories of the not-I—“what is different from us, what we cannot know, what is beyond us” (Verlie and Neimanis 2023, p. 121). They plea for integrating collective and more-than-individual stories of science, art, literature, historical testimony, critical theory and other sources of information that situate personal experience within wider ecological and political contexts. Learning disturbing facts about the actual state of the natural world is then critical and needs according Haraway to be understood as “care”:

Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning. (Haraway 2008, p. 36)

Vignette: Coming Down to Earth

For me personally, the project fostered a profound sense of “coming home”. Engaging with ecological loss in the Veluwe deepened my sense of thankful belonging to the forest in

which I live. As Chaplain argues, attuning to and confronting ecological losses can be a pathway for placemaking and grounding in the more-than-human communities in which they live (Chaplain 2025). This was certainly my experience. Although I have facilitated dialogues on ecological loss with students, activists, and artists since 2016, hosting such conversations in my own living environment felt remarkably different. Earlier in my work I had argued that individuals, communities and societies must learn to mourn ecological losses (Nowak 2016, 2020; Pali et al. 2022). However, through this project I realized that my own ecological grief had largely been directed toward distant and globalized losses: from the Arctic to the Amazon. In the words of philosopher Bruno Latour, this project fostered a “coming down to earth,” reminding me that I am a terrestrial being linked to distinct places even as I exist within a broader planetary ecosystem (Latour 2017).

Sharing these experiences with neighbors and strangers living in the same landscape generated a strong sense of intimacy and relationality. The expression of Wilma who felt the same concerns for the trees, at the same space where I also feel such sorrow, gave me a deep sense of connection and consolation. At the same time, I was deeply moved not only by expressions of grief, but also by the affection, joy, care, and wonder participants expressed toward specific flowers, butterflies, trees, etc., they witnessed.

This experience also confronted me; I noticed that I still felt a certain hesitation or even embarrassment when speaking openly about my feelings of love, wonder, and interconnectedness with the more-than-human world. Paradoxically, it often felt easier to articulate grief and anxiety than to speak about experiences of awe, reciprocity, and encounters with transcendence and the sacred in nature.

Listening to participants enlarged my knowledge and perception of the landscape. They directed my attention to sounds, smells, and ecological details that I had previously overlooked or not know about. These encounters fostered a renewed desire to deepen my ecological literacy. They reminded me that attuning to ecological loss is not only about recognizing absence and degradation, but also about learning to perceive the presence of what still persists and nurturing our capacities for curiosity, love and wonder.

7. Conclusions

How can contemplative ecology be a pathway for mourning ecological losses? This article explored the project Lab Landschapspijn Veluwe as a case study of building a contemplative ecological practice of mourning ecological losses. Through heuristic inquiry, I conclude that contemplative ecology can serve as a meaningful pathway for witnessing and mourning ecological losses by creating conditions in which ecological changes can be attentively witnessed, emotionally acknowledged, and relationally processed.

The findings indicate that contemplative activities such as contemplative dialogue and contemplative walking can sensitize participants to ecological degradation which often unfolds slowly and therefore remains normalized or unnoticed. Through practices of attentive observation, dialogue, walking, silence, and shared reflection, participants became more aware of both tangible ecological losses and their emotional, existential, and moral implications. The findings suggest that participants experienced ecological degradation not only as the loss of species and ecosystems, but also as a broader loss of lifeworld. Ecological change affected relationships with places, species, memories, familiarity, belonging, and, at times, relationships with other people. These contemplative practices enabled participants to articulate both grief and care for specific places and species and ecological relationships that matter to them. In this way, contemplative practices fostered ecological losses as “grievable,” allowing participants to acknowledge forms of loss that are often disenfranchised.

Contemplative dialogue in particular functioned as a space in which participants could explore the emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of ecological loss. The structured format of writing, speaking, listening, and silence created a container in which feelings that are often marginalized or suppressed (such as sadness, powerlessness, anger, or ambivalence) could be expressed, held, honored and shared. Rather than resolving these emotions, the dialogue allowed participants to remain with uncertainty, paradox, and dissonance.

Contemplative walking through degraded landscapes further supported a different mode of attention. By slowing down, gazing and lingering in damaged environments, participants encountered ecological losses in embodied ways. Such encounters allowed memories of absent species to surface as well as experiences of beauty, curiosity, and gratitude. Embodied presence within the landscape appeared to help regulate difficult emotions and to foster forms of eco-empathy and renewed attentiveness to the more-than-human world.

The communal dimension of these practices proved particularly significant. Sharing experiences of ecological loss enabled participants to attune to one another's perceptions, memories, and forms of ecological knowledge. Through this process, ecological grief became not only an individual emotional experience but also a relational and collective one. Participants encountered the plurality of ways in which people perceive, interpret, and respond to ecological loss. Such plurality suggests that practices for ecological mourning must remain open to difference, contestation, and dialogue rather than presuming a uniform emotional response.

This practice of contemplative ecology thus deepens emotional and existential relationships with these places of loss, fostering eco-empathy, presence, wonder and community. At the same time, practices of attention benefit from being complemented by ecological knowledge, scientific insight, and historical understanding of ecological loss. Integrating these forms of knowledge can prevent premature acceptance of ecological degradation and support more critical engagement with the socio-political conditions that shape ecological loss. Similarly, participants' expressed desires to act and contribute to repair and restoration should be taken seriously as part of the process of mourning rather than being dismissed as a departure from it.

Witnessing ecological loss raises difficult and unresolved questions. How should we respond to landscapes that continue to degrade? Which changes must be accepted, and which must be resisted? How can people sustain joy, belonging, and care within environments marked by ecological decline? Contemplative practices therefore do not resolve ecological grief. Rather, they provide spaces in which grief can be acknowledged, explored, and held collectively. By cultivating attentiveness and relational awareness, contemplative ecology may support ongoing processes of ecological mourning that remain open-ended and unfinished.

At a time when ecological crises continue to reshape landscapes and ecosystems, developing spiritual practices for witnessing and mourning environmental loss may be an essential dimension of responding ethically to the ecological wounds and wonders around us.

Ways Forward: Interdisciplinary Practices of Eco-Chaplaincy

This study suggests that responding to ecological grief may benefit from interdisciplinary practices that bring together ecological knowledge and forms of spiritual care. Attuning to ecological loss raises existential as well as scientific questions. The elusive, ambiguous, uncertain and complex character of ecological decline needs robust ecological

knowledge. Scientific (biological and ecological) knowledge can help to contextualize personal experiences of grief and clarify the systemic dynamics driving ecological degradation.

At the same time, ecological knowledge alone may be insufficient for addressing the existential and spiritual questions raised by ecological crisis as dealing with uncertainty and the deeply disturbing nature of the ecological crisis is a deeply existential task. The emerging practice of eco-chaplaincy may offer valuable frameworks and practices for accompanying individuals and communities confronting ecological loss and encountering feelings of ecological grief. Collaborative initiatives between ecologists, nature educators, and chaplains could therefore be further explored and developed, in order to create spaces and practices in which ecological understanding and spiritual reflection mutually inform one another and existential capacities are mobilized to contribute to efforts of restoration and conservation.

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