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Place, Climate Change and the Experience of Loss

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ABSTRACT

Climate change leads to environmental transformations and destruction, which deeply affect individuals and communities living in vulnerable areas. There is a growing literature considering the ethical and political implications of climate change on people's identity and attachment to places. Separately, there is a body of research on the mental health impact of climate change, with many studies focusing on ecological grief—the grief felt in response to ecological losses. In this article, we will connect these two strands of inquiry. We will bring together insights from accounts of attachment to place and the experience of ecological grief, which will shed new light on the negative implications of climate change on places and people's connections to them. The study of ecological grief within climate research capitalizes on existing work in psychology on grief over non-death losses. There is growing evidence that people grieve not just bereavement but also losses arising from illness, incarceration, or infertility. A recent proposal is that what unites all these experiences is a sense of losing one's life possibilities. In the case of ecological grief, the heart of the experience is the loss of possibilities that were sustained by one's place. In this article, we will connect this insight with the emerging attention given by political theorists to the significance of occupying a specific place for people's life plans, and we will investigate how climate change threatens people's ability to sustain their traditional ways of life and their stability in life projects, constituting an incommensurable loss.

This article is categorized under:

Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change > Values-Based Approach to Vulnerability and Adaptation

Policy and Governance > Governing Climate Change in Communities, Cities, and Regions

1 | Introduction: Place and Loss

Studies coming from the many frontlines of climate change highlight the losses that follow climate-change-induced disturbances to place (Amoak et al. 2023; Cianconi et al. 2020; Crate 2008; Cunsolo Willox et al. 2012; Dodd et al. 2018; Drew 2013; Ellis and Albrecht 2017; Jarillo and Barnett 2022; Puig 2025). The environmental impacts resulting from climate change go beyond the physical, as they affect people's place attachment, sense of place, and socio-cultural activities (Devine-Wright 2013; Devine-Wright and Quinn 2020). Losing a place has a significant impact on the very sense of identity of those affected. For many, identities are place-based, and many place-based activities are rendered unviable by climate change. In this advanced review, we integrate two different approaches to the study of place in climate research and provide an account of ecological grief that connects the normative political theory literature on territorial rights with the descriptive literature on how and why people are attached to places. With this two-strand approach, we want to advance a programmatic framework for future research on climate change, loss of place and climate policy from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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Within psychology and cognate disciplines, the loss of place has been studied through the lens of ecological grief, the 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, 275). This approach, which we distinguish from one focused on climate grief (Box 1), helps clarify some of the central phenomenological themes of this particular experience of loss (Fernandez Velasco 2025). However, there is a gap in the psychology of climate change when it comes to linking the mental health impact of environmental loss to its political dimensions. While ecological grief has been recently examined with an eye to its socio-ecological dimensions (Benham and Hoerst 2024), it has not been analyzed in relation to its political and normative implications yet, even if it has relevant implications for people's choices regarding relocation and immobility in the face of climate change.

Meanwhile, political theorists have discussed the normative significance of certain relations between specific places and people, and how this grounds specific rights (e.g., Armstrong 2017; Lo Coco and Schuppert 2021; Moore 2015; Stilz 2019). However, their analyses are disconnected from the recent psychology scholarship on the experience of ecological grief, and their accounts remain imprecise in their understanding of people's connection to places. As Benham and Hoerst suggest, "ecological grief studies can provide an avenue to understand place-based concepts as they are surfaced at a time of unprecedented change and disruption" (2024, 6), including the concept of people's attachment to place, on which we focus. In this review, we argue that insights from the phenomenology of ecological grief can help explain what is at stake when places are lost or radically transformed, and can provide a stronger justification for people's normative entitlements over land and resources.

BOX 1 | Climate grief and ecological grief.

Ecological grief and climate grief are sometimes used interchangeably (Zurba et al. 2025). Here, we focus on ecological grief, and we reserve the term climate grief to the grief people feel in response to concern about the climate crisis (Dennis and Stock 2024; Pihkala 2024a). Climate grief is not necessarily tied to specific places. In contrast, we conceive ecological grief as concerning the loss of particular, meaningful places through acute or chronic environmental change. Ecological grief emerges as a response to experienced or anticipated ecological losses (e.g., loss of ecosystems, species, etc.), in line with existing work in the literature (e.g., Cunsolo and Ellis 2018). The reason that ecological grief is often anticipatory is not because it is abstracted, but because the climate crisis creates a temporal horizon of expanding ecological loss. People who grieve over the changing of sea ice melting patterns are quite aware that these patterns are increasingly disrupted every year. As a result, people might be grieving at once currently experienced, and anticipated, ecological losses. Thus, ecological grief and climate grief remain distinct, but related, concepts. In both cases, many emotions are likely to overlap, including anxiety, and disorientation. And in both cases, people might experience grief over an "ambiguous loss" (Boss 2004), which complicates the way in which people understand the loss, and the way they act. Grief typically has a temporally extended, processual structure, but ambiguous loss often results in a grief that becomes frozen and leaves people feeling stuck.

After describing our methodology (Section 2), we will examine these two strands of research, that is, accounts of attachment to place in political theory (Section 3) and phenomenological studies on the experience of ecological grief (Section 4). In Section 5, we will integrate them to connect the experience of losing a place with its political and normative ramifications.

2 | Methodology

This paper employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology based on a critical literature review of two different fields: (1) accounts of attachment in theories of territorial and resource rights from a political theory perspective; (2) phenomenological studies of ecological grief. This paper does not adopt a systematic review methodology. Instead, relevant publications were identified through a targeted and iterative search process, based on the authors' familiarity with the field, targeted searches in academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Google Scholar), and engagement with key references cited in the existing scholarship. The selection focused on peer-reviewed publications that are widely cited or considered influential within the field. More specifically, publications were selected based on their conceptual relevance and influence within the field using three criteria: representativeness of the body of literature of ecological grief, representativeness of the body of literature of attachment to place, and relevance for integrating the two bodies of literature.

Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed works published in English between 2005 and 2025 and relevant to the topic, while non-academic sources were excluded. No geographical restrictions were applied. Where relevant, we included empirical works and some seminal works from previous years. The review includes 104 works in total. All works discussed are included in the reference list. The selected literature was then analyzed to find areas of convergence, leading to the development of an integrative conceptual framework.

3 | Attachment to Place

In a context of increasing environmental degradation, resource scarcity, territorial conflicts, and changes in land habitability due to climate-related impacts, political theorists have provided several accounts of what justifies and legitimizes the rights that people hold over a territory, land and/or natural resources (e.g., Armstrong 2017; Blomfield 2019; Kolers 2009; Moore 2015; Nine 2012, 2022; Stilz 2019). Among different rightful claims that people may hold, "attachment claims" refer to when certain people form meaningful and normatively significant connections with places (Armstrong 2014; De Biasio 2024b; Lo Coco and Schuppert 2021; Mancilla 2021). Hereafter, we refer to these claims as instances of "attachment to place". These relations often arise when specific places are valued for cultural and symbolic reasons, beyond merely economic ones (Miller 2012).

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The legitimacy of attachment to place is grounded in the idea of people's practice-based interests and stability in life plans (Armstrong 2017; Stilz 2019). Stilz argues that "the occupancy of a particular place is of central importance for an individual's life plans and projects" (2019, 40). Without access to specific places, some individuals would not be able to sustain their life projects. Armstrong writes that "attachment-based claims seek to ground rights over resources on the close relationship which some agents have formed with specific resources, developing life-plans which depend upon secure access to them" (2014, 49). When people form morally valuable connections to specific places, key dimensions of their well-being (e.g., health, psychological well-being, social relations) are structured upon such connections in a way that is not easily substitutable (De Biasio 2024b). Think about the relationships between some Indigenous peoples or resource-dependent communities and their land. In many cases, their traditional livelihoods, well-being, sense of identity and activities are all place-based. Hence, they are indissolubly linked to the features of their surrounding environment and depend on continuous and stable access to it. As political theorists argue, members of these communities would hold attachment claims over their territory in a normatively significant manner and would be entitled to rights over them.

People's normatively significant connections to places can be disrupted for several reasons (e.g., think about land dispossession). Today, climate change is a major driver of environmental changes that affect land and resources. When key places change in an irreversible manner or are lost (or projected to be lost) due to climate change, people's connections to them can be disrupted, their traditional livelihoods impaired, and their well-being and stability in life plans severely hindered. For instance, consider how climate change and sea-level rise are threatening the very habitability of island countries in the Pacific Ocean, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu or the Marshall Islands (Farbotko 2010; Vaha 2015). The lives of those residing in these countries, who have developed peculiar livelihoods that rely on the specific features of their islands and their resources, are currently jeopardized by climate-related impacts.

When climate change negatively affects places, there are not only physical and material losses. Some people's practices and identities are territorially defined: they depend on a specific territory that becomes non-substitutable for their lives and future trajectories. For those people, maintaining a stable connection to a place is critical to retain their agency and shape their present and future in a meaningful way (Straehle 2023). As places change, there is a more pervasive sense of loss that affects people's identities and the very possibility of sustaining their lives and projects (de Shalit 2011). Such losses are often labeled as "incommensurable", defined by Barnett et al. (2016, 977) as people being "dispossessed of things that they value, and for which there are no commensurable substitutes". As clarified by Adger et al. (2011, 14), a "incommensurability arises because some of the values that should be considered in climate change decision-making cannot be compared meaningfully using any common metric" (for example, a monetary one). Incommensurability often relates to irreversible losses, conceived here as permanent losses driven by climate change that cannot be undone, such as species extinction or submerged islands (Puig 2025). Many of these irreversible climate impacts fall into the category of incommensurable loss, as what has been lost does not have a commensurable substitute.

In a sense, theorists of territorial and resource rights have accurately recognized that places carry an essential and non-substitutable value for some people, which goes beyond the universal right held by all to a healthy and liveable location (United Nations 2021). Nevertheless, the experience of losing the place one is attached to (due to physical removal or transformations in the place itself) remains under-theorized in the political theory literature. Scholars refer to "a loss of a valuable way of living" and mention changes in traditional place-based practices, personal and cultural identity (e.g., Heyward 2014, 2016). Theorists highlight that specific places/resources matter to specific people due to their importance for their life plans and projects, and recognize that losing them is especially problematic. Still, in most accounts, the idea of the centrality of places for one's life plans remains a vague notion, leading several theorists to justify overreaching and illegitimate attachment claims (De Biasio 2024b; Lo Coco and Schuppert 2021).

To date, the resources of other disciplines, such as the study of ecological grief, that examine emotional responses to environmental changes and place loss have not been integrated within theories of territorial and resource rights. In this context, employing the resources of these other disciplines can help shed light on the significance of places for specific people. Considering ecological grief helps emphasize how place-dependent projects, relationships, commitments, and expectations are integral to the structure of one's life. Additionally, it can help develop a more comprehensive understanding of what it means for a loss of place to be incommensurable. It is not just that people lose projects or become distressed. An organization of life possibilities comprising a sense of who they are is profoundly disrupted, thus requiring a temporally extended process of reorientation and self-change. Hence, theories of territorial rights could benefit from having a prior understanding of the experience of ecological grief, which would enhance their ability to appreciate what is at stake in these situations and how to best intervene.

4 | Ecological Grief

Ecological grief is often studied along with other emotional responses to climate change, such as ecological guilt (Adams et al. 2020; Jensen 2019), ecopride (Bissing-Olson et al. 2016), climate hope (Bury et al. 2020; Ojala 2012, 2017), climate anxiety (Clayton 2020; Crandon et al. 2022), climate anger (du Bray et al. 2019; Kleres and Wettergren 2017), and solastalgia (Albrecht 2019).[1] In this context, ecological grief has been characterized as an emotional response 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, 275). In this broad characterization, the object of ecological grief is heterogeneous, encompassing the loss of ecosystems, species, and landscapes, both anticipated and experienced.

The study of ecological grief is linked to a growing interest in other forms of grief over non-death losses, including illness, incarceration, and involuntary childlessness (Fieldsend and

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Smith 2020; Harris 2019; King and Delgado 2021). A recent development in phenomenology helps unify research across various cases of grief over non-death loss, including ecological grief. This is the conception of grief as the response to and engagement with the loss of "life possibilities" (Ratcliffe and Richardson 2023). Here, we follow this characterization not as an alternative understanding of ecological grief, but as a phenomenological explication of the concept advanced by Cunsolo and Ellis (2018). The idea is that our lives are structured by our projects, pastimes, routines, which, together, weave a fabric of significant "life possibilities" that are coherently organized and provide the background to what we experience as salient and meaningful in the world and to who we understand ourselves to be in that world. In the case of bereavement grief, our loved ones are integrated into this structure, and when we lose them, grief emerges as a form of responding and reacting to the corresponding loss of life possibilities (Ratcliffe et al. 2023). Things that used to be salient and meaningful, possibilities that seemed to open to us, are no longer there. Besides people, our projects, our jobs, and our situatedness both in physical places and in a social network can all structure our life possibilities. When we lose one of these sustaining elements, grief ensues (Ratcliffe 2023). The phenomenology of grief is reflective of the impact the loss has on our practical identity (Cholbi 2021; Korsgaard 1996). Korsgaard (1996, 101) characterized it as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking". Because what is lost was integral to our system of value, this system is the background of our experience of grief and also what is transformed through the process of grief.

In this review, our understanding of ecological grief is narrower than that of Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) in that it is centered on place, rather than encompassing a broad range of phenomena (e.g., species loss). We focus on this form of place-based ecological grief because it denotes a unified phenomenon and provides a connection to the literature on place attachment from a political theory perspective. Nevertheless, ours is still a broad understanding of place, based on the notion of dwelling. Here, it is important to contrast physical space, or location, with place as lived and experienced, which encompasses cultural practices and social relationships, many of them with the more-than-human (Casey 1993).

The way in which places can sustain our life possibilities is encapsulated in the notion of dwelling (Basso 1996; Ingold 2021; Malpas 2021; Norberg-Schulz 1985; Rose 2012). To say that dwelling is a central element in human experience is to say that human patterns of sense-making are emplaced (or situated). Place is understood as an overarching structure within which subjectivity unfolds, sustaining our life possibilities: "the space that dwelling opens up is thus a space of possibility" (Malpas 2021, 46). Of course, dwelling is not a stable process, but is dynamic, cultural and collective. The life possibilities sustained by place are part of ongoing social processes, where "represented and enacted–daily, monthly, seasonally, annually–places and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social life" (Basso 1996, 110). The resulting picture is one in which the places through which our lives develop can sustain the very structure of our lives, our life possibilities. Thus, when these places are lost due to climate change, ecological grief emerges as a response to that loss of life possibilities. In this light, we can understand ecological grief as a crisis in dwelling (Fernandez Velasco 2025; Gleizer and Fernandez Velasco 2024).

Ecological grief is not just a response to the loss of place, but to the loss of the ways in which some places sustain our life possibilities (Pihkala 2024b). This loss does not necessarily imply a physical displacement or removal of the individuals from the place that sustains their lives. It can be experienced in the place itself without physical removal. As Heyward (2021, 25) calls it, this constitutes a form of "nonspatial removal", in which places are removed from people rather than the opposite. Whereas people are not displaced elsewhere, the ensuing feelings of loss that result when meaningful places change are similar. Often, people keep living in the same places, but the possibilities that these places used to sustain have either already faded away or soon will. There is, hence, an important connection with the concept of "solastalgia", used to describe the distress that follows radical changes to one's home environment (Albrecht 2005, 2010; Askland and Bunn 2018; Tom et al. 2023). Albrecht (2019) defines it as "the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment" (p. 39), as often "home is becoming more than unrecognizable: it is for many becoming increasingly hostile" (p. 71). Solastalgia has strong affinities with ecological grief (Albrecht 2020), particularly when we focus on the loss of place while remaining in place. Their similarity notwithstanding, a key difference in conceptualization is that by conceptualizing the phenomena as a kind of grief rather than a *sui generis* emotion, we can connect it to the literature on grief over non-death losses.

It is also important to note that the losses at the heart of ecological grief are not only individual losses but also collective. Places are often key to individual as well as collective identity, history, and memory. Environmental destruction can alter the sense of place attachment of a community (Escalera-Reyes 2020), as well as collective place-based identities, such as people identifying as "reindeer people" (Vladimirova 2011). Collective identity is sometimes described as a shared sense of belonging to a group, based on common interests, activities, and histories (Taylor and Whittier 1992). The connection between ecological grief and collective identity does not require us to posit a collective that is experiencing a single collective emotion. Rather, the sharedness of ecological grief comes from the way in which place-based identity and practices are shared (Fernandez Velasco and Richardson 2025). This results in an emotional process that involves interactions between individuals of that collective (Richardson 2024). Then, ecological grief often concerns the loss of our collective possibilities (Ratcliffe 2023).

Once we consider the ways in which places can support the very structure of our subjectivity, we can start to make sense of the many reports highlighting the connection between ecological grief and identity. A member of an Inuit community in Labrador puts it as follows: "And I think ... it's a loss of, a little bit a loss of identity, I think. And when you have that loss, where are you going to get it back?" (Cunsolo et al. 2020, 45). In Ghana, someone affected by deforestation makes a similar connection between the loss of place and the loss of identity: "Hunting for bovines was who we are, but that's no more. Whether we overhunted them or the land became toxic for them [referring

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to bush burning and increased pesticide use], we don't know" (Amoak et al. 2023, 11).

Another common theme in many reports of ecological grief concerns the possibilities that used to be open to people, which have now disappeared. Again in Labrador, an Inuit elder laments this loss of possibilities:

> I try and keep talk[ing] to my kids and my youngest one now, about our huntin' places, where would we go, this is where we kill caribou, this is where we had to climb up, this is where we had to camp, and all that kinda stuff. But, it's really hard to carry it on when you can't take 'em out, take them to travel the routes and shoot the caribou. So, it's quite sad. (Cunsolo et al. 2020, 46).

When the places that sustain people's life possibilities are affected by climate change, our surroundings lose their significance. They are no longer a place for camping, climbing, or killing caribou. When those possibilities fade away, one's very identity can fade with them.

5 | Integrative Framework

In this section, we connect the two separate lines of work explored so far to advance an integrative framework that draws from the concept of ecological grief to inform a better understanding of people's attachments to places and their disruptions. We also explore the normative implications of our analysis and explain how it can be used to inform policy recommendations in relation to land allocation and migration responses.

5.1 | Understanding Attachment to Place Through the Lens of Ecological Grief

Accounts of attachment to place and studies on ecological grief emphasize the connection between places, life possibilities, and stability in people's life plans. Bringing these two complementary approaches into dialogue allows us to deepen our understanding of attachment to place and the experience of losing a place. Both strands of scholarship recognize how places shape the lives and identities of some individuals. The reference to life possibilities (in the phenomenological literature on ecological grief) and life plans (in the political theory literature on attachment) amounts to the recognition of the same critical connection to a place, which carries a significant and non-substitutable role in certain people's lives. This connection to a place can be truly understood only by looking at the experience of a place and its loss, which are the object of study of phenomenological research on ecological grief.

As seen, studies in phenomenology clarify the ways in which place can mold the shapes of our lives and the mental health impact resulting from the loss of place. Many individuals and communities do not just live in a place. They live with the place, where a specific place is indissolubly linked to how they understand themselves and their presence in the world. Attachment to place is then not just a political or legal notion but carries an unavoidable emotional and psychological aspect. Research on ecological grief provides theoretical backing for the intuition shared by many theorists that land and resources are not only to be conceived in terms of the monetary and economic benefits they bring to people (e.g., Miller 2012; Moore 2015; Stilz 2019). Correlating the political notion of attachment claims to its emotional and affective dimensions leads us to endorse a conception of land that differs from a fungible and material good and, additionally, it helps us justify the existence of special rights connected to places due to non-economic reasons.

Additionally, in the literature on territorial and resource rights, not all scholars recognize the legitimacy of such special rights over land and resources (e.g., Ypi 2017). The experience of ecological grief, instead, gives empirical and embodied support to the claim that attachment to place is normatively significant. People's rights over land and resources should not only result from contingent factors and legal claims (e.g., the recognition of a state's sovereignty) but should map onto their meaningful and identity-defining relationships to places. Most of the time, these attachment claims occur at the level of sub-statist or trans-statist communities. This consideration legitimizes a more fluid view of territorial allocation, which would respect the claims of different, sometimes overlapping, communities with strong emotional attachments to places, while rejecting a fixed statist view of territorial rights. Importantly, in the context of a changing climate and environmental transformations, where the mobility of populations will become ever more frequent, challenging a fixed and static view of territorial rights held by states is going to be key to addressing this increasingly fluid and dynamic situation.

When meaningful places change due to climate-related effects, the emergence of feelings of ecological grief signals a broken connection between people and places. Ecological grief becomes then a useful diagnostic tool for understanding when legitimate attachment claims to territory are disrupted, even if people remain in the same geographical locations. The presence or absence of ecological grief when places change (or are going to change) provides a clearer picture of which attachment claims are legitimate and which ones are not, bringing some needed clarity to current accounts of attachment that struggle to make sense of legitimate relationships with places from a purely normative perspective (Section 3). We thus avoid the problem of ambiguity or imprecision in grounding legitimate attachment claims since, when people experience ecological grief, this corresponds to a meaningful relationship they held with the place that has been or is anticipated to be disrupted.

Hence, ecological grief reveals something deeper about the political relationships between some individuals and communities and their territory/resources. Here, it is important to note that other emotions, still connected to place, have been linked to political questions and action. Consider soliphilia, defined as "the love of the totality of our place relationships, and a willingness to accept the political responsibility for protecting and conserving them at all scales" (Albrecht 2019, 121). As evident from this definition, soliphilia is fundamentally linked to political questions, issues of responsibility and meaningful action in the face of environmental transformation (Tom et al. 2023). As just argued, ecological grief carries relevant political implications too,

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in that it legitimizes the idea that attachment to a place is normatively significant and reveals when it occurs. Additionally, it can provide some guidance on how to address the rupture of these attachments and inform climate policy.

To grieve a place is to express a normatively significant claim: that the place mattered in a way that is not replaceable. Here, the loss relates to losing the ground that sustains some people's life possibilities. As theorists of territorial and resource rights argue, people with this sort of meaningful connection to places should be entitled to rights over them. When such rights are violated, in most cases, something ought to be done to redress this situation. Ecological grief, hence, can be seen both as a testimony of the presence of relevant attachment and as the expression of a demand of justice. Losing a place often implies that some people have been significantly wronged, and this should be somehow addressed, though not in all cases.[2]

5.2 | Normative and Policy Implications

Studying the lived experience of ecological grief can help shed some light on what is at stake when climate change transforms relevant places for people and acts as a fruitful avenue to clarify which losses are tolerable, which ones can be compensated, and what compensation ought to look like. More specifically, recognizing ecological grief as the expression of a demand of justice in the context of climate change expands the scope of climate justice to encompass not only material and economic losses, thus supporting insights from growing research in the climate change literature on loss and damage (e.g., McShane 2017; Preston 2017; Shockley and Hourdequin 2017). In many cases, the loss is not only material but primarily emotional, as studies of ecological grief suggest. As McNamara and Jackson (2019) write, "understanding what people value" and "what people are willing to lose or not" are important directions for research on climate change, related losses and compensation. In recent years, several scholars have proposed ways to address the wrongs of climate change and recognized that appropriate measures should not only be concerned with economic losses (e.g., Düvel and García-Portela 2024; Heyward 2016; McNamara and Jackson 2019). Overall, as McShane (2017, 139) rightly argues, it is fundamental to stress that "assessments of non-economic values should be made by or in consultation with affected communities and be informed by an understanding of the roles that the values play within those communities".

Ecological grief indicates that the different feelings of loss that people experience must be acknowledged and respected. Distributive concerns for material losses do not exhaust all the required reparative measures, but other ones, including recognition and procedural aspects, are often necessary. Acknowledging the legitimacy of grief and the values that places carry for people is key to respecting people's relations to them. Though some of the irreversible effects of climate change cannot ever be fully remedied, in some contexts, potential second-best measures of reparative justice may entail memorializing lost landscapes or supporting cultural continuity for the affected communities. Public rituals or practices of mourning may also be useful in this context. Varutti (2024, 560) notes that "ecological public mourning re-places these emotional responses firmly in the public arena, leveraging shared emotions to assert ecology as a key societal and political concern and demanding political accountability". People have a right to grieve, and this should be acknowledged to enable political actors to take responsibility for environmental disruptions and address them.

Some effects of climate change cannot be mitigated any longer and will be irremediably disruptive for many places, such as small island states and the Arctic region. Ecological grief allows us to see that these places are often not replaceable. This has relevant normative implications for the distribution of rights over resources and land in the context of a changing climate and for demands of climate justice. As mentioned earlier, when attachment claims legitimately hold (as informed by accounts of ecological grief), they can justify the rights that some people hold over specific natural resources and places. When addressing climate-related issues and environmental degradation, policymakers should look at when people's relevant relations to places are disrupted, and should intervene while being mindful of the emotional and affective dimension of people's relations to places and of what their disruption entails. For instance, consider the words of the "mayor" (AngajukKak) of the Nain community in Labrador: "Inuit are the people of the sea ice. If there is no more sea ice, how can we be people of the sea ice?" (in Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 277). For the Inuit people, and many others, another territory with distinct geographical features would not provide them with the means to sustain their traditional livelihoods, identity and culture.

Acknowledging the existence of the experience of ecological grief has substantial implications for choices, decisions, and migration in response to present and future climate changes. There are clear connections between climate-related effects and choices regarding climate (im)mobilities, which are in turn linked to people's attachment to places and prospects for future adaptation (or impossibility thereof). People's decisions on whether to move or stay are often shaped by their connection to places: ecological grief can signal when such a significant relation is present and when it risks being disrupted. People with these connections will often try to stay put in the face of ongoing environmental disruptions. A member of the Vanuatu population, an island country in the Pacific Ocean threatened by climate change, claims that internal migration within the country would be preferable "because you can maintain your culture, your way of life" (as reported in Perumal 2018, 52). Similarly, Rabbani et al. (2022) discuss the situation of local communities in the Kalapara region in India and report the words of a coastal fisher: "This is our fishing place. I was born here. Where else would I go? What will I do there? I am good at fishing. I know where to get more fish around the coasts of Kuakata. You don't get fish everywhere in the sea" (p. 108). For many, a different place cannot replace the original one; if displacement is inevitable, there will be a loss that, according to some, can never be fully compensated (de Shalit 2011). In such cases, promoting adaptation in the area could be the best answer.

Instead, proposals for relocation that provide the affected people with the means to survive in a different territory (Lister 2014; Risse 2009) would often miss something normatively significant. Climate policy treating relocation as the only viable compensation option for the (present or anticipated) loss of place does not

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BOX 2 | Climate change, migration and grief.

According to scientific projections, climate change will hinder the habitability of specific places and people will often have to move and relocate elsewhere (IPCC 2023). There will be an increasing incidence of "climate migration" and "climate-induced displacement", that is, voluntary or forced decisions to relocate to cope with climate change. Although climate change is increasingly seen as a driver of migration (Piguet 2010, 2022), it is difficult to isolate it as its main cause, as it intersects with existing conditions of disadvantage and vulnerability, high levels of poverty and lack of economic means (Draper 2023; Thampi et al. 2025). It also disproportionately affects vulnerable individuals and communities with strong attachments to place.
Individuals who migrate do so for multiple reasons and experience a complex range of losses related to the act of relocating, especially when relocation is not voluntary (Straehle 2023). Those losses can be mapped onto the experience of migratory grief (Renner et al. 2024), which focuses on the grief felt after abandoning one's own house and country. Migratory grief is not necessarily related to climate change. When migration (at least partially) results from climate change, people experience multiple feelings of loss (for an overview, see Thampi et al. 2025). In these cases, ecological and migratory grief intersect and intensify the feelings of loss felt by people once they abandon the key places that sustained their lives. In a way, ecological grief is often a response to compounded, multiple losses, and migration is a significant aspect of this (Pihkala 2024b).

consider that places are often not fungible and irreplaceable for local people. Seeing relocation as the only viable option (as more cost-efficient) is disrespectful of people's connection to relevant places and their autonomy in choosing how to live their lives (De Biasio 2024a; Farbotko et al. 2023; Stilz 2024; Straehle 2023). At the level of policy making, people whose places are affected by climate-related impacts often call for an increase in adaptation measures to respect their rightful claims to territory. As climate change mostly affects already vulnerable people (Draper 2023), measures to ensure a successful adaptation for specific communities would need to be financed by wealthier countries, especially in the Global North. Demands of justice, in this context, do not only amount to providing people with the opportunity to live elsewhere and attain basic living conditions but require engaging with people's emotional connection to places and their un-substitutable role in their lives.

Still, there will be cases in which adaptation would not be possible. In these instances, people will be forced to migrate (Box 2). As Thampi et al. (2025, 2) note, multiple losses are associated with forced migration, which generate persistent grief, ranging "from interpersonal losses, such as the loss of family members, friends, and community, to material losses, as well as abstract losses, including the loss of status, identity, communication, familiar environment, and social roles". Though not all these losses can be remedied, some scholars propose as a second-best recommendation that the affected people are granted access rights to new territories with similar environmental features (Stilz 2024). In addition, relocation should be planned via active consultation with local stakeholders to respect as much as possible their needs. Overall, considering ecological grief as an expression of an injustice entails that there should be substantial efforts from the international community to ensure that people's choices for voluntary immobility are respected and that plans for relocation are previously agreed with those affected.

Adaptation measures should also be supported and matched with appropriate mitigation measures. The emergence of feelings of ecological grief indicates that mitigation efforts have so far fallen short of the required measures to tackle climate change. As emissions are not substantially cut and temperatures continue to rise, more people will experience feelings of ecological grief, signaling that their normatively significant relations to places are disrupted. Adaptation and mitigation, as theorists of climate justice have suggested (Gardiner 2010; Gardiner et al. 2010), are part of the same bundle of possible responses to climate change. To be successful, both need to be implemented to address the wrongs of climate change and respect people's connections to places.

6 | Conclusion

Our analysis in this Advanced Review constitutes a novel contribution to existing climate change research and its effects on people's ties to places, as it explores the link between accounts of place attachment in political theory and the growing research on the experience of ecological grief. By bringing together these two research strands, we brought new clarity to the concept of attachment to place and its connection to the lived experience of ecological grief, considered the normative implications of recognizing ecological grief as an expression of a demand of justice, and sketched some potential measures to address the (present or future) loss of place. Attachment to place and ecological grief are two sides of the same coin. The former expresses the presence of meaningful place-based ties; the latter mourns their loss. Understanding attachment to place through the lens of ecological grief entails recognizing the inevitable emotional dimension that underpins people's relations to places and its normative force as a justification for territorial and resource rights. When climate change disrupts places, the experience of ecological grief signals that something identity-defining has been lost for some people and further signals that reparations are due.

Given the increasing incidence of climate-related environmental impacts, our integrative framework is especially relevant and timely, as we do need a comprehensive account of what is at stake when climate change disrupts specific places and affects people's relations to them. Overall, we expect that our analysis will be beneficial to scholars working in different fields, such as climate displacement, environmental science, psychology, territorial rights, and climate policy. We also hope that it will encourage further interdisciplinary research on the normative implications of ecological grief and the emotional dimensions of attachment to place. Making different strands of research dialogue with one another can foster new understandings of key concepts and promote interdisciplinary research on a topic that is going to become ever more relevant as environmental conditions continue to change and affect people's lives.

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Author Contributions

Virginia De Biasio: conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal). **Pablo Fernandez Velasco:** conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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Endnotes

[1] New emotion terms to denote the affective responses to climate change are sometimes collectively referred to as "Earth emotions" (Albrecht 2019; for a taxonomy, see Pihkala 2022). Not all of these are negative emotions. Even for ecological grief, attending to it can lead to positive emotions, and some positive emotions can be accompanied by grief and still carry a mobilizing potential, that is, inspiring climate action and promoting solidarity (Olsen et al. 2025).

[2] Present patterns of territorial control often result from a history of conquest and domination. Concerns of historical injustice should be considered when justifying territorial rights (e.g., Nine 2008; Moore 2015; Stilz 2025). Considerations of historical injustice would weigh against potential demands for compensation based on the presence of legitimate attachment.

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