

# A World of Worry

Exploring consumer eco-anxiety  
and environmental behaviours



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# What is eco-anxiety?



As awareness of the severity of the environmental crisis grows, more and more people are reporting feelings of anxiety around our planet's future – particularly as extreme climate events, such as Australian wildfires, become increasingly common.

For many, scientific predictions of irreversible climate damage, and consequent social crises, jars with the (lack of) governmental and societal response. [1] The psychological distress resulting from this has been described by the American Psychological Association as 'a chronic fear of environmental doom'. [2] However, eco-anxiety is not characterised as a psychological disorder by all; there are other researchers who view the phenomenon as a rational response to a real and existential threat. [3]

Regardless of how it's framed, the severity of anxiety, and actions in response, varies from person to person. Whilst some seek professional help, others try to alleviate their anxiety through eco-activism and lifestyle changes. However, to date, the evidence of how eco-anxiety affects people's actions, behaviours and beliefs, as well as its demographic profile, remains largely anecdotal.

To bring quantitative insight to the discussion, we surveyed 1,002 UK consumers on their attitudes, behaviours and beliefs about the environment, including how worried they were about its future.

## The feeling is mutual

Worry about the environment was common across the sample, with 68% saying that thinking about the environment's future makes them nervous (24% strongly agreed), while 56% felt helpless when they thought about the future of the planet. There was little faith in government to solve the climate crisis; 72% of consumers worried that those in power will never make the changes needed to avoid a climate disaster.



**74% were worried for future generations.**

**52% felt guilty about their effect on the environment.**

## Some worry more than others

Respondents were asked how often they worry about the environment. It would be inappropriate to ascribe anxiety diagnoses from the survey, but we have categorised respondents into three groups:

**Frequent Worriers:** those who worry every day about the environment (18%) or a few times a week (33%).

**Semi-frequent Worriers:** those who worry a few times a month (28%).

**Infrequent Worriers:** those that worry a few times a year (10%) or never (6%).

It is likely that some people across the groupings only worry once they are actively reminded of it.

## Eco-worriers to eco-warriors

Our findings show a correlation between worry, advocacy and behaviours. 46% of Frequent Worriers said they actively seek sustainable companies and products often or all of the time, while the same was said by only 23% of Semi-frequent and 10% of Infrequent Worriers. This suggests a strong correlation between eco-anxiety and sustainable behaviours.

This relationship was also seen when asking if they were trying to buy less, with 64% of Frequent, 43% of Semi-frequent and 34% of Infrequent Worriers saying they regularly were. However, high numbers of all groups recycled at home (90% Frequent, 83% Semi-frequent, 75% Infrequent).



**64% of Frequent  
Worriers were trying  
to buy less.**

Our findings indicate that eco-anxiety, or frequent worrying about the environment, does lead to positive environmental actions and behaviours – including advocacy – suggesting that the phenomenon does have some useful social benefits.

## Gender is a better predictor than age

Women were consistently and significantly more likely to report concern over the environment. 78% of women, compared to 68% of men, were worried for future generations, with a similar trend amongst those who felt guilty about their effect on the environment.



**71% of women indicated that thinking about the environment made them nervous, compared to 63% of men.**

**56% of women felt guilty about their effect on the environment, compared to 45% of men.**



Age was a less clear determiner of eco-anxiety. Concern over the environment was high amongst all age groups, with Frequent Worriers (daily or several times a week) accounting for:

- 44% of Gen X (born 1965-1979)
- 55% of Millennials (born 1980-1995)
- 55% of Gen Z (born 1996-2010). [4]



However, Gen X consumers were significantly less likely to say that worrying about the environment affects their day-to-day life, or that they feel helpless when they think about the future of the planet, when compared to Millennial and Gen Z age groups. This is explored in detail in our white paper on generational differences, [The XYZ of Sustainability](#).

## Conclusions

Eco-anxiety, or frequent worrying about the environment, is a common phenomenon, with 51% of our consumer sample worrying either every day or several times a week. Across demographic segments, levels of concern remain high. As eco-anxiety seems to show no sign of going away, with even higher levels of concern amongst younger age groups, it is something to which companies of all kinds should pay attention.

Based on our findings, we recommend companies consider the ideas outlined on the following page when exploring how eco-anxiety intersects with consumer behaviour.

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## Something worth tracking

Eco-anxiety is likely to increase as time goes on, especially as it features more prominently in younger age groups. Those who are most worried are also most likely to take action, seek sustainable products, and buy less overall. It is therefore important for companies to understand these anxieties and what is driving them, so they can help solve rather than contribute to the issue.

## Women are a key demographic

Women are both more likely to worry about the environment and drive the majority of consumer spending. This potentially makes women a key demographic for marketing around sustainable products and services, as they are more likely to take action around their sustainable and environmental beliefs.

## Communication should hit the right notes

Key to allaying fears around eco-anxiety is good communication that feels both actionable and engaging. Those who worry most about the environment also tend to worry more about their consumer spending and purchasing behaviour. Companies, alongside tracking eco-anxiety and paying attention to demographic differences, should ensure their products and services have clear environmental messaging so they can become part of the solution and not the problem.

*If you are interested in conducting research into sustainability, or want to speak to one of our experts, please email our Senior Research Manager via [elsie.lauchlan@shift-insight.co.uk](mailto:elsie.lauchlan@shift-insight.co.uk) or call 0207 253 8959.*

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- The Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR
- The ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research
- The MRS Code of Conduct.

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## References

[1] <http://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>

[2] <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>

[3] <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191010-how-to-beat-anxiety-about-climate-change-and-eco-awareness>

[4] A note on age: Survey respondents were aged 13-55. Previous research on this issue has suggested a discrepancy in attitudes between young and old (usually comparing Boomers with Millennials). As a corrective, we compared Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X to focus on differences between younger demographic groupings.