


Ableism, mental health, and environmental change: Critical ecology beyond Western paradigms

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Abstract: This article examines the intersections of ableism, mental health, and environmental change through a critical ecological framework grounded in intersectionality and decolonial thought. Dominant responses to ecological crisis within Western paradigms tend to frame climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as technical or managerial problems, marginalizing the embodied, psychological, and relational dimensions of ecological harm. Disabled people, neurodivergent individuals, and those experiencing mental distress are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, yet their experiences and knowledges remain peripheral within environmental theory and policy. Drawing on disability studies, political ecology, and Indigenous and non-Western ecological scholarship, this article argues that ableism functions as a structuring logic within Western ecological paradigms, shaping assumptions about resilience, productivity, adaptation, and value. Through a critical synthesis of interdisciplinary literature and a set of analytical case interventions, this article advances critical ecology as an approach that centers interdependence, vulnerability, and care as ecological principles rather than deficits. It contributes to decolonial ecological debates by demonstrating how disability and mental distress expose the limitations of Western ontologies of control and autonomy, and by articulating alternative ecological imaginaries grounded in relational responsibility, collective survival, and epistemic plurality.

Keywords: ableism, critical ecology, ecological knowledge, environmental justice, mental health, Indigenous

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental change is most often framed within Western discourse as a problem of measurement, management, and optimization. Rising global temperatures, intensifying disasters, species extinction, and pollution are translated into datasets, predictive models, and policy targets intended to stabilize ecological systems while preserving existing social and economic arrangements. While these approaches dominate institutional responses to ecological crisis, they frequently obscure the embodied, psychological, and relational dimensions of environmental harm. Climate change is not only an environmental transfor-

mation but also a reconfiguration of how bodies, minds, and communities experience time, place, and futurity.

The impacts of environmental change are profoundly uneven. Political ecology and environmental justice scholarship have demonstrated that ecological harm is distributed along lines of race, class, gender, and colonial history (Nixon, 2013). Disabled people and those experiencing mental distress are among those most affected, yet they remain marginal within dominant environmental frameworks. Disaster preparedness plans presume physical mobility, sensory access, and cognitive capacity, while climate adaptation strategies emphasize resilience, flexibility, and self-sufficiency. These assumptions reproduce ableist norms that privilege particular bodies and minds while rendering others expendable, invisible, or burdensome.

Ableism operates here not as a secondary form of exclusion but as a structuring logic of Western ecological thought. It organizes social value around ideals of autonomy, productivity, and emotional regulation that are deeply entangled with capitalism, colonialism, and modernity. Within environmental discourse, ableism shapes assumptions about who can adapt to ecological change, whose lives are worth protecting, and which futures are imaginable. The normative ecological subject is implicitly imagined as able-bodied, rational, and resilient, capable of enduring ecological disruption without dependence on care or accommodation.

Mental health occupies an ambivalent position within environmental debates. While there is growing recognition of climate-related distress, including eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and ecological grief (Albrecht, 2011), these experiences are frequently individualized and medicalized. Distress is framed as a personal coping failure rather than as a rational response to systemic ecological destruction. Such framings reflect Western psychiatric paradigms that isolate mental suffering from its political and environmental conditions (Burstow, 2015).

Despite the growing sophistication of environmental scholarship, a significant analytical gap remains in how ecological change is theorized in relation to disability and mental distress. While political ecology and environmental justice research have convincingly demonstrated that environmental harm is unevenly distributed along axes of race, class, gender, and colonial history (Nixon, 2013; Robbins, 2012), disability and mental health have largely been treated as secondary or additive concerns rather than as structuring dimensions of ecological thought itself. Existing studies tend to frame disabled people and those experiencing mental distress primarily through vulnerability or risk-based lenses, without interrogating how foundational environmental concepts—such as resilience, adaptation, and sustainability—are premised on ableist assumptions about autonomy, productivity, and emotional regulation (Kafer, 2013;

Campbell, 2009). Similarly, although climate-related distress has gained recognition within environmental psychology and psychiatry, it is frequently individualized and medicalized, detaching suffering from its political and ecological conditions (Albrecht, 2011; Burstow, 2015). As a result, there remains a lack of integrative frameworks that conceptualize ableism not as a peripheral exclusion but as a core ontological logic shaping Western ecological paradigms. This article addresses this gap by advancing a critical ecology of ableism and distress that synthesizes disability studies, mad studies, political ecology, and decolonial scholarship to reframe ecological futures around relationality, care, and interdependence rather than normalization and control.

This article intervenes at the intersection of critical ecology, disability studies, and decolonial thought. It argues that Western ecological paradigms are fundamentally constrained by ableist ontologies that prioritize control, independence, and normalization. By centering disability and mental distress as ecological relations rather than deviations, this article advances a critical ecological framework grounded in interdependence, care, and vulnerability. It further contends that Indigenous and non-Western ecological philosophies offer essential resources for reimagining ecological futures beyond Western norms of mastery and extraction.

This article makes three central contributions. First, it conceptualizes ableism as a foundational yet underexamined dimension of Western ecological thought, demonstrating how it structures environmental policy, climate adaptation strategies, and narratives of resilience. Second, it reframes mental health and emotional distress as ecological experiences produced through environmental disruption and structural injustice, challenging individualizing and psychiatric accounts. Third, it contributes to decolonial ecological debates by articulating a critical ecology grounded in relationality, collective care, and epistemic plurality, drawing on disability justice and Indigenous scholarship. The article proceeds by reviewing relevant interdisciplinary literature, outlining a critical ecological framework, analyzing illustrative case interventions, and reflecting on the implications of this approach for environmental theory and praxis.

Theoretical framework

Disability studies have fundamentally challenged medicalized and deficit-based understandings of disability by reframing it as a product of social, political, and material arrangements rather than solely an issue of individual impairment. The social model of disability differentiates impairment, as a bodily or cognitive difference, from disability, which results from inaccessible environments and discriminatory social structures (Oliver, 1990). Although

foundational, this model has been critiqued for its limited engagement with embodied experience, affect, and mental distress. In response, relational and ecological approaches have emerged, conceptualizing disability as produced through dynamic interactions among bodies, environments, technologies, and socio-material systems (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Within this framework, ableism is understood not merely as individual prejudice but as a systemic logic that organizes value around autonomy, productivity, and normalization, thereby shaping political and ecological imaginaries of progress and sustainability (Kafer, 2013).

Despite increasing acknowledgment of these dynamics, disability continues to be marginalized within mainstream environmental theory. When it is discussed, it is most often perceived through the lens of vulnerability, especially concerning disaster and climate risk. Research documenting elevated mortality and injury rates among disabled individuals during environmental crises has been instrumental in revealing systemic neglect (Tierney, 2014). Nevertheless, such studies frequently regard disability as a demographic risk factor rather than questioning how environmental systems and adaptation strategies themselves are influenced by ableist assumptions. Consequently, disabled individuals are primarily viewed as objects of protection rather than as active agents or producers of knowledge within ecological systems.

Critical mental health scholarship and mad studies similarly challenge dominant psychiatric frameworks that individualize distress and abstract it from social, political, and environmental conditions. Instead of perceiving mental illness as an internal pathology, mad studies highlight that experiences of distress frequently serve as meaningful responses to structural violence, precarity, and environmental instability (Burstow, 2015). In light of the escalating ecological crisis, an increasing body of research documents climate-related anxiety, depression, trauma, and heightened suicide risk following extreme weather events and environmental degradation (Clayton et al., 2017). Concepts such as solastalgia further encapsulate the distress generated when familiar environments, which nurture identity and belonging, are irreversibly transformed (Albrecht, 2011).

While this body of literature has played a significant role in legitimizing climate-related distress, critics contend that medicalizing such experiences risks depoliticizing them. When anxiety or grief is primarily characterized as a mental health disorder, the responsibility shifts from the structural drivers of ecological destruction to individual coping mechanisms. Scholars in mad studies argue that these framings perpetuate ableist expectations of emotional regulation and resilience, framing distress as a failure rather than an ethical or epistemic response to environmental loss (Burstow, 2015; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

This critique underscores the necessity for ecological frameworks capable of addressing mental distress without resorting to pathologization.

Political ecology and environmental justice scholarship offer essential tools for comprehending how ecological degradation is generated through extractive economies, colonial histories, and uneven development (Robbins, 2012). Nonetheless, disability and mental health are frequently under-theorized within these frameworks, often integrated through additive inclusion rather than rooted in conceptual transformation. Indigenous ecological thought provides valuable corrective insights by emphasizing relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility, perceiving land as a living relation rather than merely a resource (Whyte, 2018). Simultaneously, scholars advise caution against the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge that is disconnected from struggles for sovereignty and decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Collectively, these bodies of scholarship highlight the necessity for a critical ecology of ableism and distress that prioritizes interdependence, care, and relational ethics as fundamental to ecological futures (Kafer, 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method grounded in critical methodology, drawing on conceptual analysis, interdisciplinary critical synthesis, and discursive reading of dominant environmental paradigms. Rather than producing new empirical data, the analysis interrogates how ableism and mental distress are constituted, normalized, and rendered marginal within Western environmental discourse. This methodological orientation aligns with established approaches in political ecology, environmental humanities, disability studies, and critical theory, where conceptual intervention, theoretical synthesis, and normative critique are recognized as rigorous and necessary scholarly practices (Escobar, 1999; Haraway, 1988; Whatmore, 2002).

Drawing on genealogical and discursive traditions, the analysis treats environmental governance, policy frameworks, and scientific narratives as systems of power that shape how ecological problems are framed, how responsibility is distributed, and which forms of life are valued or rendered expendable. Concepts like resilience and adaptation are therefore analyzed as ethical–political frameworks that encode assumptions about autonomy, productivity, emotional regulation, and bodily capacity, emerging from specific historical contexts shaped by colonialism, liberal governance, and capitalist political economy.

Methodologically, this article integrates insights from disability studies, mad studies, political ecology, and environmental justice to conceptualize ableism not as an additional axis of vulnerability but as a structuring logic of environmental discourse itself. Disability and mental distress are approached

relationally, as phenomena produced through interactions between bodies, infrastructures, social norms, and ecological conditions, rather than as individual deficits. Climate-related distress is thus understood as an intelligible response to environmental loss and political inertia, challenging medicalized and individualizing frameworks that reinforce ableist expectations of emotional resilience. The analysis accordingly consists of close conceptual examinations of disaster governance, environmental mental health discourse, and relational ecological practices, alongside critical engagement with Indigenous and non-Western ecological scholarship as epistemological interventions. Together, this approach foregrounds ableism and mental distress as central analytical lenses for rethinking how ecological futures are imagined, governed, and ethically constrained.

RESULTS

The following analytical interventions examine how ableism and mental distress are structured within dominant Western environmental paradigms. Rather than functioning as empirical case studies, these sections offer discursive and conceptual analyses of widely institutionalized environmental logics—disaster governance, climate-related mental health discourse, and land-based healing frameworks—to demonstrate how ableist assumptions are embedded in ecological imaginaries and practices (Chandler, 2014; Povinelli, 2011; Robbins, 2012).

Together, these interventions illustrate how disability and mental distress are not external to environmental change but are actively produced through environmental governance, epistemology, and ethics. Environmental crises do not merely impact disabled and distressed bodies; they are mediated through systems that presuppose particular forms of bodily capacity, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and temporal orientation. At the same time, these interventions show how alternative ecological ontologies—particularly those grounded in relationality, care, and interdependence—challenge ableist assumptions and reconfigure what ecological responsibility entails (Kafer, 2013; Whatmore, 2002).

Disaster governance and the ableist logic of universal adaptation

Contemporary disaster preparedness and climate adaptation frameworks are frequently grounded in assumptions of universal adaptability. Policy documents, emergency management protocols, and climate resilience strategies implicitly presume subjects who are mobile, cognitively agile, sensory-normative, digitally connected, and capable of rapid decision-making under conditions of crisis (Chandler, 2014; Tierney, 2014). Preparedness is framed as an individual

responsibility, while risk is managed through anticipatory planning, self-evacuation, and the ability to quickly interpret and act upon standardized information.

Evacuation protocols often prioritize private vehicle ownership, real-time digital alerts, and standardized communication formats that presume visual, auditory, and cognitive accessibility. Recovery models emphasize self-reliance, flexibility, and rapid reintegration into economic productivity, framing recovery as a return to normative functioning rather than as a collective, long-term process (Klinenberg, 2015; Wisner et al., 2004). Within these frameworks, those who cannot evacuate independently, process information quickly, or recover “efficiently” are positioned as logistical problems rather than as subjects of ecological concern.

Within this paradigm, the disproportionate harm experienced by disabled people during environmental disasters is routinely framed through the language of vulnerability. Disability is treated as a risk factor—one variable among many—rather than as an indicator of systemic design failure. A critical ecology of ableism reframes this outcome as structurally produced exclusion rather than inherent susceptibility, aligning with disability scholarship that locates risk in social organization, infrastructure, and governance rather than in bodily difference (Oliver, 1990; Campbell, 2009).

The problem, from this perspective, is not that disabled people fail to adapt, but that adaptation itself is defined through ableist norms of autonomy, speed, and independence. These norms elevate self-sufficiency as an ecological virtue while rendering dependence and care as failures of preparedness. As disability scholars have long argued, independence functions not merely as a practical expectation but as a moral and political ideal that organizes social value (Kafer, 2013; Titchkosky, 2011).

By reading disaster governance discursively, ableism becomes visible not as an oversight or unintended consequence but as a constitutive feature of environmental management systems. These systems imagine ecological futures populated by adaptable, resilient subjects while implicitly accepting the attrition, abandonment, or premature death of those whose lives require sustained care, collective coordination, or non-standard temporalities. Such futures normalize loss as an unfortunate but acceptable outcome of ecological crisis, revealing how ableism shapes whose lives are considered ecologically viable (Povinelli, 2011).

Climate anxiety and the psychiatric framing of ecological awareness

The growing recognition of climate anxiety, ecological grief, and solastalgia within environmental psychology and public discourse marks an important

shift in acknowledging the affective dimensions of environmental change (Albrecht, 2011; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Climate change is increasingly understood not only as a biophysical process but as a source of profound emotional distress, particularly among young people and communities experiencing ongoing environmental loss.

However, this recognition is frequently articulated through psychiatric and therapeutic frameworks that conceptualize distress as an individual psychological condition requiring management, regulation, or treatment (Rose, 2018). Climate anxiety is often framed as a mental health problem to be addressed through resilience-building, coping strategies, or clinical intervention. While such supports may be necessary and beneficial for some, this framing risks narrowing the meaning of distress and detaching it from its political and ecological causes.

A critical ecology of ableism reads this discourse as an extension of Western psychiatric paradigms that individualize suffering and abstract it from structural causation (Burstow, 2015). Within these frameworks, distress becomes a problem to be solved rather than a form of ecological knowledge. Emotional responses to environmental collapse are evaluated against normative expectations of emotional regulation, psychological stability, and functional productivity, reinforcing ableist assumptions about mental competence and adaptability (Campbell, 2009).

From this perspective, climate anxiety and ecological grief are not failures of mental health but ethically and politically intelligible responses to ongoing ecological destruction, anticipatory loss, and political inertia. Mad studies scholarship emphasizes that distress often signals heightened awareness of injustice rather than pathology, particularly under conditions of structural harm and existential threat (Albrecht, 2011). To expect emotional equilibrium in the face of planetary degradation is to demand psychic adaptation to violence.

By reframing distress as an ecological relation rather than a psychiatric symptom, this analysis challenges the expectation that individuals must remain mentally well within structurally unsustainable systems. It exposes how dominant environmental discourse demands emotional regulation and personal resilience while leaving intact the political and economic drivers of ecological harm. In this way, the psychiatric framing of climate distress reproduces ableist logics that treat suffering as an individual malfunction rather than as a rational response to collective failure (Chandler, 2014; Povinelli, 2011).

Relational ecologies and the limits of Western environmental repair

Indigenous land-based healing practices offer a critical counterpoint to Western separations between environment, body, and mind. These frameworks

understand health as emerging from reciprocal relationships with land, community, ancestors, and more-than-human worlds, refusing distinctions between ecological repair and collective well-being (Simpson, 2017; Whyte, 2018). Environmental degradation is understood not only as physical damage to land but as a rupture in relational obligations that sustain life.

Within a critical ecology of ableism and distress, these practices are not treated as supplemental or symbolic alternatives to Western environmental management but as ontological challenges to dominant paradigms. Indigenous relational ecologies disrupt ableist assumptions that health is an individual achievement, that autonomy is the highest ecological value, and that care is merely a compensatory response to deficit (Kafer, 2013; Whatmore, 2002). Instead, they foreground interdependence, responsibility, and collective survival as foundational ecological principles.

Crucially, engaging these frameworks requires resisting their abstraction from struggles for land sovereignty, cultural continuity, and political self-determination. Decolonial scholars caution that extracting Indigenous ecological knowledge without attending to colonial violence reproduces epistemic harm and reinforces settler colonial logics of appropriation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). A critical ecology must therefore approach Indigenous thought not as a toolkit for sustainability but as a challenge to the conditions under which sustainability is imagined.

A critical ecology learns from Indigenous relationality by recognizing that ecological repair cannot be separated from justice, accountability, and care. Rather than offering a model to be adopted, Indigenous ecological thought exposes the limitations of Western environmental imaginaries that seek sustainability without confronting histories of dispossession, ableism, and colonial domination. These frameworks insist that ecological futures cannot be built on exclusion, attrition, or the management of vulnerability, but must be grounded in reciprocal responsibility and collective survival (Whyte, 2018; Simpson, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Ableism as an ecological logic

This study demonstrates that ableism functions not merely as a social bias within environmental governance but as a structuring ecological logic that influences how vulnerability, adaptation, and resilience are conceptualized and operationalized. By employing a genealogical and discursive methodology grounded in disability studies, mad studies, and political ecology, the analysis advances beyond additive models of inclusion that treat disability solely as a demographic variable.

Ableism, within this scholarship, is increasingly understood not merely as prejudice but as a systemic logic that organizes value around autonomy, productivity, and normalization. Kafer (2013) argues that dominant political imaginaries are structured around “able-bodied futures,” rendering disability incompatible with progress and sustainability. This insight has significant implications for environmental thought, where futures are often imagined through narratives of resilience, adaptation, and efficiency that implicitly exclude disabled bodies and minds.

Despite these insights, disability remains marginal within mainstream environmental theory. When disability does appear, it is most often framed through vulnerability discourse, particularly in relation to disasters and climate risk. Research documenting higher mortality and injury rates among disabled people during environmental crises (Tierney, 2014) has been crucial in exposing systemic neglect. However, such work frequently treats disability as a demographic risk factor rather than interrogating how environmental systems themselves are designed through ableist assumptions. As a result, disabled people are positioned as objects of protection rather than as agents or knowledge producers within ecological systems.

Ableism operates within environmental discourse as an organizing logic that determines whose lives are considered adaptable, resilient, or expendable. Climate policy and adaptation strategies frequently assume subjects who can relocate, retrain, self-manage risk, and absorb loss without long-term support. Disabled people and those experiencing mental distress expose the fragility of these assumptions, revealing how ecological systems are designed around normative capacities rather than relational care.

Drawing on Kafer (2013) critique of able-bodied futures, this framework understands ableism as future-oriented. Environmental imaginaries that prioritize efficiency and resilience often imagine futures in which disabled and mad lives are either cured, managed, or absent. A critical ecology of ableism rejects this logic by insisting that disability and dependence are not obstacles to ecological futures but conditions through which ecological ethics must be rethought.

Mental distress as ecological relation

The analysis of disaster governance frameworks illustrates how adaptation is framed as a universal capacity rather than a socially mediated condition. Emergency preparedness protocols assume subjects who can self-evacuate, access digital infrastructures, interpret standardized warnings, and rapidly return to economic productivity. These assumptions reproduce what disability scholars have identified as the moralization of independence and efficiency (Oliver, 1990; Campbell, 2009), positioning those who require sustained care or

collective coordination as failures of preparedness rather than as indicators of infrastructural design flaws. Recent disaster studies further support this critique, showing that resilience-oriented governance often externalizes responsibility onto individuals while obscuring institutional accountability (Tierney, 2014). From this perspective, disproportionate harm is not an unintended outcome but a predictable effect of ableist ecological imaginaries.

Likewise, the discourse surrounding climate-related psychological distress reveals how psychiatric perspectives on climate anxiety risk depoliticizing ecological consciousness. Although recent psychological research has acknowledged climate anxiety as a prevalent phenomenon (Hickman et al., 2021), the tendency to interpret distress predominantly through therapeutic or resilience-oriented interventions serves to reinforce ableist expectations of emotional regulation and psychological stability. As scholars in mad studies have argued, distress within contexts of structural violence should be understood as a relational and epistemic response, rather than a dysfunction requiring remediation (Burstow, 2015; Rose, 2018). This study advances that perspective by illustrating how environmental discourse increasingly demands psychic adaptation to ecological collapse, thereby normalizing ongoing harm while individualizing the responsibility for coping.

Within Western paradigms, mental distress is typically framed as an individual pathology requiring therapeutic management. This framework reframes distress as an ecological relation produced through environmental instability, loss of place, and structural violence. Climate anxiety, grief, and despair are not merely psychological reactions but responses to real and ongoing ecological harm. Mad studies scholarship challenges the assumption that emotional regulation and resilience are universal goods. Instead, it recognizes distress as a meaningful response to conditions of precarity and loss (Burstow, 2015). Within a critical ecology, mental distress becomes a form of ecological knowledge that signals ruptures in human–environment relations rather than individual dysfunction.

Significantly, those findings indicate that ableism manifests not solely through exclusion but also through future-making practices that tacitly accept attrition. Environmental imaginaries structured around efficiency, adaptability, and resilience implicitly delineate which lives are regarded as sustainable amid crises. This correlates with Povinelli's (2011) concept of geontopower, in which certain forms of life are rendered expendable in the management of ecological futures. Recent critical climate scholarship similarly contends that resilience discourse frequently functions as a governance technology that legitimizes unequal survival (Eriksen et al., 2021). By highlighting disability and mental distress, this study elucidates the ethical limitations of environmental frameworks that prioritize systemic continuity over the thriving of diverse living forms.

Relational ontologies and decolonial ethics

Indigenous and non-Western ecological philosophies provide crucial resources for this framework by foregrounding relational ontologies. In these traditions, land is not an external object but a relation that sustains and is sustained by human and non-human life (Whyte, 2018). Such perspectives disrupt Western separations between mind, body, and environment, and challenge ableist assumptions about independence and self-sufficiency. An ethics of care emerges as central to this critical ecology. Care is understood not as a compensatory response to weakness but as a foundational ecological practice. Disability justice movements have long emphasized collective care, interdependence, and survival within ongoing crisis (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). These practices offer critical insights for ecological futures shaped by uncertainty rather than stability.

The engagement with Indigenous and relational ecological thought further challenges Western ecological ontologies grounded in control, mastery, and normalization. Rather than offering Indigenous frameworks as alternative tools for sustainability, the analysis positions them as epistemic interventions that unsettle ableist assumptions about autonomy, health, and productivity. Indigenous relational ontologies emphasize interdependence, care, and responsibility as foundational ecological principles (Whyte, 2018; Simpson, 2017), resonating strongly with disability justice scholarship that understands dependence not as failure but as an ordinary condition of collective life (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Recent decolonial environmental scholarship underscores that such frameworks cannot be separated from struggles over land, sovereignty, and historical accountability (Whyte et al., 2020), reinforcing this article's caution against extractive engagement.

In summary, this research advances critical environmental theory by developing a critical ecology of ableism and distress that repositions disability and mental health as integral, rather than marginal, to ecological futures. The results indicate that reconceptualizing ecological responsibility necessitates not only inclusive policies but also a transformation of the fundamental values guiding environmental governance. By recognizing care, interdependence, and vulnerability as ecological assets instead of liabilities, this framework challenges prevailing narratives of resilience and adaptation, thereby creating space for more equitable and sustainable ecological visions. Future investigations could build upon this conceptual framework through empirical studies that explore how disabled and distressed communities actively engage in creating alternative ecological practices, thereby further challenging ableist assumptions within environmental governance structures.

CONCLUSION

Environmental change is not solely a scientific or technical problem but a deeply political, ethical, and relational one. Dominant Western ecological paradigms continue to frame climate change and environmental degradation through logics of control, efficiency, and resilience, reproducing assumptions about autonomy, productivity, and normalization. As this study has argued, these paradigms are structured by ableism, rendering disabled people and those experiencing mental distress as peripheral, vulnerable, or burdensome rather than as central to ecological thought and practice.

By integrating disability studies, mad studies, political ecology, and Indigenous ecological scholarship, this study has advanced a critical ecology that foregrounds ableism as a foundational but underexamined dimension of environmental theory. Rather than treating disability and mental distress as secondary concerns or special cases, this framework understands them as key sites through which the limitations of Western ecological ontologies become visible. Normative assumptions about resilience and adaptation rely on bodies and minds capable of enduring instability without dependence on care, obscuring the relational infrastructures that sustain ecological life.

Reframing mental distress as an ecological relation further challenges individualizing and psychiatric accounts of climate-related suffering. Experiences such as climate anxiety, grief, and despair are not merely psychological symptoms to be managed but responses to real and ongoing ecological loss. Attending to distress as ecological knowledge destabilizes ableist expectations of emotional regulation and invites more honest engagements with environmental harm.

The analytical interventions explored in this article demonstrate how a critical ecology of ableism and distress reveals the exclusions embedded within environmental governance, mental health discourse, and adaptation planning. From disaster response systems built on myths of universal mobility, to the pathologization of climate awareness, to Indigenous land-based practices grounded in collective survival, these interventions illuminate alternative ecological imaginaries centered on care, interdependence, and relational responsibility.

Importantly, this article does not propose inclusion within existing environmental frameworks as a sufficient response. Instead, it calls for a deeper transformation of ecological thought itself. Decolonial and disability justice perspectives challenge the assumption that ecological futures must be oriented toward normalization, growth, or mastery. They invite a reimagining of sustainability not as endurance without care, but as the cultivation of relationships capable of sustaining diverse forms of life amid ongoing uncertainty.

For environmental scholarship and praxis, this critical ecology has several implications. Research must move beyond additive models of inclusion and attend to how ableism shapes foundational ecological concepts. Environmental policy and planning must center interdependence, accessibility, and care as ecological necessities rather than accommodations. Environmental movements, in turn, must recognize disability and mental health not as peripheral justice issues but as integral to decolonial and intersectional ecological futures.

As ecological crises intensify, the question is not whether vulnerability and dependence can be eliminated, but how they are distributed and responded to. By centering disability, mental distress, and non-Western ecological knowledge, critical ecology opens space for futures that do not demand resilience at the cost of care. Such futures are not only more inclusive but more ethically and ecologically viable.

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