

## Climate Education: The Key to Solving Climate Anxiety

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Travelling to Whitehorse, Yukon was a life-changing experience. The scenery was mesmerizing: with mountains towering over the landscape covered in snow that had never been set foot on, the Northern Lights shining brightly overhead, and a peaceful ambiance reflecting the rare balance between humans and nature.

I wondered why places like this were so rare, and how eye-opening it would be for all youth to have such experiences in their lifetime. If more people were able to experience natural beauty and wonders firsthand, they may become more inclined to take action against climate change.



*Taken in Kluane National Park in Yukon (Picture: Adam Smith).*

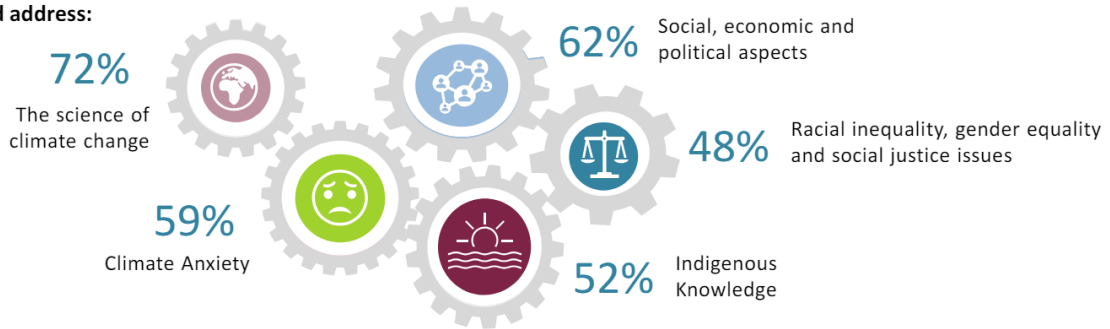
<https://metro.co.uk/2018/10/30/canada-in-winter-visit-yukon-to-enjoy-one-of-the-worlds-last-wildnernesses-8006569/>

Currently, there are many reasons why individuals refrain from actively reducing their carbon footprint and GHG emissions. However, an executive summary conducted by the Government of Canada (n.d.) has identified “*a lack of knowledge and non-supportive attitude*” as the primary obstacle.

As a result, the global climate crisis has grown increasingly urgent. According to a 2022 Executive Summary by LSF-LST, “*only 6 of 13 provinces and territories [in Canada] have included climate and sustainability in their curricular documents or education policy*” (Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2022). Furthermore, while a majority of Canadians feel that we are experiencing a climate emergency (73%) that is largely caused by human activity

(72%), only 55% understand that GHG emissions are the primary cause of climate change. Climate education is currently on the rise; however, 64% of Canadians agree that there should be more education for young people regarding climate change. Unfortunately, only 34% of Canadian educators feel that they have sufficient knowledge and skills needed to teach climate change (Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2022). This indicates the need for climate education and qualified educators to deliver these courses to the youth of tomorrow.

Canadians feel that climate change education should address:



Taken from Learning for a Sustainable Future. Canadians' Perspectives on Climate Change Education: 2022, Executive Summary.

<https://lsf-lst.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Climate-Change-Education-Executive-Summary.pdf>

Most importantly, half of all Canadians (50%) believe that climate change is causing mental health issues or contributing to the worsening of existing mental health issues (Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2022). Eco-anxiety, also known as climate anxiety, is defined by the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica as “a chronic fear of environmental doom” (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2023).



MAE LANDER/RD.COM, GETTY IMAGES (2). <https://www.rd.com/article/climate-anxiety/>

Climate anxiety can lead to a variety of mental health issues including panic attacks, insomnia, obsessive thinking, and even depression. Notably, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg struggled with depression over climate change for years as a young child, forcing her to take action. Lise Van Susteren, a general and forensic psychiatrist who specializes in the mental health effects of climate change mentions the intergenerational injustice associated with climate anxiety. Younger generations feel betrayed and abandoned by older generations, who seem to have left the problems they caused in the hands of young people to deal with (Schmidt, 2023). This indicates the importance of bridging the intergenerational gap and conflict in order to effectively resolve our global climate crisis as a collective.

Climate anxiety is largely the result of a lack of education on climate change, translating to both misconceptions about the issue and a lack of solutions being developed. As a result, not only are Canadians in desperate need of climate education as a means of gaining the knowledge to solve our global climate challenges, but also as a way to cope with climate anxiety, which has become an increasingly urgent mental health concern over the years.

I understand how it can feel hard for youth to make a difference in the world, necessitating more innovative approaches to inspire activism. Personally, I became passionate about climate action after discovering an emerging genre known as climate fiction (cli-fi), which often depicts dystopian societies ravaged by climate change. By reading and writing cli-fi short stories, I have been able to paint vivid pictures in the minds of readers, thus raising awareness on the true severity of climate change, and its potential impacts on society if we don't take action immediately.

Inspired to share my love of climate fiction with others, I created an annual environmental and climate fiction writing contest, with a judging panel consisting of notable figures including Pulitzer prize-winning American novelist Jane Smiley. In a conversation with her, she mentions: *"We are raised on stories, and stories always teach us something. What we need to learn, now more than ever, is how to understand our planet and fit ourselves into it so that we humans do not cause more damage than we already have. Our hope lies with young people and the best thing we can do is to help them use their own intelligence and imagination to understand the problems we are facing and how to fix them."*

Recently, I was able to expand this initiative into my own youth activism organization, which uses cli-fi to provide youth around the world with climate education taught from the perspective of young people. We are now federally-registered, have members and participants from 6 different countries, and hold many writing and other educational events for youth on the international scale.

Though my own initiative operates on a relatively small scale, organizations such as YOUNGO, the official children and youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and international climate movements inspired by the actions of Greta Thunberg, such as Fridays For Future (FFF), are leading the charge to

inspire change among youth. Matshona Dhliwayo once said: “*One bee cannot build a hive; one ant cannot build a colony.*” But with a collective effort, great things can happen.

**So how can a young climate activist make a difference?** Joining local environmental advocacy groups, whether it be an environmental advocacy journal, youth cabinets, or even a constituency youth council for a politician, provides the opportunity to increase access to climate education, and incentivize climate awareness and action. To create environmental change, just listen to Greta Thunberg: “*You are never too small to make a difference.*”



## References

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## Image Sources

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