

## Photography as an “art of noticing” climate loss in more-than-human relationships of care

To better understand the impacts of climate crisis on the more-than-human in her research, Lena M Schlegel engages in a practice of photography as a powerful tool to witness and share relationships of loss and care.

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Sometimes, the strictly analytical fails to capture the full range of knowledge and experience underlying an issue. This applies in particular to the endeavour of knowing non-human experiences.

In my doctoral research, I seek to better understand how the unfolding climate catastrophe is affecting not only humans, but more-than-human relationships, with a focus on the 2019–20 bushfires in East Gippsland, Victoria. In addition to more traditional methods of social inquiry, I engage in photography as an “art of noticing,” a reflexive ethnography of the sensory kind, where one pays attention to the sensibilities of diverse more-than-human entangled ways of life and makes sense of social structures in light of these diverse experiences.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the compounding disasters of climate change and extinction, we<sup>2</sup> need to come to terms with and repair our relationships to the more-than-human world. We need to work towards ways of living in multispecies care and cohabitation. The practice of photography as an “art of noticing” enables me to uncover more-than-human experiences of the unfolding climate catastrophe and works as a tool for witnessing and sharing those stories of multispecies loss and care.

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### Rainforest refuge at the Errinundra plateau

East Gippsland harbours some of Australia’s most spectacular old growth and Victoria’s last rainforests. Many species, including possums, gliders, parrots and owls rely on large trees for their hollows, which take hundreds of years to form. Here, magnificent Errinundra shining gums and cut-tails tower over rainforest species, like southern sassafras, black olive berries and tree ferns. With links to the Gondwanan forests, the ancient landscape of the Errinundra plateau provides a refuge for wildlife, including threatened species, in a rapidly changing world.



### **Logging coupe: the double trouble of logging and bushfires**

Devastating bushfires in 2014 and again in 2019–20, as well as ongoing logging operations, have put increasing pressure on these sensitive environments and the animals inhabiting them. The common practice of clearfell logging promotes a high level of disturbance and the regrowth of less sensitive and usually more fire-prone species. This increases fire frequency and intensity and ultimately leads to landscape change and extinction. Despite these impacts, native forest logging in Victoria is set to continue using public funding until 2030: “Not only is biodiversity not worth anything,” a local ecologist states bitterly. “We even get to pay for it to be destroyed.”



### **More-than-human loss and recovery**

Disasters are a source of trauma for the whole community, which includes the more-than-human world. Locals mourn the absence of birdsong, that beloved tree, the possums at night. They recall the dread of looking up into the burnt canopy, the drive into town through skeleton trees. Their solastalgia reflects not only human attachment to place, but the multispecies relations that make up those connections. Bushfire recovery is not only about replacing assets, but also about repairing more-than-human relationships. This can be observed, for instance, in the coastal community of Mallacoota, known for its abundant birdlife, which is slowly recovering from the devastating fires, where I encountered this beautiful, healthy kookaburra on a scorched branch.

### **The slow violence of climatic changes on Australian animals and ecosystems**

In addition to the stark and immediate horror of disasters, there is also the slow violence of climatic changes and disruption of seasonal patterns. The disorientation and stress that comes with that, however, is not just a human experience. “The animals don’t know where they are with their cycles,” a staff member of a wildlife organisation explains. “And when you’ve got animals like flying foxes and birds relying on flowering trees and the trees don’t know when to flower, we also have starvation problems.” One of the most important pollinators for ecosystems in Eastern Australia, the grey-headed flying fox, is struggling to cope with extreme heat. “On hot days, they start clumping together in trees,” she explains. “So, every time it comes up to summer, not only do we have the threat of bushfire, we also have the threat on some of our most important species.”



### Multispecies care in wildlife rehabilitation

The impact of climate change is particularly felt in the wildlife rescue and caring community. People who have rescued and cared for wildlife after bushfires speak of the horrors involved in witnessing their suffering: kangaroos and wallabies with scorched feet, possums and koalas that can no longer climb for their claws have melted, the many animals who are incinerated and the ones that survive but later die due to injury or starvation. Compared to the three billion vertebrates who are estimated to have been killed in the 2019–20 fires, the number of animals rescued from firegrounds is shockingly low. To sustain caring for and rehabilitating wildlife amid such loss and trauma is only possible by focusing on the individual animal, giving them the best possible care and preparing them for another chance at life in the bush – the ultimate success and a beautiful example of multispecies care and cohabitation.



1. Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 37.
2. While these challenges to some extent evoke a collective response, it is important to note that humans are diversely affected by the impacts and carry different degrees of responsibilities for our shared predicament.