



Toolkit:
**Art and community engagement
as restorative practices in contexts
of environmental trauma and grief**

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An insightful contribution that bridges artistic practice and community engagement, offering practical guidance for those seeking to create meaningful social impact through art.

This toolkit addresses a crucial aspect of fire research, as it emerges from fire-affected communities, and its relevance is undeniable in the face of the growing climatic and societal challenges ahead.

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Grieving loss linked to environmental trauma — whether a forest, a home, or a sense of safety — requires space and tools to process overwhelming emotions.

This toolkit offers simple and affordable methods of community engagement and employs art and co-creation to shape a safe space to process these emotions. It aims to give dignity, find ways to build resilience, and begin to heal distress and grief caused by environmental trauma. It builds upon the key approach of Pro(to)topia to imagine caring societies, where participation and equity are at the core.

Art doesn't rebuild homes or restore forests, but it helps rebuild connections to the land, to each other, and to hope.



This toolkit draws on the community engagement program (Bellavia and Botequim 2024) that we conducted in 2024 in the municipality of Santa Comba Dão in Portugal, which was affected by extreme wildfires in 2017 (San-Miguel-Ayanz et al 2020).

The program was part of an art, science and policy project titled Lament developed by artist Margherita Pevere which addresses death from an ecological perspective (Pevere 2024), developed in the context of the NaturArchy Resonances Project at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (Benincasa and Eeckels 2025).

The community engagement was co-directed by environmentalist Céline Charveriat and Margherita Pevere and supported by the School of Agriculture (ISA) – University of Lisbon, CoLAB ForestWISE and FIRE RES – Innovative Technologies & socio-ecological-economic solutions for fire resilient territories in Europe, in collaboration with its forestry

researchers Conceição Colaço and Brigitte Botequim. The main objective of the community engagement program was to contribute to the field of mental health and climate change through action-based research. It articulated through:

- 1) Providing a safe space for the expression of individual and collective grief linked with wildfires or other environmental trauma;
- 2) Developing methods to contribute positively to the alleviation of trauma through expression, togetherness and creation.

While this toolkit was developed in the context of wildfire research, its findings and features can be adapted to other scenarios of environmental trauma.



Wildfires are among nature's most complex phenomena. While they belong to the natural cycle and support nature's regeneration, they can have ramified noxious effects in the context of eco-disruption and climate change: wildfire regimes have been disrupted and extreme events have become more frequent (San-Miguel-Ayanz et al 2022).

Multiple studies have found that climate change has already led to an increase in wildfire season length, wildfire frequency, and burned area. Similarly, climate change threatens to increase the frequency, extent, and severity of fires through increased temperatures and drought (Eisenman DP 2022). Burnt areas lose part of nature's normal capacity to absorb CO2 and wildfires are major contributors to climate change, with substantial contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. Burnt areas in southern Europe during the 21st century could increase by 50% to 100% for a 2°C global temperature increase scenario (Zeng et al 2021; Guerra n a; US EPA n a).

Wildfires devastate not just landscapes and economies but also lives: they consume homes, communities, and memories, and can cause trauma whose symptoms include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Hong et al, 2022).

But the emotional toll of wildfires doesn't stop at their perimeter. Smoke-filled skies, air pollution, and a sense of helplessness ripple far beyond the fire line, unsettling the general public and contributing to widespread ecoanxiety, eco-grief, and solastalgia. While the focus of many studies remains on higher-income regions, the reality is global: in 2022, 67% of wildfire-affected areas were in Africa, compounding the vulnerability of already at-risk communities (Radford, 2022).

Ecoanxiety: a challenging emotional response characterized by a chronic fear or distress caused by climate change and environmental degradation.

Eco-grief (also environmental g.): grief linked ecological losses, like the loss of ecosystems, species, or meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change (Cunsolo et al 2018).

Solastalgia: distress due by environmental change on people while they are connected to their home environment (Albrecht 2007) .

Art and co-creation as a gateway and safe space

Art can make room to address topics otherwise difficult in other contexts, and co-creation has the ability to process and voice complex emotions by non-verbal means. Integrating art-mediated activities into disaster response strategies can thus provide individuals and communities with tools to navigate eco-grief, foster community resilience and rebuild connections, thus offering meaningful pathways to recovery.

Art-based approaches can complement traditional **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Systems (MHPSS)** by addressing the unique psychological impacts of environmental trauma:

1) **Therapeutic practices**

Incorporate art therapy programs into MHPSS to provide individuals with creative outlets for expressing eco-grief and trauma. Techniques such as community mural painting or sculpture-making can foster a sense of agency and collective healing.

2) **Community engagement**

Engage local artists and cultural practitioners to co-develop projects that resonate with affected communities. Incorporating traditional and Indigenous art forms can enhance cultural relevance and inclusivity.

3) **Awareness and education**

Use art as a tool for raising awareness of eco-grief and its mental health implications. Public exhibitions or participatory art projects can destigmatize mental health struggles, encouraging communities to seek support.

4) **Policy integration**

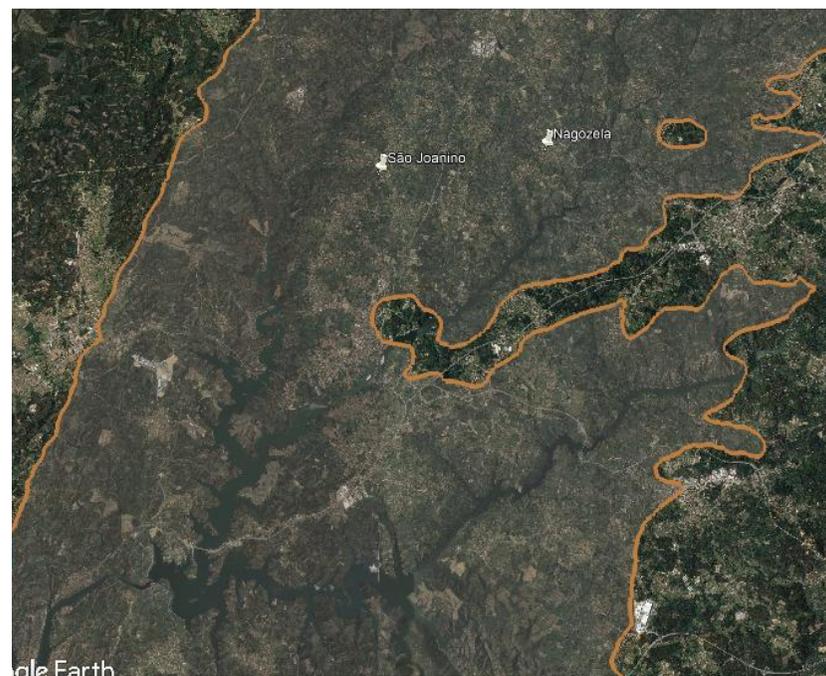
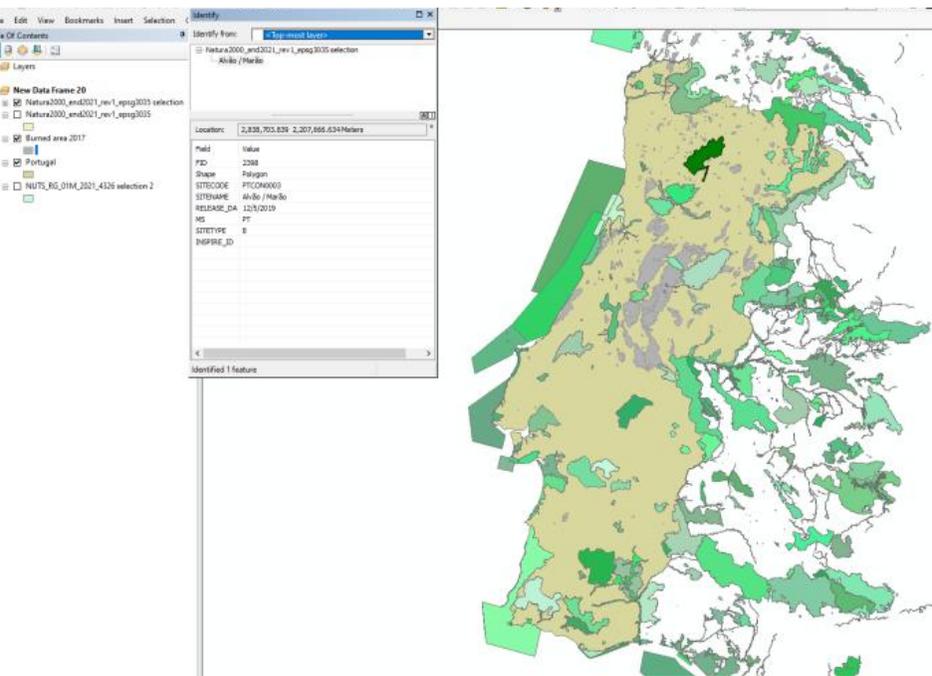
Advocate for the inclusion of art-based methodologies in disaster response frameworks. Mental health professionals and artists can collaborate to design scalable programs that address both immediate trauma and long-term eco-grief.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support is an umbrella term used by humanitarian organizations to describe a range of services aimed at addressing mental health and emotional well-being during and after crises, such as natural disasters, conflicts, or pandemics.

Our toolkit is based on co-creating an art piece that is made of **simple materials sourced locally, requires low maintenance, and can be exhibited in a publicly accessible site.**

The co-created art piece ideally is relatable with the territory and its realisation should not require specific technical, conceptual or artistic skills. In our case we combined two methods. The first one is Pevere's previous **participatory works** that feature large black canvas and white pencils (Pevere 2017). The second is the **technique of sensory mapping** which allows to map an area not based necessarily on geographical or metrical coordinates but on feelings, memories and perceptions (Sensory Trust n.d).

We invited community members to bring small objects linked to the events to both allow multisensorial creativity and also sharing stories linked to particular objects.



The idea was to realize an “emotional map” featuring objects, sentences, and drawings by the participants, with these steps:

1 Preparation of the canvas

A black cotton canvas of 4 x 2.6 m black canvas was prepared in advance with the local tailor. The dimension was chosen to ensure space for contribution by many.

2 Equipment of the room

With the help of the local firefighters and researchers we equipped the room with tables with materials and tools for hanging the canvas.

3 Designing the outline of the territory

Collaborating scientists provided a satellite image of the fire-scar, which is the blackened trace left by the wildfire as it burns through a territory.

During the first session, we sketched the outline of the fire-scar by projecting the image onto the canvas with a projector, and adding relevant elements such as the position of municipality, smaller communities, and the river. Such elements helped participants to add their contributions by referring to coordinates that are realistic but open.

4 Mapping territories, healing and memories

Participants could mark their house and/or whereabouts on the day of the wildfires. This gesture allowed participants to relate to the experience and the co-created artwork simultaneously. Allowing everyone to draw, write sentences, place objects collected from the fire, photos, leaves or moss or wood on the canvas is a non-threatening and inclusive way to include everyone in the artwork. Contributions can include: bringing an object linked to the events, some leaves or branches, a photograph; helping sawing the objects and fixing them to the canvas, drawing or writing on the canvas.

Preparatory work

Preliminary work will allow to tailor the program to the needs of the community and the specificity of the events, while preparing a substrate for effective collaboration. Preparations can happen remotely and involve meetings with the local partners and stakeholders.

1) Finding local partners

Local partners and researchers already involved in local to regional projects are key to create meaningful connections, shape partnerships with local actors (local firefighters, psycho social workers, environmental engineers, and municipalities), and build the trust of stakeholders. Their knowledge is crucial to tailor activities on the local needs and involve citizens. They also can use the lessons of projects to inform future policy.

2) Choosing the community

The locality would need to be chosen according to the following criteria:

- affected by the event more than 1 year ago and less than 10 years ago;
- interest from local authorities as part of their effort to prevent further fires and/or deal with its implications;
- likelihood of a recurrence due to vulnerability.

3) Contextual research

Working with local experts and stakeholders will allow to gain contextual understanding of the nature of the event and its impact on the community. This also includes getting satellite data, such as, in the case of a wildfire, the "fire scar-map".

4) Involving local actors

Local actors can be personnel of the municipality working with the community or the environment (in our case: the local psychologist and an environmental engineer); educators such as teachers or youth group mentors; women leaders; shop-owners: they will help reach out and engage diverse participants. Local actors will also help identify a suitable space for the activity, which in our case was a large vehicle hall in the firefighters' headquarters. Firefighters offered precious practical support and their headquarters was accessible and central, and equipped with lights for the evening, toilets and tables. It also allowed us to honour their important role.

5) Identifying target groups

All activities (site walks, co-creation, presentations) must be designed to involve diverse participants in terms of age, gender, educational status, profession, considering the specificities of each community.

Co-creation of an artwork with the community

Once on-site, with the support of local partners and stakeholders, the works can unfold through public and communal moments, tasks to carry out together, and engagement with both the territory and people.

1 Town hall meeting

A town hall meeting at the beginning offers the opportunity to meet the community and authorities before the work starts to clarify objectives, allow for a collective review of the methods adopted, and create conditions of trust with the community and its stakeholders.



2 Procurement of supplies

Ideally, supplies are sourced locally to actively involve business owners and workers, for instance purchasing the fabric for the canvas at a local shop and having it sewn by a local tailor; procuring yarn of different colours at the haberdashery; pencils and scissors at the local stationery shop.

3 Testimony gathering

It is important to create opportunities to capture written words during walks or by visiting people's homes to accompany objects and drawings. This process also allows for the participation of people who might not be able or willing to go to the place where the canvas is located.



4 Site walks

Walks are occasions to connect with participants while visiting sites that are linked to the events or locally relevant, thus allowing remembrance and moments of lightness. Possibly, balance visiting sites of dramatic events, reconstruction, and local identity, such as : historical or landmark sites; sites of the events or where traces are still visible; woods that grew back or are still damaged; an area where trees have been re-planted or buildings have been reconstructed; the place of someone who played an important role during the events. Visiting natural areas gives space to the connection to nature.



5 Scheduled sessions with groups

Specific sessions (for instance firefighters, students, Scouts or other groups, families) can provide a dedicated space for stakeholders whose experience might be distinctive.



6 Open hours for other citizens

Open sessions in different times of the day will allow the participation of people with diverse schedules (i.e. students, workers, housewives, ...). The open sessions are attended by members of the working group and local partners to offer context and support the citizen's participation.



7 Community gathering to unveil outcomes

A final meeting to unveil the outcomes can include an official moment such as a speech by the mayor or another representative; the introduction of the working group and participants; and the presentation of the co-created artwork. Activities such as adding the last touches or writing the names of all contributors can be a nice way to engage everyone again. Local food and drinks will ensure a festive mood.

Follow up: awareness raising and informing public policy

Our experience suggests that follow up activities and presentations allow the community engagement to gain momentum and crystallise as a meaningful experience for participants. Here's some ideas.

Creating opportunities for sharing with community and the local media

We recommend placing the work in a public space which the community frequently uses, ideally a town hall or a museum with free entrance. In the art work, we created a pouch for participants to share their dreams for a better future: making the unveiling of these wishes may become another possibility to raise awareness of the public. This can go hand in hand with a presentation by fire fighters and civil security of best practices to prevent fire hazard and respond to an emergency situation. Other options might include movies related with fire.

Creating opportunities for sharing with policy makers

While the activity is not focused on creating a policy debate, the issue might surface during the activities. By discussing with various stakeholders during the preliminary phase, we identified the following policy recommendations, which you could test and adapt depending on their relevance in the local context and subsequently present to public authorities:

1 Place people at the centre of resilience policies:

decisions about the design and funding of resilience to wildfires often focus on technical, economic and infrastructure. Often, the social, emotional and cultural dimensions of resilience can be overlooked, while the evidence shows they are central.

2 Address the collective dimension of grief and ensure that support is available in the medium to long term for communities within post-disaster MHPSS processes. This addresses the collective dimension of trauma, which can be felt for years, while disasters might be recurring several times in the same location over the lifetime of individuals, causing compounding effects.

3 Explore further art-based activities as an efficient and effective tool.



Key findings and lessons

The importance of adapting to community needs

Values of co-existence with nature, which acknowledges both humans and non humans, are to be adapted to the needs of the community. Participants were very keen to tell their story, whose in their view had not been heard or sufficiently listened to. It can happen that participants do not mention nature as a subject, but rather as a decor. To respect their needs, the focus can be shifted on the human side of the wildfires (casualties, destruction, trauma, resilience).

The importance of celebrating resilience

Participants emphasized the solidarity and resilience of their community, moving the narrative away from victimhood and trauma to surviving and thriving.

A long term scar

Contrary to the belief that the trauma, after seven years, had subsided, we found that grief and trauma were lingering, especially amongst the town's adolescents, which means that support should continue beyond the immediate aftermath and allow to prepare for the eventuality of future events, alongside the natural cycle of fires in a given ecosystem. The trauma of both children and older people might have been overlooked, as both these groups felt both extremely vulnerable and unable to act and contribute in the way they would have liked.

Collective vs individual trauma management

There is a big difference to addressing trauma individually and collectively. For instance with firefighters, it was very important that some of their leaders mentioned the mental health toll of the wildfires amongst the volunteers as this provides collective validation and recognition of these challenges beyond individual cases, which might cause a feeling of singularity, inferiority and loneliness.

Budget and time

This project is defined to be affordable as we sourced materials locally, through donations of burnt objects, free materials gathered in nature, as well as second hand goods. However, time needed for the core team should not be underestimated as it takes time to come to a joint design but also to nurture trust with the community, which is essential.

Art as a gateway

The creative activity allowed for quantity, diversity and quality of participants. We felt that participants were freer to touch on difficult issues that they would have been through a normal town hall setting. A key element is to leave open what art is, so everyone feel they could contribute.



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Imagineering caring futures

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