Poetic Inquiry Atlas

Vol. 2: A Survey of Ecopoetics

Edited by

Adam Vincent

Capilano University, Canada

Lee Beavington

Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada

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Chapter 6

Peat, Diesel, and Seaweed: Poetic Inquiry in the Coastal Communities of Northwest Highlands of Scotland*

Mandy Haggith
University of the Highlands and Islands

Abstract

This chapter draws from a project exploring how people in coastal communities in the northwest highlands of Scotland feel and think about climate action. It was a poetic inquiry and so this narrative of the project findings is mostly expressed in poetry. The project was driven by the need to achieve net zero carbon emissions in ways that are both practical and benefit local people by supporting livelihoods and wellbeing. In the spirit of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 16), it was intended to encourage people to express their concerns but also to dream about a better future. Poetic inquiry methods were used as I am a poet, in order to encourage participation from people who might not engage with traditional scientific or social science research (Fernández-Giménez 2019) and because it would ensure that the research would not disconnect participants' knowledge and thinking from embodiment and emotion (Leggo 2008, Vincent 2018, Faulkner 2020).

Keywords: Climate action, poetry, wellbeing, future, Highlands.

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Early in the project planning phase we ran a survey that revealed a range of powerful negative feelings around climate. Related research led us to expect this among young people especially (Hickman *et al* 21), but the level of

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negativity we found across all age groups in our community was concerning. In the following poem I summarise the answers to two of the questions: 'What is your greatest fear around climate change?' and 'What climate action gives you hope?' The form of the poem is deliberately reminiscent of the way the football (soccer) results used to be read out on the radio on a Saturday afternoon when people of my generation were young. There is a pun on 'pooling' because these results were used as the basis of a lottery system, called the Football Pools. The fears are on the left hand side and the hopes on the right hand side, with each grouped by themes and the numbers referring to how many people mentioned that theme in their response to the question. I encourage you to read it aloud, as if reporting sports scores.

Pooling the Results

Polar bear fears, three	–	Hope, none
Fear of extinction of species, four	–	Hope, none
Storms and floods and sea level rises, five	–	Planting trees, three
Burning to death or ice age, two	–	Simple life, one
Food insecurity, two	–	Gardening, four
Mass migration, one	–	Technological progress, three
Conflict and war, two	–	Positive news, two
Inertia of government, two	–	Greta Thunberg, five
Suffering of vulnerable people, two	–	Hope, none
Climate denial, one	–	Hope, none

From this point on, our project goal became hope and my research question narrowed in scope. Can poetry provide a way to avoid anxiety and think about how we can grow a better future together?

Fundamental to my research approach is working in the place I have lived for twenty-five years, in partnership with a network of community organisations, called Northwest 2045, which has a shared vision for net zero and sustainability in our area. The poetic inquiry was thus deeply embedded in place and focused on three topics selected with the local partner: peatland restoration, alternatives to marine diesel and seaweed cultivation. Although very significant in terms of their impact on climate change emissions these have been less widely discussed locally than some other issues like road or air travel, energy generation, housing and food.

Methodology

Together with my community partner, we drew together relevant expertise from land managers, harbour users, scientists, local businesses and other community members, generating a body of source texts including interview transcripts, survey responses and specialist documentation (including a technical report about green hydrogen, chemical analyses of diesel, a feasibility

study into a seaweed farm and a business plan for a local seaweed processing facility). I also used "rubber boots methods" including mountain and seashore group walks to engage young people and capture their words and expressions. The peat part of the project involved three interviews (Andersen et al. 2023), with the chairman of a community landowner who is actively involved in peatland restoration, a conservation organisation's land manager and a peatland restoration scientist, plus three creative sessions: a writing workshop with adults at a museum with a peat exhibition, an indoor/outdoor session with a group of teenagers, and a mountain walk with a group of adults. The marine diesel part involved three interviews, with the head of the harbour authority, a marine renewables engineer and a hydrogen industry consultant, plus creative work with an organic chemist. The seaweed part involved three creative sessions, one with adults as part of a seaweed farm consultation process, a day-long visioning and creativity session with young people and a poetry session on a beach with a group of school children. Altogether 72 people took part in one form or another, plus 35 people responded anonymously to an online survey.

The result of all this participation was a corpus of texts, plus some images. Workshops generally generated words written on slips of paper—these had images of sphagnum moss for peat events and for seaweed events they were shaped liked seaweed fronds, sea shells, fish or waves. Some workshops involved the creation of a group visual poem using these paper slips and other images or paper artifacts. All the words written on these papers were typed up. All the interviews were transcribed.

This raw data was analysed by using it as the basis for found poetry in a range of forms, having fun whilst delving deeply into difficult issues. With workshop paper slips, I often set myself the challenge of using all and only the words written by participants to create a poem, or at least something that is, to use Maria Lahman's useful term, "poemish" (Lahman *et al* 2019). Here is an example from one of the seaweed events, drawing together the words from the 17 young people who were asked, after a walk at the seashore, to write on a slip of paper in the shape of a kelp frond something they had just learned and thought was cool about seaweed.

What is Cool about Seaweed?

There's loads of different kinds of seaweed.
Their categories—egg wrack, sugar kelp…
There are 3 main types—red, green, brown,
different shapes, colourful green and brown shapes.
You can eat seaweed.

You can eat it.
It can be eaten.
They are edible.

It has many uses—
carbon capture, ecosystems, food, fertiliser.
It helps the biodiversity of our seas.
Lowers carbon.
It is versatile.

It grows on each other.
They all grow on each other.
They can reproduce.
They can have sex.
They pop!

I have used this method in a previous project about trees (Haggith). It is a powerful way of distilling out a collective expression from a group activity, and offers a simple and easily digestible way to provide feedback to participants, showing that they have been heard and allowing them to see their own contribution in the wider context of the group. It offers an inkling that group thinking is possible.

Project Findings

Peat

Peat is a big issue for climate change because when it is in good condition, it absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through the photosynthesis of mosses and other plants, which do not rot away when they die because of the wet, acidic condition of the ground. However, when peatland is damaged, particularly when it is drained and dries out, it emits that carbon back out to the atmosphere in the form of both carbon dioxide and even more powerful greenhouse gases such as methane. Northern Scotland has substantial peatland areas with some of the biggest blanket bogs on the planet, including the UNESCO World Heritage site known as the Flow Country, but much of this land is in poor condition, so it is emitting carbon. Fortunately, it can be restored to good health, by blocking drainage ditches to re-wet it and by repairing scars and eroding peat hags.

To elicit poems on this topic, I interviewed a peatland expert, Professor Roxane Andersen; a conservation manager for the mountain of Quinag, Romany Garnett; and a director of one of our community organisations, Lewis

MacAskill, who has been leading a project to restore damaged peat on our community land.

I worked with the transcripts of each interview using the method termed "Surrender and Catch" (Prendergast 2015), which involves "surrender", i.e., immersive reading of the words of the interviewee looking out for phrases that catch my interest, highlighting those I "catch", fishing for other, related phrases and words, and then kneading the words and phrases together into something poemish. The following example shows how this can act as an interview summary, while also drawing out connections with the cultural context, highlighting the metaphorical thinking that people do, naturally, all the time, without necessarily being conscious of it.

Gully Blocking
(with thanks to Lewis MacAskill)

It's a bit of a helter-skelter,
gullies continually scouring out
washing peat and soil away down the hill.
Some of them are fifteen or twenty feet deep,
rivers running down off the top of the mountain
in the worst winter weather.
See the forces of the elements when the water's racing.
The hags are huge
and the washing out is more prevalent
and erosion's increasing
because we're getting more and longer spells of rain.
The sheep and deer grazing didn't help,
left large areas degraded, washed out, in poor shape.

We've a problem with culture, with identity.
Kids who grow up here are different to other kids.
It's a unique place. We've got folk
from all four corners of the UK and beyond
but you go into the school playground
and there's no-one speaking with an Assynt accent.
It's a bit brutal. Song and spoken word
was really important, but we're struggling.

When I was a young graduate forester
we had all these guys ploughing up and down the hills.
We're living with a legacy of all these bloody plough furrows
that washed everything away.

I'm having to go back in and repair work
that I thought was a good thing all those years ago.

We're building dams and bunds
to slow the water running off the hill.
It's still flowing, but slowing
allows the peat to stabilize.
Things recover: more plants, more photosynthesis,
more flowers, more insects, more birds, more life.

There are opportunities here: good jobs, good money.
We need guys and girls on the ground:
ecologists, bird people and digger operators.
We're building dams and building knowledge.
We're blocking washed out peat gullies,
bringing in new streams of revenue.
Just stopping emitting carbon isn't enough.
This goes beyond locking it in.
It's about making the land and community healthy,
so moss grows over the scars.

The peatland expert very explicitly used a metaphor of breathing to describe the way peat soaks up water and expands in wet periods and shrinks in dry times, resulting in a rhythmic seasonal change between winter and summer that can be detected by satellite. Her vivid explanation of peatland as alive, led to the following experiment in personification. When read out, it can take listeners a moment to lose the sense that I am talking about a real, living person, and this chimes with traditional local stories of spirits and deities of the land.

Peat is Breathing
(*with thanks to Professor Roxane Andersen*)

We need to talk about Peat.
Not Lewis, Tony, Colin or Simon,
it's Peat—we absolutely must
do something. Now.

Peat's not dead you know.
Peat's very much alive,
breathing, very slowly,
but you can watch their body

swelling and shrinking, swelling and shrinking,
ups and downs like a heartbeat.
If they're healthy they can breathe deeply,
the amplitude of those movements is really big.

When Peat's less healthy, like now,
the breath is more shallow,
it's stiff,
it's lost that elastic capacity.

Peat's completely underappreciated.
A lot of it has been the language
that's been used to talk about them
for a very long time—poor, empty, dangerous, smelly…

but imagine if we can turn that on its head,
see the beauty, the uniqueness,
the really cool things in Peat,
maybe that will change.

Peat's amazing. Peat can help us
to go back into our past
and to understand our future.
Even the oceans depend a little bit on Peat.

I love Peat.
I want everyone to love Peat.
We need Peat
to keep breathing.

Another peatland personification emerged from the third interview transcript with someone who regularly guides young people on wild land walks.

Be Wary
(with thanks to Romany Garnett)

If there's been heavy rainfall
bogs are difficult places,
intricate pool systems,
surprisingly deep.

Each footstep sinks in.
And when the mist comes down
bogs take no prisoners.
You have to be really wary.

You can't just blasé your way through.
They'll get you!

The same expert had really wise things to say about climate change, and as our discussion lingered on the emotional dimension of the issue, this emerged strongly in the following poem.

Reductionism

(with thanks to Romany Garnett)

A really positive thing to do with the climate change question
is not to reduce it to some sort of chemical formula
or something you can put in a spreadsheet and account for.
Leave it in its beathing, living environment.
Understand that it is something bigger, more spiritual.
Allow nature to teach us: it will have a way of healing itself.
Hope is a wonderful thing: it makes things happen.

If we reduce ourselves to carbon emitting machines
sitting in front of screens
then we do exactly the same
as reducing the bog to something just chemical.
A bog is not a flat, dead, empty expanse of carbon.
If you have that narrow view you miss

the greenshank, the dragonflies and frogs,
the sheer beauty of a bog asphodel flower.
The closer you look the richer it is:
sundews, bladderworts, butterworts,
exquisite little flowers,
sphagnum moss,
purple sandpipers and golden plovers,
damselflies dipping for a drink.

Temperatures rising is really scary.
I swing from extreme anxiety—why aren't we doing more?—
to complete apathy—what the hell, we're going to die anyway.
I feel guilty too.
But I've got a great belief in the earth being able to look after itself
and there are pockets of people tackling things
on a local level, regaining identity.

You can't really care for the planet
if you're struggling with your own concerns.
We need songs and stories and laughter,
joining together, having a good time.
We're beautiful too.

This poem's key insight is that we cannot generate any kind of enthusiasm for climate action if we don't acknowledge people's emotional starting point and find ways to help them move from their state of 'struggling' to something more positive. Her words also chime with Lewis' view that this work is about simultaneously 'making the land and community healthy'.

Diesel

The coastal communities in the Northwest 2045 area include two harbours in Kinlochbervie and Lochinver. Lochinver's fish landings are the second largest in the country, with the vast bulk of these fish coming from French and Spanish ships that spend a week at a time out in the North Atlantic Ocean, then make landfall here to unload their catch into a fleet of refrigerated lorries that drive the fish by road to France and Spain. The ships fill up with diesel before heading back out to sea. There are also some small, inshore fishing boats and considerable fish farm activity, all fueled by diesel. Marine diesel is thus a substantial source of carbon emissions (much of it invisible, over the horizon) and conversation is needed about the alternatives for marine propulsion, which include electricity, green hydrogen and ammonia. A large off-shore wind farm is planned between our coast and the islands of Orkney, which offers a renewable energy opportunity.

I interviewed a marine engineer based in Orkney, Colin Risbridger, a senior manager in Highland Council Harbour Authority, Tony Usher and a hydrogen energy consultant from Mott MacDonald, Simon Nesbitt. The results were long, technical transcripts exploring marine propulsion and alternatives to diesel, from various perspectives. It was not immediately obvious how to make poems from these. Using Prendergast's 'surrender and catch' method I hit upon a phrase from Colin Risbridger, complaining that the energy industry always says 'produce, produce, produce'. This set me wondering which other words these experts were using repeatedly, and so I searched the respective transcripts for words or phrases used three times, which turned out to be a good way of zooming in on concepts that were significant in the debate. This poem is the result.

Joining the Dots

Colin says it's all 'produce, produce, produce',
when we really should be 'efficient, efficient, efficient'.
Tony says 'electric, electric, electric'
and Simon says 'before the meter, before the meter, before the meter'.
Everyone says 'wind farm, wind farm, wind farm'
and 'hydrogen, hydrogen, hydrogen'.
Simon and Tony say 'ammonia, ammonia, ammonia'.
Simon says 'refuelling stations, refuelling stations, refuelling stations'
while Tony says 'big tanks, big tanks, big tanks'.
Tony asks about 'infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure'
and when Simon says 'cost, cost, cost'
Colin says 'tax breaks and incentives, tax breaks and incentives, tax breaks and incentives'
and Tony says 'investment, investment, investment'.
Colin and Tony say 'ferries, ferries, ferries',
Simon and Tony say 'fishing vessels, fishing vessels, fishing vessels'.
Colin says 'tides, tides, tides'
and Tony says 'yacht, yacht, yacht'.
Colin and Tony say 'companies, companies, companies',
and Tony also says 'government, government, government',
while Simon adds 'communities, communities, communities'.
Colin says 'design, design, design'
Tony says 'jobs, jobs, jobs',
Simon says 'skills, skills, skills'
and I hear 'dot, dot, dot…'

Another poetry game I played in analysing the words from transcripts, was to create poems that were formally based on the chemical formulae for diesel molecules. (Thanks to Stephen Wren for this inspiration). Following the idea that carbon has a chemical valency of 4 and hydrogen of 1, I represent carbon atoms by four-syllable words, and hydrogen atoms by monosyllables, building the poem in the strict form following the molecular diagram for the chemical structure. This gives me a novel way to select words from transcripts and try to make sense of them together.

Diesel Poems

A diesel poem, based on $C_{11}H_{23}$ represented as pairs of one-syllable words with a 4-syllable word between them and one solitary H before the C at the end.

hooked on
hydrocarbons
pushed by
capitalists
sold by
oil-industry
jagged through
leaky-pipelines

so much
greenhouse gases
too hot
high-emission
high-risk
particulates

must halt
supertankers
give up
fossil fuels
don't use
petroleum

next fix?
biofuels
stop!
dependency

This one based on $C_{11}H_{zz}O_2$ interpreted as 11 4-syllable words, 2 2-syllable words and 22 1-syllable words, in a strict molecular pattern

Can
we decarbonise our
lives? Regulations could
make agriculture much
more sustainable, our
food deliciously free
from guilt-inducing peat,
and especially meat.
Less transportation and
more vegetables. It's
a problematic world.
Industrial

palm-oil soya
don't definitely solve
it.

This next poem is another transcript analysis poem, from an interview with one of the harbour masters.

Stink

To step away from diesel is not going to be easy.
Blue and green hydrogen might be an alternative,
but it would need a big, heavy tank.
Big ships are physically more able
whereas small boats, creel boats and yachts,
need to look at electric.

Put a little wind generator on your vessel
and a solar panel, super-reliable—
you know exactly how much light you're going to get.
All the ballast in the keel could be batteries.
Rip out the engine, get a tesla motor bolted in, connect it to the shaft
and it'll go like stink.

Talking of which, another fuel is ammonia.
It's not a very nice gas, not something you'd want to breathe in.
The old Lochinver ice-plant's refrigerant used to be ammonia.
I couldn't breathe in there, would never go in.

But electric's a good solution.
They're looking at it for ferries.
There'll be designs, there'll be construction jobs, lots of call for electricians.
Somehow we've got to cut emissions—climate change is happening.
The future's coming.
It's going to smell strong.

Seaweed (and Time Machines)

This phase of the project explored the role of seaweed in sequestering carbon and the potential for seaweed farming to be an element of the Green Transition in our area. A trio of community development trusts up our coast is planning a multi-site seaweed enterprise, exploring the technical feasibility of seaweed production in our sea lochs and processing on-shore. Consultations around the plans provided a context for me to engage with local people and use creative methods to bring in the opinions of youngsters in particular. I designed

interventions into consultation sessions and workshop methods, with the aim of finding out not only how people responded to seaweed but also whether their feelings change in the course of taking part in creative activity involving imagining the future.

One of the workshop methods that I have developed and used several times involves thinking of the sea as a time machine. This was initially inspired by my own experience as a sailor and historical novelist; when at sea I find it is easy to imagine the past because the tides, wind, wildlife, mountainous landscape and the sea itself are just as they would have been in times gone by. I am also intrigued by Tidalectics, an epistemological approach that sees knowledge as fluid and creative knowledge generation and sharing processes as tidal (Hessler 18). My workshop method treats the present moment as mid-tide, and asks participants to allow the tide of time to ebb, going back to an earlier time to find something good, either a pleasant memory or a time in the past when they believe things were better than now. I lead them through a 5-senses embodied imagining of that time. Then I ask them to think of the tide rising all the way past the present, mid-tide point, to the high-tide as far in the future as they were in the past, taking the good thing that they found back then out into the future. We repeat the 5-senses embodied imagining of the future time and then return to the present to share the results. I give people blue paper slips in the form of waves to write words on for both past and present and these are used to create a collective poem at the end. Both before and after the exercise I ask people to write down how they feel about the future, which allows me to assess any change in the collective mood.

In one seaweed workshop, together with two other researchers, we facilitated a more structured visioning process for imagining the future and steps towards it. One participant has described these past-and-future envisioning processes as 'imaginative pilates'. I think of them as guided mind-walks in the opposite direction to the apocalyptic, dystopian futures that our disaster and crisis-laden climate change language tends to direct people towards.

Here's a poem to show feelings about the future of a group of young teenagers from Kinlochbervie High School, before and after the workshop.

The Future

In the morning…
I feel baad
Bad
Disappointed by slow progress
Scared
I feel scared and hopeless

Worried
Worried
Apprehensive
Climate change
Climate change
Plastic pollution
It is in chaos
Tipping point
Warm
Deisel (finished)

By the afternoon…
How do I feel about the future? A little terrified to begin with.
Warm ☹
Too warm and bad for the planet.
I feel that the government should be doing more.
More bike trails.
Hopeful from activities like this but also quite scared.
Hopeful
Optimistic
Hopeful & excited!
Good
Great
Good
Great
Goooood
OK
Interested
Curious
The future is bright
At least seaweed will survive!

Reflection

The purpose of all the poems in this chapter so far has been analysis – processing, making sense and finding patterns in the words that participants have shared with me. I know no better tool for qualitative data analysis than this – it enables care to be taken over the nuances of the words that people use, it highlights metaphor that reveal the connections between thoughts and feelings, plays with sound patterning to display and emphasise key ideas and enables collective and group perspectives to be seen.

The final way that I have used poetry in this project has been as a reflective process. The following reflective poem muses on the finding that imaginative time-travel using the sea's tidal rhythm seems to help people to generate hope about climate change and other environmental problems we are facing.

Hope

out of the calm, deep-sea darkness
where history is hidden
where filth sinks and melds into maerl
where surface motion stills
violence quells
hot air cools
sins and sorrows heal
where seals swim
among holdfasts and mudworms and crabs
watch—something is brewing
the sea breathes and chuckles
swells and surges
storm and filigree

each waft of a kelp frond
each swish of eel grass
each shimmy of a wrack
lifts us into the future
look what's rising on the tide
waves of change entangle us in flow
bounce and froth
splash life and freshness into our faces
sunshine sparkles and ripples glitter
wonder at the wild, wild hope
that bubbles up
once we see we are all
people of the sea

Conclusion

Feeding back the results to community members and other interested people has involved reading out poems at community events, such as meetings of local organisations, and also via a padlet linked to a blogpost on the North West 2045 website, circulated on community social media groups. Because poems are short and not the kind of thing that is often read out in the context of, for example, an annual general meeting of a community group, there is a novelty

factor that means that the research findings are able to penetrate better than they could in a conventional report form, opening up the discussions to members of the community who might not otherwise be heard or involved. The sound patterning and rhythms of poems generally make the experience of listening enjoyable, so I find people smiling, engaging and listening with enthusiasm. "Pooling the Results" with its distillation of the results of the survey, exemplifies how poetry can be a pithy collective expression of thoughts and feelings, internally inconsistent, yet revealing of a pattern. Poetry's emphasis on feeling, its refusal to leave emotion at the door, is enabling us to approach the local conversation about climate action in a form that feels fresh, respectful, open and, ultimately, a bit more hopeful.

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Author's Bio

Mandy Haggith is a writer based in Assynt, in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland who teaches Creative Writing and does research at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She has been writer in residence in the Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh and Inverewe Garden and is currently writer in residence and an honorary research fellow at the Scottish Association for Marine Science. Her books include six poetry collections and a tree poetry anthology, five novels, a book about paper and her latest, *The Lost Elms*. www.mandyhaggith.net