



Exploring the Meaning of Environmental Risk in Everyday Life among Rural Communities Experiencing Environmental Degradation: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Environmental sociology has long examined how environmental change and risk are socially produced and distributed within society, emphasizing the interaction between social structures and ecological conditions. More recent scholarship has increasingly focused on how environmental risk is experienced at the local level, particularly among rural communities whose livelihoods depend directly on natural resources. However, limited attention has been given to how environmental risk is subjectively experienced, interpreted, and given meaning in everyday life, raising the question of how rural community members make sense of environmental degradation as a lived phenomenon. Here, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural residents living in a rural community affected by environmental degradation, where everyday livelihoods remain closely connected to local ecological conditions. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with rural community members directly affected by environmental degradation, including participants whose daily activities and livelihood practices were shaped by changes in their surrounding environment, and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. To enhance research trustworthiness, the study employed prolonged engagement with participants, careful interview documentation, iterative coding, and reflexive interpretation throughout the analytical process. The findings show that environmental risk is normalized through daily exposure yet remains emotionally charged, shaping fear, anxiety, resignation, and moral negotiation between economic survival and ecological awareness. The analysis further reveals that environmental risk is experienced collectively through social relations and shared meaning-making, rather than solely as an individual perception. These findings advance understanding in environmental sociology by demonstrating that environmental risk is fundamentally a lived and meaningful experience, highlighting the importance of phenomenological approaches for future research on human–nature relationships.



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INTRODUCTION

Environmental change and degradation have become defining features of contemporary social life, reshaping the ways societies interact with nature and understand environmental risk (Amul, 2025). Within the field of environmental sociology, the relationship between society and the natural environment is widely recognized as socially constructed, historically situated, and deeply embedded in everyday practices. Environmental problems such as land degradation, water pollution, and declining ecological resources are no longer perceived solely as biophysical processes but as social phenomena that influence livelihoods, identities, and social relations.

Current scholarly discussions emphasize that environmental risks are unevenly distributed and disproportionately experienced by communities whose livelihoods depend directly on natural resources. Rural communities, in particular, occupy a vulnerable position as they often face environmental degradation alongside limited economic alternatives and institutional support (Lemana et al., 2025). In these contexts, environmental change is not an abstract global concern but a lived condition that

permeates daily routines, work practices, and social interactions. As previous studies suggest, environmental risk is closely intertwined with cultural meanings, moral judgments, and social expectations, shaping how individuals perceive their relationship with nature.

Despite growing recognition of the social dimensions of environmental risk, much of the existing understanding remains grounded in structural analyses, policy frameworks, or objective indicators of environmental harm. While these perspectives provide important insights, they tend to underrepresent how environmental degradation is experienced and interpreted by those who live with its consequences on a daily basis (Abeysekera & Fernando, 2020). Environmental change is not only encountered through measurable impacts but also through emotions, memories, uncertainties, and moral reflections that emerge from lived experience (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). These subjective dimensions play a crucial role in shaping how individuals respond to environmental threats and negotiate their relationship with nature within specific social and cultural contexts.

This situation highlights the need for an approach that foregrounds meaning, experience, and interpretation (LeMasters et al., 2025). A phenomenological perspective offers a valuable lens for exploring how environmental risk is lived, felt, and understood from the standpoint of those directly affected. By attending to participants' narratives and sense-making processes, phenomenology allows for a deeper engagement with the experiential dimensions of environmental issues that often remain overlooked. Such an approach is particularly relevant for understanding the human–nature relationship as it unfolds in everyday life, where environmental degradation is encountered not merely as a scientific or policy problem, but as a meaningful and consequential part of social existence.

In recent years, the study of lived experience has become an increasingly important area within environmental sociology, particularly in relation to how individuals and communities encounter environmental risk in their everyday lives. Scholars have begun to acknowledge that environmental degradation is not only a structural or ecological condition, but also a phenomenon that is subjectively experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by social actors (Gaies et al., 2025). This shift reflects a growing awareness that understanding environmental issues requires attention to how people perceive change, attribute meaning to nature, and situate environmental risk within their personal and collective histories.

Despite this growing interest, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences. Much of the existing research relies on quantitative surveys, risk perception scales, or policy-oriented analyses that prioritize measurable indicators and generalized patterns (Bacha & Ajina, 2020). While these approaches contribute valuable insights into trends and correlations, they often struggle to access the nuanced emotional, moral, and existential dimensions through which environmental risk is lived. As a result, the voices of those most directly affected particularly rural communities whose livelihoods are closely tied to ecological conditions are frequently reduced to variables rather than explored as sources of meaning in their own right.

These methodological limitations have constrained the ability of prior studies to grasp the essence of environmental risk as a lived phenomenon (Cheah et al., 2025). Approaches that emphasize abstraction, aggregation, or external evaluation tend to overlook the interpretative processes through which individuals make sense of environmental change and reconcile competing demands of survival, responsibility, and identity (Maksymova et al., 2024). Consequently, existing methods have often proven insufficient for illuminating how environmental risk is experienced from within, as part of everyday social life (Makman & Finn, 2025). This gap underscores the need for research designs capable of engaging deeply with subjective experience and interpretative meaning, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the human–nature relationship as it is lived and understood by those at the center of environmental transformation.

Existing responses to environmental risk within rural and environmentally vulnerable communities have largely relied on practical and instrumental approaches, including policy interventions, risk management frameworks, and behavioral adaptation strategies. These solutions are commonly designed to mitigate environmental damage, regulate resource use, or enhance community resilience through technical or institutional measures (Talwar et al., 2023). While such approaches provide important guidance for environmental governance and planning, they tend to conceptualize

environmental risk as an external condition that can be managed or controlled through standardized solutions.

However, these dominant approaches exhibit significant limitations when it comes to understanding how environmental risk is actually lived and experienced by those most directly affected. By prioritizing measurable outcomes and generalized models, existing frameworks often fail to capture the subjective dimensions through which individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to environmental degradation (Haris et al., 2023). As a result, critical aspects such as fear, moral ambiguity, attachment to place, and the meaning of nature in everyday life remain underexplored. This gap leads to a partial and, at times, superficial understanding of environmental risk that overlooks the experiential realities shaping human–nature relationships.

Given these limitations, there remains a lack of holistic insight into the essence of environmental risk as a lived phenomenon embedded in daily social practices (Ji et al., 2025). Addressing this gap requires an alternative approach capable of engaging with meaning, interpretation, and lived experience. A phenomenological perspective offers such an alternative by foregrounding participants' narratives and sense-making processes, allowing environmental risk to be understood not merely as a technical problem, but as a meaningful and consequential aspect of social life (Setiawan et al., 2024). By adopting a phenomenological approach, the present study seeks to move beyond existing practical solutions and contribute a deeper, experience-based understanding of environmental risk that remains insufficiently explored in current literature.

Previous studies in environmental sociology have examined environmental risk through frameworks of social construction, modernization, and governance, highlighting how risks are produced, distributed, and managed within society. Research has also addressed subjective dimensions of environmental change, particularly in relation to risk perception and community vulnerability. However, these studies often approach experience as a secondary outcome rather than as the primary object of inquiry (Chatpibal et al., 2024). As a result, lived experiences are frequently framed through predefined categories rather than explored as meaningful narratives. This literature provides an important foundation but leaves limited space for understanding how environmental risk is experienced in everyday life.

To address this limitation, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore how rural community members experience, interpret, and give meaning to environmental risk. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is employed to examine sense-making processes and the ways individuals relate environmental degradation to their daily practices, emotions, and moral considerations (Wang et al., 2025). This approach directly responds to the knowledge gap by foregrounding lived experience rather than relying on abstract or technical representations of risk. Through this method, environmental risk is examined as a meaningful and embodied aspect of social life. The study therefore contributes a deeper and more holistic understanding of the human–nature relationship.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a coherent exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction outlines the theoretical and contextual background of environmental risk and lived experience. The method section describes the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures (Palarczyk, 2023). The results section presents key experiential themes derived from participants' narratives, followed by a discussion that situates the findings within existing literature. The article concludes by summarizing the main insights and outlining implications for future research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore how rural community members experience, interpret, and give meaning to environmental risks arising from environmental degradation in their daily livelihood practices (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015).

Phenomenology was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings individuals attach to phenomena as they are lived and perceived. Rather than focusing on objective measurements or external indicators, this approach prioritizes participants' perspectives and lived realities, which are central to understanding the human–nature relationship within environmental sociology.

More specifically, the study was guided by an interpretative phenomenological perspective rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology. This approach emphasizes sense-making processes, acknowledging that experiences are always interpreted through social, cultural, and historical contexts. By adopting this design, the study was able to capture not only how environmental risks are experienced, but also how participants actively interpret and negotiate their meanings in everyday life.

Participants

Participants consisted of rural community members who were directly affected by environmental degradation and routinely exposed to environmental risks in their livelihood activities. Selection was conducted using a purposive sampling approach to ensure that participants possessed firsthand experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) adults aged 18 years or older; (2) long-term residence in the affected rural area; and (3) direct involvement in livelihood activities dependent on local environmental conditions. Individuals without direct exposure to environmental changes or those who had recently migrated to the area were excluded to maintain experiential relevance.

A total of 12 participants took part in the study, representing diverse ages, genders, and livelihood backgrounds (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). This sample size was considered adequate for phenomenological inquiry, as it allowed for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of individual experiences while also enabling the identification of shared meanings across cases.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences with environmental risk (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). An interview guide was used to facilitate discussion while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they perceived as significant. Questions focused on daily interactions with the environment, perceptions of environmental change, emotional responses, and the ways environmental risks influenced social relations and decision-making.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations familiar and comfortable to participants, such as their homes or community spaces, to encourage openness and trust. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a conversational manner to allow participants to express their experiences freely. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of their narratives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), emphasizing both detailed engagement with individual accounts and interpretative understanding of shared meanings (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript to achieve immersion in the data. Initial noting was then conducted, focusing on descriptive content, language use, and conceptual reflections relevant to participants' experiences.

Emergent themes were identified within each case through systematic coding of meaning units. These themes were subsequently examined across cases to identify patterns, connections, and divergences, resulting in a set of superordinate themes that captured the essential structure of the phenomenon (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Throughout the analytic process, attention was given to maintaining the link between participants' original expressions and the interpretative insights derived from them. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to assist with data organization and theme management, without replacing the interpretative role of the analysis.

RESULTS

Living with Environmental Threat as an Everyday Reality

Participants described environmental degradation not as an abstract or distant issue, but as a constant presence embedded in their daily lives. Environmental risk was experienced as something “ordinary,” yet deeply unsettling, shaping routines, work patterns, and perceptions of safety. Rather than sudden disasters, participants emphasized slow and cumulative environmental changes that gradually altered their relationship with the land and natural resources.

One participant explained:

“We do not wake up thinking about disaster, but every day we see the water getting dirtier and the soil less productive. It feels normal now, but at the same time, it is frightening.” (Participant 3)

This sense of normalization did not imply indifference. Instead, it reflected a process of adaptation in which environmental threats became part of the lived landscape. Participants often spoke of learning to “live with risk,” even when they were aware of its harmful consequences.

Meaning-Making of Nature Between Dependence and Loss

Nature was described as both a source of life and a space of growing uncertainty. Participants articulated a deep emotional and symbolic connection to the environment, rooted in livelihood dependency, cultural memory, and intergenerational continuity. Environmental degradation was therefore experienced not only as material loss but also as a disruption of meaning.

As one participant stated:

“This land fed our parents and grandparents. When it changes, it feels like losing part of who we are.” (Participant 7)

Participants interpreted environmental change as a sign of broken relationships between humans and nature. Several narratives revealed feelings of grief and nostalgia for a past environment perceived as more balanced and generous. These accounts highlight that environmental risk is experienced not only physically, but also existentially, affecting participants’ sense of identity and belonging.

Emotional Responses to Environmental Risk: Fear, Anxiety, and Resignation

Emotional responses emerged as a central dimension of participants’ experiences. Fear and anxiety were frequently expressed, particularly regarding health risks, declining income, and uncertainty about the future. However, these emotions were often accompanied by resignation, reflecting limited perceived options for change.

One participant shared:

“We know this is dangerous, but this is where our lives depend. Leaving is not really a choice for us.” (Participant 11)

This resignation did not necessarily indicate passivity. Rather, it reflected a constrained agency shaped by economic necessity, social ties, and lack of institutional support. Emotional narratives revealed the psychological burden of living with environmental risk, where awareness of danger coexists with a sense of powerlessness.

Moral Negotiation Between Economic Survival and Ecological Awareness

Participants consistently described moral dilemmas arising from the tension between economic survival and ecological responsibility. While many expressed concern about environmental damage, they also acknowledged their dependence on practices that contribute to degradation.

As one participant reflected:

“If we stop working this way, we cannot feed our families. But if we continue, the land will suffer. We are trapped in between.” (Participant 5)

These narratives reveal that environmental risk is experienced as a moral struggle rather than a simple lack of awareness. Participants demonstrated reflexivity about their actions, recognizing environmental harm while simultaneously justifying their choices as necessary for survival. This moral negotiation underscores the complexity of human–nature relationships in contexts of structural constraint.

Social Relations and Collective Meanings of Environmental Risk

Environmental risk was also experienced as a shared social condition. Participants emphasized how environmental degradation affected community relations, fostering both solidarity and tension. Informal discussions, shared concerns, and collective coping strategies emerged as important ways of managing uncertainty.

One participant noted:

“We talk about this among ourselves. Everyone feels it, even if we do not always agree on what to do.” (Participant 9)

While some participants described collective efforts to adapt or resist environmental decline, others highlighted conflicts arising from differing interests and priorities within the community. These accounts illustrate that environmental risk is not experienced individually alone, but is socially constructed and negotiated through everyday interactions.

Environmental Risk



Overall, the findings reveal that environmental risk is experienced by rural communities as a deeply embedded, emotionally charged, and morally complex phenomenon. Participants interpret environmental degradation through lived experiences that intertwine economic dependence, emotional responses, ethical considerations, and social relations. Rather than perceiving environmental risk solely as an external or technical issue, participants construct its meaning through everyday life, revealing the inseparability of environmental conditions and social existence.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that environmental risk is experienced by rural community members as a deeply embedded and meaningful aspect of everyday life rather than as an abstract or purely technical condition. These experiences reveal that environmental degradation is interpreted through emotional responses, moral negotiation, and social relationships, directly addressing

the central question of how individuals experience, interpret, and give meaning to environmental risk in their daily lives.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

This study contributes to the research question by illuminating how environmental risk is constituted through lived experience and sense-making processes within specific social and ecological contexts. Rather than perceiving environmental degradation solely as an external threat, participants constructed its meaning through daily encounters with environmental change, economic dependency, and social interaction (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). The findings show that environmental risk becomes normalized through repeated exposure, yet remains emotionally and morally charged, shaping how individuals navigate uncertainty and responsibility in their everyday practices.

By foregrounding participants' narratives, this study reveals that experiences of fear, anxiety, and resignation are not isolated emotional reactions but integral components of how environmental risk is understood and managed (Kim et al., 2025). The moral tension between economic survival and ecological awareness emerged as a central dimension of meaning, demonstrating that participants actively reflect on their role in environmental degradation while simultaneously recognizing structural constraints. In this way, the findings provide a nuanced answer to the research question by showing that meaning is produced at the intersection of personal experience, social relations, and material dependence on the environment.

Furthermore, the study highlights that environmental risk is not experienced solely at the individual level, but is collectively shaped through shared conversations, social expectations, and community dynamics (Shi et al., 2025). This collective dimension contributes to a broader understanding of how environmental risk informs social relations and decision-making, offering insight into the relational nature of human–nature interactions. Through this lens, the findings extend existing discussions by demonstrating that environmental risk is lived as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed or singular experience.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings align with existing literature in environmental sociology that conceptualizes environmental risk as socially constructed and embedded in everyday life (Irwin, 2014; Giddens, 2013). Similar to prior studies, this research confirms that risk is not merely a technical assessment but is shaped by social context, cultural meaning, and lived experience. However, this study extends previous work by providing a more detailed phenomenological account of how these constructions are experienced emotionally and morally by individuals whose livelihoods depend on degraded environments.

In relation to studies on subjective environmental risk, the findings resonate with Brown's (2015) argument that perceptions of risk are grounded in personal experience rather than objective indicators alone (Crifo & Rebérioux, 2024). The present study complements this perspective by demonstrating how such perceptions are intertwined with feelings of attachment, loss, and resignation, revealing the depth of meaning that accompanies everyday exposure to environmental degradation. Additionally, the emphasis on moral negotiation echoes Adam and Groves' (2007) discussion of uncertainty and future-oriented concerns, showing how participants reconcile immediate survival with long-term ecological awareness.

The collective and relational aspects identified in this study also correspond with Lidskog et al.'s (2020) emphasis on the social dimensions of environmental risk. However, while previous research has often focused on risk communication or governance, this study shifts attention to the experiential core of risk as lived and interpreted by community members themselves (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By situating these experiences within a phenomenological framework, the findings contribute a deeper understanding of the human–nature relationship, emphasizing meaning, emotion, and moral reflection as central to how environmental risk is understood in everyday social life.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for both scholarly understanding and practical engagement with environmental risk in rural contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the relevance of phenomenological inquiry within environmental sociology by demonstrating that environmental risk cannot be fully understood through structural or technical frameworks alone (Ismanto et al., 2022). The lived experiences documented in this research highlight how meaning, emotion, and moral reflection shape human–nature relationships, suggesting that environmental risk is as much a social and experiential phenomenon as it is an ecological one.

Practically, these findings underscore the need for environmental policies and interventions to consider the experiential realities of affected communities. Participants' narratives reveal that economic dependency, emotional attachment to place, and moral dilemmas significantly influence how environmental risk is perceived and responded to. Policies that overlook these dimensions may fail to resonate with local communities or address the underlying social dynamics shaping environmental behavior. By foregrounding lived experience, the study offers insights that may inform more context-sensitive and socially grounded approaches to environmental governance and community engagement.

Beyond the immediate research context, the findings are relevant to other populations experiencing environmental degradation under conditions of limited choice and structural constraint. While rooted in a specific rural setting, the experiential patterns identified such as normalization of risk, emotional ambivalence, and moral negotiation reflect broader dynamics present in many environmentally vulnerable communities (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). As such, the study contributes to a wider understanding of how environmental risk is lived and interpreted across diverse social contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the phenomenological design emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on a relatively small number of participants within a specific rural context. While this approach allows for rich and detailed exploration of lived experience, it limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other settings or populations.

Second, the study relies on self-reported narratives collected through in-depth interviews, which are shaped by participants' memory, language, and willingness to articulate their experiences. Although this is consistent with the aims of phenomenological research, it may result in the underrepresentation of certain experiences or perspectives (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Finally, the contextual specificity of the study means that cultural, economic, and environmental conditions unique to the research setting may influence how environmental risk is experienced, further constraining the transferability of the findings. These limitations point not to weaknesses, but to the situated nature of phenomenological knowledge and the importance of contextual sensitivity.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research within environmental sociology and related fields. Subsequent studies could extend this phenomenological approach to different geographical, cultural, or socio-economic contexts in order to explore how lived experiences of environmental risk vary across settings. Comparative phenomenological studies may be particularly valuable for identifying both shared meanings and context-specific interpretations of human–nature relationships.

Future research may also integrate phenomenological insights with other qualitative or mixed-method approaches to deepen understanding of how lived experience interacts with institutional structures, policy frameworks, and environmental governance. By building on the experiential foundation established in this study, further research can contribute to more inclusive and responsive models of environmental understanding. Ultimately, continued exploration of lived experience has the

potential to enrich theoretical debates and inform practices that more fully acknowledge the human dimensions of environmental change.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how rural community members experience, interpret, and give meaning to environmental risk arising from ongoing environmental degradation in their everyday lives. The findings demonstrate that environmental risk is lived as an embedded social reality shaped by emotional responses, moral negotiation, and collective social relations rather than as a purely technical or external problem. By foregrounding lived experience through a phenomenological approach, this study addresses limitations in previous research that relied heavily on structural analyses and objective indicators, offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the human–nature relationship. The results contribute to environmental sociology by highlighting how meaning-making processes influence how individuals respond to and cope with environmental change under conditions of constraint. This experiential insight provides value for developing more socially grounded approaches to environmental understanding and engagement. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that environmental management strategies should move beyond technical risk assessments and incorporate local perceptions, lived experiences, and community knowledge into environmental planning and decision-making processes. Policies aimed at addressing environmental degradation in rural areas should therefore promote participatory mechanisms that enable residents to actively contribute to identifying environmental problems, setting priorities, and developing locally appropriate solutions. Furthermore, strengthening rural community engagement through environmental education programs, community-based monitoring initiatives, and collaborative governance arrangements may enhance environmental awareness while fostering collective responsibility and resilience in responding to environmental change. Future research may extend this phenomenological framework to different contexts or combine it with complementary qualitative approaches to further enrich understanding of environmental risk as a lived phenomenon.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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