

# Solastalgia's growing influence is 'bittersweet' success

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If you enter '[solastalgia](#)' into a Google search, the staggering number and range of results illustrates just how widely the influence of Professor Glenn Albrecht's concept has spread.

From academic research projects to media articles, via papers for the United Nations to punk rock songs, solastalgia has caught the attention and imaginations of many.

Professor Albrecht, who heads the Institute for Social Sustainability (ISS) at Murdoch University, first coined the term in 2003 to describe the distress or sadness a person feels when their home environment is desolated in ways they cannot control, like the damaging effects of coal

mining or [climate change](#). He defines solastalgia as the homesickness you have when you are still at home.

His initial studies into the communities and individuals plagued by persistent drought and large-scale open-cut coal mining in the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales have since been applied by other scholars to communities all over the world.

For example, in Ghana, Dr Petra Tschakert from the Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University is testing the concept in communities affected by drought. On the Torres Strait island of Erub, Karen Elizabeth McNamara and Ross Westoby from James Cook University in Queensland have revealed that respected older women (or Aunties) are experiencing solastalgia because of changes including tidal surges, increasing inundation and altered trends of weather, flora and fauna. The concept has also been used to describe the experiences of Inuit communities in Northern Canada coping with the effects of rising temperatures and for the survivors of Hurricane Katrina returning to their homes in New Orleans.

Solastalgia is also referred to by the writer Richard Louv who wrote the influential and bestselling book *Last Child in the Woods* in which he coined the term ‘nature-deficit disorder’. This describes the possible negative consequences to individual health and the social fabric as children move indoors and away from physical contact with the natural world. The book sparked a national debate in the United States and inspired an international movement to reconnect children with nature. In the follow up book, *The Nature Principle* (2011), Louv examines the similarities and differences between nature deficit disorder and solastalgia.

The concept also featured in a report of a non government organisation working group entitled *The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health*

and Psychosocial Well-Being: Guidelines for Action on Climate Change which has consistently been referred to in reports about the effects of global warming to the United Nations.

Professor Albrecht said he believed there were two interviews he gave which were very influential for getting solastalgia internationally well known. One was for Wired magazine in 2006 and another was for the New York Times Magazine, which was published in January 2010. He also gave a TedxSydney talk in 2010.

“The growing influence of solastalgia is bittersweet for me,” he said.

“As a philosopher you want your ideas and concepts to be influential and used and I’m pleased that people have found solastalgia to be inspirational, in the arts and in academia, where there are now many research projects and papers produced internationally that use solastalgia as their core research theme,” he explained. “But equally, the concept in itself is depressing and it’s unfortunate that people are all too familiar with the negative feelings it describes.

“The concept has also simply given meaning and a narrative to a feeling or emotion that people have had for a long time. There just hasn’t been an appropriate word for it in the English language.”

Certainly this is the case for American artist Nikki Lindt, one of many who have been influenced and inspired by the solastalgia concept. A few years ago she started a series of paintings depicting small figures in fluid landscapes but didn’t know how to name or describe them.

“The figures were all desperately trying to get a hold on their surroundings, often leaning in or crouching almost animalistically as the fluidly painted surrounding seemed to slide between their fingers,” she said. “They had great significance to me.

“A friend of mine, Hubertus Breuer, who had been following my work for some time, introduced me to the concept of solastalgia. When I read more about it I felt as if someone was putting my inner feeling and intentions into words. I was so excited that I named my then upcoming exhibition and the entire series that I had been working on ‘Solastalgia’. I have since been able to dig deeper and I have continued to work with this concept.”

Similarly, another American artist Kate MacDowell, who makes hand built porcelain sculptures, said she was “struck by Glenn’s terms and the ideas they encapsulated which were very much the underpinnings of my own art, but I didn’t have a word to describe the feelings that drove me and were embodied in my pieces until that point”.

The arts world seems to have embraced Professor Albrecht’s concept with solastalgia inspiring a Broadway play, a collection of poetry, numerous pieces of art and several pieces of music encompassing genres as diverse as progressive rock, ambient, electronic and punk.

Future projects include a solastalgia-inspired art and craft exhibition called Life in Your Hands, which will open at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery in New South Wales in April and a video project which Professor Albrecht is working on with the photographer Dr Allan Chawner. The video will also be incorporated into Life in Your Hands.

Professor Albrecht said he believes his concept has touched a nerve with creative people in particular.

“Artists have picked up on it because, generally speaking, they are sensitive souls,” he said. “Also, unfortunately, under global development and climate change pressures, the incidence of solastalgia, worldwide, is on the increase.”

Professor Albrecht has coined other “psychoterratic” terms to describe mental health states and conditions which are related to the state of the earth, some of which are more positive than solastalgia and which are also growing in their influence.

Soliphilia, for example, is the feeling of unity and oneness people need to overcome the alienation and disempowerment with the decision-making process they feel. The Occupy protest movement which has spread all over the world is a good example of soliphilia in action, said Professor Albrecht.

“I’ve used a grant from Murdoch's Strategic Research Fund to commence research on the people and communities of the Cape to Cape region of south west WA because I feel their unity, resilience, enterprise and sustainable lifestyles really encapsulates what soliphilia and sustainability is all about,” he said. “It is a perfect place to examine the relationship between good ecosystem and human health.”

He hopes to take this research further in 2012 as one of the flagship research priorities of the Institute for Social Sustainability. In addition Professor Albrecht is engaged in ongoing research on the impacts of climate change on mental health and has completed a book chapter on the topic which was published in 2011.

More of Professor Albrecht’s ideas and observations can be seen on his blog [Healthearth](#) and in a number of journal articles and book chapters he has written on his research ideas.

Provided by Murdoch University

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