Solastalgia Experiences in Australia

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Solastalgia is a term used to describe the pain and distress experienced by those witnessing their home environments destroyed or changed in unwelcome ways. Place-based distress is expected to become more prominent as climate change worsens and transforms landscapes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are particularly considered at risk due to intimate connections to home environments and distressing experiences of damaging changes to landscapes and home environments since invasion and ongoing colonisation.

1. Introduction

The distress and pain felt by those who experience their home environments being destroyed or changed in ways that alter their sense of place is a concept known as solastalgia [1]. Albrecht coined the term in 2003 after recognising a decline in his own mental wellbeing while examining the impacts of mining in his home environment [1]. Solastalgia is a portmanteau of the words: solace (i.e., comfort), algos (i.e., pain or suffering) and nostalgia [2]. Thus, solastalgia refers to the pain and distress caused by the loss or inability to derive solace when there is the lived experience of physical desolation in a home environment [3]. External forces, like extreme weather events and mining activities, are common causes of landscape and seascape changes that can lead to feelings of psychological desolation about its transformation [3][4]. A lack of solace can erode the sense of place, belonging and identity through the disconnection and powerlessness felt in response to unwelcome environmental changes [3]. Albrecht describes nostalgia as intense distress and melancholia triggered by homesickness (when distant from home) [1]. As nostalgia and solastalgia both describe distress triggered by a compromised sense of place, solastalgia is often described as "homesickness at home" [3].

The incidence of solastalgia is expected to grow as weather and climatic events increase in frequency and severity with the worsening of climate change [5][6]. As global temperatures continue to rise, Australia is likely to experience more acute and chronic weather events, including flooding, bushfires, droughts and salinisation [7][8]. These events will alter landscapes and seascapes, which can be distressing to people as they connect with their home environments. This concept appears especially pertinent worldwide for First Nations peoples who have intrinsic cultural and spiritual connections to the land [9]. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples refer to this attachment as a connection to Country, whereby Country encapsulates a system that people both belong to and are related to [10][11], and an essential source of culture and identity [2][12]. Land and sea degradation potentially destroys cultural and spiritual connections and affects health and wellbeing in ways that most non-Indigenous people cannot comprehend [13][14].

Globally, the unique cultures, languages, worldviews, and social systems of First Nations peoples are often unrecognised or underacknowledged, within a history of land dispossession, human rights violations and other historical traumas that continue to intensify social, economic, and cultural disadvantages [15][16]. First Nations determinants of health and wellbeing vary from Western models of health, with the land, sea, and reliance on natural environments for cultural practices and livelihood recognised as vital for overall First Nations wellbeing [17][18]. As climate change and the global burden of mental wellbeing challenges are expected to intensify, these key determinants of health and wellbeing are becoming significantly disrupted, leading to increasing mental health impacts and inequalities for First Nations communities [19].

Links between poor social and emotional wellbeing and changes to natural environments have already been documented in First Nations populations worldwide [9][19]. Despite these realised and predicted impacts on mental wellbeing, there appears to be a scarcity of evidence to improve the understanding of solastalgia amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [20]. While the term 'solastalgia' is relatively new, it is critical to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and other First Nations peoples around the world, have been experiencing this type of mental distress for many years since colonisation/invasion started to drive significant, damaging changes to the landscape and home

environments. The gap in understanding First Nations' experiences of solastalgia has been acknowledged by Galway and colleagues in the first review synthesising the existing solastalgia literature [6].

To date, there has been no review specifically mapping the Australian literature to describe the nature and extent of this negative emotional experience on Australian communities, where climate change is already rearing its ugly head, as seen by unprecedented bushfires, droughts, and flooding. This purpose was to bridge this research gap by mapping the literature on solastalgia in Australia, specifically to understand how the term is conceptualised in Australian literature and identify various risks, protective factors, and strategies to address solastalgia in Australia. Researchers maintained a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences; as such, researchers go beyond merely naming this group as at-risk, as much of the existing literature has done [6], and attempt to explore the relationship in more depth.

2. Risk Factors and Protective Factors for Experiencing Solastalgia in Australia?

Risk Factors

Of the 18 papers included, 11 discussed numerous risks and protective factors for experiencing solastalgia. Humans with connections to specific geographic locations experiencing environmental degradation and alteration are suggested as particularly at risk. This risk factor featured in 36% of the total papers reviewed for this question [1][21][22][23]. Commonly identified risks were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a deep connection to Country, colonial settler families possessing multi-generational ownership of agricultural and farming lands, rural and regional communities where extractive industries severely change the natural landscape, and the collective experience of industrialisation and urbanisation of communities [1][21][22][23].

Climate change was featured in four of the 11 articles relevant to this question. Particularly, impacts stemming from climate change that have tangible adverse outcomes on the home environment were identified as elevating the risk of solastalgia [1][21][22][23]. Experiencing drought, and witnessing negative changes to landscapes and waterways was found to heighten feelings of disconnection and displacement from what was previously a positive association with the home environment [23]. Both slow onset and extreme weather events have been identified as causational factors to various psychological and wellbeing effects [23]. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rural communities, young people, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up groups that are more susceptible to climate change-related experiences of solastalgia [1][23][24].

Adverse outcomes on community health and wellbeing, social cohesion, and individual factors were identified as risks resulting from, and contributing to, experiencing solastalgia [1][2][21][22][23][24][25][26]. Health issues alone featured as the largest risk factor; 45% of the papers assessed for this question identified health issues as a notable risk factor [1][2][21][23][25]. Population decline and loss of employment opportunities were found to impact community health, wellbeing, and cohesion [23]. For individuals, solastalgia has been described as having the potential to increase alcohol and illicit substance consumption and reliance on social supports, which have embedded reductions in positive connections to family and interpersonal relationships [1][23].

Various actions by local and state governments also presented as a risk factor contributing towards people's experiences of solastalgia, appearing in 27% of the articles reviewed. Several issues stemming from governments' handling of sustainability and planning, agricultural regulation, water management and mining leases were all seen as concerns contributing to experiences of solastalgia in communities [26][27][28].

Protective Factors

Protective factors for countering negative experiences of solastalgia were less commonly reported than were risk factors; however, a small number were identified. In two of the included papers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of connection to and caring for Country were suggested as an ethical model of understanding the importance of protecting environments that all Australian people should learn from [24][29]. Believing that humans have an innate duty to respect land, sea, airways, flora, and fauna through physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual caretaking, were approaches perceived to be of great relevance as protective factors for solastalgia. Similarly, 'eco-cultural identity', defined as the relationship between the human self and the 'more-than-human' world, was explained as a protective factor in one included paper due to the increased sense of responsibility and obligation to respect and care for flora, fauna, and environmental systems [29].

Civic engagement with planning against climate change through protest, education, and advocacy was identified as emerging yet meaningful mechanisms, serving as protective factors against solastalgia [24]. By doing so, individuals can collectively express shared concerns of negative feelings, receive information on the risks and what can be done about them, and potentially develop resiliency towards dealing with stressors that lead to experiencing solastalgia. Godden and colleagues concluded that health and wellbeing services should adopt climate change-appropriate intervention and assessment frameworks to deal with health and wellbeing challenges adequately [24]. They also identified that young people's access to community groups and projects for combatting climate change may act as a support to mitigate climate change and consequently the onset of solastalgia [24].

3. How Is Solastalgia Experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples?

Eight of the 18 included papers related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of solastalgia. The majority of the authors and co-authors reviewed in this focus question were found to be non-Indigenous to Australia. Co-authors that publicly identify as Indigenous contributed to just over a quarter (27%) of the literature that was reviewed for this focus question only [24][30].

Connection to Country appeared in all eight of the papers concerning this question and was described as a deeply profound and innate lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their connection to the land, sea, animals, spirituality, kinship, and culture [1][13][21][24][30][31][32]. A further 85% of the papers relevant to this focus question described feelings of loss and sadness relating to the need to be on Country, but seeing their Country change before them [1][3][13][30][31][32]. The use of maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcoholism and gambling were found to be used as a response to solastalgia-related distress from the changing land and Country [1][30], which, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, directly results from the ongoing effects of colonisation [1].

In 57% of the papers reviewed for this question, the destruction of Country was named as leading to a loss of culture and lore [13][30][31][32]. James Ingram Jr tells of significant cultural practice in the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, Australia, where Wiradjuri boys learnt rope-making through their mothers, using a wetlands plant called Cumbungi [31]. The deterioration of wetlands has limited the availability of Cumbungi, preventing this cultural learning; the loss of such practices is devastating to Wiradjuri culture, having a detrimental impact on the community and individual wellbeing [31]. Women Elders from the Torres Strait Islands have also noted the devastation caused by rising sea levels to their harvesting of certain shells and foods integral to their culture [13]. They explicitly communicate the sadness and confusion that this causes them, which the authors relate to experiences of solastalgia [13]. The topic of solastalgia-related suicide, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, appeared once in Albrecht's original paper [1]. Despite detailed discussion about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and dispossession may be connected to suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities [1], Albrecht mentioned no explicit evidence linking solastalgia or place-based distress as a contributing factor.

4. How Can Solastalgia Be Addressed in Australia?

Of the 18 papers explored, nine had made suggestions for addressing or mitigating the impacts of solastalgia on the mental health and wellbeing of the community [1][13][22][23][24][25][27][29][30]. These recommendations all similarly suggest that any potential intervention needs to be place-sensitive, resilience-building, and embrace traditional knowledge from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Three of the reviewed papers explored strategies related to resilience building [1][29][30]. Eco-cultural identity pertains to human connection to the world outside of humanity itself, for example, plants, seas, and soil [29]. As mentioned earlier, Boyd and Parr suggest that a positive eco-cultural identity may help address or reduce the distress associated with solastalgia [29]. They further suggest that this will build resilience by developing a stronger sense of agency regarding the changing climate [29]. Sartore and colleagues propose the development of community resources such as mental health support, men's groups, and practical support for farmers as ways to build resilience in rural communities [23].

Place-based interventions were a common feature of the recommendations for addressing solastalgia, making up for 77.7% of the findings relating to this question [1][22][23][24][25][27][29]. A caring for Country (Indigenous land management) approach was featured as a method to reduce solastalgia and poor mental health in the community [24][30]. Rigby and colleagues propose that improving access to Country through the state forests may also increase wellbeing through the Caring for Country method [30]. Ellis & Albrecht did not mention addressing solastalgia specifically, however, they mentioned that mental health interventions for rural populations should be 'place-based' and could build upon lessons

learned in Indigenous contexts that recognise the importance of place for health and wellbeing [22]. Further, Ellis & Albrecht also indicated that Natural Resource Management interventions should be explored with farmers to test claims that such initiatives improve the health of the land and farmers [22].

Indigenous cultural knowledge and connection to place/Country featured in 44.4% of the papers reviewed for this focus question. Godden and colleagues argue for culturally safe and appropriate strategies that support and increase resilience to the psychological impacts of climate change [24]. Further, interventions must be grounded in the local Country/place, landscapes and culture, and be responsive to other local contexts [24]. Rigby and colleagues recommend that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be resourced and supported to develop land care programs that strengthen the connection to Country and protect against solastalgia [30]. Further, Rigby and colleagues suggest that Indigenous-led programs and events, such as the Koori Knockout and "pitstop" program for men, will be effective in improving mental wellbeing during times of drought [30]. In their Torres Strait Island study, McNamara and Westoby suggest that Torres Strait Islander communities that have adapted to the changes in the landscape have been able to maintain their sense of identity and place [13]. McNamara and Westoby also discuss the gendered perspectives of climate change as communicated by Torres Strait Islander 'Aunties' (older women) in their study and echo the United Nations Development Program's recommendation that women should be included as active participants and decision-makers to ensure the effective development of climate-related adaptation strategies [13].

5. Implications and recommendations

The findings uniquely build on the findings of the work by Galway and colleagues, by providing an Australian-specific picture of the solastalgia evidence base [6]. The results suggest several theoretical and practical implications. The definition of solastalgia itself appears to have strayed little from how Albrecht conceptualised it almost two decades ago [1]; however, the findings show that its temporality and definition of place have been contested. The definition-related findings summarise the emotions associated with solastalgia, as described in Australian literature, its relationship to a sense of self, belonging and familiarity, and highlights the importance of 'place' as a conceptual comparison to other eco-psychological terms [3][21], all consistent with the findings of Galway and colleagues [6]. The absence of research and political action could partly be attributed to the present understanding of solastalgia as an experience or feeling, rather than a condition that warrants intervention. Askland and Bunn argue that positioning solastalgia as a diagnosable mental health condition, rather than an experience or feeling, may encourage institutional action, and empower sufferers [33]. Further, lobbying for institutional intervention against it could thrust it into the political sphere and initiate a mitigatory response [33]. On the other hand, viewing solastalgia as a mental health condition could be contested as medicalising a social condition. A comparative perspective is seen with 'Ulysses Syndrome', a depathologised term often used to describe experiences of war refugees for whom suffering is an understandable and direct result of extreme conditions, not a psychological disorder [34]. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, social and emotional wellbeing is often preferred to Western models of diagnosable mental illnesses [35]. Hence, a perspective of solastalgia as a social issue or condition could be viewed as more inclusive and lead to holistic social interventions (e.g., social support, training, employment) rather than medical or psychological interventions [34].

In terms of future research, it would be useful to extend the current findings by examining a more comprehensive range of population groups and geographical locations across Australia. The vast majority of papers focused on rural or regional New South Wales, with the remainder investigating solastalgia in communities of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait Islands, leaving the remaining Australian states and territories unexplored to date. Based on the literature, solastalgia in metropolitan environments is hardly considered despite its relevancy to urbanisation, and thus little is known about the effect of urbanisation on place attachment in relation to solastalgia. Diverse methodologies, particularly involving mixed methods and epidemiological data, are also needed to strengthen narrative evidence and understand the breadth and extent of solastalgia in Australia, which may help to get solastalgia on the political agenda. Further, as mentioned earlier, there is a gap in understanding the practical implications of solastalgia and how researchers can best intervene, raising the need for research to explore strategies or interventions to address solastalgia.

There is a need for a better understanding of how solastalgia is perceived, conceptualised, and applied in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which must be acknowledged in the context of historical traumas and the holistic impacts (i.e., spiritual, cultural, social and emotional wellbeing). Importantly, given the power and complexity of language [20], there is a further need for research into whether the term is indeed accurate or inappropriate for describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences. Albrecht has suggested solastalgia as a more inclusive and culturally appropriate eco-psychological term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, than terms with the prefix "eco" (for example, eco-anxiety or ecological grief) that force Western science onto Indigenous belief systems and wellbeing, identified by Albrecht as a form of neo-colonialism [3]. One First Nations scholar, consulted for the 2018 review by Galway and

colleagues, held the belief that there are better concepts to use as "solastalgia is a colonised word, and using the term solastalgia (to describe Indigenous experiences) feels like trying to knock a square peg into a round hole" [6]. An example of this is the community-driven study by Rigby and colleagues, which described the place-based distress felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples without using the term solastalgia [30]. Therefore, researchers echo Galway and colleagues' recommendations that solastalgia-related research should be conducted using decolonising research methodologies and led or conducted in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to better understand whether the community feel the term is appropriate and beneficial for describing the lived negative experiences of environmental change [6]. Similarly, researchers recommend that future research to address the gap in solastalgia interventions should also prioritise a community-driven approach to ensure the appropriateness of such interventions [36]. Encouragingly, two of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific papers included were co-authored by researchers who have publicly identified as Aboriginal [24][30]; researchers look forward to further Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research on this topic.

6. Summary

In summary, 18 Australian studies has drawn attention to, and mapped, the existing knowledge and understanding of solastalgia in the Australian context. It has been importantly highlighted that, despite recent novel literature on the topic, there is still much to be learned about solastalgia, particularly from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences and worldviews. As climate change worsens, solastalgia is expected to become increasingly relevant to all Australians. Further research is needed to heighten the awareness of solastalgia and other negative impacts of climate change and to further explore practical implications through community-driven mental health interventions and mitigatory responses.

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