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An introduction to solastalgia and its relevance to proposed high-speed-rail development

Anticipatory Solastalgia and Proposed High-Speed-Rail: Impact Is Already Occurring

For some people in affected regions, what is happening right now with respect to the proposed high-speed-rail (and corridors) might feel something like experiencing things precious, vital, and loved as though they were in critical condition in an intensive care unit—land, home, community, livelihood, wildlife, way of life. You feel deeply concerned you are going to lose what you love, what has provided security, identity, shelter, or solace. You feel distressed and overwhelmed. You go through the days not knowing what the outcome will be yet you also know that loss is a real possibility. You know, too, that if these things are lost, they cannot be replaced. Changed forever. You live with that piercing wisdom daily.

There is a word related to this kind of distress. Solastalgia.

Solastalgia is a term coined in the early 2000s by Glenn Albrecht to describe the emotional distress a person may experience in relation to the degradation or transformation of their home environment (Rafa et al., 2025). It is “the homesickness you have when you are still at home” (Albrecht, 2012, August 7)— an affective response to your home environment transforming around you.

While solastalgia refers to distress in response to environmental changes that are already underway or have occurred, what many people in this region may be experiencing is something related — an *anticipatory* form of solastalgia: the distress associated with the real possibility of solastalgia in the future if a proposed large-scale project (high-speed-rail) were to go ahead.

In testimony Glenn Albrecht gave in 2013, he described solastalgia as

The pain or sickness caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory. It is the ‘lived experience’ of negative environmental change manifest as an attack on one’s sense of place. It is characteristically a chronic condition tied to the gradual erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation (loss of wellbeing). (p. 26)

— Firelight Research Inc, *Indigenous Mental Wellness and Major Project Development: Guidance for Impact Assessment Professionals and Indigenous Communities* (2021)

The degradation or transformation of one's home environment may be caused by natural disasters, climate change, or by human activities such as mining projects, deforestation, or the construction of transportation infrastructure such as high-speed-rail. Home, in this context, includes one's immediate home (property, physical dwelling place...), as well as the broader environment one lives in and relational bonds (Rafa et al., 2025).

Solastalgia includes emotional, mental, spiritual, and psychological health dimensions (Galway et al., 2019) and is a nuanced experience of loss of solace linked to experiencing environmental degradation of home while living at home (Rafa et al., 2025).

Solastalgia in Research and in Canadian Impact Assessment

Solastalgia appears in academic and research literature, Government of Canada documents, in reports and recommendations made to the Government of Canada and impact assessment professionals, and is named in impact assessments themselves (e.g., Firelight Research Inc., 2021), Impact Assessment Agency of Canada [IAAC], 2021; Impact Assessment Agency of Canada [IAAC], 2022; Impact Assessment Agency of Canada, 2023; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

In the Indigenous Mental Wellness and Major Project Development (2021) report, the authors recognize solastalgia as a mental wellness impact of major project development. Solastalgia is described as:

The sense of loss and emotional distress that results from the experience of adverse environmental change. Solastalgia is tied to sense of place: the feeling arises as the result of loss of meaningful connections to the land, family, ancestors, and identity. Solastalgia may arise due to alteration of cultural landscapes and sensory impacts (noises, scents, visual changes, presence of non-Indigenous people, etc.). (p. 18)

Projects and Their Impacts Occur in Ecosystems

Solastalgia exists within an ecosystem of relational impacts (negative or positive or both). So do major infrastructure projects, resource extraction, and other major projects as well.

Regardless of any hoped-for or actualized benefits, a high-speed-rail corridor does not occur in a vacuum of no impact and no influence or effect.

Notably, neither does *the proposal* of high-speed-rail and its potential corridors (alongside public facing information sessions and requests for feedback) operate in a non-influencing, non-impacting, non-effect-producing silo either. The proposal of high-speed-rail and potential corridors can have impact even before a comprehensive impact assessment has been done. The emotionally felt threat of solastalgia is one example.

Based on information provided on the Alto Train website, an Impact Assessment by the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada is one of the assessments that will be required in a future phase of the proposed project. Other assessments such as by the Canadian Transportation Agency are also required (AltoTrain, n.d., FAQs, Is the project subject to an Impact Assessment?).

Canada's legislative framework recognizes the interconnected nature of impacts. Based on the Impact Assessment Act (2019), impact assessments must include (in part) health, social, environmental, and economic dimensions, as well as impacts on Indigenous peoples. Critically, the *interactions* between impacts and “the result of any interaction of these effects” (impacts) (*Impact Assessment Act*, S.C. 2019, c. 28, s. 1, Section 22(1)(a)) must be assessed, as well as any *cumulative* effects (also in Section 22(1)(a)).

Project Proposals Have Impact

There are numerous lived experience reports illustrating that the proposal of high-speed-rail itself, alongside public consultations and relevant government legislation development and debates, is already producing impact. Many people have expressed feeling gravely concerned and stressed.

On February 26, 2026, Save South Frontenac Committee issued a Citizen-Led State of Emergency noting they have identified serious mental health concerns among residents directly attributed to anticipated negative impacts of the Alto high-speed-rail project if approved (Save South Frontenac [SSF], 2026, February 26). Among several serious concerns about impact are “the loss of opportunity to enjoy and benefit from mindful and physical integration with nature, because the construction of a high-speed train will destroy recreational trail and water systems” and “the loss of agriculture, including dairy and beef farms, market growers, and overall annihilation of food systems that cannot be replaced” (SSF, 2026, February 26).

Anticipatory solastalgia is the distress associated with the real possibility of solastalgia, the real possibility of the degradation and/or transformation of one’s home environment in the future if a proposed large-scale project such as high-speed-rail were to go ahead.

Some people are excited at the prospect of high-speed-rail. Others are experiencing a profound ill-feeling. They are feeling homesickness for the solace of a home environment that hasn’t yet been forever degraded, may not be in the future, yet there is also the very real possibility that it will.

Anticipatory solastalgia. Impact is already occurring. Who is measuring this?

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