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**PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HUMAN-NATURE  
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG FREERIDERS IN PYHÄTUNTURI**

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**Abstract**

Covid-19 challenges tourism industry to consider the unsustainability of the pre-crisis tourism rather than returning back to 'business as usual' in tourism sector. The increase in social and environmental concerns will encourage post-crisis tourists to choose destinations closer to where they live; Covid-19 has been boosting proximity tourism. Proximity tourism highlights local destinations, travelling short distances and using lower-carbon modes of transport. Pyhätunturi is considered to be a proximity tourism destination for Finnish freeriders, and its importance has raised due to Covid-19 as freeriders have not been able to travel abroad. Also, freeriding has been a growing phenomenon in recent years. Nevertheless, there is only small number of studies regarding freeriding. Understanding this phenomenon would give useful insight why people engage with this specific outdoor recreation, which includes lot of physical attributes and high possibility for risks.

The purpose of this master's thesis is to gain deeper understanding of freeriders human-nature relationships based on their freeriding experience in Pyhätunturi. The basic idea of this study is that humans' relationship with nature is manifested in one's experiences, therefore human-nature relationships of freeriders are examined through the experience of acting in nature. This study is qualitative. Phenomenological approach was adopted, and this study is positioned in the phenomenological-hermeneutic family. The research data consisted of six semi-structured interviews conducted with freeriders who had been freeriding in Pyhätunturi. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The findings of the study indicate that human-nature relationships among freeriders are diverse, and the meaning of place was emphasized. The findings of this thesis also established that freeriding has gone through an "evolution" from risk-taking and danger to enjoying, well-being, learning and embodied experience. It could be argued that this evolution has a positive effect for the future of freeriding, as if snow cover will be less abundant making riding more difficult, freeriding could still be practiced in terms of outdoor recreation. Freeriding enables close contact with nature, and nature in turn provides a place to relax and have a physical activity. This study indicates that nature affects freeriders, hence nature has agency. Further research should pay attention to the role of nature's agency as part of freeriding.

Key words: human-nature relationships, freeriding, proximity tourism, phenomenology

## Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .....	5
1.1 Background to the study .....	5
1.2 Freeriding at Pyhätunturi .....	9
1.3 Previous studies on freeriding.....	11
1.4 Purpose of the study.....	15
1.5 Methodology.....	16
1.6 Structure of the study.....	17
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - HUMAN AND NATURE .....	19
2.1 Introduction to nature and environment .....	19
2.2 Relationship between human and nature .....	20
2.3 Experiencing nature and place.....	25
2.4 Dependent on nature – tourism and freeriding .....	28
3. PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROCESS .....	31
3.1 Introduction to phenomenology.....	31
3.2 Semi-structured interviews .....	34
3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	36
3.4 Ethical issues and concerns .....	39
4. RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE IN FREERIDING EXPERIENCE .....	42
4.1 The meaning of place .....	42
4.2 Nature as an environment of activity.....	47
4.3 Values that guide freeriding .....	52
4.4 On nature’s terms.....	55
4.5 Discussion on the findings.....	59
5. CONCLUSION .....	63
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	68
APPENDIX 1: The interview guideline .....	76
APPENDIX 2: Letter of consent .....	77

## List of Figures

	p.
Figure 1. Visual aid of defining different types of off-piste skiing. ....	7
Figure 2. A continuum of types of relationships with the mountain environment. ....	13
Figure 3. Human-nature relationships are influenced by socio-cultural concepts. ....	23
Figure 4. Dimensions of place. ....	27
Figure 5. Four themes that together constructs interviewees relationship with nature. ....	39

## List of Tables

Table 1. Information of the participants. ....	36
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background to the study

The idea for the research topic of human-nature relationships among freeriders came from my background. Snowboarding has been my main hobby since childhood, and ever since it has been a big part of my life. Over the last couple of years, I have started to be more interested in freeriding as I wanted to find a new dimension for snowboarding. The biggest turning point for me was when the Covid-19 pandemic started and closed all the ski resorts. As the only option to snowboard was to hike up, I decided that I needed to buy a splitboard, which I did, right before they were almost sold out worldwide (Buchanan, 2020). It can already be deduced that the number of freeriders increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Buchanan, 2020). After this phenomenon, the exponential growth of numbers of freeriders, my curiosity awoke as I started to wonder if this was just a short-term phenomenon or if it was something more permanent.

My own experiences about freeriding have been very diverse. Sometimes I feel it is the best outdoor sport ever, I feel alive, and I am amazed of the scenery around me. Snow conditions are great, and I feel that I can control my snowboard perfectly. The other extreme is when nothing goes smoothly. The weather is dull, I am all sweaty and irritated by my condition when I don't have enough strength to hike up. Even snowboarding back down goes badly, I fall down all the time and it is difficult to get up by myself as there is too much snow. Everything annoys me during the trip, but for some reason when I think about that trip afterwards, I get a good feeling. After all, it is nice to be outdoors and spend time with people, as I would never go freeriding alone – at least for as long as I don't know enough about snow conditions and which routes are safe. It is important for me that I get to share the experience with someone. The encouragement and enthusiasm of other people makes me to continue the trip even it would otherwise feel a bit dull, and it is also a big reason why I enjoy freeriding, in addition to snowboarding and being outdoors.

Every time of freeriding is instructive and dissimilar, unique. The same place may be different after a week, even after a day as conditions vary so quickly. I have often asked

myself what makes people engage in this sport as it requires much more than ordinary downhill skiing, and sometimes all the effort is made only for few turns in the snow. Is it a search for connection with nature and if so, what that connection is? This thought led to the choice of this research topic, as I am curious what is that makes snowboarders and skiers engage to freeride. Thereby I decided to focus on examining freeriders especially from the human-nature relationship point of view, as from my experiences, nature is the main reason why I engage in freeriding. I am curious to find out what kind human-nature relationships freeriders in Pyhäntunturi have and what differences and similarities may arise in them.

Due to Covid-19, tourism sector is under transformation. Romagosa (2020) argues, that in the light of the current Covid-19 situation, it would be useful to use this standstill period to make far-reaching structural changes to the tourism sector, starting with consideration of its sustainability. Covid-19 challenges tourism industry to consider the unsustainability of the pre-crisis tourism rather than returning back to 'business as usual' in tourism sector. Impacts are already significant in tourism field, and it has caused significant changes in mobility, social behaviour, consumption patterns and leisure (Romagosa, 2020). Lebrun, Corbel, and Bouchet (2021) states that the increase in social and environmental concerns will encourage post-crisis tourists to choose destinations closer to where they live, as nearby destinations may be considered less risky, and that Covid-19 has been boosting proximity tourism. Proximity tourism highlights local destinations, travelling short distances and using lower-carbon modes of transport (Rantala et al., 2020). Pyhäntunturi is considered to be a proximity tourism destination for Finnish freeriders, and its importance has raised due to Covid-19 as freeriders have not been able to travel to the Alps for instance. Finnish freeriding destinations have become more popular, and some ski resorts have noticed a niche market and started offering more freeriding services, including Pyhäntunturi (Peltoperä, 2022).

There are many different types of off-piste skiing, and the terminology is rather broad (see Figure 1). It is important to underline what is meant with the chosen term in this thesis, as the concept may have different meanings. For this thesis, I chose to use the term *freeriding* which means a combination of freeriding and backcountry skiing (including ski touring and splitboarding) as explained below. As Figure 1 shows, these terms can overlap and create a combination. This thesis is focusing on Pyhäntunturi area which includes ski resort terrain and backcountry terrain; hence term freeriding is suitable.

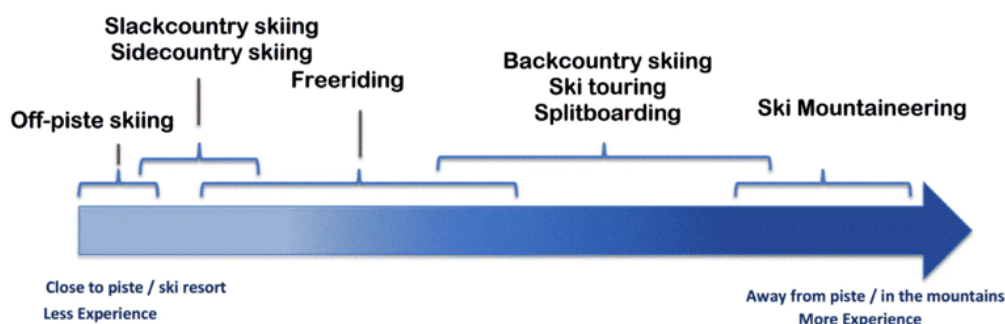


Figure 1. Visual aid of defining different types of off-piste skiing.

Source: Thibaud, 2017.

Freeriding describes skiing and snowboarding in natural, undeveloped spaces; it means skiing in the backcountry on unmarked and ungroomed slopes, places of performance may not be monitored, maintained, or patrolled (Frühauf et al., 2019; Berbeka, 2018). According to Frühauf et al (2017) “The term *freeriding* is widely understood and accepted in snow sports and is included in the name of major competitions (e.g., “Freeride World Tour,” “Freeride World Qualifier”)”. Freeride skiers or snowboarders (referred to as freeriders) usually have good skiing or snowboarding skills and some experience on backcountry terrain. Freeriding can take place within ski area boundaries accessible by ski lift but also in the backcountry so that it includes hiking up using equipment such as snowshoes or skis, ski touring bindings, and skins (skins are placed underneath skis to help on the uphill) (Berbeka, 2018). Avalanche equipment is highly recommended for freeriding (Thibaud, 2017).

According to Laetitia (2019) freeriding is the purest form of skiing. The author continues that the very first skiers were freeriders as they were skiing on open terrain, without groomed slopes, but it has formally been recognized as a sport in the 70s. Since then, freeriding has become more popular particularly in recent years as new and innovative skiing equipment has evolved (Laetitia, 2019). Backcountry skiing differs from freeriding mostly by accessibility and difficulty level (Thibaud, 2017). According to Pew (2020), backcountry skiing involves touring and skiing down in remote wilderness areas, and more advanced skiers might venture for multi-day camping and ski trip. Backcountry skiing and freeriding enables diverse movement in nature.

Backcountry skiing has so many of the things we look for today: the solitude of the wilderness, the opportunity to push yourself physically and mentally, and a deeper connection to the natural world. Unlike skiing in the resort, which can be rather anaerobic, backcountry skiers will build significant strength and stamina while enjoying the best skiing and snowboarding available. The most transformative aspect of backcountry skiing, however, is the connection to the natural world and the ability to transport yourself out of your normal surroundings. (Pew, 2020)

A deeper connection to the natural world is also a reason why a Finnish professional snowboarder Antti Autti started to focus more on freeriding rather than competition (Antti Autti). Autti refers that climate change started to make him question his choices about traveling around the world just to show the best moments in different films. Autti released Arctic Lines in 2021, which is a web series project showing diverse freeriding possibilities in the Arctic Circle (Arctic Lines). Arctic Lines videos show what winter in the Arctic really is for a freerider from Finland, and these videos have been an inspiration for me to focus on this topic, as the videos show in an easily accessible way how variable and unique freeriding places can be found very close by. Videos show the reality that freeriding can be harsh and annoying, and that the conditions can change the original plan (Autti). Autti ponders if freeriding in Finland is more just being outdoors, which can be enjoyed despite the quality of the snow, than trying to find perfect powder (Vilhunen, 2022, p 95). This ideology is suited well with proximity tourism as sometimes even a small hillock in the backyard could be enough for freeriding. Staying in local areas reduces carbon footprints, is economically advantageous and enables one to explore one's backyard in a new way (Lee, 2020).

It is up to each self who to classify as freerider. Nevertheless, it could be said that freeriding in Finland has experienced an evolution. According to Oivo (2022), people used to travel there where the biggest and best slopes are and spend time there as a "ski bum", and nowadays people ask around if closest ski resort has a good backcountry terrain. Comparing and speculating gears is also a thing for example who has the lightest skis and boots on the market. A certain kind of communality and sense of doing has changed into speculation. According to Hilander, Majava, Oivo and Valonen (2022), social media affects what and where people are riding, and it also makes the hobby more dangerous. A certain pressure to get pictures on Instagram has led to unnecessary risk-taking and going beyond the skill level. Use of social media, however, may increase interest towards freeriding as from social media



(e.g. Facebook) one gets information and updates about places to go, and which places should be avoided.

## 1.2 Freeriding at Pyhätunturi

This thesis is focusing on Pyhätunturi, which is one of the main freeriding areas in Finland (You've got to start freeriding somewhere). I decided to focus only on Pyhätunturi area, as the conditions were ideal for me; I moved to Pyhätunturi when I started to write the thesis. Pyhätunturi is a rather wide concept and needs a definition of what it means in this thesis. Pyhätunturi is a seven kilometres long chain of fells, intersected by steep rocky gorges. It is located in Eastern Lapland, and it is part of Pelkosenniemi municipality and the city of Kemijärvi. Its highest peak, Noitatunturi, is 540 meters above sea level, and its deepest gorge, Isokuru, is over 200 meters deep and one and a half kilometres long; Isokuru is Finland's largest fell gorge (Ruutu, 1986; Korpela, 2004). Other fells in the area are called Kultakero, Ukonhattu, Laakakero and Peurakero (Ruutu, 1986). Pyhätunturi is one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, it was formed over 2 billion years ago (Ruutu, 1986, p. 3). Almost entire area of Pyhätunturi is part of the Pyhä-Luosto National Park which has a long history. Pyhätunturi National Park was established in the year 1938, and it was one of the first national parks in Finland. In 2005, National Park was extended to the north-western part of the Luosto area, forming Pyhä-Luosto National Park (Pyhä-Luoston kansallispuisto).

The purpose of national parks is to protect and preserve untouched nature for generations to come, and in Pyhä-Luosto National Park the purpose is also to preserve the geologically unique fell range and its forests, historical sacrificial site of Sámi, and the Christian baptism places; Pyhätunturi has been a sacred place for the forest Sámi people of Pyhä-Luosto in ancient times (Pyhä-Luoston historia; Ruutu, 1986; Kyöstilä, 2013). Pyhä-Luosto National Park is divided into zones, which aim to control the use of the National Park in a way that causes the least possible harm to nature and those who move in nature (Kyöstilä, 2013, p. 14). For example, the deepest gorge Isokuru in Pyhätunturi is a restricted zone, which means that movement is permitted only on a marked summer route along the bottom of the gorge; there is no winter route to Isokuru due to high risk of avalanches (Pyhä-Luoston ohjeet ja säännöt). A restricted zone preserves the nature conservation values of the area (Kyöstilä, 2013, p. 14). Thereby, freeriding in Isokuru is forbidden. However, Isokuru fascinates

freeriders. As argued by Henttonen (2021, p. 46), who is one of pioneer freeriders in Finland, Isokuru would be one of the best places for freeriding in Finland, but violations of the restrictions may result in day-fines under the title of nature conservation violation. According to Henttonen (2021), freeriding is not a new thing in the National Park. In fact, freeriding in Pyhätunturi is older than the National Park as skiers were known to be skiing on fells and gorges in the early 1930s. In the 70s freeriding began to evolve into its present form, and ever since people have been freeriding in Isokuru. Henttonen (2021) is aware that as the popularity of freeriding has grown it can have a harmful effect on the area's nature, especially when riders tend to move in places where there are no official routes. The increase of freeriding has been one reason to set Isokuru for the restricted zone. Henttonen (2021) however criticizes this decision, as the effects of freeriding on the nature of the park have not been studied in any way nor being verified.

Right next to the National Park there is a ski resort called Pyhä (Pyhätunturi Oy). Pyhä is situated at Kultakero, meaning it is part of Pyhätunturi (Rinnekartta). As Pyhä Ski Resort enables access to off-piste areas by ski lift, it presents an important part of this study. Pyhä is identified as a freeriding resort, which can already be seen in their webpage's marketing slogan *Laske itsesi vapaaksi*, freely translated *Ride yourself free* (etusivu). In addition, Pyhä has been a pioneer of sustainable tourism since 1990, and their goal is to be the cleanest ski resort in the world (Pyhä responsibility programme). Pyhä was one of the first Finnish companies in the tourism industry that participated in MEK's (Matkailun edistämiskeskus) pilot projects in sustainable tourism, and together with Pyhä's sister resort Ruka they introduced their environmental programme in 2008, which has been upgraded to responsibility programme in 2019, including social and economic aspects as well (Pyhä responsibility programme). In 2011, Pyhä became the first carbon-neutral ski resort in the Nordic countries as it began offsetting the remaining carbon footprint caused by the use of fossil fuels (About our responsibility programme). One of Pyhä's key part of the responsibility is to retain the domestic market as their most important market area and to promote proximity tourism (Pyhä responsibility programme).

The diversity and easily approachable backcountry terrain are a few reasons why Pyhätunturi is a popular freeriding destination in Finland. As stated by Autti (2022), "the ski resort and Finland's oldest National Park next to it are full of opportunities for freeriding. Especially

the gorges have a lot of interesting shapes and steep terrain, which is quite uncommon in Finland. Riding here is a kaleidoscope of moments where you're gliding from the open fells and into the snow-caked forest".

### **1.3 Previous studies on freeriding**

Freeriding is a relatively little-studied phenomenon. Many of the studies are focusing on risk factors as freeriding is counted as a high-risk sport (Tøstesen & Langseth, 2021). Tøstesen and Langseth (2021) studied freeride skiers' risk-taking, recognition, and moral boundaries in Norway, Westfjord by studying values within a freeride culture. Authors recognize that despite the risks, freeriding has faced increased popularity. Based on their data analysis they found out that there are three central dimensions that influence risk-taking; firstly, the link between risk-taking and recognition, secondly the limits of the risk-recognition nexus, and thirdly the moral boundaries of risk-taking.

The first dimension creates a link between risk-taking and recognition. According to Tøstesen and Langseth (2021), risk-taking motivation is often understood as individual goals, but as a result of their research, risk-taking can be seen as a form of symbolic capital that can give recognition and status to the holder. Therefore, risk-taking is a social phenomenon. Authors continue that what freeriders strive for, what they dream of doing and what they actually do on skis is due to a social subculture with certain values, and that one of the values in freeriding is risk-taking. The other dimension, however, shows that risk-recognition logic is limited by freeriders skill levels. A beginner who takes too much risk would be considered foolish and would not receive recognition for his/her work. Likewise, a very skilled freerider who rides in light terrain would go unnoticed, and this would not help him/her achieve a position in the subculture of freeride skiing. The last dimension proposes that the freerider should include friends, family, and rescue personnel in the equation when they embark on risky skiing. A freerider has moral responsibilities that go beyond the individual athlete. Failure to do so can lead to both a personal sense of shame and criticism from the freeride community.

Frühauf et al (2019), in turn, compared different motives and behavioural aspects between slope skiers and freeride skiers. Research results showed that freeriders showed remarkably

higher sensation-seeking scores than slope skiers. In addition to that, the results showed that freeriders had experienced higher levels of agency than slope skiers before and after riding. Freeriders also reported higher accident and close call involvement than slope skiers, a potential behavioural gain of freeriding is at the cost of higher risk. Frühauf et al (2019) argues, and as Tøstesen and Langseth (2021) notes that it would be monotonous to think of taking risks and looking for sensations as the only factors that makes people engage in freeriding and that it would be beneficial to gain more insight into the motivational and behavioural aspects underlying freeriding.

Study of Perrin-Malterre and Chantelpoup (2018) shows that bonding with natural environment is important for ski tourers. Their study defined practitioners' profiles according to socio-demographic characteristics and their relationships with the natural environment. The results show that most users want to protect wilderness areas, but nevertheless, this majority also demands the right to access this natural environment and, above all, wants it to remain as a place of recreation. From the results, three different dimensions of relationships with nature emerged (see Figure 2): topographical, landscape, and spiritual dimensions. The topographical dimension describes that the attention of an outdoor recreationist can focus mainly on his/her own body without giving much importance to the spaces passed through, and in this case, the choice of the environment is mostly made due to its topographical characteristics. Their environment of practice is functional in nature. The spiritual dimension, in turn, is the opposing dimension of the topographical dimension. The relationship with environment is no longer formed through the performance of sports, but rather through the combination of one's own physicality and natural environment, the feeling of becoming one. Nature is experienced with all senses. The landscape dimension is between these dimensions. The practice of sport offers a very special transmission of the landscape to the environment, as the latter is valued through the mobilization of the body and the various senses. Recreational practice becomes an opportunity to have a sensual nature experience (Perrin-Malterre & Chanteloup, 2018).

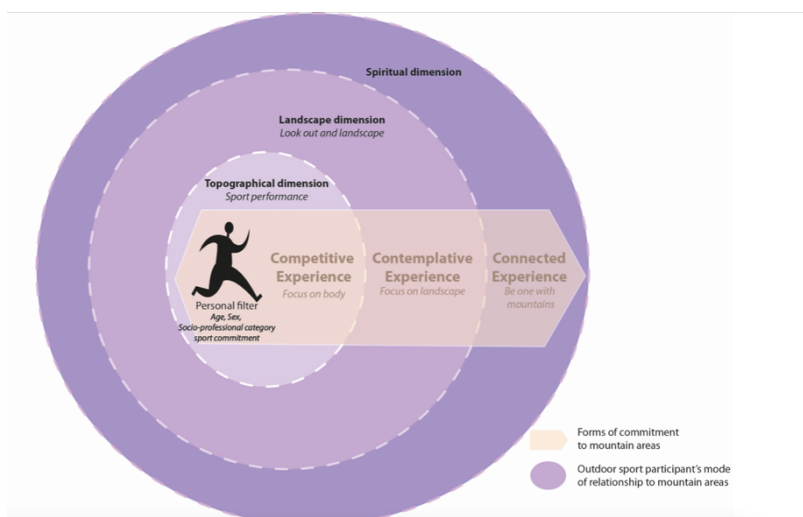


Figure 2. A continuum of types of relationships with the mountain environment.

Source: Perrin-Malterre & Chantelpoup, 2018.

Brymer and Gray (2010) have studied quite a similar phenomenon as this thesis. They made a phenomenological analysis of participants' relationship with nature through extreme sports participation. In their article they are not talking about freeriding but extreme skiing, which can be understood as a rather similar action. The article takes a stand on anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives on extreme sports. From an anthropocentric point of view, the natural world is seen as *other* by humankind, nature exists to benefit humanity. Nature is seen as either a conquering force or as a means of developing an individual or social identity. The traditional view of the role of nature in extreme sports argues that nature acts only as a worthy adversary ripe to fight and conquer. This relationship suggests that humans have become so isolated from nature that it has become something to fear and therefore control (Brymer & Gray, 2010, p. 363).

The ecocentric perspective in turn recognizes that nature has an inherent value and is not just a human resource. Proponents of this approach argue that modern industrialized society has given rise to the notion that humanity is separate from nature; as a result, society as a whole has become alienated from nature and even frightened by it. The essential proposal of ecocentric perspective is that we are part of nature in the same way that other animals are part of nature. As stated by Duerr (1985, as cited in Brymer & Gray, 2010, p. 363) "...from an ecocentric perspective, we can only really know our true selves if we experience and cross our civilized boundaries by re-turning to wildness, overcoming alienation and, ironically,

confronting death”. Research results showed that participation in extreme sports provided a framework to appreciate humanity’s connection to nature and the realization that humanity is only a small part of a larger whole; this ecocentric insight arises from a growing consciousness that extends to all-natural conditions but is hidden in the everyday events of modern human life (Brymer & Gray, 2010, p. 368).

Berbeka (2018), in turn, studied the value of remote Arctic destinations for backcountry skiers. The research purpose was to study experiences, motivations, and values that participants gained from ski touring in remote Arctic areas. Berbeka (2018) argues that there are only a few studies that explore the backcountry skiing market and due to growing demand from tourists for more extreme and unusual environments, it is important to understand this market segment. The findings showed that experiences are one of the most important values for skiers in Arctic regions and value was created by their experiences in connection with nature, skiing, and other people. According to Berbeka (2018), more representative research is needed to determine the value of remote Arctic destinations among backcountry skiers. Although Berbeka (2018) refers more to the market segment of backcountry skiers, this may support the importance of this research. Freeriding is a growing phenomenon in Pyhäunturi as well, so understanding better freeriders human-nature relationships may benefit the development of the area and customer experience.

While searching articles and previous studies of the phenomenon of freeriders, I learned that there are only few studies to be found. It was rather difficult to find studies that were not focusing on risks of freeriding or socio-demographics and types of winter practices. For me it was rather clear from the beginning that I wanted to use phenomenology as a methodology, and freeriding as the phenomenon to study. I wanted to study experiences because I think it is the experiences that best show why people freeride, therefore phenomenology was logical and interesting approach, and I got curious of studying freeriding as I had just started to engage with it more. Previous studies showed that freeriding is very little studied phenomenon, but it is important to understand this segment as more and more people are engaged with freeriding.

#### 1.4 Purpose of the study

As stated by Kilpijärvi (2013, p. 83), the development of human-nature relationships is an ongoing process, and it can vary with different stages of life. Things learned and experienced in childhood serve as a basis for the relationship with nature in adulthood. According to Hemmi (2005, as cited in Kilpijärvi, 2013, p. 83), the human-nature relationship can also be understood as part of a wider worldview which changes during human life as a result of interaction, perception, experience, learning, and changes in habitats. Values given to nature by humans, practical consideration of nature, and the way human relates his/her own position to nature reflects the human-nature relationship (Kilpijärvi, 2013, p. 83). In accordance with Kilpijärvi (2013) I examine the relationship with nature from the point of practice, that is, acting in nature. The aim of the study is to examine freeriders relationship with nature based on their freeriding experience in Pyhätunturi, meaning that they are acting in nature.

The basic idea of this study is that humans' relationship with nature is manifested in one's experiences. According to Laurén (2006, p. 13), human activity is largely intentionally directed at something and the world in which we live appears to us as meaningful. Reality is always interpreted reality. My research is based on hermeneutic-phenomenological research tradition, where human is both researcher and research subject. Humans can be understood by examining one's relationship to the world, as a human is how one lives. How phenomena and things exist for the human individual is examined through experiences. For humans, nature is a construct formed in the mind, and it does not exist without our relationship to it (Laurén, 2006, p. 13).

The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of freeriders human-nature relationships when they are freeriding at Pyhätunturi. The main research question of this study is *How human-nature relationships appear in freeriding experience?* The sub questions of the study are *What is the meaning of a freeriding place for the freerider? What kind of values freeriders have towards freeriding?* and *How nature itself affects the freeriding experience and human-nature relationships?*

## 1.5 Methodology

I chose a phenomenology as my research approach because it was suitable for exploring people's unique experiences and the world of experiences. According to Koivisto (2012, p. 119), experience consists of a person's current experiential state, which is based on the life situation and the interaction that he or she perceives as relevant internally. Human is situational being in relation to both ideal and real reality. Unique meanings form for a person from this reality. The real contents of experiences are the structures of meanings, and the subjective worldview is their whole (Koivisto, 2012, p. 120). Laine (2015) also states that experiences are essentially built on meanings. When examining experiences, one examines the meaning of the experiences and its structure. Although the phenomenological approach emphasizes the study of an individual's subjective experience, the phenomenological meaning theory also includes the idea that the human individual is essentially social. In some cases, phenomenological research is seen as revealing more generally about the community or society. Although everyone experiences their own world, members of the same community are very similar in their relationships to the world (Laine, 2015).

As stated by Koivisto (2012) phenomenological philosophy has two main approaches: descriptive phenomenology and interpretive alias hermeneutic phenomenology. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed descriptive phenomenology which seeks to describe the essential contents of the meanings of human experience. As Koivisto (2012) refers, according to Husserl the world of experiences or things as they appear in people's immediate experiences is the source of all science. Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, is interested in human existence. Heidegger emphasized the interpretability and diversity of the study of the inner world of human, meaning that he emphasized the existence of human in relation to a world that is always individual (Koivisto, 2012, p. 120). In this study, the research approach is based on Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Considering the phenomenological point of view of this study, example of how phenomenology is used in tourism studies. According to Pernecky and Jamal (2010), the first work that uses phenomenological perspective in tourism studies is Eric Cohen's work *Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences*. Pernecky and Jamal (2010) show a rather critical



point of view for phenomenological approaches in tourism studies, as they state that most of the studies have been unclear at best as many studies seem to avoid discussion about phenomenology and provide brief information on phenomenological approaches (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1057). The authors acknowledge the importance of theoretical and methodological discipline in the study of a complex but momentous area of phenomenology. According to Pernecky and Jamal (2010), Cohen's work provides a framework and typology for tourism experiences, but no reference is made to the rich tradition and theoretical rationale of phenomenological research. On the other hand, according to Botterill and Platenkamp (2012), Cohen's article is rather theoretical and speculative, and it has been influential for many researchers since. Cohen's research question in his article was that what tourists are looking for and as a phenomenological answer, he distinguished five modes of experience during the tourist journey. His inspiration for the theoretical approach of phenomenology is from Alfred Schütz and Luckmann (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012, p. 138). In tourism research phenomenology is a growing 'phenomenon', despite as a methodology it has been largely forgotten (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012).

The empirical material of the study consists of interviews that I conducted with freeriders who had recently been freeriding in Pyhätunturi area. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a data collection method in this study, and the interview questions were based on the theoretical framework of the study. The interviews occurred both in Pyhätunturi and online in Teams. The interviewees were selected based on who had recently been freeriding in Pyhätunturi and would differ from one and other. The interviews were conducted during February-March 2022. Overall, six interviews were made. The empirical data was analysed by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which theoretically draws on phenomenology and hermeneutic (Liimakka, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

## **1.6 Structure of the study**

This thesis has five main chapters. Introduction chapter gives an overview and describes the empirical phenomenon of the thesis together with previous studies and preview of chosen methodology. The second chapter, theoretical framework, discusses about relationship between human and nature. Additionally, it includes theory about experiencing nature and

place and briefly how tourism sector and freeriding are dependent on nature and how climate change is affecting them. In the third chapter I go through phenomenological research process and explain the process of data collecting with semi-structured interviews and analysing the data with interpretative phenomenological analysis. The chapter also includes the ethical considerations of this study. Chapter four presents the findings of this study including discussion of them. Chapter five, lastly, provides conclusion of the study with discussing limitations and suggestions of future studies.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - HUMAN AND NATURE

### 2.1 Introduction to nature and environment

The term 'nature' is perhaps the most complex and difficult word in the English language; that the idea of 'nature' contains an enormous amount of human history; and that our current understanding of nature derives from an immensely complicated array of ideas, linked to many of the key concepts of western thought, such as God, Idealism, Democracy, Modernity, Society, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and so on. (Williams, 1972, as cited in Macnaghten and Urry 1998, p. 17)

Järviluoma (2006, p. 44), in the line with citation above, argues that the environment and nature are not easily understood as terms that could be given a precise meaning due to their standard language. Nature and environment are words that are widely used in the mass media and interpersonal communication, and their content is not usually explained in more detail as everyone is thought to understand what the environment and nature are based on their own life experience and knowledge.

Nevertheless, Haila and Lähde (2003, p. 13) argue that nature and the environment are not the same things. According to Haila and Lähde (2003, p. 13), the environment surrounds us. The environment of humans forms a set of concrete factors that determine their living conditions. The environment is literally a concept tied to time and place, but it is now also a general concept as the environment of all mankind. Nature on the other hand is not located around a certain centre but is present everywhere. As Haila and Lähde (2003, p. 14) determine, the nature relevant to humans is the totality of the processes underlying their existence. Humans interact with nature through their life practices in their own living environments, so nature always gets a 'meaning' based on place-bound experiences. However, nature is also greater than the sum of the experiences produced by human life practices. Nature extends beyond perceptible creation but is at the same time the basis of its existence. In addition, humans are part of nature, and we have our own human nature (Haila & Lähde, 2003, p. 14).

According to Grimwood, Caton, and Cooke (2018, p. 3) scholars have traces of how the meaning of nature changes over time, evolves from a particular context or takes place in a

particular context and produces many verbal effects. However, Grimwood, Caton, and Cooke presents three typical contemporary popular discourses that conceptualize nature; external, intrinsic, and universal nature. External nature refers to what is perceived as the original and natural material aspect of the world; self-evident and ‘natural environment’, including non-living and living components. With this, nature is raw and untouched, independent of society, and is associated with the usual differences such as rural/city, country/city, and wilderness/civilization. In turn, “intrinsic nature refers to an unchanging essential quality or attribute that is more or less discernible in some thing or some being” (Grimwood, Caton & Cooke, 2018, p. 3). This conception of nature is expressed by references to the inherent properties of the whole, such as human nature. Lastly, universal nature means that nature is a holistic and integrated force that controls verbal processes. In this sense, nature refers to the natural order of things and is presented in concepts such as the laws of nature.

## **2.2 Relationship between human and nature**

The history between humans and nature extends far. According to Moghadam, Singh and Yahya (2015), humans and nature have been connected throughout the history of life on Earth. In other words, the beginning of the history between humans and nature is the same as the beginning of human history on Earth. Humans have been dependent on nature throughout history as people have a primary psychological, emotional, and intellectual dependence on nature. Mythologies are severely in connection with nature as most of the gods and goddesses are from nature or are the owner of natural power. Nature is what gives meaning to them. Also, different religions have a connection with nature. As Moghadam et al (2015, p. 91) state “Even the holy books of Quran and Bible always recommends human to look to nature if he/she is looking for being close to the great GOD”. Human connection with nature in history can be seen also in societies: hunter-gatherer -societies and agrarian societies. People provided their food and needs from wild nature (plants and animals) around 40 000 years ago and 10 000 years ago people depended on domestic land and agriculture. Agriculture has played a significant role in developing the civilization still being in close touch with nature (Moghadam et al., 2015).

Moghadam et al (2015) state that the industrial revolution was a turning point that caused a gap between the natural environment and humans. Suddenly everything surrounding humans was man-made. Technology and industrial advances made humans busy and made him/her forget their intimate relationship with nature. The role of nature has shifted and become a role for physical welfare for humans. Human used to be a part of nature, but now he/she has become an exploiter of nature. According to Moghadam et al (2015, p. 93), although the connection between nature has been weakened, human's psychological and physical need for nature has not weakened at all. As Rannikko (2009, as cited in Valkonen 2013, p. 5) also states, highly industrialized countries, such as Finland, are currently experiencing a transition from the industrial era to the late industrial era in the use of natural resources. Natural environments are no longer just raw materials for industries but a place of consumption and recreation. An outdoor person is more often a free-time spender, hunter, hiker, or tourist. According to Eder (1990, as cited in Valkonen 2013, p. 5), generalization of nature tourists and leisure has led to a change in humans' relationship with nature. Humans' relationship with nature is increasingly determined by tourist practices such as hiking, climbing, and camping. Nature has begun to take shape as an object of individual consumption and a source of experiences, and at the same time, the understanding of nature as a producer of various environmental services has grown (Valkonen, 2013, p. 5).

A posthumanist theory formed in the social sciences and humanities seeks to dispel the confrontations between nature and culture and between human and non-human nature. Human is not above other species, but the product of co-evolution which, like other organisms, has evolved in dependence on other species (Ihnji, 2020). Posthumanist ecology focuses on showing how much we are dependent on the functions of the ecosystem and all the non-human "ancestors" that make possible the material world in which we live. Posthumanist ecology also emphasizes the empirical and sensory experiences of our immediate surroundings and argues how our environmentally friendly actions should be nurtured from our everyday experiences of the world and the environment. This means that "love for nature" is something to be cultivated, starting with taking care of our daily interactions with the local environment (Ihnji, 2020). According to Susi (2021), nature promotes and destroys the well-being of people, causes joy and fear, surprises, and acts on its own terms. Non-human nature has its own agency that does not return to serve humanity. Posthumanism does not mean neglecting people's experiences but shifting attention to the

fact that nature and environment are strongly intertwined in our daily lives, and nature is inseparable from people's culture; it is possible to make this entanglement visible through experiences. Bodily knowledge and lived experiences sensitize us to the reactions of the environment (Ihnji, 2020; Susi, 2021).

According to Valkonen (2013, p. 6-7), human-nature relationship is generally found to mean attitudes or ways of thinking about nature rather than concrete interactions between humans and nature. Relationship with nature is often understood primarily as a worldview, especially as a philosophical and ethical phenomenon. In environmental philosophy, the dominant approach to the relationship between humans and nature has been to examine the values of nature. The author continues, that empirical studies of the human-nature relationship have generally focused on looking at the environmental awareness, values, and attitudes of people as expressions of a relationship with nature, but studies show that environmental awareness and attitudes inadequately explain people's practical practices. Instead, practical relationships have a significant impact on human-nature relationships. People interpret nature through various practical interactions and therefore humans' relationship with nature is a rather practical than an ethical consideration (Valkonen, 2013, p. 6-7). As Laurén (2006, p. 13) also states, our relationship with nature becomes meaningful through our own experiences, perceptions, awareness, and actions.

Although human-nature relationships become meaningful through experiences, and it is the main perspective in this research, it is notable that socio-cultural aspects such as traditions, ethics, attitudes, values, behaviour, lifestyles, and worldview are closely intertwined with human-nature relationships, and boundaries between these terms have become blurry (see Figure 3) (Flint et al., 2013; Muhar et al., 2018).

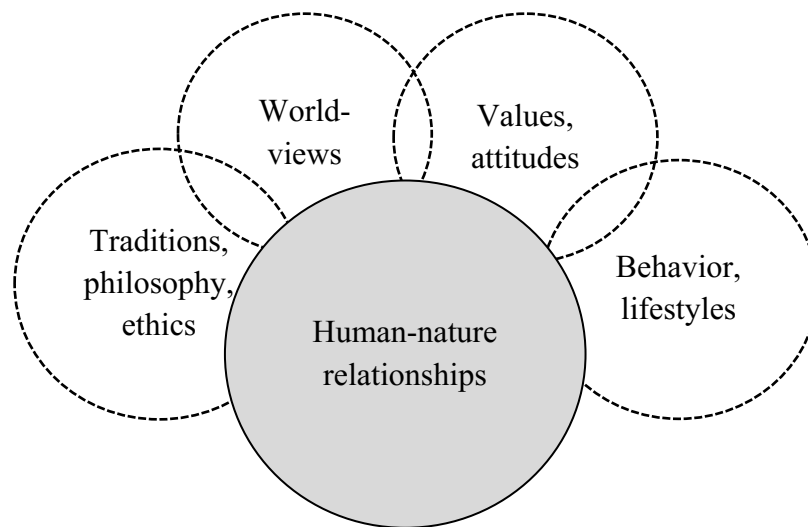


Figure 3. Human-nature relationships are influenced by socio-cultural concepts.

Source: Flint et al, 2013.

Socio-cultural concepts also affect the definition of nature. According to Valkonen (2003, p. 166), there is no single nature, but many, even opposing natures that are built in the social process through different socio-cultural practices. Although nature is real, physical, and material, it connects in different ways in different places into human culture and contains many different dimensions of meaning.

According to Haila and Lähde (2003), there is no single unified relationship with nature. The practical relationship of humans to nature can be approached through the concept of the environment. As the environment is something that surrounds us (see e.g. Haila & Lähde, 2003, p. 13), it means that there is no environment without a subject who experiences the world around him/her as his/her own environment. Thus, the environment always has an experiential centre (Haila & Lähde, 2003, p. 149). Suopajärvi and Valkonen (2003, p. 7) doubt that the relationship between human and nature can be exhaustively defined as it is not possible to know what that relationship contains or what is the nature of that relationship. According to Suopajärvi and Valkonen, the worldliness of nature is always involved in the local nature, and therefore the relationship with nature is not only situational and practical but also ideal and symbolic. The situational and practicality of the relationship with nature means that human or human community's perceptions of nature are shaped in everyday activities through various social practices. The ideality and symbolism of the relationship with nature, in turn, means that the conceptions of nature are culturally defined. They always

contain a certain kind of collectively shared normative view of how to deal with nature (Suopajarvi & Valkonen, 2003, p. 7).

When reading various research about the subject, it is notable that human-nature relationships are addressed in many ways. A significant branch of research considers the relationship between humans and nature using the concept of the human-nature relationship. Human-nature relationships have been studied widely by scholars in different fields. Muhar et al (2018) explain that there is a growing recognition among scientists to consider the interactions of ecological and social aspects across multiple disciplines to understand the changes in ecosystem services. Understandings between the relationship have been extensively studied in social sciences such as social psychology, environmental psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Muhar et al., 2018).

Some human-nature relationship studies attempt to describe the different aspects that shape the relationship between human and nature. Flint et al (2013) explored in their article empirical typologies of human-nature relationships and they divided them into three main dimensions – positionality, character of bond, and understanding of nature. The first domain includes the anthropocentric-ecocentric polarity, the hierarchical relationship of humans to nature, and the perception of human as part of nature or separate from nature. The second domain of dimension, character of bond, includes a variety of dimensions including the intentions underlying humans' interaction with nature, responsibilities, and rights of nature. It also includes preferred roles of technology in nature, instrumental to intrinsic values, and apathy which refers to a distance from or lack of attention to nature. The last domain includes dimensions related to perceptions of nature as fragile or tenacious, predictability of nature, and ways of learning (Flint et al., 2013). In addition, certain properties from different analytical dimensions are closely correlated. For example, the emotional connection between human and nature often correlates with the understanding that human is part of nature. However, an understanding of human standing above nature can lead to either the dominion of nature or a sense of moral obligation to protect nature (Flint et al., 2013).

As stated by Karvinen and Nykänen (1997, p. 17) human-nature relationship has always many layers. The layer of sensory perceptions has stored views, scents, voices, and senses. The layer of knowledge contains information and notion about nature. The layer of



imagination is stored with experiences and feelings and finally, a layer of direct use contains information and skills about practical actions such as berry picking (Karvinen & Nykänen, 1997, p. 17). According to Karvinen and Nykänen, there are differences between people in what is stored in these layers and thus, they have differences in how they see and experience nature and what they do in and for nature. Defining human-nature relationships is challenging as everyone has their own individual relationship with nature, but Karvinen and Nykänen suggest one way to approach it – *a rainbow of human-nature relationships*. These “colours of the rainbow” are archaic, utilizing, aesthetic-romantic, naturalistic, informative-scientific, and indifferent, fearful or hostile to nature. In the archaic human-nature relationship human is part of nature, not a separate creature of nature. In utilizing relationship with nature, human values elements that provide material benefits, such as berry picking or fishing. In an aesthetic-romantic relationship with nature, human seeks sensual and aesthetic pleasures as well as emotional experiences from nature. In the naturalistic relationship with nature, human seeks nature to prove one’s own ability to survive; nature can be an opponent but can also be seen as a challenging environment. In an informative and scientific relationship with nature, one goes to nature to seek questions and answers. In an indifferent, fearful, or hostile relationship with nature, one does not seek nature but seeks to get out of it. Individuals’ human-nature relationships can be a mixture of all these qualities, and different things are emphasized to different people in their relationship with nature (Karvinen & Nykänen, 1997, p. 17-19).

### **2.3 Experiencing nature and place**

According to Kirjonen (1992, p. 32), the formation of an individual's relationship with nature requires experience from nature as from the natural environment, plants, animals, and landscape factors. Gaining experience, on the other hand, requires a certain amount of activity, moving so close to the object that you can sense it and pay attention to its details. Experiences can open opportunities for the increase of interest (Kirjonen, 1992, p. 32).

The nature experience is very individual. What is perceived as nature varies from one individual to another and from one situation to another within the same individual. Also, the same environment can provide different experiences for different people; experiences vary in terms of both activities and environmental experiences gained earlier (Telama, 1992, p.

62). Nature is experienced not only visually as a landscape, but also through the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, and the sense of touch. According to Telama (1992, p. 64), past experiences and cultural differences affect the way nature is perceived. Telama also argues that the aesthetic experience gained from the natural landscape is a common motive for moving around in nature.

According to Massey (2005, as cited in Äijälä, 2015, p. 29) nature and the natural landscape are permanent constructions on which the appreciation of places is based. The nature of the places and values are based on the interaction between the mobile culture and the nature in place. In accordance with Äijälä (2015, p. 33), a place is a space in which a person has a meaning in the world of living. Place is a phenomenon that derives its meaning from human interpretations and experiences. According to Sharpley and Stone (2012, p. 182), dualism can be created between space and place; the former contains an abstract and absolute category, while the latter is full of social meaning. However, space is an overly abstract concept when studying the world of human life and human as acting and experiencing subject (Äijälä, 2015, p. 27). According to Tuan (1977, as cited in Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 182), space can be described as a movement, while a place is a pause in movement that can turn a space into a place. Space becomes a place when it means something to us; that is when we experience it (Sharpley & Stone 2012, p. 182). Accordingly, Canter (1977, as cited in Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 182) states that a place cannot be fully identified until we know the behaviour associated with its location, the physical parameters of that setting, and the conceptions that people have of behaving in that physical environment. The relationship between activities, conceptions, and physical attributes presents the meaning of place (see Figure 4). These three elements guide to understand place experience (Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 182).

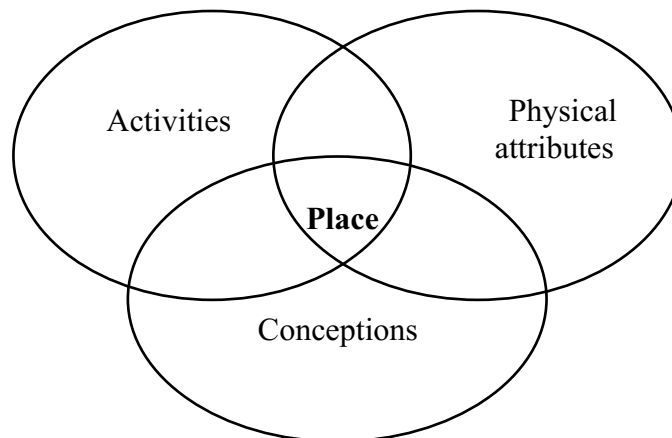


Figure 4. Dimensions of place.

Source: Canter, 1977 as cited in Sharpley & Stone, 2012.

As stated by Sharpley and Stone (2012, p. 183), the making of a place depends on individual conceptions. Conceptions are based on memory and record the experience of place in a circle of anticipation, performance, and remembrance. Anticipation (as part of pre-conception) of place is based on images and previous experiences in similar or same places, and they form the expectations of the location. Being physically in the location, ‘in place’, the bodily and social performances affect these anticipations although they may be disputed and adjusted by present experiences. And finally, post-conceptions consist of memories that can turn into feelings that form routines in favour of certain experiences, and these can affect tourists’ choice of holiday place among other things. Place experience is constantly interconnected with “expectations of future, attention to present and memory of past” (Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 184).

According to Äijälä (2015, p. 27), the activities that take place within places affect their identity and thus a particular place is unique compared to other places. In summary, places can be understood as a combination of social relationships, environments, landscapes, and habits, formed in relation to other places and personal experiences. As studying human-nature relationships among freeriders, it is important to understand that the participants of the study are narrating about their experience that occurred precisely in Pyhätunturi. The meaning of place is formed through their freeriding experience, and it is entangled together with participants human-nature relationships. Considering this, participants of the study are referring to a localized relationship with nature.

## 2.4 Dependent on nature – tourism and freeriding

As stated by Grimwood, Caton, and Cooke (2018, p. xv), tourism has a long-term relationship with nature. Contradictory, tourism dominates, appreciates, and exploits nature in countless ways. Destinations utilize nature as tourist attractions which later increases the demand for tourism. Different studies and publications about ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and nature-based tourism started to draw attention to the relationship between nature and tourism in the 80s, and the tourism industry has recognized the implications of tourism on nature and the environment. Sustainability and ecotourism are ongoing trends as we are more aware of global climate change. According to Grimwood, Caton, and Cooke biologist Eugene Stoermer and chemist Paul Crutcher published a paper that defined Anthropocene as a current geological epoch “in which human interventions in the environment are having profound and globally significant impacts” (Grimwood, Caton & Cooke, 2018, p. xvii). The Anthropocene marks a new relationship between human and nature. It signals humanity’s far-reaching impact on global ecosystems, and it also signifies a new understanding of the relationship between human and non-human. Humans are now agents of the change in environment at a global and geological time scale. Tourism structures and practices are implicated in these environmental changes. Gössling (2002, p. 539) also states that “evidence suggests that tourism is fundamentally changing the relationships individuals have with society and nature in a way detrimental to the goals of sustainable development”.

Backcountry skiers, in general, would not consider themselves as tourists, as they are people who independently and actively look for an adventure (Berbeka, 2018; Beedie & Hudson, 2003). However, according to definition of tourist, they are categorized as tourists: “a visitor (domestic, inbound, or outbound) is classified as a tourist (or overnight visitor), if his/her trip includes an overnight stay, or as a same-day visitor (or excursionist) otherwise” (UNWTO). Backcountry skiers and freeriders could be classified as adventure tourists. Adventure tourism combines travel, sport, and outdoor recreation (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). As referred by Berbeka (2018), adventure tourism is a settled niche sector in global tourism market, and it represents about one-fifth of the tourism industry. Due to Covid-19, the demand of adventure tourism is even growing, as it allows distancing and being outdoors (Kelly, 2020).

I would consider freeriding also as nature-based tourism as freeriders interact with nature by many means, and natural environment is relevant to them. The aim of nature-based tourism is to facilitate understanding of nature through direct interaction with the natural environment. By involving in both the living and non-living aspects of the natural environment, nature tourists, ideally, form a unique set of including increased understanding of nature, better interpersonal relationships, and escape from everyday life pressures (Line & Costen, 2017). According to Line and Costen (2017), adventure tourism and nature-based tourism are classified under definition of *tourism in natural areas*. As freeriders are acting in nature and they are dependent of it, it is crucial to think how to create and maintain tourism that respects nature and how to encourage tourists to actively think of moral issues about the nature of tourism and its relationship to nature (Grimwood, Caton & Cooke, 2018, p. xvii). According to Grimwood, Caton, and Cooke (2018, p. 1), tourism has become a world-making force interacting with the more-than-human world in a diverse and dynamic way. Some of these interactions are crucially material and ecological and can affect the life support systems on which we all depend. For instance, many have contributed to the carbon emissions associated with traveling with car when accessing to the ski resorts, helping to accelerate climate change (Grimwood, Caton & Cooke, 2018, p. 1).

Awareness of climate change has been growing for some years and freeriding among other winter sports is facing its impacts. One essential condition for freeriding is snow, but climate change has made snow cover a less abundant commodity (Mourey, 2020). According to Mourey (2020), as a consequence of climate change, the length of ski touring season will decrease among areas and sections which are suitable. The reduction of snow cover makes some routes infeasible to ride as rocky outcrops require large quantities of snow to cover. Climate change will also affect snow conditions as they will vary more rapidly, and powder snow will occur less frequently (Mourey, 2020). As weather and snow conditions became more unstable, avalanches become more difficult to predict (Hazzard, 2022). As stated by Hazzard (2022), climate change is making ski touring less safe. Decreasing snow cover and as untouched powder is increasingly difficult to reach, it has pushed more ski tourers on groomed trails. Nevertheless, Hazzard (2022) refers that “more and more alpine skiers report using ski touring on natural snow as a reflection of their values” as powder snow is a pure

miracle of nature and cannot be reproduced. It is therefore varied what people seek from ski touring and freeriding.

Hazzard (2022) says that skiers are currently adjusting to the double crisis (global warming and global pandemic), and it may change “the endangered sport”. Thereby the ski industry is wondering whether it should adapt to changing conditions or try to overcome them with new infrastructure and artificial snow (Hazzard, 2022). Artificial snow is made with snow cannons that use a high-pressure pump to spray water mist into the cold air. Artificial snow brings its own contradictions, as water and electricity consumption are high, and artificial snow is four times harder than real snow (Ross, 2019). Climate change is a major threat to tourism as well, as lack of snow and winter can cause a closure of ski resorts. Nevertheless, ski resort regions are valuable landscapes and offer many attractions for tourists, despite the economic importance of skiing.

It is also an interesting question whether freeriding is more sustainable than resort skiing. Freeriding involves free moving in given settings and may be performed independently from the existing infrastructure. According to Bielański et al (2018), spatially unconstrained recreation activities, such as freeriding, pose challenges for effective nature protection in those sites, especially when performed in protected areas. Unlike infrastructure-dependent outdoor activities, which allow wildlife to become accustomed, fauna cannot easily adapt to unexpected human disturbances that occur off-trail. In addition to wildlife, spatially unconstrained recreation activities may be problematic for risk management reasons as well (Bielański et al., 2018). Due to the nature of freeriding, the risk of serious personal injury or even death due to avalanches or other natural hazards is significantly higher, and organized rescue might not be available (Frühauf et al., 2019; Gross, Jackowski & Schön, 2021).

### 3. PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROCESS

#### 3.1 Introduction to phenomenology

When studying experiences, the word *phenomenology* is inevitable. Phenomenology is a scientific approach to knowing the world through direct experiences of the phenomena (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012, p. 138). Moran (2000) stated that phenomenology was first formally published by Edmund Husserl between 1900-1901, and by the time, it was a radically new way of doing philosophy. Phenomenology was announced in Husserl's work *Logische Untersuchungen (Logical Investigations)*, and during that time phenomenology was engaging with multiple philosophical currents. By the year 1913 Husserl's project had grown from clarifying epistemological concepts to transcendental science of consciousness. The concept of phenomenology deepened, and Husserl became a founder of a new movement, developing phenomenology gradually making it the main current of European thought throughout the century. Husserl saw himself as a founder of a new discipline (Moran, 2000, p. 1-2).

According to Botterill and Platenkamp (2012, p. 139) Husserl "resisted empiricism as well as rationalism and wanted to allow a phenomenon to speak for itself by trying to purify our consciousness from pre-judgments regarding these phenomena." In this approach, the subject does not focus on the object of research but on the structure of one's own thinking in relation to the object. For Husserl consciousness was always a consciousness of something. Its central task is to produce clear, systematic, and accurate descriptions of the meaning that constitutes action in human experience. However, Husserl's attention changed from consciousness to the life-world, which is "the whole self-evidence marking our experience" (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012, p. 139).

As stated by Cerbone (2014, p. 5) phenomenology begins with Husserl but it does not end there. Although subsequent phenomenology practitioners and philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Heidegger, are inspired by Husserl, many depart in different directions; sometimes in ways that complement his original vision, and sometimes in ways that more correctly mean rejection or denial (Cerbone, 2014; Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012). In social sciences, as stated by Botterill and Platenkamp (2012), the most influential follower of the phenomenological approach is Alfred Schütz. Schütz focused on the reality of everyday life.

Experiences in one's life-world are vital in understanding our world. Phenomenology has affected to shift social science's goal from explaining the world to emphasis on understanding it. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, p. 21), Heidegger started his philosophical career as a student of Husserl and is now one of the leading figures in phenomenological philosophy. He moved away from Husserl's transcendental interest towards a more interpretative and worldly position. Heidegger focuses on understanding the perspectival directedness of our participation in the lived world, and it is "something which is personal to each of us, but which is a property of our relationship to the world and others, rather than to us as creatures in isolation" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 21).

It is important to outline that phenomenology does not apply only one agreed method or accepts only one theoretical perspective. Philosophers who practice phenomenology are exceedingly diverse in their interests, interpretation, and in their application of how they understand the central issues and methods in phenomenology. Perhaps because of this diversity phenomenology is both a method and a general movement (Moran, 2000, p. 3). Even philosophers who practice phenomenology are diverse, they share a common idea that human individuals are built in relation to the world in which they live, and they themselves build that world.

Laine (2018) explains how experiences can be studied from a phenomenological approach. The method to use in research takes its applicable form as a result of many different factors of the respective research. In order to achieve the meanings of others' experiences and his/her expression as authentic as possible, situational consideration should be used to decide which method suits best for the particular study (Laine, 2018). Pernecky and Jamal (2010) also advertise that "Phenomenological research requires a dose of scholastic vigilance to ensure that all components are consistent with the objectives and philosophical basis of the research." (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1061). As an example of a method, Laine (2018) states that phenomenology and hermeneutic are closely related, and that phenomenological-hermeneutic is a known method. The method requires reflection as it is not technically learnable, but it is directly related to the whole network of various major questions. Pernecky and Jamal announce that the potential of hermeneutic phenomenology to address experiential and existential issues related to the world of tourism remains largely unexplored (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1055).



According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), all qualitative researchers are philosophers in the universal sense that all people are guided by very abstract principles. These principles combine beliefs about ontology, epistemology, and methodology and these beliefs shape the way qualitative researchers see and act in the world. The net that combines these premises may be termed as a paradigm (Guba, 1990, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). As referring to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 13) “all research is interpretative: guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied”. The purpose of the thesis is to examine freeriders’ human-nature relationships based on their lived experiences, making the nature of the thesis qualitative. As the purpose of the study is to describe the essence of a phenomenon, the phenomenology approach is applied. In addition, my interest in this study is to interpret experiences and phenomena through an individual’s lifeworld, making the research hermeneutic-phenomenological.

Tökkäri (2018) argue that phenomenology and hermeneutics do not form an individual method and cannot be defined in only one way. Laine (2018), as well, argues that it is not possible to give an accurate description of the phenomenological or hermeneutic method. Instead, they offer many, even opposing, perspectives that are applied in empirical research in various disciplines for looking at the experience. However, the factors linking phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches are more important for the study of experience than differences of perspectives.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994, as cited in Tökkäri, 2018, p. 66), phenomenological and hermeneutic research methods are united by the fact that they are predominantly positioned in a constructivist paradigm. The choice of the method of analysis is influenced by the researcher's ontological and epistemological definition of experience; in other words, the researcher must define what experience means in his or her research and how to gain knowledge from the experience (Tökkäri, 2018, p. 69). This thesis is qualitative research that follows constructivist paradigm, which characteristics are relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (Tökkäri, 2018, p. 66). A relativist ontology assumes there are multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology assumes that the knower and respondent co-create understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 13). According to Tökkäri (2018, p. 66), this means that in the study of experience, lives, and worlds of experience of individuals are

considered to be unique and constantly changing, meaning that knowledge about experiences is also individual and changing.

According to Heidegger (2000, as cited in Tökkäri, 2018, p. 65) in research that is applying a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, experience is defined as conscious emphasizing that meanings do not only manifest to consciousness but require interpretation. Experience researcher in his/her work is influenced either unconsciously or consciously of his/her previous experiences and presuppositions. They should be recognized and used in research (Tökkäri, 2018, p. 65). My pre-understanding of the research topic is formed from my snowboarding background. I am in some way part of the freeriding community as I am a person who is interested of freeriding and likes to go freeriding on occasion, and I own gears that makes it possible. Nevertheless, I would not necessary call myself as a freerider as for me, to be able to do so I should be freeriding more often.

### **3.2 Semi-structured interviews**

The empirical material for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. According to Laurén (2006, p. 80), experiences cannot be conceptually touched unless they are expressed verbally by speaking or writing. Regarding to Laine (2018), an interview is the broadest approach when approaching another person's experiential world relationship. Interview questions should be open and guide the answer as little as possible; a phenomenological interview is by nature an open, natural, and conversational event in which the aim is to give the interviewee as much space as possible to achieve the meanings of the one's experience and his/her expression as authentic as possible (Laine, 2018). From this point of view, I decided to use semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection as for phenomenological study it is beneficial to delve as deep as possible into another person's lived experience.

A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange where the interviewer seeks to elicit information from the interviewee (Longhurt, 2003, p. 143). Semi-structured interviews are sufficiently structured to answer certain dimensions of the research question while leaving room for the research participants to offer new meanings to the research topic (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 3). The aim of semi-structured in-depth interviews is to create comfortable

interaction with the participant for it facilitates the participant to provide a more detailed account of the experience in question (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59). The participant should be encouraged to talk at length, and verbal input from the interviewer can be minimal. Typically, interviews move between themes or sequences which are primarily narrative or descriptive (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59). I found the flexibility of semi-structured interviews helpful, as it offered me an opportunity to ask additional questions about the topics that were and were not addressed as well. I formed the interview questions and the guideline based on the theory of this study, and I divided them into four different themes: background questions, nature and nature relationship, riding environment and experience description (see Appendix 1).

Once the interview guideline was made and I got a permission to start interviews from my supervisor, I started thinking who to interview and when. I decided to wait for better snow conditions in Pyhätunturi as there was only little snow so that there would be more freeriders, but after a while I realized that poor snow conditions and rocky fells might be the future of freeriding due to climate change, so it would be unlogic to wait for the best powder days. I had my first interview on 7<sup>th</sup> of February and last interview on 16<sup>th</sup> of March. The best snow conditions, however, happened to be during this period, as after the interviews the weather got warmer, and snow started to melt quite quickly from the top of the fells. The study should therefore take into account the snow conditions that prevailed during the interviews.

It was quite easy to find interviewees; it helped that I lived in Pyhä as I got connections and recommendations on who to interview when I talked to people about my thesis. I found three participants with this help. The subject of the study seemed to be interesting for people as everyone I contacted straight were willing to participate. I also posted on Vapaalaskijat Facebook group and asked if anyone was coming to Pyhä to freeride and would like to participate to the study. Altogether, I got seven messages, and I chose three of them which differed from the interviews I had already made in Pyhätunturi. The aim was to find participants that differ with freeriding background and/or riding skills, to have people from different age groups and different genders to have variety of the interviews. Eventually, the age difference between the participants was not significant. The interviews were in Finnish, as I assumed that most of the freeriders in Pyhätunturi are Finns based on my own experiences and perceptions of the area. In addition, speaking with native language reduces

the potential for misunderstanding and makes the situation more comfortable, which is important in terms of gaining deeper understanding of the subject.

The aim of the interviews was that they happen face-to-face in the same location they have been freeriding and quite recently after the event so that participants would have a fresh memory of the experience. Unfortunately, three of the interviews happened online in Teams. The reason for two of the interviews was that I caught a cold and during Covid-19 it was not possible to meet in person if one is even a little ill, and for one interview the reason was difficulties with scheduling the time meeting face-to-face. Overall, six interviews were made. I decided to code the interviews by Finnish pseudonyms, as referring to participants with names matches the research topic better than using numeric codes, making it more personal (Table 1.).

Table 1. Information of the participants.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Main riding gear</b>
Eetu	35	Snowboard
Ilona	27	Skis
Kalle	48	Skis
Leevi	37	Telemark
Ossi	45	Telemark
Tytti	32	Snowboard

The interviews happened from one hour to five days after their freeriding experience in Pyhäntunturi, and the duration of the interviews was from 25 minutes to 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded. After each interview I transcript the material.

### **3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

For analysing the research data conducted with semi-structured interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method is suitable (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 56). IPA is a qualitative research method part of a family of phenomenological psychological approaches, and it is committed to exploring how people understand their life experiences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). The method focuses on the study of experience, and it is concerned

with the details of personal lived experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 193). As Smith et al (2009, p. 1) state, "...IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on particular significance for people". Theoretically IPA draws on phenomenology and hermeneutics. The method is described as phenomenological because it examines experiences and hermeneutical because it emphasizes interpretation. The method is engaged in a double hermeneutic: the researcher tries to interpret the participant who is trying to interpret his or her experience (Liimakka, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). In this thesis, double hermeneutics come true when I as a researcher try to understand and interpret the interviewee of how their human-nature relationships occur in their freeriding experience.

According to Smith et al (2009, p. 1), Husserl urged phenomenologists to go "back to the things themselves", and IPA researchers follow his lead in this matter. IPA agrees that humans are sense-making creatures, and therefore the explanations given by the participants reflect their efforts to make sense of their experiences. IPA also recognizes that the availability of an experience always depends on what participants tell us about the experience and that the researcher must then interpret the participant's narration to understand their experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). The method assumes that there is a connection between people's speech and their thinking and emotions. However, this connection is seen as complex, and the researcher is not thought to have direct access to the experience of the participant. Instead, it is assumed that the research data can tell something about the orientation of the participant to the world and how they themselves understand that (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47; Liimakka, 2012, p. 103).

According to Smith et al (2009, as cited Veijola, 2015, p. 41), the IPA method seeks to understand the participant's experience through in-depth analysis. Because the material is studied in great depth, the material does not have to be extensive. More important is the depth of the material. The goal is to reveal something about the experiences of each of these individuals. IPA seeks to know in detail what the experience for the particular person is like, what sense that person is making of what is happening to them. The study can examine in detail the similarities and differences in each case (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

The analysing process started by reading and re-reading the transcript data. Firstly, I read the transcript completely thorough, then again with listening the audio-recordings at the

same time. When I had an understanding of the data, I started to underline words and sentences that felt important and were relevant for the research topic. IPA as an analysing method is flexible, and there is no right or wrong way to do it (Smith et al., p. 80). This gave me an opportunity to choose my own way, but at the same time as a novice researcher I had difficulties on finding essential points from the data and continue the analysing process.

After being stuck with the analysis for a while, I read the data all over again and made notes case by case using mind map and commenting. I moved back and forth with the transcript and each time I wrote down more things that emerged and made notes of my thoughts as well. Analysing this way presents well the idea of *hermeneutic circle* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80). The nature of hermeneutic circle is openness, and it is possible to continue the interpretation into new perspectives (Tökkäri, 2018, p. 80). After making notes and re-reading the material in great depth, I understood the data deeper and was able to come up with themes that occurred the most and started to pay attention for similarities and differences between participants. I made tables to clarify topics that occurred case by case.

After I had revised the themes, I started to divide them under different main themes that I formulated based on the themes. After combining themes, four main themes became clearer: the meaning of place, nature as an environment of activity, values that guide freeriding, and on nature's terms. These main themes build a picture of participants human-nature relationships (see Figure 5). *The meaning of place* theme was formulated through concepts of landscape, versatility and reputation of Pyhä and the National Park. Theme of *Nature as an environment of activity* consist of physicality, riding itself, outdoor recreation, and training. *Values that guide freeriding* theme consist of climate issues, respecting nature, tranquillity, and natural environment. Lastly, theme *On nature's terms* constructs from snow and weather conditions, reading nature and risks.

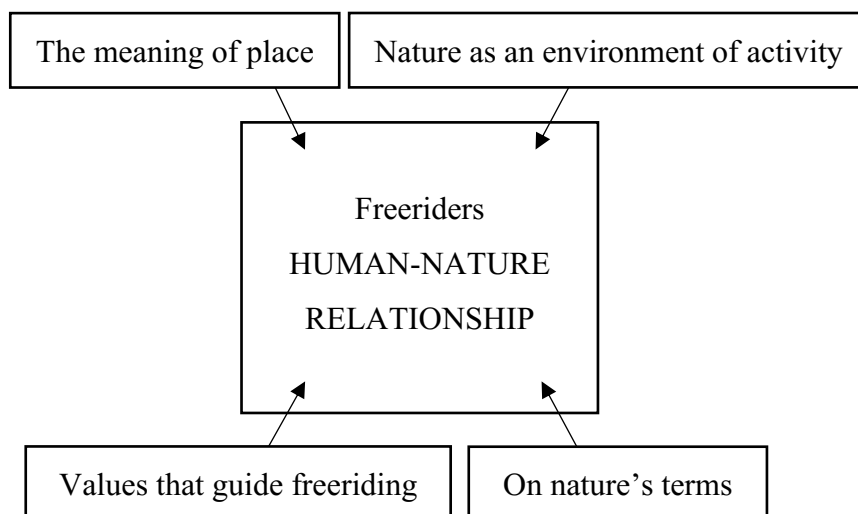


Figure 5. Four themes that together constructs interviewees relationship with nature.

These themes are discussed in detail in the findings chapter. Although the main themes have been specified, it is notable that these themes are intertwined, which will be reflected in the findings chapter (chapter 4).

### 3.4 Ethical issues and concerns

Scientific research can only be ethically acceptable and reliable if it has been conducted in accordance with good scientific practice. The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK, in co-operation with the Finnish research community, has set guidelines for responsible conduct of research, and for handling alleged violations of conduct (the RCR guidelines), and its aim is to promote responsible conduct of research. Guidelines apply to all disciplines in Finland, and all universities are committed to it (Responsible Research editors, 2018).

RCR guidelines also clarify the values and objectives according to which research should be conducted (Responsible Research editors, 2018). Ethical questions such as what should be researched, how research participants should be asked for consent, how data and equipment should be obtained et cetera. Pre-emptive ethics is a tool to systematically identify and solve these ethical issues. Ethical issues should be tackled before they cause ethical problems, and the aim of pre-emptive ethics is to make ethics visible in research. It also gives the researcher,

as an individual, the confidence to justify the ethical decisions made during the research (Mustajoki, 2018).

According to TENK (2019, p. 7) there are three general ethical principles for research with human participants that researchers in all disciplines are guided by. Firstly, the autonomy and dignity of research participants must be respected. Secondly, the researcher must respect the material and immaterial cultural heritage and biodiversity, and lastly, the research must be conducted in a way that does not cause any harm to research participants or communities, nor any other subjects of research. The ethical principles of human research have been developed to support researchers and research groups to protect the people who are participating the research (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK]), 2019, p. 7). As the data of this research was collected by semi-structured interviews meaning human participants were involved, these ethical principles were followed.

To avoid causing unnecessary harm to the research participants and the communities they represent, it is important that the researcher gain knowledge beforehand of the research community, culture, and their history (TENK, 2019, p. 8). TENK (2019, p. 8) has also set ethical principles for the treatment and rights of research participants. Informed consent to participate in research is a central ethical principle of research involving human participants. The letter of consent (Appendix 2) was handed to every participant. The letter included information on the research, the purpose of the study, and it informed the participant that it is voluntary to participate, it is handled anonymously, and withdrawal of the participation was possible at any phase. These are the same principles that can be found in TENK's guidelines (2019, p. 8). Every participant signed or verbally agreed with letter of consent. The interviews were recorded with a permission of the participant, and names or other personal information was left out from the transcripts. Participants were also informed that I will translate interview quotes in English myself. Quotes were translated as accurately as possible, without changing the interviewee's message.

Allmark et al (2009) state that in-depth interviews, such as semi-structured interviews, reveal details of the interviewee's experience that would not be revealed in the survey for example, and that such research can raise ethical issues and concerns. Authors recommend that in response to the rising ethical problems faced by a qualitative interviewer it is often



recommended that researchers engage in ongoing reflection while being sensitive to the needs of participants (Allmark et al., 2009, p. 51). Although my research subject is not sensitive and does not reveal anything harmful of the participant, personal experiences and their interpretation deserved diligence. According to Tökkäri (2018, p. 75), researcher using IPA method can use its pre-assumptions to help and mirror while studying other people's experiences. Although the researcher's own experiences are openly involved in the analysis, the aim is to build an interpretation of the experiences of the interviewed, not the researcher's own. I acknowledge that my background and pre-assumptions were involved during the whole thesis writing process, and I have presented my pre-assumptions in this thesis. I had knowledge of the subject beforehand and I was able to understand what the participants were narrating about, hence my pre-assumptions helped me to ask further questions if needed.

According to Kuula-Luumi (2018), research participants' identity needs to be protected, and it is one of the most important principles of research integrity. The main rule is to write the research results in a way that it safeguards the anonymity of the subjects and the other people mentioned. Research participant identity and personal data should not be revealed in any way (Kuula-Luumi, 2018). The concept of personal data is broad. According to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), personal data means all information relating to an identified or identifiable individual (Eronen, 2019). To avoid revealing any personal data or identity, I have used codes when I am referring to my interview participants or quoting them. The names or any other personal data of the participant have been left out already during the transcribing process. Collected data is stored in a way that I am the only one accessing the files, data is stored in my computer behind a password that only I know.

## 4. RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE IN FREERIDING EXPERIENCE

### 4.1 The meaning of place

The importance of place was highlighted in the responses of the participants. Shrivastava and Kennelly (2013) emphasize the richness and usefulness of the multidimensional concept of place by dividing it into three parts: *location, landscape and meaning*. Location is described by the exact geographical location. All places are located in the biophysical space. To be a place, there must be a *there* that can be expressed objectively. As quoted by Shrivastava and Kennelly (2013) "...space is what you travel through, place is where you stop". Landscape, in turn, reflects physical dimension that is part of the natural environment. The physical environment with its landscape is a major factor in creating a place. Place also encompasses man-made landscape, the built environment as a dimension of a place is an important environment for social relations that determines the shape of the place where people live their lives.

Meaning describes that place covers not only the natural and man-made environments, but also the social and cultural dimensions that give meaning to the place. Place is more than a physical location; it is also a product of the human experience experienced in the everyday world (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013). These three elements of a place come true also in the responses of the interviewees. They are acting in a same area, same place, which derives its meaning from their own experience and interpretation. There is an aspect of action in experiencing a place, and a place enables diverse activities. As a result, themes *the meaning of place* and *nature as an environment of activity* are closely intertwined.

In accordance with Äijälä (2015, p. 33), from the perspective of the individual, place is a profound and complex part of the way a person experiences the world around them. Place can be a determining aspect on where to go freeriding, and at the same time the place can only be noticed once it has been reached.

In my opinion, the big thing in freeriding is that you can move with those gears (skis) to really great places that you might not otherwise get to, and that's an essential part of at least my pursuit of being there in those places. (Kalle)

Nature has like a real big role in it (freeriding). Or the fact that some people may look for the best riding line or the best powder or something, but for me it doesn't really play a big role in the end, but the place where I hike and the place where I go outdoors is more important to me. (Ilona)

Ilona especially highlights the importance of the scenery in freeriding. Landscape and location matters, as she wouldn't go freeriding without seeing beautiful sceneries, hence landscape determines where she goes freeriding. For her, freeriding is an aesthetic experience. This is in accordance with Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup's (2018) landscape dimension, meaning that contemplative experience encourages to appreciate the natural environment where practicing. Other interviewees highlighted the importance of scenery only when I asked them to describe their recent freeriding experience. Especially participants who had a great weather during their freeriding trip in Pyhätunturi expressed how beautiful landscape there was.

As a freerider I am a hunter of beautiful landscapes or that, that I feel like if there's some super beautiful weather or there's some nice scenery, like I usually always have a camera with me that it's also part for me to get those moments and landscapes captured on my own eyes as well. I only realize now that I wouldn't go riding to a place with lot of trees and bushes if I don't even see any scenery from there. (Ilona)

According to Féménias et al (2011, as cited in Perrin-Malterre & Chanteloup, 2018), aesthetic experience may explain the urge to escape from developed areas such as ski resorts. Aesthetics play a role in the success of the nature experience, and it is a common motive for moving around in nature (Telama, 1992, p. 64). Being *in the middle of nowhere* is considered to mean being away from infrastructure and everything man-made among participants. In addition to creating a comfortable place for the freerider, it is also valuable. The values are reviewed in the following subsections.

Being in the middle of nowhere also describes being 'alone', out of other people with only your group. As freeriding has become more popular in recent years, it inevitably shows also in Pyhätunturi. Most popular and common places are sometimes crowded. Yet, most of the interviewees thought the phenomenon as a good thing, the fell area is so large that possibility of rush is small, there is room for everyone. Some experienced other freeriders as an issue of pressure for example at a campfire site if it's full or if other freeriders are heading to ride the same line. Most of the participants considered the National Park as a great place to escape

everything man-made and to truly be in nature, as the National Park's purpose is to protect and cherish nature, it prevents excessive construction (see e.g. Ruutu, 1989).

Freeriding gets you into beautiful scenery or so because that's what I think downhill skiing can't offer in a way, or like of course there are beautiful scenery on the slopes too, but there's so much man-made there then I think it's best when you get to the National Park, where there are not so many traces of man, or that there are no poles of light at the fells, or no tracks made by piste basher so that's one nicety in it. (Ilona)

Downhill skiing is nice also, but you feel like you're surrounded by people and there's all the infrastructure but freeriding really takes you like in the middle of nowhere. (Tytti)

In freeriding, rider is in close contact with nature. As, for instance, snow conditions are crucial in freeriding, rider easily notices differences among same places. To be able to do so, it requires knowledge of the place and previous experiences to which compare it. In accordance with Shrivastava and Kennelly (2013), I would describe it as *a sense of place*. The sense of place creates meaning and encompasses the meanings that people have acquired from their physical and material experiences in places that provide lasting affection. Sense of place is a living ecological relationship between the observer and the environment (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013). Some of the participants reflect that if you go to the same place after a week or so, it differs from the last time. Hence, same place can be visited multiple times as it is never the same, there is always something that is different regarding snow and weather conditions. This supports the idea that one does not always need to travel to a new place to find something new.

Well, that (nature) gives it a great environment where it can be done and it changes all the time, it doesn't necessarily be the same every day. The same place can be challenging one day and one day it's super easy. That in a way, even if we are in a certain area and we are riding in the same places, it still takes shape in it. (Eetu)

And it is like being able to explore new places all the time and they are never on the same snow. If you have been somewhere a month ago or somewhere a week ago you can visit the same place again. (Ossi)

Sense of place was also reflected in some of the participants description of the most recent experience. Ilona, for instance, narrated that she was concern about their routes, as she knew from last time when they were freeriding in the same place that there were rocks, and the snow cover was not that deep to cover them everywhere. She refers that the visibility was

weak, but they managed to find safe routes and noticed how much one place can change during a week.

Then we rode the familiar route back down, in fact from exactly the same place what we rode last weekend, and it was good it was the same direction where we rode so we noticed how different it is with different snow. Like it's completely different, that a week ago it wasn't very nice to ride, but now there was like really nice snow, pretty heavy snow, but still so nice to ride. (Ilona)

I was curious to find out what are the reasons behind why freeriders had chosen to come to Pyhätunturi. There were similarities in the responses, but two of them were clearly the same for all; versatility and reputation of Pyhätunturi. Most of the participants narrated same thing as Eetu: “Well, in Finland it carries the status as a freeriding resort and is like the toughest freeriding resort in Finland.” Versatility creates opportunities for freeriders of all levels. Some of the participants have children, and they found it beneficial to have something to ride for everyone and that it is easy to take children along to freeride as well. Natural settings of Pyhätunturi, such as gorges, fells, and forests, were mentioned as advantage. Pyhätunturi was compared to other freeriding places in Finland, such as Pallas, by most of the participants. According to these participants, both places are considered as best places for freeriding in Finland, but Pyhätunturi attracts with its services and accessibility. It was mentioned that when travelling from Southern Finland, the length of the journey is one deciding factor.

Everyone but one of the participants had their own freeriding equipment, and the one who did not have was pleased of renting opportunities in Pyhä. One of the interviewees had a freeriding guide from ski school to show secure places to freeride when she started freeriding one year ago. Two of the more advanced participants have been more or less developing freeriding services in Pyhätunturi. Some of the interviewees narrated that there is no need for them for guiding services in Pyhätunturi, it is not necessary as the area is so simple. Snow safety service was mentioned by most of the participants as advantage as well. According to most of the participants, information of security aspects, such as the level of risk of avalanches, places to avoid, and guide signs in Pyhätunturi area were easily accessible. Participants mentioned that these are also the reasons why Pyhätunturi has achieved its reputation as a best place to freeride.

There is such a different gorge terrain and there is that mountain range, so it has so many different shapes and places that even though those places maybe are not so big that somewhere in Ylläs or Pallas so that versatility is definitely advantage of Pyhä. (Kalle)

Well, I would say that in a way if you think, Pyhä is Finland's number one place to go just because you can go to backcountry straight from the slopes, there is a real variety and even a few more difficult place that are quite easily accessible. (Leevi)

Versatility also means the versatility created by the weather. For Ilona, Pyhätunturi is a great place to practice with different weather conditions as well, as the places are familiar making it feel more secure. When places are familiar, one can also focus on developing riding skills when observing the environment and getting to know it does not take all the time. In her description of the most recent experience, she also mentioned how happy she felt when she noticed that she was not scared of skiing in the middle of trees and felt that she can control her skis. Kalle, in turn, considers familiar places fascinating, as there are still always new dimensions to find. Proximity of Pyhätunturi for these two participants offers the opportunity to go freeriding multiple times. Hence, there is an opportunity to choose when to go freeriding, taking weather and snow conditions into account, and there will be no risks taken necessary. Some of the participants discloses that time pressure, for example on holiday, may lead to unnecessary risk-taking. On the other hand, also if there is a friend visiting and a participant wants to show places for her/him, it could also lead to unnecessary risk-taking.

The environment and nature create such diverse conditions that sometimes it can be really nice to ride and sometimes it is terrible to ride and more, so yeah and especially at this point when I am really only learning how, how to ride better, and how to start enjoying it more and so on, so this is a really good place and on the other hand it is good that there are those familiar places where to ride, that I can to focus on riding that I know the environment where I ride so that it doesn't take time to get used to a place. (Ilona)

So that you can always think you're going somewhere completely elsewhere but somehow it feels great to be in a familiar place where you always find new stuff and get deeper into it. (Kalle)

Three interviewees considered the National Park meaningful, and others related neutrally. For example, Leevi stated that he did not need it as a 'brand' but understood its importance. Presence of the National Park did not affect his choice of place to come freeriding. Eetu, in turn, narrated that "the status of the National Park does not add any value to me, as it doesn't change the terrain". The National Park, however, enables to remain naturalness of the area

and prevent construction. Down to earth ideology, as Kalle refers, in Pyhätunturi is seen valuable also among other interviewees. Tranquillity and ecology are said to be appreciated part of Pyhätunturi. It was noted by Tytti, as Pyhä is carbon-neutral ski resort in the use of ski lifts as an example, it feels nicer to visit such destinations.

That kind of resorts, ski resorts, that are build more with nature's terms as for example here the National Park restrict development and the ideology of Pyhä is down to earth so that appeals a lot, more than if ski lifts were built all over the place and all those after ski places. (Kalle)

Two of the interviewees considered Pyhä as a good place to practice and spend time outdoors, but the main thing of freeriding is somewhere else. As narrated by Eetu "I feel that in terms of freeriding, in terms of my own freeriding, it (Pyhä) is a good place to practice". This was in line with Eetu's description of the most recent experience, as his freeriding experience in Pyhätunturi was an orienteering exercise without a map, only using compass. He mentioned that visibility was poor, but freeriding terrain was easy, making it a good opportunity to have an orienteering exercise. For more challenging terrain, mountains outside Finland are places to be pursuit. In this matter, the dimension of a relationship with nature is following Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup's (2018) topographical dimension. The participants narrated choosing freeriding places in terms of challenging places, as risk-management and overcoming challenges is motivating for him in freeriding.

For me freeriding is that I am there (mountains), like for me that I am skiing at Pyhä is more like nice time being outdoors and I do enjoy it, it's like different, but for me the breath-taking thing in freeriding is there at the mountains. (Ossi)

The meaning of place for the participants has formed through their activities, notions, and physical environment. This follows the line of Canter (1977, as cited in Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 182), as the meaning of place is formed by the relationship between activities, conceptions, and physical attributes (see Figure 4). As mentioned, place has an aspect of doing, and in this case, the aspect of doing is freeriding. In the following section I will discuss what kind of activity freeriding contains.

## **4.2 Nature as an environment of activity**

According to Milligan et al (2021) routes into engaging with nature-adventure activities, such as freeriding, are important to understand why people connect with natural environment

in the first place, but also what guides and maintains their active commitment to these landscapes throughout their lives. The routes of how interviewees had started freeriding were asked. Two of the interviewees had some form of participation in freeriding as a child. At that time, it was more like playing with friends. Three of the interviewees were inspired and got a spark for freeriding in the Alps when they visited there with friends, family or worked there, and one interviewee started quite recently with the encouragement of the spouse. Four of the interviewees were advanced freeriders, three of them working around freeriding on occasion. Two of the interviewees were beginners. After learning how they had started with freeriding, I was interested in why participants engage with freeriding. Similarities were found, and the greatest similarities were physicality and being outdoors. Two of the more advanced participants narrated that also challenging themselves with freeriding is motivating, as challenges always teach something new and gain self-awareness. One of them particularly was desired to test his own limits and facing challenges. This participant is in line with Berkeka (2018), who found out that backcountry skiers were motivated by testing their limits and boundaries, experiencing locus control. For other participants, testing one's limits was not desired, but physicality of freeriding was inspiring.

According to Kumpulainen et al (2010), human has a will to be active and when being and experience are added to the activity, one can speak of agency. Agency is about doing things and not just expecting things to happen to a person. Hence, person has an influence on the things that happen to them. Agency is often associated with such things as activity, intentionality, inclusion, influence and choice, volunteering, and the ability and power to choose one's own course of action. Thus, the experience of agency plays a major role in the formation of human (or community) identity (Kumpulainen et al., 2010).

And just like, there is a feeling of doing it when you are skiing there and not so that the ski lift pulls you up so yeah, it is like one that also motivates, like the fact that I am a person who likes to move, likes physical exertion so then it's nicer to hike yourself up than to always go with a lift. (Ilona)

Skiing itself, there is a huge attraction in pristine and soft snow. (Kalle)

A certain kind of snow and then kind of the feeling when riding, and then that challenge. It's maybe more that challenging and looking for boundaries kind of that motivates. (Eetu)



According to the interviewees, physicality of freeriding is a positive part of it. Hiking up is an important part of freeriding as it offers more of a feeling of doing. Some of the participants wanted to use as little as possible ski lifts and other motor vehicles as a help for going to places, as Eetu refers “and maybe such a thing like avoiding motor vehicles like somehow to get there on my own”. “Earn Your Turns” is a commonly known term in freeriding community. It means that people are ready to use time and physical strength to hike up and ski down and sometimes all the effort is made only for few good turns in the snow, but then you have “earned” your turns using your own muscle strength. It was also meaningful for the participants that they felt that they have been doing something.

But then again, I am also a Earn Your Turn -type of person, that I am ready to make an effort to get to good places, so like, yeah, I don't mind spending time to get to cool places. (Tytti)

Tytti's description of the most recent experience did support Earn Your Turns 'ideology', as she referred being a bit disappointed that they could not go more deeply to the backcountry. Her freeriding experience in the interview was off-piste skiing using ski lifts. She narrated that as they only had one day to ride and they were not sure about snow conditions in the backcountry, they decided to stay in the ski resort area. Taking unnecessary risks was not desired. The physicality is evident in the descriptions of the experiences of others as they narrate in which places they ascended and descended. Four of the participants went to Ukonhattu and hiked there in various ways, one participant hiked to Noitatunturi to freeride. Ukonhattu and Noitatunturi are basic freeriding routes in Pyhäntunturi, especially Ukonhattu as its profile is easy and risk of avalanche is extremely low.

The responses also confirmed what Autti pondered; whether freeriding in Finland is mostly outdoor recreation (see chapter 1.1). Most of the participants mentioned freeriding in Finland and in Pyhäntunturi as touring, being outdoors, more than as a search for best powder. Nature, finding new routes and being outdoors are considered admired in freeriding, and as referred by one of the interviewees, these were more important aspects than skiing itself: “and hmm, as a freerider I am an outdoor person and enjoyer, that I really like the hiking part also, that skiing itself is not the thing for me” (Ilona).

For some of the participants freeriding was also an option for outdoor activity after workday for instance. For these participants freeriding did not mean conquering mountains and

searching for best powders, but it is more of an outdoor recreation. It is an activity to refresh and get thoughts out of everyday life. Nearby destinations are seen as an important motive for proximity tourism mobilities by some of the participants. In the descriptions of the most recent freeriding experience of the participants, outdoor recreation is also strongly featured. Many of the participants narrates of their breaks and snacks they ate along the way. These responses also conveys that they have not been in a hurry, they have enjoyed their day being outdoors.

After our freeriding trip we were very hyped of the day, like this is the way you should always spend your Sundays. Riding and eating and hiking and enjoying nature. (Ilona)

Nature-adventure activities is a term used to define voluntary engagement in new, insecure, and emotionally intensive recreational activities, such as freeriding. Earlier in nature-adventure activities, risk-taking was central to the experience, that danger and uncertainty were interpreted as fun and excitement. In recent decades, however, these factors have been seen as less important than the benefits of enjoyment, well-being, learning, and embodied experience through emotional, social, and environmental interactions (Milligan et al., 2021).

There was a noticeable change in attitudes towards freeriding for participants, who had been freeriding multiple years. Three of the participants were talking about evolution of freeriding. Before, it was important to find the best powder and it was sought even at the risk of danger. Today, freeriding is being approached more cautiously and calmly. These participants had understood their vulnerability and having children had also contributed to a change in attitudes. Kalle mentioned that ‘macho’ culture in general in freeriding has changed to appreciating nature more. In accordance with Milligan et al (2021), freeriders that I interviewed were looking for enjoyment and social interactions through freeriding experience.

Well, I've gone through that kind of evolution, from like taking unnecessary risks, and trying to achieve something so wild to that today I move quite carefully and sensibly that's maybe because of my own training and that I have kind of understood my own vulnerability. (Kalle)

Well, in the past it has been all about skiing and the kind of feeling you got from that soft snow and from one turn, somehow it was addictive and of course still is, it's very cool but maybe it's has changed more a bit like being outdoors and like

that, going up and your group and everything all around is like pretty important part of freeriding. (Leevi)

Moving around in nature is a way to escape from everyday life and calm down. Everyday worries disappear and one can focus only on being in that moment. This could be described as the concept of flow. Flow is a state where people are so involved and concentrated in an activity, that nothing else seems to matter (Pitt, 2014). All the concerns are forgotten. Especially Leevi mentioned freeriding to be an activity that helps him to forget everything else.

It's a bit like calming down and stopping thing to get into nature and finding new places and sweet landscapes, that is like so cool --- Like everyday life disappears quite quickly, the activity takes all the attention. (Leevi)

Training also turned out to be a part of freeriding. Each of the interviewees (and presumably one advanced freerider with whom there was no talk about it) had completed snow safety course at some point. Ilona, by way of illustration, had completed snow safety course one week before freeriding experience that she narrated in the interview. She notices that it was at the same time positive and negative aspect that they had a fresh memory of the course, as the visibility and conditions were not the greatest when they went freeriding. She felt that it would have been embarrassing if something would have happened, as after the course they should know better.

Three of the interviewees were more educated, meaning they acted as freeriding guides for instance. Their knowledge of Pyhätunturi area and safety issues were broad. Everyone but one also owned avalanche-safety equipment (avalanche beacon, shovel, and probes). All the participants were aware of the risks in freeriding, but some took a different approach to them as they considered risk-management inspiring and for some participants risks of freeriding pondered and unnecessary risks wanted to be avoided by all means. Participants wanted to find out and learn about safety issues, which shows an interest in one's own development. Beginners as well as more advanced freeriders were similar in this matter. In accordance with Berbeka (2018), training offers a potential for increased contributions for interpreting nature and learning how to behave more environmentally.

### 4.3 Values that guide freeriding

Some of the participants experienced tranquillity as meaningful in freeriding. According to Kaplan and Kaplan (1989, as cited in Marafa et al., 2018), the concept of tranquillity refers to a psychological state characterized by calmness, quietness, and peacefulness. Phrase *in the middle of nowhere* is repeated in the narration of one interviewee. She realizes being in the middle of nowhere when there is no one except their own group around and there is no man-made infrastructure around (see e.g. 4.1 The meaning of place). Natural environment is all that surrounds. The beauty of the landscapes encourages contemplation in action. This follows the line of Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018, p. 8) as they argue that “the mountain environment therefore has an aesthetic value that is revealed by the contemplation of the landscapes, as well as by the sensations of pleasure that this contemplation procures”.

Well, just like is there a lot of people around, or like the tranquillity, the tranquillity of the area, if there are lot of other freeriders there, of course it affects differently than if you are there only with your own group like in the middle of nowhere. (Tytti)

Pristine nature is said to appeal by most of the participants as well, that the natural environment is an essential dimension. Pristine nature is referred to mean escape from infrastructure and man-made environment. As stated by Kalle “I am more attracted to pristine natural area than to a park-like environment, although it would somehow be made more optimal for that hobby (freeriding)”. Untouched nature is considered to be authentic nature; even though ski resorts are also in nature, backcountry is the ‘real thing’. Freeriding equipment (skins and skis) enables access to places that could be difficult to achieve otherwise. When participants are referring to the previous, it could be interpreted as a *sense of freedom*. As noted by one interviewee, word *free* is already included in freeriding. Freedom to choose one’s own routes and places to go in freeriding for participants of the study. This is in accordance with Berbeka (2018) who found that the opportunity to choose a personal line and being away from crowded areas were significant value for backcountry skiers. The value of freedom appears to play an important role for winter sport practitioners also according to Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018), and it is linked in search of a break from everyday life. Avoiding developed areas and places with too many visitors is considered as a freedom to practice in more tranquil places, and it is an opportunity to free oneself from the demands of urban civilization.

Now, through freeriding, I get to places where there are not so many people. Like it has such a completely different feeling, that in my opinion it has offered a whole new dimension. (Ilona)

Freeriding is also referred as a therapy or as a mindfulness matter. One interviewee felt deeply happy to be so privileged to be in Pyhätunturi and to be able to ski, saying that every moment is important and unique. This follows the spiritual dimension of Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018) “*Be one with mountains*” (see Figure 2.). Spiritual dimension is related to the search for a strong relationship with the natural environment. It reflects that freeriding, embodied experience, and surrounding nature creates a strong state of mind for Kalle. Spiritual of natural environment is a search for peace and quiet. Kalle reflected, that being around nature and natural environment has become so valuable, that he could not imagine living in a city anymore. He was pleased that his life choices had led him to stay in Pyhätunturi for longer time and to be able to ski as much as he likes.

Well, that's (nature) just the main thing in it or that, the feeling is the best, like the snow and the scenery, and it's more like a therapy almost when you go to the backcountry. (Tytti)

It's like mindfulness thing that somehow you try to be in the moment and happy about the moment what it is even if it's not as perfect as imagined, like you can be there it's too cold and frosty and your nose is white but it's still great to be there. --  
- It is just such a deep happiness that it is possible to be there. (Kalle)

Also, from the experience description of Kalle it is highly noticeable that for him freeriding is a strong emotional and sensual experience.

It was just extremely beautiful and quiet and no wind, like the weather was pretty awesome, so I don't know it is just, well I was just there I where I want to be haha. That it is a truly holistic experience, that it is such a mental landscape and such a state where I want to be. (Kalle)

Three of the participants mentioned climate change, or more precisely climate awakening. Participants said they could fight for and do things for nature as they want to preserve it for generations to come. Yet, as results from Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018) also presents, nature is to be protected, but it is also to be used for recreational purposes, such as freeriding. Some of the more advanced freeriders narrated that their traveling habits towards freeriding had changed. One interviewee, Ossi, had been traveling a lot for freeriding in different places around the world, but it changed when he realized that there are perfectly fine mountains in Norway that are easier to reach time wise and thinking about proximity

tourism. Kalle had experienced similar change in his traveling habits. Fells and freeriding places in Finland are enough, especially Pyhänturi, and if something bigger is needed, then mountains in Norway are being reached.

Maybe there is also some kind of climate awakening, it's hard to think of going to for example to Japan just for riding. Like somehow the fact that it is here we have places that are pretty easy to reach with somehow reasonable transportation, so it feels more important. If I want to go to the mountains I'll go to Norway, I won't say that I wouldn't never go to the Alps, but long-distance destinations have been left out somehow. (Kalle)

Two of the interviewees were looking forward for travelling to the Alps, as traveling restrictions due to Covid-19 had made it difficult previous winters. According to another of them, freeriding in the Alps is more demanding and rewarding when you get to challenge yourself.

Nature, in general, is respected and its value is highlighted among all the interviewees. The role of nature in freeriding is considered meaningful, as it enables freeriding. It gives the environment for freeriding. For some of the interviewees the role of nature has grown when growing older as they have noticed its vulnerability. Freeriding has also brought new dimensions on respecting nature according to some of participants, as they can experience how nature behaves and is constantly changing. Some of the interviewees also narrated that keeping nature clean and avoiding leaving traces is important for them. "It's like it's high in value (nature) and in a way keeping nature clean is important and it's like it is already part of respecting it" (Eetu).

Yes, it's like, it's maybe the role of nature has grown with age. Maybe at least as big with the snow that when I leave there in the backcountry, I'm not going to get some untouched snow, but as soon as I get to the National Park, somehow there is that peace being there with deadwoods and old trees, just that you can be there is already a really big value in itself. (Kalle)

As stated by Alexandris et al (2009), individuals are engaged in recreation activities (e.g. freeriding) to achieve certain psychological outcomes, such as stress relief. It shows from the responses of the participants, that tranquillity, natural environment and being in close contact with nature are high in value. As stated earlier, freeriding is a way to escape everyday life and to experience a sense of freedom, it also refers to psychological outcomes. Freeriding offers an escape from urban city life, and the place has a significant role. Some of the

participants narrates that accessing to the National Park offers peace, and in general getting away from infrastructure and other distractions is valuable. As described by one interviewee, freeriding is a form of self-expression, that it is more than riding with freeriding equipment, it is a holistic nature experience. Then, freeriding becomes a state of mind.

#### **4.4 On nature's terms**

Nature ultimately determines where to go freeriding. The environment has to be suitable for the practice and conditions such, that they enable freeriding (e.g. snow). Many of the interviewees recognize that nature cannot be modified the way they want, nature must be accepted as such. This is in line with Brymer and Gray (2010), as the participant in an extreme sport must accept that nature is greater than the participant. Outdoor recreationist must accept that he/she is only small part of the world, and one must be adapted and adjusted to the natural world. Nature is greater and more powerful than humanity (Brymer & Gray, 2010, p. 368). Freeriders are in close contact with nature, and all the participants noticed that you must behave on nature's terms when moving in nature. This is also part of respecting nature, understanding that it cannot be treated arbitrarily.

The fact that if you think about moving in nature and so on, so understanding that it cannot be defied that we need to go on nature's terms that's what it is. (Eetu)

But I may have gotten over the point that I can't assume that nature is in it for me, but I have to be on the terms of nature, I have to do things on the terms of nature. Like you can't, it it's just too much of a power to try to force into some shape you want. (Kalle)

Reading nature is also a big part of freeriding. More advanced freeriders have gained knowledge for reading nature through long history with freeriding and they were not as concerned about the risks of freeriding as beginners. Beginners, for instance, avoided more places that they weren't sure about in terms of avalanche danger. For safety manners, snow along with weather conditions are the most important aspects of what to read. Conditions, in the end, determine where one can ride. One participant's description of the most recent experience contained educational aspects. He was freeriding with his family in Ukonhattu, and along the way he thought his children how to read snow, how to see which places are safe and which elements are to avoid. He was passing his knowledge for younger generation. Participants also refer that reading nature is constant observation. It starts already before the

freeriding trip, as weather and snow conditions must be determined in advance. During the trip, observation continues as earlier knowledge of the situation might have changed. Hence, conditions significantly affect planning the trip before and during.

As Humberstone (2011) expresses, moving ‘through’ nature brings out ever-changing perceptions and awareness. Knowledge of the environment is constantly evolving as moving around. Observation includes natural features, such as snow, wind, clouds, and terrain. When choosing the freeriding place, riding skills should be in proportion to the prevailing conditions, as was noted by one of the participants. As another of the beginners referred, she had to be extremely sure about conditions before going as she did not want to take any kind of risks. According to Humberstone (2011), nature-based physical activities engage with nature in different ways than traditional sports, since the relationship between the body and nature can seldom be subject to limited rules; rather, the body must anticipate and respond to an ever-changing environment. As also Brymer and Gray (2010, p. 367) states, participation on nature-based activity accepts and is dependent on understanding the environment and on learning to work with it, not against.

So, like the interaction is pretty strong, constant observation on what the weather is already in advance like where you should go, where the wind has blown and where it is even possible to ride, and then when you go there to the spot it’s like continuous observing of the situation (Leevi)

And maybe that's like nature, it happens in nature, so that nature’s conditions, nature is such a big element that you can't ignore it, you have to take it into account in all your planning. The terrain and conditions, so on nature’s terms it largely goes. (Kalle)

According to the narrations of the participants, weather may affect the experience negatively and positively. As stated earlier, weather conditions are crucial in freeriding. Bad weather may cause problems with visibility, as was referred in Ilona’s and Eetu’s descriptions of the most recent experience. According to them, when visibility is weak, the practice is automatically performed with greater caution, and it can affect the experience negatively. This is in line with Berbeka (2018), where findings showed that the poor visibility may negatively influence the overall experience. Other factors in addition to weather that influence the freeriding experience and are dependent on are social atmosphere, perceived risk or safety and group achievements (Berbeka, 2018).



Four of the participants highlighted the importance of other people in their descriptions of the most recent experience. They narrated with whom they were freeriding with and what was their aim for the trip. They also mentioned how they together wondered the weather at the time. Admiration and wonder of the weather and landscapes was unifying matter in every experience description. Participants narrated surprisingly accurately what the weather was like during their trip, and it was also told what kind of snow there was. Participants were not pleased if there was hard crust in the snow as it is more difficult to ride, but they noticed that snow was softer when they rode between trees, not on top of the fells. This matter also affected their choice if they decided to hike up again.

The weather was described as how was the wind, clouds, and sunshine. From this perspective, descriptions of the most recent experiences indicates that freeriding is an opportunity to have a sensual nature experience, as also stated by Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018). Nature is experienced visually as a landscape and also through the senses of hearing, smelling, and touching (see e.g., Telama, 1992, p. 62). Visual sense and sense of touching were most common senses participants reflected on, some of the participants also noticed how quiet it is when you are *middle of nowhere*. Sense of touching come true for instance when they feel the snow and how their riding equipment is behaving with it. As stated also by Laurén (2006, p. 81), the human environment is multidimensional and its experience consists of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling through which we form our perception of our environment.

And then again, that even though there is bad snow but a super beautiful weather like some awesome colourful sunrise or sunset or a pink sky or something like that, it might save a lot of that trip if you are then like wow how beautiful, or on the other hand also the fact that no matter how super awesome the snow but super icy wind so yes it will turn it the other way around so that then comes like ah, this is terrible with this wind. Or that the trip will be shorter after, like the weather has a big impact.  
(Ilona)

Even though in nature sports such as freeriding humans are interacting with nature rather directly, technology can affect the experience (Krein, 2014). Krein wonders if nature sport involving a high amount of technology can be authentic but at the same time identifies the high potential of technology. For instance, having any kind of skis on our feet allows us to experience snow in a very different way than we would by walking through it. High-tech materials in clothing allow adaptation to different weather conditions and GPS and route

descriptions make untamed terrain marked and clear paths. Instead of interfering with human interactions with natural features, the introduction of technology in such cases often allows us to interact with them in ways that would not otherwise be accessible (Krein, 2014).

Skiing in the backcountry is a different experience than skiing in a resort; it requires choosing your own lines, dealing with significant variations in snow conditions, and assessing the risk of avalanches. When freeriding in backcountry terrain, carrying avalanche-safety equipment is highly recommended. It involves technology, such as avalanche beacon. Beacon is an electric device worn on the body that helps to find buried avalanche victims wearing a beacon as well (Avalanche beacon). In conclusion, even though freeriding is an activity that involves practicing on nature's terms, safety aspects can be improved with the use of certain equipment and technology.

Risk of avalanche and other risks that can occur during freeriding (e.g. injury) raised dissenting opinions among participants. Two of the participants reacted rather neutrally when asked about risks, they were not concern about them but were aware of risks and did not see it as a negative part of freeriding. Three of the participants reacted for the risks more fearfully, as Tytti refers: "like not always everything can be planned in nature as it is unpredictable so something can always happen, so yeah, it always makes you think". These participants prefer taking a completely safe route rather than taking unnecessary risks. For one participant, in turn, risks were one of the main things in freeriding, as for him it is interesting aspect to manage sudden aspects in freeriding. This interviewee is in line with the study of Tøstesen and Langseth (2021), that found out that one of the values in freeriding is risk-taking.

It's probably the thing that there are those risks, it's kind of risk management. Management and like development in it, in risk management. There is much of that practice in that you learn to know first about those risks and then on how to manage them. Without that risk, you don't have to go through this process, and in a way, I don't think that without that danger I would be that excited about it (freeriding).  
(Eetu)

Some of the participants were more concerned about other freeriders. As the amount of freeriders has grown in recent years, there is also room for risk factors. The popularity of freeriding outside of groomed slopes has been boosted by, among other things, social media, where spectacular images also attract inexperienced and unequipped riders to pristine slopes

(Heikinmatti, 2021). Most of the participants related positively towards increasing numbers of freeriders, but noticed at the same time some risk factors, such as pressure during holidays. If freeriding is a thing that you can do only occasionally, then the risk of excess is higher, as stated by Kalle.

Because it creates the kind of needs to do things that may not make sense. That you try to do things when the conditions are not good, you go to places with poor visibility, dangerous snow conditions, where you shouldn't go just because "I only have this week and I have to do it now because I'm at the office next week and then it would not be possible anymore". (Kalle)

It could be said that the participants of this study understand that freeriding is, above all, acting on nature's terms. Participants were connected with nature in different ways, but similarly, they were all acting in nature and observed their environment. Kalle felt being part of nature: "I observe nature a lot and I feel like I am living with nature in a way". Ecocentric perspective was stronger than anthropocentric perspective among participants (see e.g. Brymer & Gray, 2018). As stated by Brymer and Gray (2018, p. 363), "an ecocentric perspective recognizes that nature has intrinsic value and does not just exist as a resource for humanity". Nature is respected and valued, and simultaneously, some of the participants are wondering whether it is appreciated enough or whether it is self-evident for Finnish people.

#### **4.5 Discussion on the findings**

As a result of the six semi-structured interviews, I defined four themes that constructs participants human-nature relationships in freeriding experience: *the meaning of place, nature as an environment of activity, values that guide freeriding and on nature's terms*. Even though these themes are presented as separate subchapters, they are all closely intertwined. I did not explain the terms nature, environment and human-nature relationship for the participants when interviewing them, as I wanted them to answer how they understand and interpret them. In this section I will provide a summary of freeriders human-nature relationships in freeriding experience.

In each interview, the role of nature in freeriding was narrated to be meaningful and important. The reason was obvious as stated by the participants; without nature one would not be able to practice freeriding. The role of the surrounding nature in freeriding is to offer a place to escape everything man-made, opportunity to have a break from everyday life,

possibility for tranquillity and for physical activity. Freeriding happens outdoors, in natural environment, under varying conditions. Some participants mentioned their relationship with nature has strengthened due to freeriding, that is has taught and brought a new dimension to nature. The responses indicates that nature has an aspect of doing, one goes to nature to engage with some activity. However, while nature is a place to be active, it also a place to calm down. As some of the participants mentioned, while engaging deeply with freeriding, it enables to forget everyday life and gives an opportunity to really focus on moment, some referred freeriding as mindfulness and therapeutic. The responses showed overall a positive attitude towards nature and outdoor recreation, from which it could be concluded that freeriding also has well-being effects for the participants. The importance of outdoor environments in improving and maintaining health and well-being in general has been increasingly recognized worldwide in public health debates. This has led to promoting nature-based encounters, and at the same time, there is a growth of nature-adventure activities, such as freeriding as well (Milligan et al., 2021).

According to Pitt (2014), what people do is as important as where this activity takes place. The findings of the thesis revealed same matter. The meaning of place was reflected in each theme. It appeared from responses that a place enables action, and at the same time, action makes a place. The findings were in line with Sharpley and Stone (2012), that the meaning of place is constructed by the relationship between activities, conceptions, and physical attributes. In accordance with Sharpley and Stone (2012), performance in place depends on an individual's perceptions, the expectation of being there, and thus the ability to live the activities provided by physical attributes and social parameters in a given space and time. Hence, the activity involves an interaction between the specifics of the living body and the place, which creates a wide range of sensations. Freeriders relationship with nature, in this given setting, is constructed through action and experiencing nature. Without action, there is no such experience from nature. Hence, the relationship with nature among freeriders in this study has an active role. At the same time, nature determines the action, as weather and snow conditions play a dominant role when deciding where to go freeriding.

Human-nature relationships of a freerider are multidimensional. Every nature experience explains the relationship with nature at that time. The main perspective in this thesis was that the relationship with nature becomes meaningful through experiences, perceptions,

awareness, and actions (see e.g. Laurén, 2006, p. 13). Participants' experience descriptions from the freeriding experience at the time of the interview had notions of different relationships with nature that I will go through following Karvinen and Nykänen's (1997, see chapter 2.2 Relationship between human and nature) perceptions of human-nature relationships. From different human-nature relationships aesthetic-romantic, naturalistic, informative-scientific, and archaic were characteristic. For freeriders freeriding environment is constructed of different elements, such as landscapes and terrain. These elements created aesthetic and sensual experiences for the participants, following aesthetic-romantic relationship of Karvinen and Nykänen (1997). It was notable, that when asked of what motivates them for freeriding, only one mentioned landscape, but when participants narrated their description of the most recent experience, almost everyone referred for the scenery at the time. Description of the weather and snow were also an important part of the participants descriptions of the most recent experience.

Nature was also seen as a challenging environment. Participants agreed that nature cannot be modified as desired and that one must behave on nature's terms. Participants noticed that there are risks in freeriding in terms of nature, but one can lower the risks by avoiding avalanche terrain and using proper equipment. For some participants, however, risks in freeriding increased enthusiasm as it enables to prove one's ability to survive, following naturalistic character of human-nature relationships. For some of the participants freeriding experience had strong informative and scientific aspect. Their experiences included, as they narrated, reading nature and passing the information forward. They had a solid interaction with their environment, and they used their knowledge and earlier experiences as a base for it. One participant differs from other participants by his description of the most recent experience, as his human-nature relationship character was also archaic. He mentioned being part of the nature, living together with it and not as a separate creature.

These four characteristics, aesthetic-romantic, naturalistic, informative-scientific, and archaic, were revealed from the interviewee's narrations, and aesthetic-romantic was most common one. As mentioned by Karvinen and Nykänen (1997, p. 17-19), individuals' human-nature relationships can be a mixture of all these qualities. Different things are emphasized to different people in their relationship with nature. I decided to summarize freeriders' human-nature relationships in Pyhätunturi according to Karvinen and Nykänen

as their perceptions of relationships with nature summed up well human-nature relationships that indicated in this study as well. This study does not generalize that every freeriders most common human-nature relationship would be aesthetic-romantic, as freeriders in this study were referring for their localized relationship with nature (see chapter 2.3 Experiencing nature and place), but it is in line with aesthetic and sensual experience being common motive for outdoor recreation (see e.g. Telama, 1992, p. 64).

Phenomenologically, experience is a relationship of meaning that includes both the conscious subject and his/her conscious activity and the object to which the activity is directed; experience is built on this relationship between subject and object. Connection to everyday life situations makes experience meaningful and experience is what life situation means to a person (Laurén, 2006, p.81). Phenomenological methodology proved to be useful in highlighting the perceptions of different participants and how they interpret their experiences, described from their perspective. Participants life situations were shown in their narratives, which proved that everyday life and life situation is included in one's experience. Research topic was noticed to be interesting and pleasant among participants, as they noted that it was nice to reflect and think deeper about reason why to freeride.

The findings indicates that one of the main reasons behind freeriding is to be outdoors, in nature. It was notable that some of the participants mentioned untouched snow and skiing itself to be reasons to freeride, but for some of the participants the place where to freeride was more important. These participants did not seek for best powder but beautiful sceneries. Overall, this study is in line with the results of Perrin-Malterre and Chanteloup (2018) research. Study of Perrin-Malterre and Chantelpoup indicated that bonding with natural environment is important for ski tourers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*“And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul” – John Muir*

The focus of this study has been to gain deeper understanding of freeriders human-nature relationships in Pyhäntunturi. I approached the study from the perspective of constructivist paradigm that assumes that there are multiple realities and the knower and respondent co-create understanding. In the study of experience knowledge is individual and unique, and it is constantly changing (see e.g. Tökkäri, 2018, p. 66). I also approached the research from perspective that acting in nature reflects one's human-nature relationships. My main research question was how human-nature relationships appear in freeriding experience? To be able to answer the research question I examined what is the meaning of a freeriding place, what kind of values freeriders have towards freeriding and how nature itself affects the freeriding experience and human-nature relationships? Human-nature relationships among freeriders were studied in order to widen understanding of why people engage with freeriding, what kind of connection they have with nature. The study also aimed to increase understanding of freeriding as a phenomenon in adventure and nature-based tourism, that is, tourism in natural areas. With this, it also contributed brief discussion on proximity tourism. These insights may establish new ways in thinking of how to behave more environmentally when acting with natural environment. The study was conducted by using the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews with freeriders who had recently been freeriding in Pyhäntunturi. The data consist of six interviews.

The findings of this study establish that freeriders' human-nature relationships are constructed through activities and experiences. Furthermore, freeriders' values given to nature followed their freeriding experience. Even though values affect practice, they do not unequivocally explain human's relationship with nature; values are part of concrete practices (Valkonen, 2013, p. 7). Freeriding has also deepened and give new dimensions for relationship with nature for the participants. As the role of nature and environment was narrated to be big and important, it could be concluded that without that nature one would not go freeriding. Nature affects back to one's activity by its conditions and elements. Hence, nature has agency. According to Lehtinen (2021, p. 11) the meaning of nature, which is non-human material, to human seems to be generally accepted, in which case it can be thought

that nature has agency. If the material is assumed to have agency, then it can affect humans. This study indicates that nature affects freeriders. This can be noticed in the answers to the sub questions of this study as well, as all of them are supporting the idea of nature having agency. Thereby it can be argued that the meaning of nature agency in freeriding experience is inevitable. Nature has agency and it affects freeriding and human-nature relationships. For instance, values of freeriders in this study focused on the protection and appreciation of nature and in addition, nature provides peace and tranquillity, and this way affects freeriders.

As stated by Rantala, Tuulentie and Valtonen (2013, p. 65), nature-based tourism research has indicated that nature, being in nature and acting there are important for people in many ways for well-being and recreation. Findings of this thesis are in line with earlier studies, that the role of nature is significant in outdoor recreation activities, and nature provides an environment for engaging with activities (see e.g. Perrin-Malterre & Chanteloup, 2018; Brymer & Gray, 2010; Berbeka, 2018). Examining freeriders way of behaving and their human-nature relationships is important because of the increased use of recreation and to understand nature-based tourism and its versatility more deeply. This way, it is also important to outline future uses of nature. The findings of this study underlines same that Valkonen (2013, p. 6) demonstrates. According to Valkonen (2013), the increase of nature-based tourism has had a positive impact both on the development of environmental awareness and on knowing and experiencing nature. Outdoor recreation is about getting active in nature, getting to know living and non-living nature. It can both improve and revitalize people's understanding of nature and increase an environmentally friendly attitude and awareness. This also supports posthumanist theory which seeks to dispel the confrontations between nature and culture and between human and non-human nature (see e.g. Ihnji, 2020).

The research was carried out using phenomenological approach. In this process I was able to gather in-depth descriptions of how freeriders perceive freeriding in Pyhätunturi. Nevertheless, this study had few limitations. It is important to notice that the findings of this study do not offer generalizable result but serve as an example of human-nature relationships among freeriders. Even though the results of the interviews were fruitful, it is not possible to make generalizations on this basis, as the interviews were only focusing on Pyhätunturi. As stated by Haila and Lähde (2003, as cited in Valkonen, 2013, p. 7), nature can never be



encountered as a whole, as it is too diverse a phenomenon, therefore, one is always in relation to localized nature at a time. Also, the interviews lacked a young person's perspective, as the youngest participant was 27 years old. Interviews included two persons who lived in the area, and they had a strong relationship with Pyhätunturi already because of that matter. If the data would have been gathered focusing only on tourists and having more variety of participants, I think the responses could have been more diverse. I was also kind of lacking negative aspects of freeriding. I did not try to focus intentionally on positive aspects in freeriding, but it was notable that the participants had hardly anything negative to say regarding freeriding or Pyhätunturi. In the interview situations I noticed that I had to ask separately if they had any negative to refer, but the only matter that was pointed out associated with the danger of avalanche.

I noticed having difficulties with translation through the whole thesis process. Some words work well in Finnish, but when translating to English it seemed that the meaning of the word slightly changed. Freeriding vocabulary in Finnish differs from vocabulary in English. For instance, there is no word in English for term *skinnaaminen*. It is translated as hiking or skiing up, as it means the activity when freerider uses his/her skis with skins to hike up. Also, word outdoor recreation used in this thesis functions better in Finnish – *retkeily*. In English there is no clearer translation for the word. Translating challenges had been taken into account when translating quotes from the interviewees.

Furthermore, me being somewhat part of the freeriding community, I noticed that sometimes I did not manage to write in a way that a person who is not familiar with freeriding would necessarily understand the meaning. As such, staying more objective was a challenge that I had to improve along the way. My pre-assumptions of freeriding were introduced in the Introduction chapter (see 1.1 background to the study). As I have some experience of freeriding on my own and I have been engaged with snowboarding many years, I assume that it had some implications on how I made this study because, after all, the research topic was chosen as I was interested of freeriding. Being part of snowboarding community was beneficial to find interviewees, as it was easy to approach them when I knew where to find them. Me and the interviewees shared the same interest, so it was natural to start conversations. Also, during the interviews, my pre-assumptions and knowledge made it

possible to ask additional questions which might not otherwise have been asked. This way I was able to take an advantage of the nature of semi-structured interviews.

It is also under consideration whether snow conditions affected the experience at the time of the interviews. During the interview period (7<sup>th</sup> of February to 16<sup>th</sup> of March) there were best snow conditions this season to freeride in Pyhätunturi. From the narrations of the participants, it was notable that all of them referred for snow conditions. The first two interviews noticed that snow cover was not that deep yet, that there were some rocks to avoid, and they needed to be careful with them. The next three interviewees mentioned how great snow conditions were, they found powder and soft snow and were able to get good turns in the snow. For the last interviewee snow cover started to melt a bit, which brought some out rocks again. Clearly, thinner snow cover affects freeriding experience as it makes freeriding more difficult and challenging. For instance, rocks can damage skiing equipment and cause injuries if falling. As was stated by Mourey (2020), climate change has made snow cover less abundant and the length of ski touring season will decrease among areas and sections which are suitable for freeriding. The reduction of snow cover makes some routes infeasible to ride as rocky outcrops require large quantities of snow to cover.

As the findings of this thesis also established, freeriding has gone through an “evolution” from risk-taking and danger to enjoying, well-being, learning and embodied experience (see e.g. Milligan et al., 2012). As some of the participants narrated, that riding is not necessary the biggest part of freeriding, that they enjoy the hiking part and being outdoors. It could be argued that this evolution has a positive effect for the future of freeriding, as if snow cover will be less abundant making riding more difficult, freeriding could still be practiced in terms of outdoor recreation.

This thesis was not commissioned by Pyhä Ski Resort, but as it focused on Pyhätunturi, the ski resort might benefit from the results of this research. The topic of the research raised interest among people working in the ski resort. I had an opportunity to talk with Pyhätunturi Oy Ski Resort Manager Jusu Toivonen, and Toivonen said following (freely translated):

Pyhä Ski Resort is known for its varied freeriding terrain and services. One of the main goals of Pyhätunturi Oy's strategy is to develop into a versatile freeriding resort. Therefore, the topic of Tiina Heikkilä's master's thesis is very interesting

from the perspective of Pyhätunturi Oy and can be useful for increasing customer understanding and developing the customer experience. (Personal communication, November 29, 2021)

By understanding better how freeriders relate to nature when they are freeriding in Pyhätunturi, it can give useful data and tools to develop the area and customer experience and in addition, how to organize more sustainable tourism. Pyhätunturi Oy has already a great reputation as a sustainable freeriding ski resort, and they have put a lot of effort on developing the area as such. Even so, this study of how freeriders view nature in Pyhätunturi has been noted as important. As the number of freeriders and outdoor recreationists is increasing, this thesis may contribute additional knowledge about how to protect nature under the pressure of increased tourism when understanding freeriders better (Perrin-Malterre & Chanteloup, 2018).

As this thesis is qualitative research and I used interpretative phenomenological analysis, appropriate number of interviewees was 3-6 (Smith et al, 2009, p. 59). Therefore, this thesis presents only a small number of freeriders who had been freeriding in Pyhätunturi. Additionally, demographics of the participants was not made. For the future studies I would suggest for more holistic approach. It would be interesting to study demographics of freeriders in Finland and to examine, who are these people for example by finding and defining different type characters. Freeriders and freeriding in general has not been studied widely, especially in Finland. As the numbers of freeriders are increasing and more people are interested of it, it would be interesting to read more studies regarding that matter. Human-nature relationships could be studied more broadly as well, by comparing freeriders in different freeriding locations for instance. Additionally, it was notable that some of the participants highlighted the importance of company, more precisely the importance of 'their own group'. This kind of mentions indicates communality. Tranquillity does not mean being alone but being with your own group as well. Based on this thesis it is difficult to state what the real impact of social aspects has towards human-nature relationships. For the future studies this could be an interesting perspective to approach freeriding. Also, as this study noted that nature has agency, further research could examine the role of nature's agency in freeriding, find out more what kind of dimensions it includes.

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## **APPENDIX 1: The interview guideline**

### **Taustoittavat kysymykset:**

Kuinka vanha olet? Mistä olet kotoisin?

Milloin olet aloittanut vapaalaskemisen? Mikä sai aloittamaan?

Kuinka paljon harrastat vapaalaskemista?

Millaisena vapaalaskijana kuvailisit itseäsi?

(Mitkä tekijät motivoivat vapaalaskemiseen? jos ei vastaa jo kysymyksessä *mikä sai aloittamaan*)

Millaisia vapaalaskuun liittyviä palveluita olet käyttänyt tai aiot käyttää?

### **Teema 1. Luonto, luontosuhde**

Millaisena kuvailisit omaa luontosuhdettasi yleensä?

Miten liikut luonnossa muutoin?

Mitä luonto merkitsee sinulle vapaalaskemisessa? Millainen rooli luonnolla on?

### **Teema 2. Laskuympäristö**

Missä yleensä lasket?

Miten valitset vapaalaskukohteet?

Millainen rooli ympäristöllä on? Miten ympäristö vaikuttaa sinun vapaalaskukokemukseesi?

Miksi Pyhätunturi valikoitui vapaalaskukohteeksi? Millaisena koet Pyhätunturin vapaalaskukohteena?

(Vaikuttaako se, että pääsee laskemaan kansallispuistossa laskuympäristön valitsemiseen?)

### **Teema 3. Kokemuskuvaus**

Voisitko kuvailla juuri koettua vapaalaskukokemustasi minulle? (Esimerkiksi mitä teit, miltä sinusta tuntui, mitä koit, millainen se oli kokonaisuutena?)

Voitko kuvailla kaikkein mieleenpainuvimman vapaalaskukokemuksesi?

## APPENDIX 2: Letter of consent



### SUOSTUMUSKIRJE



Hei,

Minun nimeni on Tiina Heikkilä. Olen Lapin Yliopiston maisteriopiskelija, ja minun graduohjaajanani toimii Outi Rantala (outi.rantala@ulapland.fi, Tel. +358 404844202). Olet tervetullut osallistumaan pro gradu –tutkimukseeni nimeltä *Phenomenological study of human-nature relationships among freeriders in Pyhätunturi* (Fenomenologinen tutkimus Pyhätunturilla liikkuvien vapaalaskijoiden luontosuhteista). Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on ymmärtää syvemmin vapaalaskijoiden luontosuhteita, kun he laskevat Pyhätunturin alueella. Tutkimuksen tulos julkaistaan osana pro gradu -työtäni. Gradu on osa Northern Tourism -nimistä maisteriohjelmää (NoTo).

Allekirjoittamalla tämän kirjeen annat suostumuksesi käyttää haastattelumateriaalia luottamuksellisesti ja yksinomaisesti tutkimustarkoituksiin. Tutkimus noudattaa Tutkimuseettisen neuvottelukunnan (TENK) sanelemaa vastuullisen tutkimuksen periaatteita. Tietoja käsitellään anonymisti. Osallistumisesi on vapaaehtoista, ja voit peruuttaa suostumuksesi myös tämän asiakirjan allekirjoittamisen jälkeen ilmoittamalla siitä alla mainitulle yhteyshenkilölle.

Ota rohkeasti yhteyttä minuun tai ohjaajaani, jos tarvitset lisätietoja tutkimuksesta ja/tai tutkimusaineiston käytöstä.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Tiina Heikkilä  
Noto maisteriopiskelija  
+358 456389201  
theikki4@ulapland.fi

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Annan suostumukseni haastattelun käyttämiseen tietona yllä mainittuun tarkoitukseen

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Allekirjoitus

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Päivämäärä

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Nimenselvennys