

Environmental flows and the heritage of River ‘Folk’

Hayley Anderson

Figure 1. Porttipahka Dam. Image: Anderson, 2024



For me, the 2024 Living in the Landscape theme of rivers evoked vivid comparisons between the experiences of the Sámi communities that historically settled along the Kemijoki River and the traditional fishing villages of my home on the rugged northeast coast of Scotland. Both communities were deeply intertwined with their natural surroundings, fostering a strong family-focused population dedicated to harmonious living and working in their respective environments.

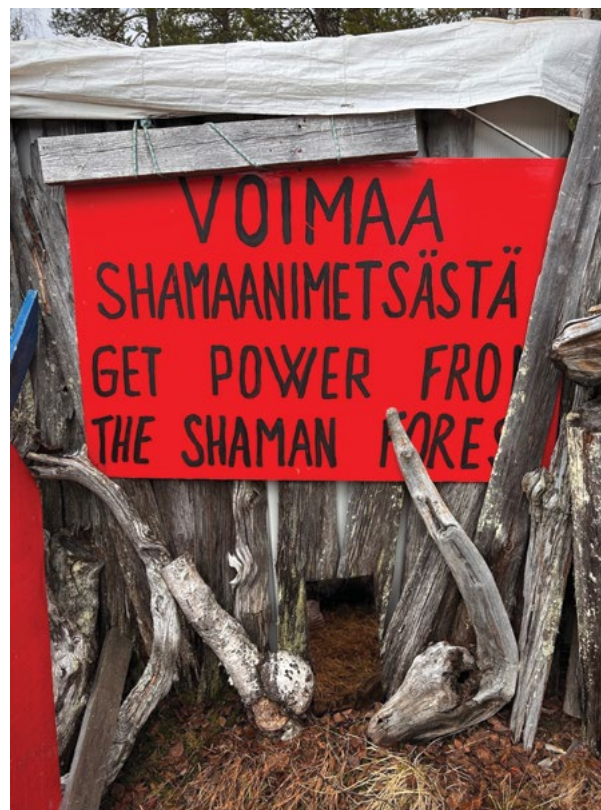
Vuotso

During our Fieldwork week visit, we journeyed north to Vuotso, Finland to meet a native Sámi, Arja. In a profoundly emotional experience for our group, Arja recounted the Finnish government's displacement of her village in the 1970s to facilitate the construction of the Porttipahta Dam. The enduring impact of this event continues to evoke deep sorrow arising from the loss of her family home and the disruption of the river community's bond with the landscape.

The regret that she could not take her children to her family home was palpable. She stated that sometimes, she would still row her boat to the centre of the flooded area where her house once stood, hoping to feel connected to the land below where she used to walk. When we visited the dam later that day where Arja's village would have once stood, there were no signs of life as there once would have been. The water was still and frozen, the shoreline built up from sharp boulders put in place during the dam's construction.

The Sámi people, residing in the northernmost parts of Finland, maintain a profound connection with their native rivers. Based on Shamanism, they

believe that water transcends being merely a substance, instead holding a spiritual bond between the people and the land they inhabit (Joy, 2015).



*Figure 2. Get Power from the Shaman Forest.
Image: Anderson, 2024*

From my observations of Arja's work, I believe she uses creativity to maintain meaningful connections to her home. She beautifully incorporates traditional Sámi crafts, *duodji*, passed down through generations and skilfully weaves symbols and patterns to tell a captivating story. Her use of the sym-

bols of the wise woman in her work brought poignancy as she spoke. Inspired by Arja's symbology, I found myself carving a fish on the underside of the boat I made from driftwood as part of our group task of building rafts of hope, adding life back into the still waters of the enclosed dam.

The foundation of Sámi culture lies in a deep connection to the land, intertwined with a nature-centred way of life centred around hunting, fishing, and gathering for sustenance, as well as a profound bond with specific geographical locations shaped by their traditions, memories, natural experiences, and social ties to the area. The Sámi worldview does not separate nature from culture but sees them as

interwoven and inseparable. Any exploration of the Sámi people's relationship with the land should encompass both the material culture and the intangible cultural heritage of the region (Heinämäki et al. 2016).

There has been a growing recognition of the interdependent relationships between water, society, and ecosystem processes, particularly within indigenous communities. Contemporary environmental flow assessments now consider the cultural values and social connections between humans and rivers, acknowledging their spiritual significance, cultural landscapes, and impact on community relationships (Anderson et al., 2019).

Figure 3. Fish Carving in wood.
Image: Anderson, 2024



Figure 4. Sami Takki and tartan shawl.
Image: Anderson, 2024



Seatown

As we further toured museums, galleries, and workshops in Lapland, I could not help but notice historical parallels with the heritage, lifestyles, and crafts of my home in the North of Scotland.

My maternal family originates in an area of Lossiemouth called Seatown, sitting on the last stretch of the River Lossie before it opens into the North Sea. Established at the end of the 17th Century, the current houses were built around 1800 (Imlach, 2024) when permanent settlers from local fishing families or 'fisherfolk' decided to make the area their home due to a natural harbour area beyond the river mouth. Of the original 51 houses, 31 were taken by

Stewarts and Crocketts, my grandmother's family names.

Until the eighteenth century, Scotland was governed by clan rule akin to tribal relationships. However, a less political community system had emerged by the time Seatown was established. Although numerous family groups still lived together, there was a more occupationally centred identity (Nadel-Klein, 2003, p. 8). The term 'fisherfolk' has had a complicated history; the term 'folk' has given an almost romanticised notion of small Scottish communities and a sense of place in the imagery of rural life. 'Folk' has become a term implying not just occupation or residence but a vague sense of a

Figure 5. Lossie Ganseys. Image: Anderson, 2024



Figure 6. Finnish Knits. Image: Anderson, 2024



difference in ethnicity (ibid, 2003, p. 9). In my local community still, the common thread of inquiry when meeting new people for the older generations is “Fa’s yir fowk?” which is local dialect for “who are your people/family?”.

Community Commonalities

The Seatown community had a close-knit relationship centred on the tasks involved with life in their trade, with both men and women equally involved in the smooth running of the operations (Grybenyuk, 2023). While the men were the ones to go out to sea, it was the women of communities like this who baited the lines, sold the fish, and even carried the men through the river to the boats to allow them to begin their journey in dry clothing (NEFA, 2024). All while fulfilling their additional parental duties.

The women were also responsible for producing thick woollen sweaters, or ‘ganseys’ as they are locally known, which insulated and protected the fisherman in harsh conditions. The patterns for the ganseys were made using specific patterns that told the story of their home and relationships; many symbols and shapes echo those used in the traditional patterns of the Finnish knits. Patterns were passed orally rather than in a written format, learned as generations gathered in the evenings (Scottish Fisheries Museum, 2020).

In the local community museum, the only written resource specifically depicting Lossiemouth patterns is a ring-bound file of instructions typed on a typewriter. The instructions were collated over many years by some of the last remaining Lossiemouth traditional gansey knitters and published in the early 1980s. As I looked through this dog-eared file of images, I began to recognise the patterns used,

bringing back memories of the sweaters my grandmother knitted for us as children. After discussing the book with my mother, I discovered that 6 of the nine contributors were Stewarts and Crocketts, including the great-aunt (front left in the picture) who raised my grandmother—the collated patterns brought even more significance.



Figure 7. Stewart Family Gathering 1909, Image: Lossie Community and Fisheries Museum.

Changes

Over the years, the villages of Seatown, Stotfield and Branderburgh grew and merged into the town

we now know as Lossiemouth. A central industrialised harbour was created away from the river. By the 1970s, the fishing industry was severely declining due to depleted fish stocks and the aftereffects of laws imposed after joining the EEC (Lossiemouth Marina, 2024). Flood alleviation measures put in place in the 2000s further upstream permanently changed the river basin at the mouth of the River Lossie, where the harbour once operated, making it a much different landscape from the one the women of Seatown once walked.

In my creative process, I wanted to honour the stories collected from Lapland and the parallels discovered in my family history – the connections and ways of life formed around the mouth of the river and the cultural, heritage and livelihoods lost when connections with the environment are interrupted.

As the older generations have passed away, homes in Seatown, once entirely occupied by ‘fisherfolk’, are now a mixture of new families and many properties in use as holiday homes for visiting tourists seeking the quaint Scottish experience staying in these tiny cottages nestled in the crook of the river.

My textile piece, made from linen dyed with local plants, printed with a hand-carved lino, and then sewn, depicts footprints in the sand between Flounder fish, which were once so abundant in the mouth of the River Lossie. The footprints not only represent the traces of the women who were once so strongly representative of the Seatown and the Scottish fishing industry of the North East but also of my own story and memories of playing in the river, Flukes (as they are called locally) wriggling under my feet as I waded through the water. Additionally, these footprints represent Arja and the river that flowed alongside her village. It now lies be-



Figure 8. Flukes. Image: Anderson, 2024.



neath ten metres of water and can never be walked upon again.

In both Lapland and Seatown, the connection between the residents and the surrounding water sources was vital to their way of life and cultural heritage. Their tacit knowledge was developed through the unique crafts and traditions passed down through generations within these communities.

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The impact of water management decisions on these communities reflects a larger pattern of neglecting people's deep connections with their environment. It's fascinating to see how similar challenges have affected these diverse places, and it raises important questions about the sustainable management of natural resources and the preservation of community heritage for the future.

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