

A PROCESS DIALOGUE OF THE EARTH'S VOICE EXHIBITION

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ABSTRACT

In our paper, we reflect, in a dialogic mode, on a practice-based exercise that brought together theoretical, artistic, and design thinking, with the aim of inviting national park visitors to reflect on how human guests visit forests and paths. The exercise originated from the 'Intra-living in the Anthropocene' (ILA) research group's desire to disseminate their research activities in the Pyhä-Luosto tourism area in northern Finland. The group ended up collaborating with three local photographers and a curator. Together, we created an art exhibition in the Pyhä-Luosto national park. For one year, three unlocked wilderness huts situated along the park's paths served as galleries where photographs and storybooks invited visitors to reflect on human-nature connectedness.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a dialogue between an artistic researcher–design professional–curator and a tourism researcher on the Earth's Voice exhibition project. Two years ago, the 'Intra-living in the Anthropocene' (ILA) research group wanted to disseminate their research activities that aimed to engage with the supposedly mundane, earthly relations in new ways. For the ILA-group this had meant, for example, asking questions such as: What does the growth of tourism look like from the mosses' perspective? What stories might the Siberian jays tell their guests? Initially, the research group had an urge to write a book about rebellious non-human actors 'operating' in northern tourism settings, including stories of a lamp post, rock, trash can, and beard lichen inhabiting and working at the Pyhä-Luosto national park in Finnish Lapland (see

Rantala & Höckert, 2025). Instead of making a book, the group ended up collaborating with three photographers and a curator, which transformed the book project into an exhibition that landed in a national park.

FINDING THE FORMAT FOR THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition started to find its format through joint meetings between the project group: we wanted to combine both artistic, curatorial, design thinking and scientific approaches to illustrate the importance of human-nature connectedness at the environmental crisis (see e.g., Riechers et al., 2021; West et al., 2021). Pinja, as the curator got familiar with the research work published by the researchers of the ILA group and the researchers got familiar with the previous artwork of the three photographers, Antti Kurola, Antti Pakkanen and Antti Stöckell. As an inspiration of the earlier idea of a storybook, we ended up selecting phrases and quotations from the published research papers that worked as “mini stories”, such as this:

The secret of mosses’ wellbeing lies in their smallness and slowness.

Besides the stories, another dialogue took place regarding the format of the exhibition. We tried to find a location for the exhibition somewhere at Pyhä and Luosto ski resorts, without success. We visited the tourism area both jointly and separately. In the end, our misfortune with finding a perfect spot in the resorts turned out to be a fortunate outcome. When not finding a space for the exhibition in the actual tourism resorts, the exhibition went to the people instead. With a permission from the Metsähallitus, the manager of the Pyhä-Luosto national park, the exhibition was presented in three wilderness huts situated in the park, with the art displayed as if it had always been a part of the space. This way, art become accessible even to those who would not intentionally have sought it out.

Once it was clear that the exhibition would take place in unlocked wilderness huts situated along the paths of the national park, the exhibition also found its final format – we decided to exhibit photographs and wooden storybooks in the cabins that would invite those visiting the national park and the cabins to reflect on human-nature connectedness. The exhibition aimed to draw attention to different ways of experiencing ecological diversity, how we visit the homes of other species, and maintain multispecies relations (e.g., Rantala et al., 2024). Thus, one of the Earth’s Voice art exhibition’s objectives was not only to create a concrete ending for the ILA research project, but to invite reflection and to increase knowledge regarding the multispecies research among natural park visitors. Non-human nature was strongly present also in the exhibition materials: the wooden storybooks as well as the wooden frames of the photographs were unique pieces made by a local carpenter. Indeed, in response to the Anthropocene time and human’s impact on the earthly processes, several design processes are moving away from the human-centric approaches and rethinking the relations between

the various materials (Manning, 2025). We are used to live and look the life from the human centric perspective, but how would it change our experiences if we would learn to put oneself in another's position, although it would be a natural object or another species? How is nature experienced, and what factors shape the human–nature connection?

ENGAGING WITH WILDERNESS HUTS

Through our practice-based research process – where technical mastery of practices and materials sometimes competed with artistic goals and connected with artistic and tourism research – we studied the ways of executing the art exhibition at the national park wilderness huts (see also Varto, 2017, p. 6). Not only did we need to create functional solutions to compose the art pieces on the walls, but to keep in mind the remote location, its special wilderness surroundings, seasonal and weather conditions, and challenging access to the huts. We were walking, skiing or traveling by electric bikes while carrying the art with us as well as the tools needed for the installation (see Figure 1). Our journeys in the park formed an important part of the dialogue. The year-round time frame meant that weather conditions were changing from the warm summer months to cold, more than -30 C° winter coldness. Therefore, sometimes we would visit the park in smaller groups by skiing, or walking alone, and sometimes everyone would join – especially when installing and removing the exhibition.



Figure 1

Artists and researchers visiting the national park during the exhibition process. Photographs by Antti Kurola and Outi Rantala

The hut locations are remote; in general, you always traverse through nature to your next destination. National Park visitors are moving from one unlocked wilderness hut to another,

while they continue their journey to the new location every day. It is not possible to make a reservation for these unlocked wilderness huts. The huts serve all travellers equally. Wilderness huts offer shelter from bad weather and also serve as meeting points among unknown travellers. There are basic facilities for cooking, sleeping, and staying warm (Figure 2). There is no electricity or running water. However, the huts have a wood stock available for visitors to burn in a wood stove to create heat. There can be places in the national park where mobile phones are not working.



Figure 2

Wilderness cabins and their characteristics

Creating an exhibition in the wilderness needs a lot of attention. Project's designer is in a powerful position to influence with the choices and beliefs in a positive and sustainable way (Berman, 2009, p. 13). Visitors' authentic experience of the pure nature and its effects should not be taken away but experiences should be designed to increase or deepen the connection with nature. National Park offers various experiences of outdoor, silence, and beauty of the wilderness. By adding something – an art exhibition in our case – on top of that, we need to be discreet and almost inconspicuous: “If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies” (Dewey, 2005, p. 13).

With the existence of the exhibition, our goal was to be receivable but not flagrantly visible. The used materials of the exhibition pieces were chosen carefully. From designer's perspective it was important to speak the same language with the hut environment but also consider materials as a whole; what are the social impacts, and are they bringing the better future for the planet, surroundings, animals, natural resources, and humans. Material responsibility is also seen a growing trend in design field (Manning, 2025.) The materials we used were mostly wooden. The art photographs were made with different techniques, and they were invisibly attached on the surface of wooden frames. The beautiful wooden sides of the frames were creating one of the recognizable parts of the exhibition visuals. Wooden books were left on the tables of the wilderness huts as part of the exhibition outcome (see Figure 3).



Figure 3

Wooden photographs and books as part of the exhibition. Photographs by Antti Kurola

The wall logs in the cabins were round, which brought a bit more challenge for the mounting, but we managed to create practical and unseen wall mounting mechanisms behind the photograph frames. A local carpenter participated in the design process and executed the frames and wooden books. With his knowledge, we created the products that endured the whole year at the wilderness huts, experiencing four variable seasons. It is part of the successful design process to verify practicality and usability, which are the marks of the durable and sustainable choices.

DESIGNING A DISCREET JOURNEY

Experiencing the Earth's Voice art exhibition can be described as a journey. It is not limited to the art photographs on the walls of wilderness huts but is melting together with the environment inside and outside, with nature that surrounds a visitor wandering in the natural park. "In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so..." (Dewey, 2005, p. 38). Everyone who visits the wilderness huts and has made the journey will experience the exhibition in different ways. When one part leads to another, and each part continues from the previous one, every part gains its own distinct character, and the flow within the experience is from something to something (Dewey, 2005).

We cannot be sure that all visitors have noticed the exhibition while stopping by or staying at the wilderness huts. As part of her PhD project, one of the ILA researchers, Salla Jutila, visited all three huts hosting the exhibition to read the guest books that one can find in every open wilderness hut. According to the national park manager, Metsähallitus, visitors can sign their

names, make comments about their journeys and destinations, and comment on the condition of the hut in the guest books. Visitors seem to stick to this tradition and seldom include comments about the artwork in their notes. Our research group wondered if this means that our intentions to repair and enliven multispecies relations through the exhibition somehow failed (Rantala & Höckert, 2025)? Can we trust that something happened and something matters without us being able to prove it? Indeed, we were curious to know more about people's perceptions about the exhibition, but we chose not to conduct interviews or to ask visitors to fill in questionnaires as they leave the huts. In a way, it was our goal: to be exhibited, to raise awareness, but to do it on the terms of the surroundings, discreetly. It could be said that we have aimed to actively participate in creating a phenomenon through quiet interpretation, reasoning, and reflection – and by aiming to evoke impressions (Stengers, 2011; Vannini, 2015). During the quiet and still moments, visitors have been able to enjoy looking at the photographs and thoughts those evoke in their minds, which is when we feel we have succeeded. We have been able to reach people with the exhibition who do not normally visit art exhibitions or enjoy art in everyday life. In the end, we learnt through our dialogical process that the journey is the most important experience of the result (Dewey, 2005, p. 4).

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