FIREWEED STORIES OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN SURVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

The interest in so-called "wilderness survival skills", such as how to make fire, identify wild plants, or build a natural shelter, is surging in response to global socioecological emergencies and more grounded concerns for safety in outdoor activities. The problem is that by focusing on an individual who must fight nature alone or survive through an approaching collapse, the survivalist discourse feeds into anthropocentrism, neoliberal individualism, and environmental defeatism. This contribution to the symposium aims to examine, unsettle, and rethink survivalism, as it is manifested in outdoor education and recreation, by grounding it in relational more-than-human concerns. To assist me in this task is fireweed – a perennial plant that has a lot to teach about "more-than-human survival". Fireweed is known for its love of environments that are disturbed and damaged, for example, by forest fires, clear cuts, railway infrastructure, and explosive weapons – coming in and repairing soil for other species. At the same time, its health-related benefits have also been historically emphasized in the myths and stories of Indigenous and land-based cultures, and today – in the surging interest in wild foraging and natural medicine. Drawing on Anna Tsing's ideas on collaborative survival in capitalist ruins and Michael Marder's "plant-thinking", along with my own experience of organizing fireweed tea ceremonies, I present some lessons that fireweed has to offer to the naturecultures research and to more relational practices in wilderness survival skills education.

THE PROBLEM OF SURVIVALISM

For the past five years or so, I have been living a double life. By day, I have been working as a researcher and university teacher at a business school with an interest in environmental

ethics, human-nature relations, and post-growth economies. By night, or when not sitting at my desk or lecturing in a classroom, you would likely find me in the forest learning and teaching what some may call ‘wilderness survival skills’.

The interest in wilderness survival skills like how to make fire by friction, build a natural shelter, identify wild edible and medicinal plants, track wildlife, make traditional crafts, and more, seems to be on the rise within Nordic outdoor recreation and education. I do not have numbers to back up this claim, but there are many books, courses, and guided activities on the topic, and all courses that I personally have been involved in have always been fully booked. There might be many reasons for this interest. It might be a response to global socioecological emergencies and geopolitical tensions, or simply a need to make outdoor activities safer and more enjoyable. To some even, this might be part of a personal project to withdraw from the growth-techno-capitalist society and experiment with alternative, ecological lifestyles (e.g., Pike, 2018; Vlasov, 2025).

As an aspiring wilderness guide and instructor, I see many positive aspects with this trend, including new opportunities for people to reconnect with non-human ecologies. As a researcher, however, I cannot help but worry about the possible risks with the survivalist discourse that surrounds contemporary interest in these kinds of skills.

Western societies have long been fascinated by survival skills – from the first colonial expeditions that learned from Indigenous peoples to improve their own settlement and warfare; to more recent portrayals of survivalism in popular culture (Fenton, 2016). You might be familiar with an image of a lone survivor fighting against the fierce forces of nature to make it back to the comforts of civilisation. Such ‘entertainment survivalism’, as Lisa Fenton (2016) calls it, can reproduce the prevailing fear of nature in modern societies where human survival is put in competition with the untamed forces of ’wild nature’. Moreover, the survivalist discourse tends to focus disproportionately on the survival and self-sufficiency of an individual. While it is certainly good if an individual can feel that they can take care of their own needs in an extreme situation, the individualistic notion of survivalism becomes problematic when it is amplified through neoliberal capitalism and consumerist culture (Lavi et al., 2024). Today, the outdoor and tourism industries are eager to satisfy the deep longing to reconnect with nature by marketing survival gear and exclusive survival courses and experiences in exotic destinations, contributing to the already immense ecological footprint of outdoor recreation. Finally, the survivalist discourse also manifests itself through prepping culture. Do not get me wrong. Preparing for a possible collapse of civilisation might in fact be a much more sober response to the ecological realities than the dominant policies of climate denial or technological optimism. The problem is when environmental defeatism takes all energy from any kind of action for the earth (Katz-Rosene & Szwarc, 2022). No more fighting to save the remaining living ecosystems, no more search for alternative post-growth futures – survival is the only thing we have left, full stop.

For anyone concerned with a truly sustainable transformation, the discourse of survivalism should raise concerns. It can reinforce anthropocentric, dualistic, and individualistic perspectives on human-nature relationship that generate ecological crises to begin with. After all, climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental problems are all relational crises, signifying the separation between humans and between humans and the rest of nature (Rantala et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2021).

Can we then envision a different approach to survival skills that works to repair this broken relationship?

SURVIVING WITH MORE-THAN-HUMAN KIN

Having in mind the discursive baggage that comes with 'survival', in addition to the already problematic concept of 'wilderness' (Vannini & Vannini, 2016), I never use 'wilderness survival skills' myself to describe my work. Yet, in the spirit of an academic experiment, I want to hold to 'survival' a little longer. After all, it is a powerful word that reminds us humans of our basic needs and vulnerabilities. In the Anthropocene, it also comes as a warning that modern societies can no longer take for granted all those comforts that they have grown to hold so dear.

In my new research project, I want to critically examine, unsettle, and rethink the idea of survival, as it is manifested in Nordic outdoor education and recreation, by grounding it in relational more-than-human concerns. My inspiration comes from the *relational* ontological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives found at the intersection of Indigenous and Western thought. This includes the ideas of reciprocity, new animisms, and kincentric ecology that are attributed to Indigenous knowledge (e.g., Harvey, 2017; Kimmerer, 2024; Salmón, 2000); along with other post-anthropocentric inspirations like deep ecology (Næss, 1989), ecofeminism (Plumwood, 2002), and more recent developments in environmental humanities that decentre human agency for a more-than-human perspective (e.g., Neimanis, 2019; Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017; Rantala et al., 2024).

When referring to 'surviving with more-than-human kin', I want us to draw attention to the entanglement of human and non-human vulnerabilities, interests, and agencies in the collective endeavour that is survival. It is a very simple idea that humans cannot truly survive without making kin and living in reciprocity with non-human ecologies. But the ambition here is also to decentre human survival altogether as the exclusive and primary matter of concern. It is important to remember that humans and non-humans alike are already living in a survival situation that is the ecological crises – and in some places of the world, this is much more pronounced than in others. The production of fossil fuels continues to hit new records, climate is warming, new mines are being opened, more forests are being cut, there is PFAS in the

water, and the brains of fish and humans alike contain microplastics. Learning to confront these dark ecological realities is an important skill too, at least if we want to survive *in* the capitalist ruins (Tsing, 2021), and hopefully also find alternative ways to live *against* them.

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My search for a more relational approach to survival has only started. The plan is to start with an explorative study based on interviews and observations with professional guides and instructors who work with wilderness survival skills in the Nordics, focusing on the ethical, philosophical, and pedagogical aspects of their work. Another is to develop, test, and critically evaluate new approaches to teaching and guiding learning experiences in survival skills that are based on relational more-than-human ethics.

In this contribution, I want to share one experiment that is part of this emerging exploration – fireweed tea ceremonies that I organized this year. The ceremony invites a group of participants to gather around a fireplace, or a hearth, which has served as a special place for sharing stories and community life for a long part of human history. The fire is then started by friction, using a bow drill method, as a way of giving respect to an ancestral survival skill that requires local ecological knowledge and collaboration with non-human companions, including trees and plants that provide necessary materials for the fire kit. Once the fire is burning, a sooty kettle is put on the fire to boil. This is going to take a while, so I would use the time to tell stories – imagined and real – that involve the main host of the ceremony – the fireweed (Fig.1).

Figure 1

Fireweed thrives in disturbed places like forests after a fire. Image credit (creative commons): https://www.flickr.com/photos/bluecanoe/3857160534

Just as Anna Tsing (2021) uses the matsutake mushroom to show how life can thrive in the capitalist ruins, I find that fireweed has a lot to teach us about survival in the north amidst the changing climate, geopolitical tensions, and increasing pressures on natural ecosystems from techno-industrial development. Fireweed is a survivor-plant that seems to thrive in disturbed and barren places. Its North American name comes from the tendency to rapidly populate areas burned by fire. In England, it was once known as "bombweed" because it brought first colour to the grim, devastated landscape scarred by bomb craters after the Second World War. In Sweden, it goes under the name of "rallarros" (rallare=railway engineers, ros=rose), referring to its abundance along the railway lines. Clear-cuts, which proliferate in the Nordic forest landscape, are another place to find it.

Once fireweed arrives to a disturbed place, it works to stabilize the soil. Its roots spread deep, cracking through rocks to pull the minerals up from the earth, and they spread wide underground in rhizomes, sending new shoots in all directions. Each plant can have up to 500 tiny seeds with silky hairs that can fly long distances to allow even further dispersal. One plant is suddenly a sea of pink and purple. Being one of the first visitors, it does the necessary repair work so others can move in.

At the same time, its historic uses signify repair and survival also in cultural ways. Root and pith were widely used as a survival food by many Indigenous peoples in the north. Young shoots in the Spring are rich in vitamins and are a delicacy with a taste and consistency of asparagus. Flowers attract bees that produce high-quality floral-tasting honey, and today some make jelly and syrup from the flowers too. You can also make rope and fabrics from the fibres of fireweed. I even heard from an anthropologist friend that the Tlingit people of the Pacific Northwest Coast have a myth about the First Woman who weaved a blanket from fireweed fibers and covered the Earth with it, while singing songs to ease the pains of the Earth giving birth to all life. These sorts of myths and stories are not surprising given that the fireweed was traditionally valued for its anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial, cleansing and soothing properties – many of which are now being checked and proven by modern medicine too.

Fireweed has been widely used for tea. One can make tea on fresh and dried leaves but fermenting the leaves before drying gives a much richer taste. The fermented fireweed tea is well-established in Russia, where it is known as "Ivan chaj". It was consumed there long before the black tea came into the picture, and there is also some evidence that in the 18-19th centuries, fireweed tea was produced industrially and exported to Europe until the Chinese and the colonial British tea empires took over. It is known for its pleasant taste and smell, a wide range of health benefits – and it is caffeine free too.

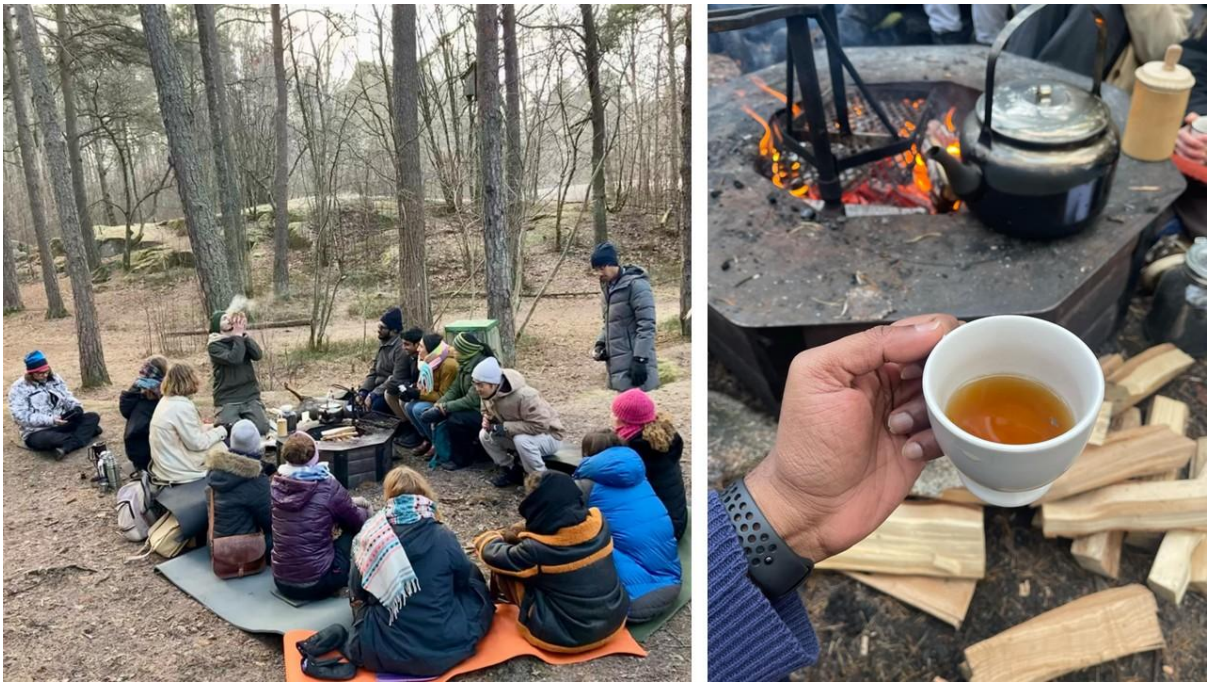

Figure 2

Left: Fireweed tea ceremony starting in Stadsskogen, Uppsala. Right: A cup of fireweed tea. Photograph (left) by Jasmine Zhang and photograph (right) by one of the participants shared this image on their social media after the event

It is this tea, made of fermented fireweed leaves foraged at the edge of Umeå in northern Sweden where I live, that we taste during the ceremony (Fig.2). By using stories and tea tasting, my approach here is to treat fireweed not simply as an object of observation but as a collaborator, teacher, and importantly – storyteller. Drawing on Michael Marder's (2013) ontology of plant-thinking, I work from the idea that plants think in their own way – non-cognitively and without a head - and that human thought can be transformed by engaging with this vegetal mode of existence. This approach of course involves a challenge of navigating between the anthropocentric thinking *about* plants that may distort vegetal life and attempts to think-*with* and even *through* plants where engagement with vegetal existence de-humanizes and renders thinking more relational, processual, and open-ended (Marder, 2013). While in our culture, 'plants are habitually viewed as mute living beings' (Marder, 2023, p.189), Marder suggests that they 'not only silently tell us something (indeed, a great deal) about themselves and the world, but also that they tell stories, rendering witness accounts about life and death, light and darkness, middles, beginnings, and ends' (ibid.).

From my experience, the relational stories of survival and repair embodied in fireweed can open spaces for conversation on important existential and ethical questions for our times. The first time I organized such a ceremony, the participants could share stories of their personal relationship with specific plants. One participant shared her knowledge and passion for foraging plants in the wilder corners of the city as medicine and tea. Another remembered

growing up in a rural area, with plant-wise grandparents, and how he became detached from this reality while living in the city. Another time, the fireweed helped to host a space for doctoral students on a course about critical perspectives on green energy transitions and organizing alternatives in the north. After our visit to a community-based initiative on an island that was working to strengthen local resilience and sustainability amidst rural depopulation, we dedicated our sharing circle to a different kind of resilience – an inner one, i.e., what gives us meaning as academics to keep going in these dark ecological times?

In both these cases, the fireweed tea ceremonies are meant to serve as spaces for listening and storytelling, where narratives emerge in dialogue with the plant's qualities—its resilience, its capacity to repair disturbed landscapes—and its cultural meanings of healing. This resonates with Bryan Grimwood and Emily Höckert's (2023) call for "vegetalizing" research through care-full, relational methods that invite collaboration and speculative storytelling with more-than-human beings. Rather than extracting data, the fireweed tea ceremonies can hopefully serve as an example of how to learn from our plant teachers: slowing down, attending to presence, and weaving stories that cultivate responsibility and moral imagination. Many questions remain, of course, as I only embark on this project – Did the tea ceremonies, as very brief disruptions in the rhythms of everyday life, have any *transformative* impact on the participants? Can we ever know and *measure* such a transformation? Should we even try?

With this experiment, my hope has been to humbly share an emerging methodology that combines philosophical reflection with experiential practice, positioning fireweed as a co-author in imagining futures of more-than-human survival in the north.

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