

IV panel: Activism: Change and continuity

From naturalness to coexistence: Contemporary nature conservation discourses in Latvia

Anita Zariņa and Artis Svece (University of Latvia)

The transition of nature conservation from the Soviet era to the present has led to substantial shifts in policies, approaches, and challenges. In the 2000s, political scientist Katrina Schwartz explored these changes providing a crucial framework for understanding Latvia's environmental history. She examined the contrasting discourses of agrarian nationalism and pro-European internationalism, which were central to nature conservation debates in the 1990s and 2000s. Our ongoing research on nature discourses suggests that these issues remain unresolved in contemporary Latvia. On the contrary, they have become more complex due to the pressing EU policies, active stakeholder involvement in conservation activities and a variety of renaturalisation and other nature management projects, revealing that a common nature conservation narrative is unlikely to be possible. To add to these nature discourses, our analysis focuses particularly on the articulation of 'naturalness', a complicated concept that could serve as an alternative to the more complex notion of 'wilderness' in Latvia, and on multi-species coexistence in the context of wildlife agency in protected areas.

Discursive approach on nature: Contemporary environmentalism and NGOs

Joonas Plaan (Tallinn University)

This paper focuses on the transformative role of conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in shaping the discourse surrounding nature. It argues that conservation NGOs, over time, have harnessed their knowledge and growing power to effect significant changes in how we perceive and conceptualize "nature."

As an example, drawing from the insights of Michel Foucault's discursive approach, this study focuses on the historical evolution of what constitutes "sustainable fish" and examines the discursive strategies employed by conservation NGOs. It reveals how these organizations have actively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed nature's meaning, values, and ethical dimensions. Through their advocacy efforts, research initiatives, and communication campaigns, NGOs have influenced public perceptions and policymaking related to nature conservation and environmental sustainability.

By analyzing the ways in which NGOs engage in discursive practices, this research sheds light on the complex relationship between knowledge, power, and environmental activism. Ultimately, it demonstrates how conservation NGOs play a pivotal role in the ongoing transformation of contemporary nature discourses, shaping our collective understanding of and response to environmental challenges.

Semiotic Engagement in the Multispecies World

Timo Maran (University of Tartu)

A person can be understood as a stream of meaningful sign relations or encounters. Here, the human extends beyond itself, spread across the culture, landscapes, and

relationships. Achievements, possessions, and belonging are not important in this view. At the core of life are meaningful encounters in the ecology, society, and cultural milieu of which we are a part. In framing such a view, we can find support in the work of the British educational semiotician Andrew Stables, who proposed the notion of „semiotic engagement.“ While educational theory focuses on student engagement, Stables extends this concept to all the activities of a person's life, arguing that “living is a semiotic engagement”. Semiotic engagement involves interpreting and acting in relation to one's environment and being aware of one's participation in environmental processes. Stables' view is based on American pragmatism - writings of Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey. Stables therefore also understands semiotic engagement in very concrete terms - as a set of practical relations, actions, and their outcomes. As a life practice, semiotic engagement leads us to positive activism, which is to shape, in a daily and conscious way, the semiotic fabric of which we are a part, together with others in the community as well as with other species.

V panel: Roots and shades of green spirituality

Anthroposophical roots of green thinking in Manfred Kyber's work

Ulrike Plath (Tallinn University)

TBA

Spiritualisation of environmentalism and Nature in Estonia

Tõnno Jonuks (Estonian Literary Museum / Tallinn University) and Atko Remmel (University of Tartu / Tallinn University)

Over the past half-century, environmentalism and spirituality have increasingly overlapped. The contemporary spiritual approach to the environment is many-sided, including influences from neopaganism, alternative spirituality, and different worldviews, shared by official followers and spiritual teachers, but also ordinary citizens. This common ‘source pool’ is used – but also influenced – by many institutionalized movements such as Christian confessions, academic scholarship, the marketing industry, and so on, who combine spirituality with their own agendas. In this presentation, we explore some aspects of the spiritualization of Estonian nature and environmentalism.

Process, participation, bonding

Evy Jokhova (artist)

Narration and storytelling, urban and ancient myths are at the core of rituals both communal and personal. From rituals routines can be born, both individual and collective.

Bonding through rituals, performed or mundane, is a sharing of (everyday) tasks that create a space for collective time in which more than one individualism interacts.

Sameness and repetition can be a way of creating diversity in the sense that no one zebra is the same. Through subtle differences, we learn to go deeper.

My presentation will look at the Process as a communal experience, a shared goal or task that forms an activity that can create a sense of (social) belonging.

For this purpose, we may look to food, as food brings people together. In my practice I explore traditional food technologies, the act of preparing and consuming food together, as well as the role of time in this.

Asking questions like What activities and processes have traditionally brought us together? Can an engagement in the Process be a way of evoking curiosity and creating a sense of purpose? I will apply a cross-approach to investigating how we are socialized through food, its value, and politics by way of conservation through fermentation as a metaphor for social interaction.

Fermentation implies transformations and evolution through a successful symbiosis. This dramatic process is always one step away from rotting and tainting. The line is thin between a reviving entanglement and a silent poison.

VI panel: After nature: merging of technological and natural environments

Environmental microhistories and grand narratives in North-East Estonia

Elle-Mari Talivee (Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences)

The paper first focuses on the depiction of oil shale mining, which started in the Republic of Estonia in the 1930s, as literature, art, film, and photography began to be urged to cover topics deemed to be of national importance, and intensified drastically after the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940. The so-called oil shale literature of the time refrained from pointing out environmental damage.

Then, the presentation introduces a manuscript by Hugo Viires, a local writer, offered to a literary magazine in 1964. With photos and illustrations, it tells a story of a 'moonscape', mentions air and water pollution, includes a list of extinct species, describes new species emerging, and discusses some possibilities of landscape restoration. Concluding, I will finish with a contemporary reflection on the wounds still visible in the same landscape, citing the poetry of Maarja Pärtna.

Fusion of organic and inorganic in the graphic artwork of Vello Vinn

Elnara Taidre (Art Museum of Estonia)

The works of Vello Vinn (born 1939) form a noteworthy example of the oeuvre of an Estonian printmaker from the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they boast a holistic and emphatically unique image system. Vinn's highly original visual world is grounded in his mastery of various printmaking techniques, delicate treatment of images, and witty associations. A common topic in Vinn's works is paradoxical hybrids, in which the organic smoothly transforms into the inorganic and vice versa. The resulting super-beings are able to communicate without interruptions and are extensively interconnected. The topics of work, industry, and science, which were considered suitable for a Soviet artist, evolved in Vello Vinn's approach to a more generalised and critical point of view instead of extolling specific events or achievements. In his works, architectural motifs are entwined with plant motifs, combining opposites: artificial construction and natural growth.