

Search for Sustainability and Connection in The Finnish Forest

“Figuring out the new lifestyle”: Reconstructing nature in a
time of ecological crisis.

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1.0 Introduction

Around 72 per cent of the total land area in Finland¹ is covered in forest. Pine, spruce and birch trees are significant features of the landscape even in major cities. However, old-growth forests are hard to find in Finland, due to a historically dominant paper and pulp industry with a seemingly endless appetite for timber. Before I went to do fieldwork, I knew that the Finnish forest would play a significant role as a context where I would meet my informants and hopefully understand more about the ways in which they relate to their environment. Many would describe how the Finnish soul always has been linked to the forest; the calming effect of the green color in summer, the gentle rustling of leaves in the wind. The forest provides them with protection and peace, the wood supplies them with fuel and heat for the sauna. It is home to a variety of life and gives berries, edible wild plants and mushrooms to those who roam there. In this way, the forest is simply a part of everyday life in Finland, and for my research participants it had a life value in it self that goes beyond mere profit-orientated resource exploitation and extraction.

In Finland, wood is an important resource, both commercially and in peoples day-to-day lives. It is both affecting and affected by people. In this diverse cultural and geographical area this is surely experienced in various ways, both today and in the past. In turn, the ways in which humans relate to the forest has consequences for living organisms that live within it. It may reflect how people perceive and experience the environment and their own participation in it at large. The effects of forestry on the landscape are visible because wood production is carried out on such a large scale. I took part in discussions and practices at various locations in the forest about engaging with nature in particular ways, some of which I will present in this paper. These interactions have played a role in furthering my understanding of participant's conceptions of nature and sustainability. Activities that I participated in with my research collaborators such as wild foraging or building livelihoods in the woods, aimed at building more sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyles. Furthermore, the empirical examples I present in this thesis can be seen as a Western cultural critique, moving away from a way of perceiving nature as something separate from themselves. They bring about greater concern for both nature and human's role in the web of life.

¹ Finland (In Finnish: "Suomi") is a nordic country in Europe which is situated in the geographical region of Fennoscandia (the geographical peninsula comprising the Scandinavian peninsula, Finland, Karelia, and the Kola peninsula). According to the WWF (World Wildlife Fund), the territory of Finland can be subdivided into three eco-regions: The Scandinavian and Russian taiga, Sarmatic mixed forests and Scandinavian montane birch forest and grasslands.

My research project consisted of meetings with individuals and communities which in different yet similar ways, are searching for more sustainable lifestyles within the forest. My main collaborator and protagonist in the film *Barefoot in the Forest*, Christof “Huck” Middeke, has initiated something he calls “The Sustainability Experiment”. This is a collaboration with other individuals from his network in Finland and other Nordic countries that explores the possibilities for an alternative lifestyle. One of my informants, Dennis, who is also part of this network, told me that he thinks “the world has gone insane,” and this is why he is “trying to do something different,” where he “strives to create as little waste as possible and to have a neutral carbon footprint.” His goal, similarly to Huck and my other informants, is to “live as sustainably and resilient as possible, learning more each day.”

In this paper I argue that through their practices and discussions my research collaborators are actively reconstructing nature and the human-nature relationship in a time of ecological crisis. We are living in a time of extraordinary ecological loss. Not only are human actions destabilizing the very conditions that sustain life, but it is also increasingly clear that we are pushing the Earth into an entirely new era, often described as the *Anthropocene*² (Ellis and Cunsolo 2018). Initially, it was proposed that this new epoch, corresponding with the rise of modern capitalism and an industrialized society, began in the eighteenth century (Steffen et al 2011). Within the anthropocene, it has become increasingly clear that humans face an existential crisis. The crisis can be seen as a result of the particular history of engagement with nature and a consequence of the alienation from nature experienced in modern capitalist society. Thus, “The Sustainability Experiment” explores practical endeavors of individuals who wish to explore the possibilities of transitioning from “non-functioning modern civilization to a lifestyle that can be sustained and safely passed on to future generations,” as Huck puts it. During fieldwork I participated in the experiment of living outdoors in the woods for close to one month. Throughout this time, the main idea was to leave behind three factors from “our destructive lifestyle,” money, fossil fuels and rubbish.

Through the filmic part of my project I further explored the time with Huck during the experiment, and touch upon the experience of this encounter and discussions related to sustainability, nature-awareness and “nature-connection.” In my film, *Barefoot in the Forest*, I also followed Huck’s own

² “Anthropocene: The human epoch” (2018): A film that explores how humans have changed the planet to the point of no return. It is directed by Jennifer Baichwal, Edward Burtynsky and Nicholas de Pencier. The movie takes us on a journey through 6 continents and with images emphasizes the consequences of human activity. Visually it convinces the viewer with the argument that we are now within the new era of the “anthropocene”.

personal conflicts while pursuing what he refers to as a more sustainable and nature-connected lifestyle. As the film itself is located in the Finnish forest, the relationship with the surrounding environment is explored audio-visually. The general image of the Finnish forest was often observed as clear-cut lands and wagon after wagon of logs piled along miles of railroad tracks. Being in the field with a person who has devoted much of his life to protecting forests from commercial exploitation, who is currently struggling to find a balance between family life in the city, the expectations of society and what he sees as the urgent necessity to change his way of life, I could not avoid emotions being a very present part of the fieldwork experience

Over the course of this project I have been following current debates about ecological crisis, biodiversity³ loss and environmental degradation. What often comes up when reading news articles is the effects this has on mental health. It has made me very interested to see how the ecological crisis effect people's emotions and how this motivates solutions and the search for new lifestyles. I wanted to meet with individuals outside major cities to find out how they rebuild relationships to nature and figure out lifestyles that aim for sustainability. I have found that both "The Sustainability Experiment" and other elements I encountered in the field, are dealing with psychological aspects of "nature disconnection" and ecological loss. One of these aspect is what I call "environmental grief."⁴

Explored from an anthropological perspective, the realities I met in the field can be looked at from countless angles, generating discussions both on classical concepts of anthropology such as cultural critique and the nature/culture dichotomy, as well as recent subjects such as activism and sustainability. In studying practices, and the relationships between people and nature, my aim has been to understand these phenomena within a larger context, as well as from an emic and

³ In one way, "biodiversity" can be understood as a concrete biophysical referent to the diversity of plant and animal life in the world or in a particular habitat. Yet, scholars like Escobar (1998) argues how it must be seen as a discursive invention of recent origin. This discourse fosters a complex network of actors, from international organisations and northern NGOs to scientists, prospectors, and local communities and social movements. This network is composed of sites with diverging biocultural perspectives and political stakes. Escobar argues for a view of biodiversity as a construction constituting a powerful interface between nature and culture and originating a vast network of sites and actors through which concepts, policies, and ultimately cultures and ecologies are contested and negotiated. This construction has a growing presence in the strategies of social movements in many parts of the world today.

⁴ Grief associated with physical ecological losses. This form of ecological grief is associated with the physical disappearance, degradation of the environment and/or death of species, ecosystems and landscapes, and is driven by climate change in several ways. (Ellis and Cunsolo 2018). See other literature discussing ecological grief in different contexts and in the anthropocene: (Cunsolo & Landman 2017), (Head 2015, 2016a, 2016b), (Butler 2004) and (Windle 1992).

phenomenological perspective. In light of this, the use of film in my research enabled me to explore sensorial dimensions of the field, the environment that might otherwise have been difficult to translate into textual analysis. In this thesis I place my empirical data within a larger theoretical framework, through exploring human-nature relations as a part of the web of life.

One way to think about the interactions of people and nature is in terms of the web of life. As Moran (2006, p 74-75) shows, this teaches us several important lessons. First, that we are all interrelated and connected as living organism. Second, we eat and are eaten. In the web of life we depend on many other life forms to sustain us, yet we too die and decay and are consumed by detritivores who are fundamental to maintaining the cycle of life. Therefore our pattern of consumption can maintain us in the web of life, or it can be responsible for undermining the integrity of it. Third, we depend on others. The balance achieved by hunting-gathering and other populations in the past was a result of some important mechanisms: Reciprocity, trust and community (Ingold 2000). The fourth lesson is that we have a role to play in sustaining the earth. One consequence of our separation from nature through, for example, industrial ways of deriving our food, has been a loss of a sense of what we in fact can do to change the world. Is it true, as Moran (2006) suggests, that by recalling the first three characteristics of the web of life we may begin to regain a sense of our ability to contribute to a more sustainable planet? Indeed, these characteristics are stressed by my informants both verbally and practically. So, if our actions have a cumulative impact, and if we are interrelated and are able to self-organize, there should be nothing standing in the way for individuals or groups to make a difference and play an important role in protecting the web of life.

When approaching the analysis of the empirical data, I explore relations with nature and conceptualizations of the notion historically and within the ethnographic context of my research. Recently, a focus on the politics of nature has been advocated as an important aspect of our reconceptualization of the term (Escobar 1999). Following nature as a concept of increased political concern (Järvensivu et al. 2018), entails an imagining or reconstructing (Dickens 1996) of it, which in turn call for particular politics as well as a particular ontology, epistemology, ethics and actions (Roepstorff, Bubandt & Kull 2003). So if one looks at nature as a notion with emotional, moral and political associations, how does it emerge out of a dialogue between perception and praxis? Paying attention to the practical as well as the discursive engagement with nature (“practices of nature”) when searching for sustainability, self-sufficiency and nature-connection, what role does grief and

hope play in the discovering of new ways of life? How does these practices in turn provide a critical view on our current system and (energy) consumption patterns?

I suggest that to find satisfactory answers to these questions we need to go beyond the social and cultural context and see human beings as individual organisms living in an environment and developing through their engagement with what they encounter in that environment. This approach follows the line of thoughts from Tim Ingold (2000), who draws on the work of environmental psychologists and ecologists such as Gibson and Uexküll. He argues that human beings come to understand the world by perceiving it directly and not only through the medium of cultural interpretations. He refers to how the corporeal engagement with the natural world is a phenomenological process that also sets certain standards/ethos for engagement with the social world. “Practices of nature” construct both perceptions of nature and establishes particular human ontologies or world-views.

The reason I chose this research is that nature concerns me on a personal level. It worries me that my own species and the broad cultural condition of western capitalism has created ways of living that damage and destroy nature. I believe that more people should care for nature and look for ways of living which may lead to greater sustainability and awareness. In other words, I share the desire for change. From the beginning of the exploration of my research questions it has been clear that emotion⁵ is an important factor, as caring for nature is an emotional response. My informants often spoke of their feelings for nature, their enjoyment of it, their distress at its destruction, their fears for its future and the grief they experience connected to ecological loss and estrangement. Thus, I assume that such feelings are an important motivator behind the particular practices I met in the field.

Much of my research has been with individuals and groups that are dedicated towards nature protection and sustainability. These approaches go beyond an anthropocentric view of nature which implies that nature should be valued for its benefits to human beings. The approaches I dealt with in the field rather include deep-ecological approaches to life and concerns for the rights and welfare of non-human entities in nature such as animals, trees and forests. Such concerns are generally ecocentric or biocentric, where nature and natural things are assumed to have a value in themselves,

⁵ Milton (2002) argue that emotions operate primarily, all though not exclusively, in ecological relations, between an individual organism and its environment, rather than in solely social relations.

independent of the benefits they may have for human beings (Milton 2002). In this paper I explore some of the ways in which my informants act upon their concerns for nature, how they relate to nature and how this in turn relates to different realities/ontologies and different ways of conceptualizing, perceiving, constructing or imagining nature. Through my data and through recent history of engagement with nature, I argue that in modern capitalist society we are estranged from nature and that the individuals concerned try to find back to a connection, both through practical and discursive interactions.

In the first part of this paper I will further describe the general approach of my research, introduce the main methods used in the gathering of ethnographic data and discuss some methodological considerations when approaching the field with the camera. In the second part, called “ethnographic description,” I go deeper into the process of doing my fieldwork, how I gained access, followed by a description of my main fieldwork collaborations. By the end this I point out some emerging themes from my observations for further discussion and analysis. The final part of the thesis will present the main theoretical considerations and the analysis of my research. First, by placing the particular interactions and practices within a broader context and discussion of more biocentric approaches to life. Following this, I look at the history of estrangement from nature and the ways in which the particular practices informs a critique of current system structures. I continue to discuss how the examples I met in the field deal emotionally with the ecological crisis. I argue that through active participation in the environment and the reconstructing of our role in the web of life, people discover practical ways to cope through grief, hope and participation in community. This in turn may encourage them to change the story of who we are, what the earth is and how we are inextricably connected to it. I underline the importance my collaborators placed “doing your part” to sustain the web of life and change the ways in which we relate to nature and ourselves. Finally I will sum up these thoughts and my main arguments in a conclusion.

1.1 General Approach, Methods and Methodology

1.2: Psychological, Emotional or Sensorial aspects.

The emotional is not a separable component of personality, but inseparable from other parts of existence, flowing in and through all aspects of human and social experience. Perhaps rather than using the term emotional one could use the term experience, so our experience in this world is very much affecting and being affected by the emotional. Based on my own experiences in the field, I have found that many describe the current state of nature as an integrated part of their own state of mind. In light of this, reports of a disappearing nature (Ripple et al. 2017) and environmental destructive practices in society may impact the mental well being of people in unpredictable ways. Scholars like Dickens (1996) describes the place of nature in people's "deep mental structures" and how their understanding of nature tends to mirror their experience of the social world. In order to understand ecological relationships, it is as hard to separate people from nature as it is to separate the emotional from the experience .

The fieldwork experience is brought to life through our actions, our practices and our sensing and embodied process of relatedness. A relational understanding regards the field as a messy web of alive and dynamically changing relationships, as providing opportunities for relationships with people, aspects of self, things and places (Jackson 1996). By developing relational epistemologies relying on embodied as well as other types of knowledge one takes part in an "affective turn". The turn towards "affect" has further problematized traditional dichotomies. Affects refer to both body and mind and involve both reason and passions. In turn, they are both causes and effects, and thus illuminate our tendencies to both affect the world and be affected by it (Hardt 2007).

In my project I want to generate understanding through the analysis of ethnographic data, scientific publications, visual representations and ethnographic film. In the film *Barefoot in the Forest* I embrace a sensorial and sonic exploration of the social and natural landscape. What initially drove my interest to investigate this project audio-visually was the call for alternatives regarding different ways in which we can relate to nature, not as an object with a price tag, but rather as bodies (MacDougall 2006) and as swarms of living organisms (Ingold 2000).

1.3: The Study of Human Practices and Ethnographic Fieldwork

A central part of the critique of culture has been what Sherry Ortner termed a “practice turn” (Ortner 1984). An attention to the unfolding of actual practice over time, which highlights the plurality and historicity of human agency involved in making communities, has thus increasingly replaced the static, systematic understanding of culture as a community bound by rules and norms (Roepstorff, Bubandt & Kull 2003). I agree with the discussion of human practices as a complex set of activities out of which certain features arise that one attempts to study, understand and classify. As a pragmatic header, it is argued (Roepstorff, Bubandt & Kull 2003) that practice is an open term that allows a focus on a number of interrelated phenomena, from knowledge, perception and meaning, to power, identity and money. It is a focus that allows for a close empirical study that is open to the phenomenological process of being and doing, while maintaining an analytical understanding of structure, power and meaning. Although a critique of culture has been acknowledged, the consequence have not been adequately incorporated into the understanding of how nature emerges out a dialectic between human perception and practice, at the same time as this is shaped by their history of engagement with nature (Roepstorff, Bubandt & Kull 2003). It is suggested that paying attention to the practical as well as the discursive engagement with nature, called “practices of nature” (Roepstorff, Bubandt & Kull 2003, p 15), is necessary to understand the processes and conditions of imagining or reconstructing nature.

Ethnographic fieldwork is a process that varies from person to person and time to time. One key feature of the methods used by anthropologists and researchers within the field has always been qualitative; long term involvement and engagement over an extended period of time. In the case of my own fieldwork, I saw exactly the limitations of the time I had to follow through the research. In many ways this is just an introduction to a set of complex realities, social interactions and engagements in the fieldwork encounter. Even during the last months of editing the film and text, when reflecting upon my empirical material and further investigating the subject-matter, I am still within a process of discovery.

I will show how I went about performing fieldwork and what methods I considered in order to collect empirical data. I come back to reflections on access, positioning and the process of fieldwork during the second part of this paper. Abduction is an approach used in ethnographic research where the research process alternates between empirical facts and theory and reinterpret them in light of each other. In such an approach one starts from the empirical basis and the analysis

of empirical facts that together with theory may well give source for interpretations that brings forth understanding (Alvesson & Sköldbreg 2009). Apart from this way of understanding ethnography as text, or in other words an explanatory model of anthropology, I will now discuss my general approach of using film as part of my research with visual anthropology and possibilities for new ways of knowing. Here I start to reflect upon my positioning in the field and the “situatedness” (Arntsen & Høltedahl 2005) of myself and others in the fieldwork encounter. I also confer about how ethnographic film may allow for a greater sense of self-reflexivity within ethnographic research (MacDougall 1998).

1.4: Participant Observation and Visual Ethnography

Participant observation is without doubt one of the most important methods of traditional as well as modern anthropology. It conveys research carried out directly among the people that inform the data on which anthropologists builds his or her analysis and understanding, usually through fieldwork conducted over a considerable length of time. Underlying participatory observation is careful observation and documentation of people’s day-to-day lives. In my understanding of participant observation and the way I implemented it as a method in my own fieldwork, was through observing what people did and said as well as actively participating in activities and discussions. I even found myself rather often being the initiator of certain discussions and activities. The information I then take out is based on my own experience of participation, the recordings of actual events, as well as what I have noted down in field notes.

In addition, as a student of visual anthropology, the nature of my research did not solely consist in the classical collection of ethnographic data through participatory observation. It was also aiming for a sensorial exploration of the field and my main fieldwork collaborator and film protagonist, Christof “Huck” Middeke, through the method of visual ethnography. Postma and Crawford (2006, p 1) use the term visual ethnography to indicate the use of the camera in anthropology as a research method, aimed at generating anthropological knowledge and representing social realities on film or video, as part of ethnographic representation. At times, these two approaches were rather conflicting as the attention I used for recording audio-visual material often stood in the way of observing and listening. At least, the ways in which I observed and listened was very different with the presence of the camera.

Filmmaking based on the process of observation principally lays weight on following the subject's actions and recording them in their totality rather than directing them according to preconceived ideas. In this way, observational cinema has much in common with the ethnographic method of participatory observation (Henley 2004). However, recent changes in anthropology's interpretive paradigms are central to the development of new perspectives on observational cinema. With the increased interest in phenomenology, the older analytical framework associated with scientific ethnography has been facing some challenges. Visual anthropology has particularly come to the fore in discussions of the form and technique of traditional anthropology. Today, one largely recognizes this field, as a place for alternative modes of anthropology, even as posing fundamental challenges to anthropological ways of knowing (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009).

1.5: Visual Anthropology and Ways of Knowing

Visual ethnography may enhance the anthropological dialogue about different modes of knowing and representing. This was an important aim of the practical research strategy I used in the field. Postma and Crawford (2006, p 2) argue that it is exactly the tension between different modes of knowing and representing, as explored extensively by David MacDougall (1998, 2006), that form the challenge of the field of visual ethnography. MacDougall (2006) suggests that visual anthropology should be seen as a discipline outside written anthropology because audiovisual representations address us differently than words or written text. With film we are rather in a "different experiential world" (MacDougall 2006, p 270) which is to be understood differently than written text. Film gives a physical presence; on the screen we see the moving image and the traces of objects seen by the camera and the filmmaker. Turning away from an emphasis on the linguistic aspect of ethnographic encounters, film rather "allows us to reenter the corporeal spaces of our own and others' lives—the manner in which we all, as social creatures, assimilate forms and textures through our senses, learn things before we understand them, share experiences with others, and move through the varied social environments that surround us." (MacDougall 2006, p 270)

As ethnographical descriptions generally attempt to be reflexive about one's own position when approaching other people, so does one need to be reflexive about one's own subjectivity and positioning when approaching others with the camera. Not only were the interactions made in the

field a product of the fieldwork itself, but the results are also a product of the interactions between myself and my collaborators, as well as with the audiences that have looked at the footage throughout the period of editing. Finally, it is a product of the relationship between myself and the audience that will look at the completed film. As pointed out by Arntsen and Høltedahl (2005), it is important to extend the focus from solely the “situatedness” of the researcher in anthropological discussion and methodology. They argue that it is both necessary and fruitful to look beyond one’s own “situatedness” in the field and include the role of the audience in this encounter. Looking at the Interrelationship and interaction between the different actors involved, for example, Huck, who we see in front of the camera in a large part of the film, myself behind the camera, and the audiences that have followed the process of editing. One can argue that we are all present on the scene of interaction and production, or what Goffman (1959) would refer to as “the stage of performance” in a dramaturgical sense.

The process of editing the film and the seminars conducted with rough cut screenings, followed by my classmates, technicians, scholars and filmmakers at the university, proved particularly interesting in this sense. Hearing the comments from the others and the different ways in which they perceived Huck and the film, took me out of my own echo chamber of perception. It expanded the fields of understanding, taking into account all the different actors and reactions to who Huck is and what the film is about. It also showed me how film affects us differently and in a different way than written text. As a student, I am doing this research as a part of this Masters program in visual anthropology and therefore I am framing my own role in the interaction in order to match the expectations of the audience, as well as my own and the ones of my fieldwork collaborators. The negotiations inside and outside the field are very much affected by this interaction. Arntsen and Høltedahl (2005) argue that the result of this encounter in the field may lead to a “fusion of horizons,” or a broadening of horizons, which involves all the different actors respectively. In this way, the camera as a medium has great potential and poses possibilities that written text does not. MacDougall (1998) argues that the camera may even bring forth an understanding that traverses or transcends cultural boundaries.

Visual forms of anthropology are without a doubt attracting attention of anthropologists, especially those concerned with the limitations of anthropological texts and the possibilities the camera pose in capturing specific aspects of phenomenological experience (Henley 2004). During the fieldwork, I surely found the camera to be a great tool in capturing and mediating such experiences. I could

never have described nor captured the characteristic mannerisms of Huck as he moves within the selected frames as well as I do in the film, for example, when he is on his bicycle, or in his way of interacting with the environment. The hand held camera gave me the opportunity to embody his movements as I followed him with the camera in the pace and the space he was traveling. Indeed, the camera allowed for an exploration of aspects such as embodiment, performance, place, the emotions, the senses, time and duration, the uses of space, posture and gesture, and the construction of self. Such characteristics have had the attention and interest of many anthropologists, especially those interested in visual representations of these facets in social and cultural life (Henley 2004). The attraction is not only to the new lines of approach, but to the new forms of understanding and ways of knowing offered by alternative means of expression (MacDougall 1998).

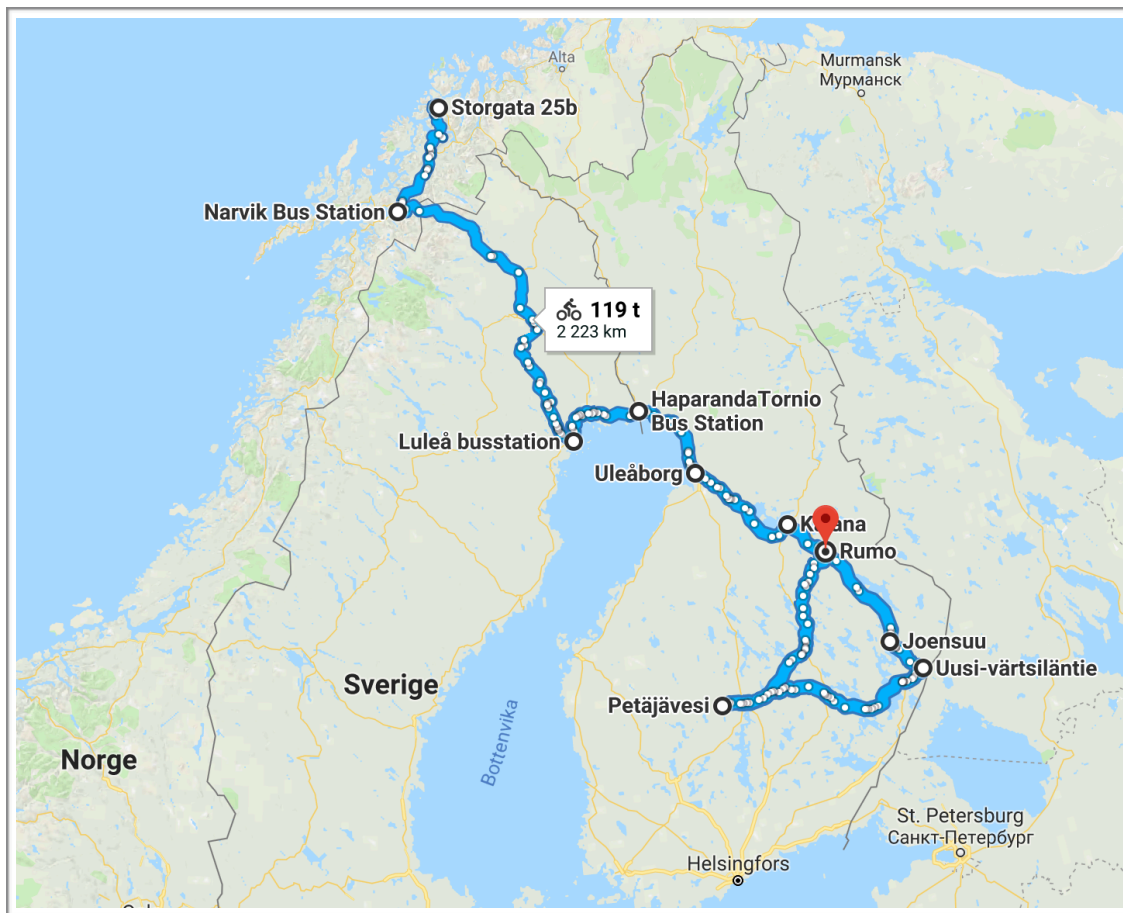
Accumulation of successive film frames evokes the sensation of movement over time quite literally through movement over time (Barbash and Taylor 1997). Following this lies the importance and the challenge of framing to show rather than tell a story which creates meaning through the camera. Film language is the language of moving, seeing and hearing, it “uses experience to express experience.” (Barbash and Taylor 1997, p 1) To a certain extent, the camera can share the physical experience of living in a certain surrounding and this experience is predominantly “transcultural” (MacDougall 1998). The aim of participatory observation is also to experience, as far as possible, the world of “the other” as they do (O’Reilly 2012). Following the importance of paying attention to sensuous aspects of ethnographic knowledge and understanding, Postma and Crawford (2006) points out how the camera can help to communicate such experiential or body-to-body knowledge.

Framing, camera movements, conditions, point of view, duration of shots and editing are all aspects of camera work determined by ideas about representation, inclusion and exclusion as well as contextualization of persons, social interaction and processes (Postma and Crawford 2006). When I was in the field with the camera many of these aspects proved their importance. I was filming Huck for a short period and I was also filming with other collaborators during the totality of my fieldwork. At the time, I did not yet know what I would include in the final edit of the film and what I would leave out. Due to time limitations, I have not had the benefit of much long-term observation before shooting and even though I knew Huck a bit from before, I recognized a change in the relationship between us with the presence of the camera. From my own standing point, it seems like the camera turns the world much more into a stage where also the actors in front of the camera are

somewhat aware of playing a role. I also experienced sensing the world differently and could direct the viewer into certain aspects that I choose as significant in the field. Indeed, the camera provides a great tool to approach and express matters of the senses, emotion, time, space, individual identity and the body. This mirrors the recent interest in phenomenological aspects of social life in anthropology in general, where visual representations might pose as an alternative to ethnographic descriptions in text.

Within the discipline of anthropology, both written and visual, reflexivity has gained significance as the aim for transparency has triumphed over the aim for objectivity. When using the camera to generate anthropological knowledge through ethnographic film, the reflexivity of the anthropologist can be read as embedded in the “very flesh of the work” (MacDougall 1998, p 85) and does not need external explanations. The process of embedding self-reflexivity into visual ethnography is in this way suggested through the film itself and does not only reflect my own stand as it might do in this text, but a whole process of discovery emerging during the fieldwork and afterwards in the editing. As it is explored from a particular perspective and point of view, ethnographic film is a way of seeing a particular reality. Even though visual anthropology has not made significant changes in the form of anthropology’s classical methods, it has a sincere focus on lived experience. Seen as a way of looking and knowing, visual ethnography’s primary aim is to seek meaning in the “corporeal” (MacDougall 2006) and phenomenological dimensions beyond what could be explained linguistically.

2.0 Ethnographic Description



2.1: Entering the Field: Access, Positioning and Cycling in the Field

I left Tromsø in the early morning the 3rd of May to catch the train from Narvik on the well known Iron Ore Line⁶ over the mountainous boarder between Norway and Sweden. When I got off the train the journey continued in bicycle speed towards Joensuu⁷, in the eastern part of Finland. I had some initial meetings planned with Huck and other people involved in the planning of the sustainability experiment that would take place in July. Together with my bike and trailer packed with camera equipment and gear needed to live outside in the forest for the next 3 months, I was full of anticipation and wonder as to what this fieldwork will bring forward. One of the main plans I had before entering the field was to gather and work with groups and individuals that in various ways, through their efforts and practices, are telling stories of a need and desire to live a more sustainable and self-sufficient life within a close relationship to nature. I was interested in engaging with

⁶ *Malmabanen* (Iron Ore line) is the Swedish name of the almost 500 km long railway track between Narvik in Norway and Luleå in Sweden. The track is used to transport iron ore from the mines in Kiruna and *Malmberget* (Iron ore mountain) for export.

⁷ Joensuu (“mouth of the river” in Finnish), is a city and municipality in North Karelia with a population of around 76 500. The city was founded by the Czar Nicholas 1 of Russia in 1848. Today Joensuu is sometimes referred to as the forest capital of Europe, mainly because the European forest institute is based there. Other forestry research and educational facilities are also based in Joensuu.

practices that question the traditional dichotomy between nature and culture. The idea was for the research to both explore my own journey to and in the field, as my own position cannot be overlooked, and the journeys of the main participants in the project.

My own journey initially consisted in finding out about how nature is conceived within the given context, the relationship between people and nature, and the potentials that lies in engaging more directly with nature and the materials used in daily life. This has, among other things, taken me on a lot of walks and talks in the forest, interacting with the environment in various ways. Such interactions were for example foraging and collecting different kinds of materials for use in building, cooking, cleaning, medicine and tool making. It has also taken me on an endless journey of discovery through talks and discussions where my informants were engaged in “practices of nature”, and imagined nature in the sense that they would build meaning attached to what nature is, and were actively exploring “new” or alternative ways of living and perceiving nature.

In this part of the paper I further describe and reflect on access and my own positioning in the fieldwork encounter. I will present key parts within the process of fieldwork conducted over the summer of 2018 in Finland, the context in which important activities and collaborations took place. During fieldwork, my own position in relation to my collaborators went beyond being solely a researcher looking in from the outside. Rather, I explored the experience of the encounter alongside my collaborators. It is this experience, together with the different collaborations, specific situations, activities and discussions, where I draw the discussion, analysis and conclusions of this thesis from. Recognizing here that the data arising out of the fieldwork came from within the certain relationships and interactions in the field, what came out of it cannot be claimed objective. I am throughout this thesis attempting to give a transparent account of how I came about gaining the insights which I found most relevant for my research questions. While placing empirical data within a larger theoretical framework, I give an account of my interpretations of this data while taking into serious consideration my understanding of emic interpretations. However, I want to stress how my own presence in the field probably has been rather influential when it comes to the focus on what I consider to be significant information, even though it is a focus which I often experienced as shared with my informants.

My personal background as an environmental activist, together with my personality and interests, have played a crucial role in the negotiations of my own position in the field as well as the gaining

of access to people and events. I knew my main collaborator and point of contact Christof “Huck” Middeke from before this project took shape, through environmental activism and a shared interest for sustainability and ecological living. For him it was therefore easy to direct me towards other interesting collaborations based on our previous acquaintance. This also contributed to how I often found myself there as a collaborator and friend within situations not too unfamiliar. I believe this created closer relationships with the people I met, as well as it strengthened my access and position as a researcher. Along the course of the fieldwork I also had the pleasure to meet other students and researchers that were looking into similar topics as I was, which opened up for fruitful discussions on the subject-matter.

My proximity to the topics of my project had a major impact on the research, mostly in a positive way. I experienced the distance between myself and my collaborators as being rather small, even though we came from different backgrounds and age groups. On the other hand, it also posed challenges in my ability to take a professional distance in order to notice particularities of the fieldwork experience that I might have taken for granted. Even though the closeness with the participants in the project has been helpful in the field, the ability to distance myself is now equally useful in gaining an understanding of particular situations and events. However, I hope the minimized distance between me as a researcher and my research collaborators also enabled me to give a more intimate account.

Both before and during fieldwork I therefore made conscious decisions to lessen this distance, for example by traveling to the fieldwork site by land, in an environmentally friendly and low emitting manner. I chose to cycle in order to travel with my own means, without using fossil fuels and to mirror the importance of sustainability and self-reliance that I was prepared to engage with in the field. Using the bicycle as a mean of transportation also allowed me to travel the same way many of my collaborators travel. It also enabled me to familiarize myself with the ethnographic context in a more intimate way. I believe this both decreased the distance between myself and my collaborators, as well as between myself and the landscape. It allowed me to experience and sense the field in a particular manner, as I moved in a low speed through the social and natural landscape of Finland and the Finnish forest. The act of cycling to and within the field thus became an important part of the fieldwork. It opened up for me to join my collaborators in bicycle speed and personal choices surrounding means of transportation also became an interesting point of enquiry for my research. It

also brought me to a closer understanding of the sensuous experience of traveling long and short distances with bicycle, something I have also explored in the film.

Already after crossing the boarder to Finland I could get a feel for the landscape and the ways people live in the landscape. I observed main industrial activity in the countryside from the northwest to the northeast, such as logging, mining, roadwork and dams. Thus, I could observe the ways in which the forest and the landscape is treated in this context. I met very few people along the way in these early days, camping in the forest as the snow was still on the ground in early may. It was not until the last days of cycling, before arriving in Joensuu, that “summer” began with a sudden rise in temperature. The temperatures would stay high throughout the summer in this part of the world and the warm and dry weather prevailed for the rest of the fieldwork. Interestingly, the weather was also a very largely discussed topic with the people I met in the field. Many commented on how the warm and dry weather was very uncommon and that they experienced it as threatening. Dried land, for example, led to failed crops and little promise for local access to food and wild-foraging. This was even felt later in the summer as berry bushes that usually yields a lot of berries and forest floors that are commonly full of mushrooms were empty and dry. Many people would also say that this was part of a scary scenario happening due to climate change and that it underlies the urgency for change, to decrease global and local emissions, the use of fossil fuels and take better care for nature and the environment.

2.2: Collaborators, Interactions, Activities and Practices

Here I will further detail the relevant social settings and activities I found myself in during the fieldwork. I will present my main collaborators during the three months I spent in Finland, with a focus on the time I spent with Christoph “Huck” Middeke during the experiment, as well as his network of people in the Joensuu area, the *talkoot*⁸ at *Omavaraopisto*⁹ and an environmental art festival. The time I spent with Huck is also the focus of the filmic part of the thesis. In order to gain a greater feel of the larger network of people that are working within similar understandings of the world, and more particularly in relation to nature and sustainability, I will describe other

⁸ *Talkoot* is a Finnish expression for a gathering of friends and neighbors organized in communal work and in this context it means voluntary over an extended period of time in exchange for food and in the spirit of community. It seems to be very close to the Norwegian term *dugnad*. The Norwegian word *Dugnadsånd* is translatable to the spirit of will to work together for a better community.

⁹ *Omavaraopisto* means school for self-sufficiency.

collaborations and situations that I found most important to deepen the grasp of the research outside the filmic part.¹⁰ Before I met with Huck in the “Experiment”, I spent almost two months helping Mick and Marja building their ecological forest home, helping Dennis with his projects, as well as taking part in other projects in and around the area of Joensuu. After the experiment, I travelled with Huck to the *talkoot* at *Omavaraopisto* and in the final part of the fieldwork I visited an ecological themed art festival with some of the volunteers that participated in the *talkoot*. The particular cases are in both similar and varied ways occupied with environmental issues, sustainability, the experience of ecological grief and increasing the understanding of their own role in the web of life. In many ways, these are stories are countering the experience of living in a society dependent on fossil fuels¹¹; dealing with effects of the “destructiveness” the current way of life in the larger society has on communities and individuals. As I will discuss more greatly later in this paper, they are all acting upon identified problems both emotionally, discursively and practically.

2.3: Huck and “The Sustainability Experiment”

My main informant and point of contact both before, during, and now after the fieldwork, is Christof “Huck” Middeke. He is born in 1979 and works as an activity teacher for children in Joensuu. He is the founder of a North-Karelian based nature education and guiding organization called NordicByNature¹² which provides services that aim to promote nature awareness and nature connection. On their webpage he asks questions like:

“Are you aware what “nature” is?

A definition? The Wilderness? The Forest?

What role do we, as humans play in nature?

Do we have to obey the rules of nature? How?

What are the rules of nature?”

“...Naturally the answers to many of these questions can be found by increasing our awareness of the natural world. After “leaving” the tight bond with the rest of the natural world behind us, we became strangers to the basis of our own survival and to our own nature as

¹⁰ I collaborated and worked alongside with various people over the course of fieldwork that I will not have room to explore or further describe in this thesis. The nature of the project has been consisting in a lot of traveling around and meeting different people, yet in order to focus the paper, I have had to choose some people and situations I consider most relevant.

¹¹ Salminen & Vadèn (2015) explore this in their essay “Energy and Experience”. Several of my collaborators referred me to this text in order to explain their own situation.

¹² Webpage: <https://www.nordicbynature.net>

“intelligent animals”. In our modern world... our role had dramatically changed. Most people do not know what role that is and this creates conflict with our human identity”. Huck also emphasizes how he finds himself “living a life between two worlds” in the film; “The one world, is our modern world. And the other world is what I came to understand as reality.”

NordicByNature offers walks, talks and activities in nature which aim to help people understanding and remembering our human nature. Huck’s life philosophy is very much anchored in seeking harmony with the rest of nature, for him we are a part of nature and nature is a part of us. He presents himself as a wilderness guide, father and environmental activist and is initiating various projects and gatherings dealing with the issues of environmental problems, survival, sustainability and ways of living in connection with nature and in particular with the forest. From before I have known him as an eager communicator in regards to the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences concerned with lifestyle choices and “nature-connection”, abandoning the idea of nature as something separated from ourselves, as merely a resource to exploit for profit. He has participated on TEDx Talks¹³ and has an online YouTube channel where he shares his thoughts on subjects like sustainability and survival.¹⁴ This has been my starting point as well as his point of departure for the idea of “the experiment”, which was one of the initial activities I was to take part in during my fieldwork.

“In order to allow for our children to safely copy our lifestyle we need to change”

(Christof “Huck” Middeke)

Huck, myself and others I met in the field, like Dennis, Mick and Marja, had prior to the summer been involved in discussions around the idea of the so called “modern-hunter-gatherer-experiment” or “sustainability experiment”. It arose out of a collaboration between people, mainly living in Finland, that communicate via online platforms such as facebook and email. Huck himself has initiated the group and calls it “a place for exchange and communication between people who wish a transition from the non-functioning modern civilization to a lifestyle that can be sustained

¹³ TEDx talk is a showcase for speakers presenting great, well-informed ideas in under 18 minutes. In March 2016 environmental activist Christof “Huck” Middeke was one of the speakers in an independently organized TED-like conference themed “Destinations” in Tallinn, Estonia. In his speech he states how “being part of the solution is easier than being part of the problem” and explains why he trusts the life of his son to a hummingbird. Parts of this speech can be seen within the filmic part of my master thesis. The full speech called “Global Spring” can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWjaumRv2pA> .

¹⁴ Huck Middeke’s online youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmf2IY-JV-RrTISV8LBIC7A>

and be safely passed on to future generations”. His idea is based on a lifestyle of possibly nomadic hunting and gathering, but in connection with “the dying civilization”, as he coins it. Between 10-20 people from different parts of Finland had prior to my arrival been planning to gather over the period of one month that summer somewhere in the forest of North Karelia.¹⁵ Among them were some of my other informants, like Mick, Marja and Dennis. In this time they wanted to explore and experiment with possibilities to live off the land within a harmonious relationship between people and nature. The idea, as I understood it, was to “experiment” with a new lifestyle, in order to re-discover or re-construct nature and discover another way of life that take better into account nature as an integral part of the self, sustainability, survival, resilience, trust, reciprocity and community. For Huck, we are part of nature and he is about sharing his values and helping to re-learn this connection, interaction and dependency, while doing our best to get "back into balance”.

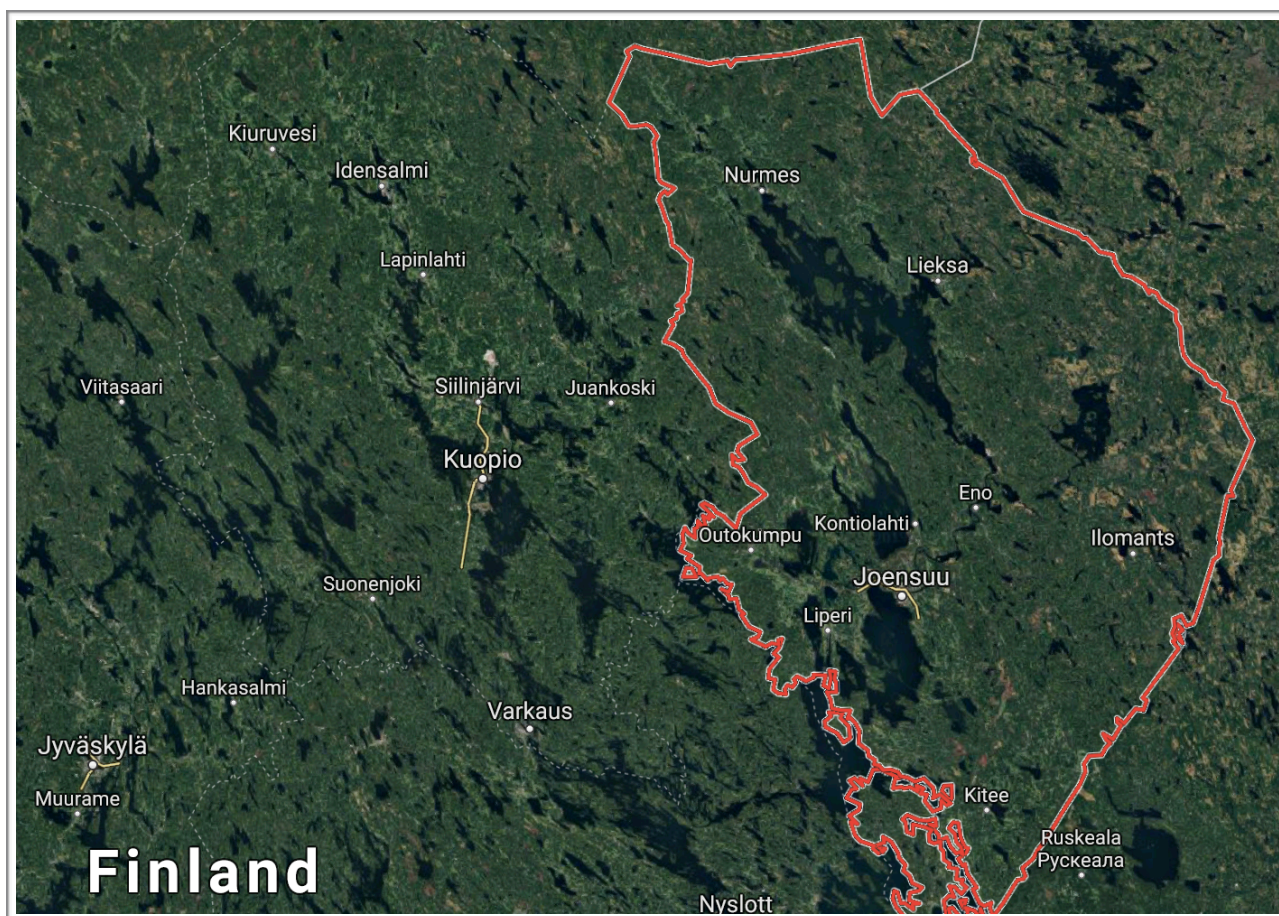
The core principles of the “experiment” is to leave out four factors: Money, fossil fuels, rubbish and harm on the environment. These are factors that I would argue are dominating global consumer culture and society today. It was and is in many ways about figuring out a new lifestyle through actively participating in the creation of this lifestyle, moving forward while taking inspiration from ancient cultures that lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. I found the idea of participating in the experiment very interesting in order to further investigate the questions of my own project, as it is both imagined and concrete, as well involving a criticism of the current system through its core principles. I was curious to see how nature might be perceived, re-constructed, imagined and understood, through both words and in praxis. And, what insights would come out of the experiment itself for the people who would participate? Before I come back to the realization of the experiment, I will introduce you to some of the other collaborations and situations that have helped me understand more about the importance of networks and community in my research. This data has also helped to strengthening the understanding of these networks as a counter-culture that reconstruct nature and deals with the ecological crisis in practical ways through grief, hope and active participation, aiming for sustainability, self-sufficiency and ecological harmony.

When I arrived in Joensuu, where Huck normally lives with his wife and young son, there was a lot of uncertainty surrounding when and where this experiment would be taking place and who would actually participate. As Huck was also occupied the first period of the fieldwork and

¹⁵ North Karelia is a region in eastern Finland where the city of Joensuu is the regional capital. Karelia is a historical province of Finland which Finland partly gave up to Russia in 1940, after the Winter War.

was traveling with his family, I was looking for other people to connect with to further an understanding of approaches to nature, sustainability and alternative lifestyles. Huck connected me with a few people that would prove to be significant for the discovering of the various ways in which people through practical endeavors are taking part in creating solutions to the problems they face in the ecological crisis, both environmentally and existentially. Most of the people I met live in the region of North Karelia, in more or less close proximity to Joensuu, which, apart from the participation in the experiment itself, was where I spent most of the fieldwork.

Map of North-Karelia (within the red outline).



2.4: Wild-Foraging and Collaborations for Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency

After first arriving in Joensuu, I stayed with Mick and Marja in Vaivio, a village in Liperi, 20 km from the city. Mick and Marja live together with their two small children; Luna and Leo in the countryside, where they are currently in the process of building their new home according to

natural-building principles.¹⁶ Marja is a Finnish sign language interpreter by profession, but has been home with her children since Leo was born in 2014. Mick is a carpenter from Ireland. At the time of the fieldwork their everyday life consisted almost solely of working with the construction of their house, as well as foraging wild edible plants in and around the forested property. Some days we were also helping out at *Pikkunuppu*, the nearby organic farm of Marja's father Piotr. Their project is to build a small straw bale round house from natural, local and recycled materials. The house is being built on a plot of land that they bought in 2016, close to the farm where Marja grew up. During my stay I took part in their daily life this time of year and helped out with their projects.

While staying there Huck would also be visiting and we would have conversations together. There was a great sense of collaboration and cooperation surrounding the idea of pursuing a sustainable life, and even though Mick and Marja kept to themselves as a family, they too felt dependent on the help and cooperation with neighbors, friends and family in the area to make such a lifestyle work. Mick and Marja have also been taking part in meetings and the planning of the experiment. However, as it turned out, they would not be able to take part physically themselves, as they needed to put their time and efforts into the construction work.¹⁷



¹⁶ Natural building includes different systems for construction that lay weight on sustainability. Mick and Marja were following a system that used straw-bale for insulation and natural, locally sourced materials in the construction. They used a round wooden log frame for the house, with trees from the surrounding forest. In addition to natural materials, they also used recycled materials, like wood and metal sheets that they had found in the area.

¹⁷ Picture to the left shows Mick and Marja at their neighbor's place making straw bales for house insulation. To the right is the construction site for their house.

During the stay with Mick and Marja I got to learn a great deal about what it means to live off the grid in a sustainable and self-sufficient way, as well as what it means to engage directly with the resources used in day to day life. Most of the food we would eat came from the family farm, and consisted in wholesome and vegan food. Even though they would also buy some other things that they could not source themselves, they had a low consumption and low impact lifestyle, close to being self-sufficient. During my stay we produced very little rubbish and I could sense a great care for nature and for not wasting any resources. They did not buy new things, and clothes were recycled or fixed when possible. They would emphasize towards me how much of the wood resources and nails they used on the house were recycled or “rescued” from the rubbish, and that the rest of the trees they used would be old ones or already dying ones from the surrounding forest.

Most of the activities they were doing this time of year took place outside as a family or with neighbors, and was often connected to the gathering of resources to be used for food, building or medicine. I took part in various activities such as harvesting wild edible plants and working on the construction site. We were making straw bales for insulation with help from a neighbor, preparing firewood for next winter from fallen trees with other volunteers and also helped out planting vegetables at Marja’s family farm. Apart from the vegetables, we ate a lot of preserves that they still had from foraging the previous year, such as berries and sauerkraut. For them, it was an important theme to raise their children in an ecological way, teaching them about nature and plants and a local and organic food supply for the dinner table. Having a low-carbon footprint was crucial for living a good life. Mick and Marja are also connected with Lasse and Maria, that are organizing *talkoots* at *Omavaraopisto*, the self-sufficiency school in *Rumo*, where I went with Huck at a later stage of the fieldwork. They are all very much involved in each others projects and share thoughts and knowledge regarding different practices, like preserving food or natural building. Mick has also been helping Lasse building the wooden log house that one can see towards the end of my film *Barefoot in the Forest*.

Awaiting what would happen regarding the experiment I familiarized myself more and more within the network of people around Joensuu working with other projects, I continued my journey to visit and help out elsewhere. After the time in Vaivio, I travelled to stay with Dennis, who is a yoga teacher, massage therapist and wood artisan. He was also supposed to participate in the experiment when I was there and even though he did not during my fieldwork, he continues to be involved currently. He lives in Uusi-Värtsilä, a village in Tohmajärvi, North Karelia, 7 km from the Russian

boarder. Some years ago he bought an old house that previously housed several families that all worked in the nearby village foundry. The foundry was closed in the 1960s, people started to move and the village got quiet. Today it is a more or less an abandoned place with many empty houses around. The area is surrounded by forests, bogs, spring water lakes and rivers.

Even though he lives alone, Dennis often has a lot of volunteers staying with him and he is collaborating on different projects through a community organization. He is restoring the house and the garden, building greenhouse domes where he plants vegetables and also plants a variety of edibles on a nearby field. Through the community organization he helps out on other sustainability and community projects in the region. While staying in Uusi-Värtsilä, we were engaged in activities that included planting seeds, harvesting wild edible plants, practicing yoga, preparing medicinal herbs, woodwork and the making of pine-bark bread flour. It was an interesting and dynamic time that allowed me to get even deeper into practical aspects of this way of life and approaches to how we may balance our relationship to nature. Even further, I was establishing more connections with people in the area and having an ongoing discussion on the topics I was looking at for my research project, both verbally and practically.

In addition to being part of the experiment, Dennis is part of an association of around 20-30 members in the Joensuu area and North-Karelian region. This association or NGO (Non Governmental Organization) is called *Maaseutuyhdistys Sydänlanka ry*, which translates to something similar to Rural-Areas Heartstring ry or Farmland Heartstring ry in English. They base themselves on community work and *talkoot*, where they help each other realize both communal and individual projects that deals with self-sufficiency and sustainability. They also organize community activities such as wild foraging and preservation and make pamphlets with information about wild-edibles and how to preserve them for food or medicine. Social activities spanned from planting, weeding and harvesting vegetables and collecting wild foods, building greenhouses and raised beds for growing food, to fermentation and preservation of foods.

In this period I travelled a lot around the Joensuu area to take part in such activities and met a lot of people within the same field of interest. More and more I realized that many of these people and projects are interconnected throughout the country with the shared interest in alternative ways of living in closer connection to nature and the resources we used. A so called “counter-culture” if I may use that word, resisting the general trend of consumerism and separation from nature through

active community participation and engagement with nature and wild natural resources. The meeting with this organization also made me more aware of the importance of mutual dependency, interconnectivity, and of community and collaboration, when figuring out the new lifestyle. This sense was somewhat lacking, all though desired, during the experiment. The desire and importance of community, collaboration and skill-sharing was however stressed by Huck during this time, and was also one of the reasons why we decided to spent the last week of the experiment at the *talkoot* at *Omavaraopisto*.

2.5: The Experiment, The *Talkoot* and The Environmental Arts Festival

After a lot of back and forth, the experiment was finally happening. Initially, it was planned to happen in the area of North Karelia, but there were problems to gain permission to use the land for living and foraging for a longer period of time. Therefore, the experiment ended up moving to the centre of Finland, where permission was granted to us by the land owner. Due to its nature, the experiment needed such permission, as it exceeded the public access rights in Finland. Legally, one is not allowed to live outside over an extended period of time without legal claims to the land or permission from the landowner. The location was near Petajävesi, about 30 km from Jyväskylä and about 300 km from Joensuu, where Huck normally lives with his family. I arrived there the same day as Huck did, and for the first two days it was only the two of us there. We had the time to talk and lay the foundation for our further collaboration during the next weeks. It was odd, as I initially did not expect to play such a crucial role in the experiment itself, but ended up becoming an integral part of the whole experience, as well as making a strong friendship and alliance with Huck. In respect to this, as I mentioned already, my role as a researcher was at times very blurred. However, I believe that my active participation became such a strong part of the research and allowed me to really experience and immerse myself in the different activities. It also allowed me access to information and situations with the camera I otherwise would not have been let in on.

The aim of the experiment was initially to explore how an average group of people can live sustainably and connected with their environment and the resources they use in their daily lives.

The place we stayed the next weeks was positioned at the river mouth of the river *Konkköjoku*, going into a huge crater lake. We were surrounded by farmland and forest and made camp, awaiting more people to come within the next days. After two days, two more people came, but only one of

them ended up staying there for longer. We waited more days, but in the end none of the others showed up, so in the next weeks we were three people participating. After visiting another gathering that was close by during the last week however, we had two more people visiting our camp. Of course the few participants in itself ended up effecting the nature of both my project and the experiment. I was proceeding to follow Huck on a day-to-day basis in whatever activities he/we were doing, as well as having an ongoing dialogue with him regarding what we where doing there and why. At one point we had both local and national media visiting the camp and the Finnish Broadcasting Agency wrote an article about Huck that ended up on the Finnish national news. We went twice to visit the nearest town, Petajävesi, to connect with the locals and share experiences from our project.

When we stayed in the camp everyday activities consisted mostly in gathering and preparing food. We imagined this would have been different if we would have been a larger group as we then could have divided the work among more people, and shared skills and knowledge within the group. We were fishing with nets, traps and lines almost every day and went to forage both fire wood and wild edibles every day. We also had some time to do some handicraft and practice different crafts and skills with natural materials that we found in the surrounding area. We were for example collecting freshly grown willow and made string out of the outer layers of the branches. We did a lot of skill sharing and Huck thought me a lot about different survival skills, both practical and discursive. Practically, he taught me skills like making a fire using flint-stone and bore-drill. Discursively, he would teach me about various “survival tools” as he calls it, such as the “Full Moon, Full Stop”¹⁸ and “Circle of awareness and Circle of Disturbance”¹⁹. There was a continuous discussion around imagining this to be a long term thing, and what and how we would do things if it was. Indeed, for him, it is a long term-life project, and as a result of this event he has made new realizations and plans for his own life. Off course we were not able to for example grow food and engage in long term projects on the spot during this short time, so a lot of the experiment was consisting in discussing ideas and figuring out what we need and what we considered important to survive in the

¹⁸ The “Full moon, Full stop” is one of Huck’s survival tools where he, during every Full Moon, S.T.O.P. (S-Sit down, stop what you are doing. T-Think. O-Observe your possibilities. P-Plan for the future) He would practice and explain this during the fieldwork as well. He shares this concept and his realizations through this practice each month on his social media platform and in several videos on his online youtube channel.

¹⁹ The Circle of Awareness and Circle of Disturbance” is another concept Huck terms a “survival knowledge”. He explains this concept in the film “Barefoot in the Forest” as well as on his online youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e13ZxnYsXLk> (Survival knowledge: "Circle of awareness" vs. "Circle of disturbance")

long run, in a sustainable way. He has taken up many of these realizations to further plan his own life accordingly.²⁰

After around three weeks, when the third person had left, Huck and I sat down to have a talk about the continuation of the experiment in this location. Even though we had two visitors during those last days, he was concerned with the fact that we did not manage to gather an average group of people, as initially hoped for. We discussed different options and decided to move the experiment to the *talkoot* of the self-sufficiency school, that in this moment had just started a 10 day work camp. Huck thought the “spirit” of the self sufficiency project of Maria and Lasse is in line with that of the experiment itself. After packing down we took time to pay our respect and gratitude to the land we had been using these last weeks and departed on each our bike.



²⁰ During this year, Huck is planning to move and build an off-grid community in the outskirts of Joensuu, which he calls the “NoMadTown”. In the picture you see Huck after we have packed down the camp and are about to move to the *Talkoot* at *Omavaraopisto*.

Omavaopisto means school for self-sufficiency. The project is located in North-Karelia, in Rumo, about 160 km north from Joensuu, where they will start teaching in 2020. Among other topics, they occupy themselves with teaching people about gardening, ecological building, handicrafts and food preservation, which makes people more independent from what they call a “destructive lifestyle.” The teachings are based on the practical experiences of Lasse Nordlund and Maria Dorff over several decades. At the time I was in Finland the project was hosting two work camps to build the infrastructure for the school, one of them was the one I went to with Huck in the end of July. During these work camps they welcome the community to share the idea of doing something meaningful, as they say, and while I was there over 40 people from all over Finland were participating in the communal work. The purpose of the project as they put it was “to provide a broad range of knowledge and guidance for people interested in living on their own terms and working with their hands. To learn and develop alternative models of living in harmony with the infinite resources nature has to offer.”

During the days I participated in the *talkoot* I met many interesting people and had countless discussions on different topics. It seemed like the camp itself was a magnet for people interested in ecology, in being closer to “wild” nature and many were searching for ways to be more self-sufficient and sustainable in their daily lives. I found that people were looking to find out how to live a life outside the city, often within the forest, with a close relationship to nature and an intimacy with resources used in daily life. We were talking a lot about the use of machines as opposed to doing things by hand, as the school and the *talkoot* have a no-machine policy. Everything from cutting logs to building houses is done without any power tools. The majority of those I spoke with found a lot of sense and joy in doing things by hand and taking part in the whole process of engaging with raw, natural material. The spirit and sense of meaning and cooperation was seemingly high among the participants that varied both in age and geographical background. I was able to observe the work they were doing there these days and I also took part in some building and was helping to cook for the community of people on the fire. Among the participants were also those that knew Huck and his experiment, and felt familiarized with his philosophy. In the end of the *talkoot*, when Huck had to leave to go south for a cabin trip with his family, I travelled on with a few others to an environmental art festival in Oulujärvi, a huge lake located in the heart of Finland. As part of the festival program, one of the hosts of the *talkoot*, Lasse Nordlund, was going to take part in a talking circle about future possibilities when dealing with the ecological crisis, proposing the school for self-sufficiency as a solution orientated project in this respect.

The festival in itself was located on Ärjansaari island in Oulujärvi, not too far from Kajaani city. The Island used to be owned by a paper company and is now protected after a lot of protests and engagement from the local community, as well as environmental organizations and activists from around Finland. It was the first year they organized a festival here, and there was discussions around the fire, talking circles, art installations, healing rituals, music, theatre and performances for two days. This festival was in many ways rounding up the fieldwork for me, but to be honest, there are many connections and thoughts I could have followed up on from here on. Yet, interestingly enough, the theme of the festival itself made some kind of summery for my own experiences during the summer.

The discourse of the festival was focused on the emotional effects of what is going on around us with respect to the environment, the energy we use and the output we get from it, the exploitation of nature and natural resources for profit, what this does to us as people and what it does to the planet. Discussing how we react to these things on an emotional level has been a prevailing theme during my research. It was proposed how ceremony focusing on grief and gratitude may be a good way to deal with the ecological crisis and engage in hope and action to change the current “story” within which we find ourselves. During the festival I participated in such a ceremony, which was organized as a collective grieving ritual. The festival closed with a discussion about the future and what is to be done and what we can do as individuals and as a collective. Lasse Nordlund participated in this discussion, presenting *Omavaraopisto* as a possible part of solutions for the future. Emerging from my empirical data, these topics are what I want to further discuss in the context of my research question: What people do to cope, to survive and to thrive and to re-connect with nature. As Huck himself says: “Nature-connection is the medicine the world needs the most”.

2.6: Emerging Themes for Further Analysis and Discussion

In the ethnographic description I have given an overview of the empirical data of my project in order to further explore nature as a concept and how people relate to and conceptualize nature within the ethnographic context of my research. In the third part of this thesis I will give an historical account of the relationship between people and nature since the birth of capitalism, taking up on Huck’s idea of how we have become strangers from the natural world and our basis for life in

“the modern world.” This is why he believes people have forgotten their role as part of the web of life. In the next section I look at biocentric or deep ecological approaches to life as well as a marxist approach to the alienation from nature, the nature/culture dichotomy and domination of nature in modern sciences. This stresses the importance of the politics of nature as an aspect of the reconceptualization of nature. Through my empirical material and the theoretical considerations I have made when looking at my data, I will further discuss the research questions of this thesis. The ethnographic examples of “practices of nature” I have presented in this paper help me to better understand how the particular perceptions and practices entail a reimagining and reconstructing of nature. This calls for a particular ontology, ethics and actions when searching for sustainability and nature-connection.

Paying attention to the practical and discursive engagement with nature during the fieldwork, I look specially at the reconstruction of nature, and what role hope and grief play when searching for sustainability, self-sufficiency and connection with nature in order to discover a new way of life. How may these practices provide us with a critical outlook on aspects of our current system, such as energy and money? Is it true that, by recalling the first three characteristics of the web of life as presented in the introduction, we may begin to regain a sense of our ability to contribute to a more sustainable planet? These characteristics stresses three important points discussed in the ethnographic material: Our interconnectivity with all living organisms, our mutual dependency to sustain the web of life and important mechanism that upholds the balance, such as community.

3.0 Analysis and Discussion

3.1: Towards a Biocentric Ecology of Life

Scientific discourse generally discuss the relationship between cultural systems and the environment by putting system and the environment into a bilateral and one-dimensional opposition to each other. One example of this, is the traditional binary opposition between nature and culture, or between nature and society. A simple test, as pointed out by Wilden (1980), for this kind of hierarchy is to ask oneself which of the two realities will survive if the other is removed or destroyed. Nature survives no matter what happens to culture or human society, yet so profoundly is this particular system-environment relationship misconducted by the scientific discourse. As a result, in its “objectivity,” science carries forward the three-centuries-old imaginary and ideological myth of “man’s mastery over nature” (Wilden 1980). A system based on the idea this kind of separation is exactly what Huck and my other informants are resisting through their practices. Thus, they reconstruct the imaginary of nature as something inferior to humans beings. Rather than placing nature as something exterior or inferior that people should control and exploit, they both desire and see the need to regain a sense of connection with nature. The way of perceiving entails an acknowledgement of our place within the web of life, of our interconnectivity and mutual dependency. Through their practices they question and redefine the hierarchy which the current capitalist society bases itself upon.

The three relationships whose step-by-step commodification in history define the novelty of the capitalist revolution - capital, land and labor potential are hierarchically ordered. Under capitalism, capital dominates labor potential and labor potential is consequently used to exploit land. But land stands for our life supporting system, the biosphere, and capital can only be produced by the capacity of human beings. Thus, the imaginary and commoditized hierarchy invented and imposed by capitalism is precisely the inverse of the real one (Wilden 1980). The nature-culture dichotomy has been central to western thinking and has allowed for the development of both materialist and symbolic approaches to human-environment interaction (Descola and Palsson 1996). However, it has also been hindering the ability to understand the larger picture of ecological relations and interactions by keeping these two valid perspectives apart, rather than seeking a synthesis (Moran 2006, p 7). Empirical evidence indeed show that the dualist paradigm is scant in treating the organic relations between people and nature (Descola and Palsson 1996, Ingold 2000, Roepstorff, Bubandt

& Kull 2003). As the separation is proving itself short in making sense out of the experience of living in the world, we need new ways of thinking about the interactions that are taking place if we are to understand the ecological relationships within it.

The practices of my informants provide clues to further discuss how the western philosophical separation between nature and people at present might actually stand in the way of properly dealing with the environmental crisis we face today. For my informants, finding solutions to the problem involve practices of sustainability, nature-awareness and nature-connection, with a drastic change in ways of life. Tim Ingold (2000) offers an approach to the ecology of life that begins by thinking about people as “organisms in their environment,” rather than apart from it. An important aspect he considers is how “people as organisms” act towards the environment within which they find themselves. He argues that humans are brought into existence as “organism-persons” within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both human and non-human. Therefore, relations among humans, which we are accustomed to call social relations, are but a sub-set of ecological relations. Ingold (2000) proposes a general ecology of life with a synthesis between relational anthropology, ecological thinking in psychology and developmental systems thinking in biology. This would start from a “conception of human beings, not as a composite entity of separable, complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (Ingold 2000, p 4).

Drawing on ethnographic material from hunter-gatherers around the world Ingold (2000) emphasizes how people develop their skills and sensitivities through histories of continuing involvement with human and non-human constituents of their environment. Thus, it is through engagement with these manifold constituents that the world becomes known by its inhabitants. Looking at the practices I met in the field, I can see that the ways in which they approach nature can be seen as similar to this or to deep-ecological approaches to life. Deep ecology includes alternative ways of conceiving the human-nature relationship. Writers like Arne Ness (1989) advocated for a paradigm-shift in the face of ecological crisis on a planetary scale already in the 80s. As my informants, especially Huck, he saw a need for each person to define their own “ecosophy” or philosophy directed at ecological harmony. The practice of deep ecology can be seen as a practice of nature and includes changes in personal lifestyles and community lifestyle. This is as a view of nature much influenced by contact with nature and with wild or free nature (Ness 1989). I would

argue that one could use aspects of deep-ecology applied to both globally and locally based approaches around the world today, as well as the ones we have met during fieldwork.

Environmental organizations such as Greenpeace draw inspiration and values from deep-ecologists and writers like Arne Ness, who was the founder of Greenpeace in Norway. Another source of inspiration for the environmental movement, like the recent Extinction rebellion²¹, is deep-ecologist and eco-philosopher Joanna Macy. In her book (Macy and Johnstone 2012) she presents us with an approach to life that acknowledges the painful reality we are confronted with in the ecological crisis and through this takes us on a journey of rediscovering ourselves and our role in the world. The purpose of this journey is to discover, offer and receive the gift of active hope. Active hope is here seen as a practice. It is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for. When I met with people and practices dealing with the ecological crisis in the field I understood that this is very much a journey of self-discovery. It is a sensorial exploration of the potentials in our relatedness with nature. My informants are exploring how we may become more connected with nature and what this potentially means for the ecological fabric of life.

I would say that a biocentric approach to life, categorized here as deep-ecology, offers revolutionary ideas about the world and the perception of our relation to nature. Biocentrism means that nature does not exist to serve humans. Rather, humans are part of nature, one species among many. All species have the right to exist for their own sake, regardless of how they are valorized by humans. Biodiversity is a value in itself, essential for the thriving of both humans and non-humans alike. As forest protection activist, Judi Bari, puts it:

“Biocentrism is a law of nature, that exists independently of whether humans recognize it or not. It doesn't matter whether we view the world in a human centered way. Nature still operates in a biocentric way. The failure of modern society to acknowledge this - as we attempt to subordinate all nature to human use - has led us to the brink of collapse of the Earth's life support system.”²²

This kind of worldview is not invented by writers like Arne Ness, but was and is rather part of the ontology and wisdom of certain non-western civilizations. However, in the context of industrialized

²¹ Extinction Rebellion names themselves as an international non-violent rebellion against the world's governments for criminal inaction on the ecological crisis: <https://rebellion.earth>

²² <http://www.judibari.org/revolutionary-ecology.html>

societies today, it is a revolutionary worldview in the sense that it challenges the system at its core. It contradicts capitalist perceptions of nature. It counters the idea man's mastery over nature and resists alienation from the natural world.

3.2: Alienation and The Domination of Nature



Still from "Stalker," by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979)

The experience of alienation²³ has been a constant companion since the birth of capitalism and the times of the first industrial revolution. This alienation may be seen as being robbed of some authentic or original human nature that existed before the industrial era of human history (Salminen & Vadén 2015) or what has recently been termed as the human era of the "Anthropocene" (Steffen et al. 2011). When Marx (1992) wrote his "Economics and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844, he was concerned with the problem of the relationship between man and nature. For him, it was part of the worker's fourfold alienation under capitalist modernity: his estrangement from nature, from the products of labor, from other people and from himself. As Marx explained, with respect to nature:

²³ Alienation has been conceptualized as a distance created between worker and his/her work (Marx), as a dissolution of organic community (Tönnies, Weil), as anomia created by rapid change (Durkheim), as a consequence of the mechanistic quality of a bureaucratic society (Weber), as the loss of authentic subjectivity while existing as an object (Adorno and Horkheimer), as an excessive division of labor (Zerzan) as a life-emptying technological self-understanding (Heidegger), as the disappearance of the sacred in a modern society (Jünger, Weil, Bataille), and so on and so forth. (Salminen & Vadén 2015, p 13)

“The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material in which his labor realizes itself...” (Marx 1992, p 325)

However, as the products of labor are taken away, nature is brought down to a mere means of subsistence;

“In a physical sense man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of nourishment, heating, clothing, shelter, etc....Nature is man’s *inorganic body*, that is to say nature in so far as it is not the human body.” (Marx 1992, p 328)

Under capitalism nature became disconnected from the person and people who then faced with nature as something alien and separate from themselves. The natural world became a world apart from the human world. As Huck puts it; “after leaving the tight bond with the rest of the natural world behind us, we became strangers to the basis of our own survival and to our own nature.” This disconnection was furthered as science began to observe, study and classify the operations and inner workings of nature in separated entities. It entailed a certain domination which in turn implicated a further estrangement from nature. Engels explained the historical unfolding of this process:

“The analysis of Nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and objects in definite classes, the study of the internal anatomy of organized bodies in their manifold forms — these were the fundamental conditions of the gigantic strides in our knowledge of Nature that have been made during the last 400 years. But this method of work has also left us as a legacy; the habit of observing natural objects and processes in isolation, apart from their connection with the vast whole; of observing them in repose, not in motion; as constraints, not as essentially variables; in their death, not in their life.” (Engels 1989, p 299)

The term “domination of nature” implies an interpretation of the unfavorable effects that modern society has had on the natural environment and our understanding of ourselves within it. What Huck describes as a “conflict with out human identity.” It is often associated with scientific philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, whose works popularized an inductive methodology for inquiry, which indeed is considered a forerunner of the modern scientific method (Gareau 2011). It is said that the driving force behind science and progress more broadly has been technological control over humans and the natural world. Bacon believed that “the real business and fortunes of the human race” was the

conquering of nature. Nature must be “forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded” by “the hand of man”. Humans must free themselves from nature, which must be “bound into service” and made a “slave”. (Cited in Gareau 2011) Surely, this way of perceiving nature has had catastrophic impacts on the way we see nature and ourselves within it. Indeed, Dickens (1996) stresses how peoples understanding of nature tends to mirror their understanding of the social world. He explores the place of nature as rooted in peoples “deep mental structures.” His argument is that the division of labor is a lead, yet neglected, factor that is underlying peoples inability to properly understand and relate to the natural world. His argument extends Marx’s theory of alienation to account for scant knowledge and therefore poor concern for nature and the environment.

When Huck talks about relearning our human nature and regaining a sense of being part of nature, he stresses how everything is nature and that there is in fact no real distinction between two worlds; a natural world and an unnatural one. The loss of such an understanding, he says, has created an existential crisis and an identity conflict within us. Anthropological work with for example hunter-gatherers show how people feel confident about their relation to the environment and know what to do in relation to it as they indeed have a radically different understanding of what it is (Ingold 2000). In fact, Ingold (2000) show that people in such societies normally would not even use terms such as nature to describe themselves and their relationship with the rest of the world. For them, there is only one world, inhabited by humans, non-humans and other entities such as rock, water and air. In modern societies, by contrast, a radical division takes place in how people understand their relationship with the environment. Yet, this is being challenged by ecological movements and alternative world views, such as the ones I encountered during fieldwork. For example, through Huck’s statement of nature being something “ever-present wherever he goes,” we can begin to understand what he means when he says that he understands how “everything in nature is connected with each-other.”.

Ecological destruction as consequence of human actions must be understood as being deeply rooted in contemporary social attitudes towards and views of nature. Such attitudes see the natural environment as something something separate that must be controlled and dominated by humans through science and technological advancements with the aim of making profit. Even though the domination of nature is commonly associated with 17th century scientific thought, the phrase gained new popularity in the mid 1960s, when widespread concern for the environmental impact of

modern industrial society took off in the western world (Gareau 2011). Recently, concerns about the effects of capitalism and industrialized society on the environment and its link to attitudes of humans mastery over the natural world, have been raised anew as large-scale threats such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation have become clearly visible. These threats are experienced and felt by my informants and people in general as the global news image keeps presenting us with news of the environmental crisis. For my informants, it presents them with an opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives and their role in contributing to a more sustainable planet. This implies a reconstruction of nature and the self and a search for new ways of living.

The issue of morality and responsibility towards nature, and society, is becoming increasingly important considering how the desire to dominate nature in the name of science, progress and the profit making of a few people, may as well lead to the domination of humanity by nature and finally to the death of the human race as we know it. Thus, looking at other ways of approaching life and understanding our place within nature, ways in which we may rebuild relationships re-creating a relationship to all life on earth based on trust, reciprocity and community, is crucial if we are to sustain ourselves in the web of life.

3.3: Search for Sustainability and Internal Cultural Critique

Energy and system criticism: No money, fossil fuels, rubbish or harm to the environment.

“After his death, God turned into oil, and oil became a surrogate God with very straightforward utility: Everything that smacks of being sacred is burned in the black motor of economic growth” (Salminen & Vadèn 2015, p 12).

After having spent almost the entirety of my fieldwork exploring ways of living without fossil fuels or money, coupled with a conscious approach to the production of rubbish and harm to the environment, I was left with an experience and idea of what it might mean to live in a post-capitalist society. During the course of the experiment we did not use any money as a means to get food or other things we needed to survive in our day-to-day lives. We were trying to get most of our food in the wild, through the collection of wild edibles, as well as the harvest of fish in the nearby lake. Even though this was not always possible, mainly because the time we spent in this location did not

allow for seasonal harvest of the local environment and preservation of certain foods for the whole year, it brought us close to nature and the natural resources we used from the local area. In this way, as Huck puts it in a conversation, it felt like the overall impact we had on the environment was much smaller than the impact we have in “normal” life in the city. Even in a near city context, like at the place of Mick and Marja, I also felt a very low impact on the environment. They had the luxury of local access to organically self-grown food and spent a lot of time wild-foraging in the surrounding area. Even though they used some money, it had a value below the value of the natural resources they could forage in their local area. In the experiment, we could explore and sense what we need to live and this brought us closer to nature through the intimacy of the resources we used or imagined to use in order to sustain ourselves. Most of our daily needs in “normal” life are taken care of by the government or we typically use money as a means to get access to food or tools. The act of not using money or fossil fuels may in this way be seen as a resistance, in itself it is an act of energy and system criticism which in turn aims for greater sustainability and “deep-nature connection,” a concept emphasized by Huck.

Energy as a critical concept has been brought back to the fore in recent years thanks to enormous political mobilization against the environmental risks tied to infrastructure expansion in the energy sector as well as the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. Academic inquiry into the chemical, biological, anthropological, literary and philosophical shape of industrial and postindustrial energy systems has grown, very much in the wake of the new climate science established in the 1990s (Salminen and Vadén 2015). The fossil fuel industry, and the environmental impacts associated with it, is also a great example of the profound climate injustice existing within the current system. The utility and wealth produced by oil are typically experienced elsewhere, while the negative impacts it has on the climate is typically felt greatest in the parts of the world that does not enjoy the largest portions of the riches. After humans have discovered oil and taken it into widespread use, parts of their experience are destroyed and new riches of experience are felt elsewhere, as separate from the destruction, as something distilled, modern and plastic (Salminen and Vadén 2015).

Today, there is little dispute in the negative effects burning fossil fuels has on the planet, coupled with deforestation and environmental degradation, and even less about the risks involved in

extracting ever harder to reach sources of hydrocarbon.²⁴ On the 25th anniversary of their 1992 declaration “World scientists warning to humanity”, where they stressed how fundamental changes are needed in order to stop the collision between humans and the natural world, they were fearing that humanity was pushing earths ecosystems beyond their capacity to support the web of life. The paper issued last year looks back at their warning and evaluates the human response by exploring available time-series data. Since 1992, with the exception of stabilizing the stratospheric ozone layer, humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges, and alarmingly, most of them are getting far worse;

“Especially troubling is the current trajectory of potentially catastrophic climate change due to rising GHGs from burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and agricultural production—particularly from farming ruminants for meat consumption. Moreover, we have unleashed a mass extinction event, the sixth in roughly 540 million years, wherein many current life forms could be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century.” (Ripple et al. 2017, p 1)

Despite these warnings, we still find ourselves confronted with the physical and social world that matured during the golden years of fossil fuel deepening, the sustainability of which is nearly impossible to imagine without the physical force available from coal, oil and gas. Fossil Fuels thus lubricate concrete abstractions in the form of social relations, market affairs and the historically specific relations between labor, capital and land (Salminen & Vadén 2015).

“The moment at hand is the end of the growth of oil production and its incipient decline. The place has changed; The bioregion is on the move. Carbon is not in the ground, but in the air.” (Salminen & Vadén 2015, p 125)

As my empirical data implies, there is a large concern about the present rate of degradation of the physical environment. Within this concern, there is a strong critique, both verbally and practically, surrounding the ways in which it is handled by governments and how the larger society deals with

²⁴ Scientists to the U.N.: “To stop climate change, modern capitalism needs to die. The era of cheap energy is coming to an end and societies will need to reshape energy consumption and infrastructure to face consequences”, warns a scientific background paper issued to the United Nations (Järvensivu et al. 2018). The paper was written by biophysicists with the BIOS research unit in Finland who were asked by the United Nations to contribute research for the U.N. Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), which will be released this year. The Finland team issued this paper less than a year after some 15.000 scientists with the Alliance of World Scientists published the “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice” (Ripple et al. 2017) that described the ways in which human activity is eroding the biosphere.

questions of nature. One of the key concepts that arise out of this concern is “sustainability.” The word in itself is derived from “sustain” which means support, enable to last out, give strength to or endure without giving away (Shiva 1992). As a concept, it was made popular in the western world by the report “Our Common Future” (WCED 1987). It became a significant term in development discourse in the 80s because four decades of development experience had established that “development” and its synonym “economic growth”, which were used to refer to a sustained increase in per capita income, were unsustainable processes. Development was unsustainable because it undermined ecological stability and destroyed peoples livelihoods (Shiva 1992).

The promotion of the market and man-made capital to the position of the highest organizing principle for society has led to the neglect and destruction of the other two organizing principles of ecology and survival which maintain and sustain the web of life (Shiva 1992). Yet modern economics and concepts of development cover a small portion of the history of human interaction with nature. Principles of sustenance have given human societies the material basis of survival over centuries by deriving livelihoods directly from nature through mechanisms of self-sufficiency. Limits in nature have been respected, and have guided the limits of human consumption. When sustenance is the organizing principle of society’s relationship with nature, nature exist as a commons (Shiva 1992). It becomes a resource when profits and the accumulation of capital become the organizing principle and create an imperative for the exploitation of resources for the market. While development as economic growth are being recognized as the root of the ecological crisis by some, it is paradoxically being offered as a “cure” for the ecological crisis in the form of “sustainable development” (Shiva 1992). The result is, as Shiva (1992) argues, a loss of the very meaning of sustainability.

The ideology of sustainable development is limited within the limits of market economy, rather than within the limits of nature. It proposes solutions to the ecological crisis in the expansion of the market system (Shiva 1992). The real meaning of sustainability would rather make it clear that nature always comes first and that the money economy is exploitative. It would also make it evident that the growth of markets and production processes at the cost of nature’s stability is at the root of the crisis of sustainability. As Shiva (1992) argues, there are evidently two very different meanings of sustainability. One which refers to the market and involves maintaining supplies of raw materials for industrial production and profit-making. The real meaning involves a recovery of the recognition of the web of life and the fact that nature supports our lives and livelihoods and is the

primary source of sustenance. Sustaining nature implies maintaining the integrity of natural processes, cycles and rhythms (Shiva 1992). In itself, the concept gives an idea of the possibility for humans to live in harmony with nature and contributes to an interest in alternative ontologies, such as native world-views and perceptions of nature. The real meaning of sustainability needs to be based on insights like those of the native American elders who indicated that money is not convertible to life:

“Only when you have fallen the last tree, caught the last fish and polluted the last river, will you realize that you can’t eat money” (Shiva 1992, p 193)

Native knowledge is often depicted as holistic and ecocentric, and taken up by environmentalists and eco-philosophers in deep-ecological or biocentric approaches to life. It is very much in line with the world-views I met in the field. These approaches contrast an atomistic and anthropogenic scientific knowledge that prevail in the industrialized west and calls for a new ecological paradigm where man and environment are no longer seen as separate and opposite entities (Kalland 2003). Rather, organisms and the environment rather form part of one another (Ingold 2000). The distinction between an anthropocentric and a biocentric worldview can be analyzed as an internal Western cultural critique (Kalland 2003). One empirical example of such an internal critique in my ethnographic data can indeed be seen around money. The ambivalent position that money has in Western culture has indeed been stressed by many scholars; on the one hand it is seen as a liberating force within neo-classic economic theory, on the other as a dangerous corrupting agent (Kalland 2003). The practices I experienced in the field show empirical evidence of a very critical outlook on money. Rather than seeking profit or using money as means of sustenance, the importance of self-sufficiency, sustainability, participation in community and the exchange of goods and services without money was regarded as important.

Rather than using money as a measure for success, my research collaborators regarded it as something that corrupts social and ecological relations. Other things than money were considered more important and valuable. The forest, for example, was valued far beyond being merely a resource for exploitation and profit-making. It was stressed how the orientation for profit within capitalism was at the root of the attitude towards nature as something separate from ourselves, as something to dominate and exploit. In such a negative view of money, which goes back to Marx, and even Aquinas and Aristotle, money is seen as corrupting both social relations and morality

(Kalland 2003, p 168). Scholars make the distinction between traditional societies existing in harmony with their environment, where there is no actual understanding of a separation between the two (Ingold 2000), and modern societies based on the market economy (Shiva 1992). In fact, Shiva (1992) argues how market economy is incompatible with sustainability.

Practices of nature aiming for sustainability and self-sufficiency might therefore provide solutions to the ecological crisis rising out of the focus on profit-making. Rappaport (1979) argues how, with the loss of local self-sufficiency, there is also a loss of homeostatic²⁵ capacity. To him, the implication is that money causes maladaptation and environmental degradation. He concludes that the decontextualized rationality of science or the world market is poorly suited to the task of deriving a sustainable livelihood from local ecosystems. This very point was stressed throughout my fieldwork. The distinction is made, for example, between commercial forestry²⁶ and local small-scale use of forest resources in the sustainability-and self-sufficiency projects in the field, such as the self-sufficiency school, the building project of Mick and Marja, the community networks around Joensuu or in the experiment.

In environmental studies it has commonly been assumed that there exists a fundamental connection between a society's management of natural resources and its perception of nature (Kalland 2003, p 170). In light of this would argue that the management of natural resources that has led to the ecological crisis can be seen in the light of the imaginary hierarchy and ideological myth of man's mastery over nature. The same logic can be seen in the ways my informant imagine and reconstruct nature and through praxis envision solutions to the ecological crisis in alternative ontologies and world-views. In addition to the the removal of separation between the human world and the natural world an ecological approach can obviate the distinction between body, mind and culture (Ingold 2003). However true it may be that a post-industrial or post-capitalist life "cannot trace its steps back to the pre-industrial since those paths have grown in or have been developed into motorways" (Salminen & Vadén 2015), paths may still be discovered through the incorporation of the real meaning of sustainability and through grief, active participation and reconstruction of nature within continuous praxis of hope and imagination.

²⁵ Homeostatic capacity refers to the capability of systems to self-stabilize in response to external forces or stress, or more simply the capability of systems to maintain homeostasis. The notion, is explored by Rappaport (1979) in a discussion of adaptation versus maladaptation.

3.4: Grief, Hope and Community Participation

“Nature-connection is the medicine the world needs the most” (Huck)

Through the fieldwork process I discovered that the lost connection with nature and the ecological crisis are seen as an individual and internal crisis for each of my informants. The internal conflict is in many ways connected to what Huck calls “a conflict with our human identity”. The web that established identity is not just a “web of significance”²⁷, but rather real and material in social connections between people as well as things, objects, technologies and non-humans (Latour 1993). I would argue that identities are established within webs of ecological relations. The types of identity thus cut across the dichotomy between the social and the natural. Identities arise out of interactions not just with humans, but also with the environment. In Latour’s (1993) term, they are collectives, being about specific groups of humans that ascertain a specific identity, but also an involvement with highlighted “things” of the natural world, like trees in the forest, animals, lakes and rivers. Or, as was the case for my informants, with nature in general. In deep-ecology, particularly as it is described by Arne Ness (1989) identification with nature and natural things makes moral reasons. He argues, that when we identify with nature we act protectively towards nature, not because, for various reasons, we think we should, but because we feel inclined to do so. Identification, in Ness terms, entails an expansion of the self to include other beings, so that one’s own self is no longer delimited by the personal ego or the organism-person.

My own research shows that people increasingly feel the effects of planetary changes and associated ecological losses internally in their daily lives. These changes present significant direct and indirect threats to mental health and well-being, both for humans and non-humans. Climate change and the associated impacts on land and the environment have recently been linked to a range of negative mental health impacts on people’s mental health including depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress and feelings of anger, hopelessness, distress and despair (Ellis & Consulo 2018). Not well represented in the anthropological literature is an emotional response termed “ecological grief” or “environmental grief.” It can be defined as “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.” (Ellis & Consulo 2018)

Environmental grief reminds us that climate change is not just some abstract scientific concept or a

²⁷ In classical symbolic anthropology, the world of relations out of which identities are contracted, was contextualized as a “web of significance” and identities were seen to be established only between social actors within social relations. (Geertz 1966)

distant environmental problem. Rather, it draws our attention to the personally experienced emotional and psychological losses suffered when there are changes or deaths in the natural world. In doing so, it also illuminates the ways in which more-than-humans are integral to our mental wellness, our communities, our cultures and for our ability to survive and thrive in the world.

“We cycled on a dirt road through the forest to explore the area around the campsite in Tiilimaa and suddenly entered a clearing, a clear cut land with a lonely tree that was nearly falling down with the rest. The beautiful sunny day turned grey, we stopped, in silence. Neither Huck or I said a word to each other, somehow in a mutual understanding that something terrible had taken place here, that we had to stop and pay our respect to the death that was so prominently in the air. I could taste it and feel it, the sadness and the loss, the smoke in the air, the anger and despair and as I glanced over at Huck I could see he was crying.” (field notes)

The case of the clear cut forest, a sight that is very commonly stumbled upon across Finland, was a prevailing theme for both grief and action during my fieldwork. There is a movement in Finland that is striving to make “clear-cut history”. Within this movement people stand up against a forest management that look at the forest something to exploit for profit and as valued space for resource extraction for profit. Clearly, the action of clear cutting a forest is not standing in line with a harmonious relationship with the forest. Rather than keeping it alive it is murdered and whatever life that was living there is left homeless or to die with it. I see the clear cut as a very important metaphor for opposite ideas of human-nature relations. The Finnish forest can be seen as a space for conflicting ways of seeing or viewing nature, which in turn relate to different ontologies or world-views. On the one hand, it is a place for exploitation, domination, extraction and profit-orientation. On the other hand, it is a home - a place to look after and take care of.

In how my informants acted upon their concerns for nature hope and imagination played a significant role. They recognize that the choices they make determine their own survival and our survival as a human species. Yet, the ecological crisis is not just seen an emergency, but also an opportunity to reconstruct nature and redefine themselves within nature. A crisis, in other words, is not just seen as a threat, it is equally viewed as a chance to change course and to evolve as human beings. Thus, the ecological crisis gives the opportunity to explore possibilities for “new” ways of life to emerge. For humanity, the question of whether we will find a way to live in harmony with the natural systems of the Earth and the biosphere that support us is an open one. Therefore, for my

research collaborators, active hope is an important aspect when dealing with the fact that the planet has entered an age of unprecedented habitat loss and the mass extinction of species. Such environmental threats have not emerged in a vacuum, they are the predictable outcome of the ways of relating to our planet, not as a home, but as a place for exploitation and extraction. Active hope therefore become important and means to become active participants in bringing about the change one hopes for.

Realizing that the problem is not a superficial one and that the time for half measures has long since come and gone, empirical evidence from the field shows an understanding of the need to change our own lives and a need to find other ways to live on the planet. However, it takes time and practice to get rid of traditional hierarchies and rebuild lost relationships. Understanding this is not just in their minds, but in their emotions. Following the line of thought from deep-ecology, there is a bond which human feels with other life forms. We are hard-wired to love the earth and our fellow inhabitants on the planet, not solely because it is in our self-interest to do so, but because we were never separate and apart from them, even though our economic system has compelled us to act as if we were. This stresses the importance of emotion if we are to begin to heal the relationship with nature. Maybe the love for nature indeed should guide our actions, as it has guided indigenous cultures in the past?

Healing, in this sense, means moving beyond the old paradigm of exploitation to a whole new way of living on the earth. In Kubler Ross's (2009) fifth and final stage of grief is the stage of acceptance. It entails and acceptance and recognition of the truth of what Huck would call "reality," not wasting energy on guilt or anger or just trying to fix thing. We need to come up with a different story about who we are and what the earth is, and how we are connected. We can no longer tell ourselves that humans are here to dominate nature and to extract maximum profit from the living body of the earth. What we would need, and what the practices in the field explored, may well be things like a different understanding of happiness, sustainability and other ways to measure success than the accumulation of money. Huck also describes this in his speech during the Ted Talk "Global Springs" where "the humming bird is the happiest of all the animals." If our story changes, values change and recognizing that the old story has not worked might indeed be a good first step towards a new imaginary of life.

Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy (Macy & Johnstone 2012) teaches practical strategies for dealing with the disturbing realities of the ecological crisis and finding agency. Among other things she underlines the importance of gratitude with an attention to aspects of life and the world that sustain and nourish us. Gratitude was important for my informants and was expressed in the ways they would talk about the forest and nature with love, sensitivity and gratitude. Macy (2012) also highlights the importance of honoring the pain and grief that we are experiencing. Practice of grief was for example seen in the grieving ceremonies that were conducted during the environmental art festival I attended at the end of my fieldwork. People would highlight that making space for grief help them to confront reality and find ways to move forward. In one such ceremony that I attended people would cry and release anger, sadness and frustration around issues such as commercial exploitation of the forests, the paper and pulp industry and climate injustice. Other lessons emphasized by Macy (2012) are related to new possibilities and finding practical actions to take. After honoring the pain and the grief they felt, I saw that people crated new ways of connecting to one another through the mourning for what they love and the exploration of possibilities for action. This reminds me of a phrase from Chris Jordan's film *Albatross* about the grief he felt for the death of the Albatross:

“The most difficult thing to bear for me was what I knew, but they couldn't know, about why they were dying. In this experience, the true nature of grief revealed itself. I saw that grief is not the same as sadness or despair. Grief is the same as love. Grief is the felt experience of love for something we are losing or have lost. When we surrender to grief it carries us home to our deepest connection with life. I didn't know I could care about an Albatross.” (Jordan 2018)

In an interview about the film, Jordan said that the film is not purely about plastic pollution, but about our broken relationship with planet Earth. It is a grief ritual and his intent with the film was to “reconnect viewers on a universal level with living beings.” In the interview he explains how “grief happens when we are loosing love and it liberates us to feel it fully and therefore we can arrive home to our core state of wisdom. Here, nothing stands in our way.”²⁸

It was curious that I experienced the instances where people got together in grief as positive and inspiring moments. This would also be confirmed when I would ask my informants how they felt in

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/12/albatross-film-dead-chicks-plastic-saving-birds>

these moments. Within this the importance of community was emphasized. Emotions that had been buried out of sight were released in the group and it evoked a new hope that arose from witnessing the power of the activated community, the feeling of not being alone. This was experienced as a point where one could create positive visions for the future and engage in shaping it rather than feeling disempowered.

Currently, we are seeing a dramatic rise of nonviolent protest movements around the world, such as Extinction Rebellion and the schools strikes led by Greta Thunberg.²⁹ Such movements give an awakened sense of agency that goes beyond the personal guilt for our own consumption. Climate activists like Bill McKibben³⁰ argues that the most important thing one can do to tackle the ecological crisis is stop being an individual and to take action together as a community. But to tackle the crisis we also need to give ourselves permission to grieve, both personally and collectively. In the field I experienced that grief may bring forth an understanding of what is important and new visions for the future. In addition, active participation in community and doing collective activities were seemingly crucial for the networks of people with whom I did my research. Perceptions of nature that identify with nature and the practice of grief and active hope entailed a new imagining and a reconstruction of nature. These aspects proved themselves important in my research participant's searches for sustainability and connection when figuring out a new kind of lifestyle.

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/greta-thunberg-schoolgirl-climate-change-warrior-some-people-can-let-things-go-i-cant>

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/i-have-felt-hopelessness-over-climate-change-here-is-how-we-move-past-the-immense-grief>

3.5: Conclusion

In current society we have changed nearly every aspect of our relationship to nature, which have led to an appropriation of nature and feelings of estrangement and disconnection from the natural world. Feelings of alienation from nature can be traced back to the birth of capitalism and has been furthered more as humanity takes stapes into the human era of the anthropocene. Reports of catastrophic changes in the environment such as climate change, deforestation or the extinction of species are also becoming more and more recognized as a threat to mental health and the well being of life on earth. I have seen this as an existential as well as an ecological crisis, where people face an internal conflict regarding their own identity and role in the web of life. The ways in which humans perceive nature have consequences for the way nature is treated and the way we see ourselves in relation to the natural world. However, my informants indeed draw inspirations from approaches to life that indicate that there is distinction between the two.

In this paper I have argued that the perception of the natural world as something separate from the human world is an important cause for the practices of profit orientated resource extraction and appropriation. A consequence is an ecological crisis which is happening both in the natural world and within our deep mental structures. Scholars like Dickens (1996) and Ingold (2000) surely argue that the corporeal engagement with the natural world mirrors or sets standards/ethos for how we engage with the social world. The way we understand nature reflects on the way we experience ourselves within ecological relationships. Practices of nature construct both perceptions of nature and established particular human ontologies or world-views. When talking about human-animal relations in a hunter-gatherer context Ingold (2000) describes how “we have gone from having a relationship to nature based on trust and harmony, constituted by autonomy and dependency, to a relationship based on domination.” The practices of nature I engaged with in the field can be seen as a contrast to the domination of nature. They explore an internal Western cultural critique through practices of nature that involve sustainability and self-sufficiency, and exclude aspects such as money or fossil fuels.

We have seen how the dichotomy between collection and production, between wild and domesticated may be marked by how humans started transforming nature into a commodity. This transformation must also have had an immense consequences for the human experience. The domination of nature has surely also affected the experience of every living organism in the world.

During the fieldwork, the discussion itself took the direction of exploring the experience of our lost connection to nature and attempts to rebuild or “heal” ourselves and the planet. In fact, is it not so that the two are connected? Considering that we are a part of nature and whether we like it or not, nature is also a part of us, how can we be healthy on a sick planet? I share the belief of my informants that with all the news spreading in this part of the world today addressing the ecological crisis we are urged to change our ways of living in order to survive. This demand a reconstruction of nature and drastic changes in both individual and collective living. It demands an understanding of the real meaning of sustainability. The rhetorics used in the general debate is another discussion all-together, but surely we experience it with our bodies, our emotions and our being in the world. For my informants the struggle to find ways to cope with the ecological crisis both emotionally and practically is very real. Huck considers the current situation in the world a survival situation where we need to pursue ways of living more “nature-connected”. In a sick world, Huck puts it, “Nature connection is the medicine the world needs the most”.

When figuring out the new lifestyle the construction of “new” imaginaries of nature is crucial. This reconstruction of nature happens in a dialogue between perception and praxis. Practices of sustainability is as much practical as it is discursive. Perceptions of nature that draw on a biocentric world view becomes revolutionary in the context of industrialized societies today. It challenges the system at its core and counters traditional dichotomies and the three-century old imaginary and ideological myth of man’s mastery over nature. Action takes place within a space of continuous praxis and reconstruction with moral, emotional and political associations. In the imagining and making of society, nature is established simultaneously as a classificatory system for system for dividing up the world which is political and historical given and as multiple fields of action for human practices. Practices of nature are involved in constructing and reconstructing specific perceptions of nature and establishes particular approaches to life, human ontologies or world-views. As argued by Ingold (2000), humans are living organisms who both purposely and habitually act in the world. At the same time as this activity takes shape from the forms of approach to life or world-views, these are also being shaped by human praxis. Thus, nature is both a product of human practice and its condition for possibility. As a background and limit, nature is continuously being valorized and made to be meaningful both through reflection and practice.

Hope, grief and imagination play an important part in practices of sustainability, self-sufficiency and nature-connection when searching for a new way of life. It takes time and practice to get rid of

hierarchies and to strike roots into a new way of life. Finding new possibilities and founding sustainable traditions on them happens slowly. The importance of hope and emotion has been stressed if people are to heal their relationship with nature. Active hope means becoming active participants in bringing about the change one wants to see happen. In the experience of grief one is brought back home to a sense of nature-connection and practice of grief individually and collectively were experienced as inspiring and empowering. Environmental grief reminds us that climate change is abstracted from the human experience, it is experienced individually and collectively in the emotional and psychological losses suffered when there are changes or deaths in the natural world. Thus, it shed light on the ways in which nature is integral to our mental wellness, our communities, our cultures and for our ability to survive. The ecological crisis is not just seen as a threat, but is a chance to rediscover inter-connective ecological bonds with nature. Grief gives the opportunity to explore new possibilities and visions for the future. It triggers hope and helps with the discovery of pathways to move forward.

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