

INTRODUCTION: AFFECTIVE MIRES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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The word ‘mire’ in English means “an area of deep, wet, sticky earth” (see Cambridge Dictionary). The dictionary defines mire by its character and also by the affective way it is perceived and sensed by people when entering and moving around in it. Mires are special natural areas that have determined how people have learned and adapted to live in them in different cultures and eras. This special thematic issue on mire cultures explores the changing cultural practices and values associated with mires in the modern day, and further, their effects on the cultural heritage of mires for the future. During the current time of climate change and eco-crisis, people’s attitudes and ways of thinking

about mires and nature in general have changed, with a greater emphasis being placed on more-than-human aspects. Human-mire relationships are processes that are shaped by changes in culture and society, and also by the experiences of individuals (Laurén et al. 2022). They include various activities that reflect the emotions, attitudes, knowledge and values of individuals and communities. In our research, the intangible cultural heritage is seen to be based on values, where mires are regarded as culturally significant natural areas and living organisms (see Poullos 2014). From the perspective of living heritage, it is essential that communities constantly recreate their traditions in relation to their environment, and in interaction with nature and their own history. Our research shows that the importance of mires is reflected in the transformation of cultural heritage for communities and acting on mires is part of people's self-expression and identity, and there is a desire to pass on different forms of mire traditions not only into the future but also within generations.

The studies presented in this special thematic issue aim to find answers to the following questions: What is the cultural heritage of mires in the twenty-first century? How has it changed since the past times? Are there signs of a changing relationship arising between humans and mires in the future?

CHANGING MIRE CULTURES

Mires have always been used in a variety of ways, especially in Finland, which has the largest amount of mire area in the world in relation to its surface area. Mires have been viewed as food stores, mostly because of the wild berries and game animals that can be found there. In the countryside, since the beginning of farming, bog-grass provided fodder and bedding for the cattle and mud taken from peatlands was used as a soil improvement material in the fields. But in modern times, especially after the Second World War, mires were seen as a kind of wasteland that needed to be transformed into something more useful for people (Laurén 2006).

Mires were seen to increase in value as they were drained and converted into fields and forests. In the 1960s and 1970s, mires began to be viewed more analytically, leading to them being perceived as more manageable, familiar, and as safe ecosystems (Lehtinen 2000). Agriculture, forestry, and peat extraction have left the most visible traces on the landscape, and while they have had a major impact on Finland's economy and the development of the welfare state, they have caused a eutrophication of surrounding water systems. However, mires are one of the most degraded habitats and their typical species are constantly

declining. Finland is protecting and restoring mires, which strengthens their biodiversity, mitigates climate change, and improves the condition of waters (Ympäristöministeriö). Overall, the country is currently covered with 8.7 million hectares of mires, of which about 1.2 million hectares are under protection (Metsähallitus 1).

In modern societies, mires have long represented places where people seek a counterbalance to everyday life, where they want to be in a peaceful and quiet environment and enjoy nature. The most typical recreational uses of mires today are berry picking, hiking, camping, exercise (e.g., running and orienteering), and hunting. The legal concept of Everyman's Rights allows everyone to spend time freely in Finnish mires, which are perceived as valuable shared environments (Metsähallitus 2). In line with the trend of the 2000s, there has been an increase in environmental, commentary art and performances related to the mire, as well as various cultural and sporting events. Also, various kinds of sustainability-oriented art productions and fictional narratives represent changes in the human-mire relationship.

Perceptions of these changes in attitudes and practices towards mires served as a starting point for our research and for the collection of research material. The affective turn in cultural studies has guided our research and analysis of the multi-sensory experiences, feelings and emotions associated with mires. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg state that such affects are vital, embodied forces that stem from stimuli other than our conscious awareness, but which guide our actions, thinking and movement. They are found in relation to the human, the non-human, and the rest of the world around us (Seigworth & Gregg 2010: 1). The way we thought, sensed, felt and understood mires in the past and do today will also have a decisive impact on how we relate to them in the future. Based on our empirical findings and research, we have identified four interrelated themes – sense of community, experientiality, affectivity, and ethics – that broadly characterize the mire trend of the twenty-first century. For example, a global climate crisis can be experienced by people as both communal and private at the same time, and art in general can be used as a tool of resistance and as raising awareness in many ways. Particularly, the artwork in mires has the potential to remind people of the diversity of nature and the coexistence of humans and other species on Earth, to influence emotions and thoughts, and to support the cultural transformation that is deemed necessary to affect change. In addition, moving and exercising together in the mire strengthens the sense of community between people and their multisensory connections with the mire. Furthermore, these experiences can awaken a sense of the various values of nature.

Cultural and social attitudes have also influenced the scientific definition of peatlands. Countries classify their peatlands in different ways, but common names include mires, bogs, fens, and marshes (International Peatland Society). Peatlands are generally classified according to their water source and vegetation. There are many types of peatlands, and the number of types is influenced by the classification system employed. The botanical classification system has over 100 different types of peatlands, while the forest classification system has over 30 (Laine & Vasander 1998: 11). Some of the terms are based on specific geographical features. The definition of mire-related vocabulary may also reflect the differences in language areas and dialects between different regions of the countries, where the naming is based on the characteristics and importance of the surrounding mire environment (Sepänmaa 1999). Some names and expressions have regular combinations. For example, we speak of bog holes when referring to small sinking and watery spots in a mire. But sometimes the established usage ignores the more specific biological meanings; for example, the term ‘swamp’ is mainly used for both sport and monsters, and in popular culture in general. In the articles of this special issue we use the word ‘mire’ as a general term, but with contextual nuances. But in botanical terms, the mire refers to a peatland in which peat is actively formed (Sjörs 1980: 304).

ARTICLES IN THE THEME ISSUE

The research by **Kirsi Laurén** and **Marjukka Piirainen** focuses on the swamp soccer and swamp volleyball tournaments that have been organized in Finland and places elsewhere in Europe for a couple of decades. The mire is at the heart of those events, offering a wet and immersive playing field which makes the games and events distinctive from common sporting events. Consequently, the researchers were keen to find out how the sensory experiences of team play in mires affect the players’ relationship with mire, and also the cultural heritage associated with mires. Based on interviews and ethnographic observations at the game events, the research shows that public events in the mire represent a new cultural heritage, where the mire is no longer just a source material of benefits or a peaceful haven of privacy, but a social space. As such, the mire provides an opportunity for people to be part of a community, and to communicate with each other and with the mire in a multisensory way. Importantly, sensing and acting on the special mire space prompts people to think about the natural and cultural values of mires which would otherwise not be considered.

In her article on transformative art and a respectful mire relationship, **Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti** examines the *Kutsuvieraat* (Invited Guests, 2020) artwork by visual artist Reetta Partanen in the Sahanneva mire in Finland. The artwork is a sculptural series made of organic material, situated nearby the city of Seinäjoki in South Ostrobothnia, where peatlands are still used for energy. Contemporary mire art is a versatile form of ecologically engaged art that reflects the human-nature relationship, and more often the mire outside human activity and the importance of protecting mire nature in the climate crisis. In the article, Latvala-Harvilahti asks how the artist and her artwork emphasize the value of the mire as a natural place and softly question the dominant place of humans in the world. An ethnographic case study based on interviewing the artist and experiencing the artwork in situ suggests that art interventions can play a transformative role, increasing knowledge, trust, and social capital. The artwork (the materials of which are left in the mire, and which are chosen in such a way that they do not burden the environment but benefit nature) gave the mire a different focus from its commercial use, highlighting the importance of the mire for the environment, for people, and for the ecosystem. Like forests and seas, mires have become the landscapes of both hope and despair in our minds.

Virpi Kaukio's article on imaginary swamp creatures asks what kind of manifestations the relationship between humans and nature in mire environments has taken in the context of various stories about supernatural creatures in the mire. In particular she asks what their stories reveal about the wider changes in the relationship between humans and mires. Using a theoretical framework of environmental aesthetics and ecocritical theory, the analysis examines various fictional narratives (cartoons, television series, literature for adults and children, and video presentations) and folklore featuring different kinds of swamp creatures. Mires have often been considered to be strange and fearsome, and both mires and monsters are linked to anomalies and burdened by negative preconceptions. However, attitudes towards the mires are slowly changing, and imagined swamp creatures' narratives which reflect the relationship between humans and nature in the mire are also actively changing it.

Meri Kinnunen's book review looks at Finnish Swede Maria Turtschaninoff's novel *Suomaa* (Mire Land, 2022), which will soon be available to an international readership in several languages. This episodic novel moves from the 1700s to the present day, and presents an interpretation of the changing relationship between people and the mire. In the storyline, elements that particularly influence this change are the different traditions of folk religion and Christianity.

However, over time, the close connection between those living near to and far from the mire is also lessened for other reasons.

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