

Capturing the Invisible: The Digital Aestheticization of Mires



Ujeti nevidno: digitalna estetizacija močvirij

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how digital devices shape aesthetic perceptions and interactions with fragile Finnish mires. Through senso-digital walking interviews, it examines how technologies like mobile cameras, social media, and navigation apps influence experiences of mires. Digital devices provide new ways to capture and share mire aesthetics and also mediate sensory interactions, allowing users to engage with the mires' visual and ecological nuances. The role of digital tools in nature encounters highlights the evolving relationships between technology, perception, and place.

KEYWORDS: digital aestheticization, mires, multisensory anthropology, nature photography, fragility, affect

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje, kako digitalne naprave vplivajo na estetsko zaznavanje finskih močvirij in interakcije z njimi. Prek čutno-digitalnih sprehajalnih intervjujev preučuje, kako tehnologije, npr. mobilne kamere, družbeni mediji in navigacijske aplikacije, vplivajo na doživljanje močvirij. Digitalne naprave ponujajo nove načine zajemanja in deljenja estetike močvirja z drugimi, hkrati pa so tudi posrednik v senzorični interakciji, ki uporabnikom omogoča dostop do vizualnih in ekoloških nians močvirja. Vloga digitalnih orodij pri srečanjih z naravo nam kaže, kako se razvijajo odnosi med tehnologijo, zaznavanjem in prostorom.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: digitalna estetizacija, močvirje, veččutna antropologija, fotografija narave, krhkost, afekt

We are living in a time when the way we observe the environment is being profoundly transformed by digital technologies and media, which influence our perceptions, ideals, and interactions with the “natural” world. The integration of digital technology adds new dimensions to aesthetic perception, affecting the ways we engage with environments in everyday life as well as in ethnographic praxis (Muršič 2023: ix). Nowadays, nature enthusiasts often bring a variety of digital tools into the wilderness, from smartphones with built-in cameras to GPS devices, fitness trackers, and AI-powered apps designed for identifying birds or plants (Arosuo 2024; Lintuyhdistys Kuikka ry 2023). In the visual domain, drone cameras have opened a novel aerial perspective that offers breathtakingly detailed bird’s-eye views otherwise inaccessible to human observers.

In this article, we delve into the digital aestheticization of the Finnish mires, focusing on how digital devices influence human relationships with nature, particularly in terms of visual documentation through photography. In the context of the sensory richness of mires, a two-dimensional visual representation cannot fully capture the immersive experience of being physically present in nature. Even with their limitations, photographs are powerful conveyors of emotions and atmosphere. In contemporary visual culture, where digital photography is ubiquitous, more images of nature are being captured than ever, many of which are also shared and circulated on social media and augmented with tags and location data. However, the allure of nature photography is not unproblematic: the very environments being aesthetically celebrated can become vulnerable to overexposure.

This digital engagement with nature is ambivalent – it can deepen our connection to the environment, but also distance us from the immediate and tangible experience (Santaoja and Peltola 2023). Digital tools can provide new insights into the landscape, thus enriching the aesthetic experience, while these same technologies can also create a buffer between the observer and the natural world, mediating the experience through screens and interfaces. Ironically, the production of the digital devices used to make the aesthetic and ecological value of nature visible is also dependent on rare metals, the mining of which poses a high risk to ecological sustainability in many places in the world.

We focus on two questions: first, how does the use of digital devices influence people’s aesthetic perceptions of mires, and second, how do these technologies shape the ways people interact with these environments? The fieldwork has been conducted in two ecologically sensitive peatland areas, the Viiankiaapa mire conservation area in the municipality of Sodankylä in Finnish Lapland and Patvinsuo national park in North Karelia, on the border between Lieksa and Ilomantsi, on Finland’s eastern flank (see Figure 1). The research materials include ethnographic walking interviews in these mires, supplemented by digital data gathered during these walks – audio recordings, photographs, videos, and field notes. For the analysis, we engage with theories of environmental aestheticization and affect, particularly delving into how individually experienced sensory perceptions are entangled with shared cultural understandings.¹

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The themes of this article, based on the same material, have previously been discussed in Finnish in an article published in December 2024 (Laurén and Seppä 2024).



Photo 1: Map of the fieldwork research sites (Map base: OpenStreetMap)

Our approach, rooted in ethnography and environmental humanities, emphasizes digitality both as an object of study and as a methodological tool in multiple ways. First, digitality forms a key dimension of the nature relationships we are investigating. Second, we use body-worn digital cameras during the walks, allowing us to capture the participants' sensory interactions. Finally, our aim has been to develop a methodological perspective of *senso-digital walks*, where experimentation with mobile and wearable technologies is especially encouraged by the researchers and is a subject of discussion with the research participants.

AMBIGUOUS AND FRAGILE MIRES

Mires have historically covered nearly one-third of Finland's land area. The boreal coniferous forests as well as cool and humid summers create the perfect hydrological conditions in which rainfall exceeds the rate of evapotranspiration, trapping moisture in the soil. High water content slows down the rate of organic matter decomposition, leading to the gradual accumulation of peat (Sarkkola and Päivänen 2020).

For humans, mires can be a challenging terrain. Their soggy surface and the difficulty of traversing them have historically made mires seem hostile. Yet people have long ventured into the mires to hunt and pick berries. In recent decades, along with the growing popularity of national parks, mires have become destinations for outdoor recreation. This shift has been accompanied by a broader cultural reappraisal of mires, which are now celebrated for their unique aesthetic and experiential qualities. Increasingly, their protection is advocated through art, and they have even become the stage for community-centred, carnival-like sporting events (Laurén 2006; Laurén, Kaukio and Latvala-Harvilahti 2023; Laurén, Latvala-Harvilahti and Kaukio 2022).

Today mires are widely recognised as ecosystems that are essential for combating climate change and biodiversity loss, but they are especially fragile. Human activities – agriculture, forestry, and peat extraction – have impacted a large part of Finland’s mires. Their drainage by digging ditches intensified rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, and ended only in the 1990s after more than half of the country’s mires had already been drained. In recent decades, increasing efforts have been made to restore the drained peatlands by blocking ditches, with the goal of restoring mires to their natural state (Aapala, Similä and Penttinen 2013).

Culturally, mires have been viewed with a certain unease. Instead of beauty, they have evoked fear, conjuring associations even with death, disease, and horror (Giblett 1996: 3; Saito 1999: 121). Mires have been imagined as infinitely deep and otherworldly, linked to the afterlife or the supernatural. In Finnish folklore, they are often haunted places, inhabited by spirits and hidden dangers. *Will-o'-the-wisps*, those eerie flickering lights, are said to hover above treasure hidden deep within the bog, and those who wander too far may hear the cries of children secretly buried in watery graves. Such evocative imageries reflect the uncanny cultural heritage of mires as landscapes of dread, as places where humans lose control and might vanish (Knuuttila 1999; Laaksonen 1995, 2008; Laurén 2006: 98–108; Lehtinen 1999).

FIELDWORK SITES

The Viiankiaapa mire, part of Finland’s Mire Protection Program and the EU’s Natura 2000 network, is safeguarded for its ecological value and as a vital bird habitat. In spite of this, the British multinational mining company Anglo American has been pursuing plans to extract valuable minerals from the area for a long time. The mining project “Sakatti”, planned since 2011, has seen exploratory drilling escalate in recent years. There has been controversy surrounding the mine for over a decade, with many suggesting it could set a crucial precedent for the fate of Natura 2000 sites across Europe. The topic loomed large during our interviews at Viiankiaapa in the autumn of 2023, often popping up spontaneously during the hikes. Consequently, the aesthetic reflection of Viiankiaapa is inevitably entangled with its uncertain future. This mire is now a site of heightened affective tension, intensified by art and activism that advocates for its protection, extensive media coverage, and the mining company’s heightened security measures within the protected area (see Kiuru and Helle 2022; Latvala-Harvilahti 2021; Nuutinen-Kallio 2024; Yle 2011, 2013, 2024). As a recrea-

tional site, Viiankiaapa doesn't attract particularly large numbers of visitors but is rather a local nature destination, which highlights a certain tension between carefree day hiking and the potential for ecological disaster due to the mining plans.

Like Viiankiaapa, Patvinsuo is a Natura 2000 protected mire of international importance. Established as a national park in 1982, it protects mires, forests, and water environments, and forms part of the North Karelia Biosphere Reserve. It also plays an important role in the international efforts to protect waterfowl and shorebirds (Ympäristö.fi n. d.a). With around 16,000 visitors annually, Patvinsuo is one of Finland's smallest national parks in the number of visits, which is at least partly explained by its peripheral location on Finland's eastern flank.

Both Viiankiaapa and Patvinsuo are delicate ecosystems, valued for their beauty and biodiversity. Their protected status aims to preserve these environments as close to their original state as possible for future generations. In these areas, human impact is carefully managed through infrastructure such as duckboards,² shelters, and signposts, which facilitate recreational use while protecting sensitive species and reducing harm to the environment (Laurén 2014).



Photo 2: The research interviews were mostly conducted while walking on duckboards
(Author: Kirsi Laurén. Patvinsuo, 25 September 2023)

2

Duckboards are narrow wooden pathways, typically one or two planks wide, commonly used in Finnish mires to help hikers traverse peatlands without damaging the sensitive ecosystem or sinking into the soft ground.

Our research material for this article comprises of 12 senso-digital walks conducted in Patvinsuo and Viiankiaapa in 2023–2024, supplemented by three expert interviews conducted indoors and/or remotely.³ The research participants included both recreational visitors and people who have engaged with these sites through their profession. We used the snowball method to recruit participants, gathering recommendations from previous interviewees (see Grönfors and Vilkkä 2011: 96–97) and also directly approaching hikers who were active on social media sites. Although the participants came from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, and were of different ages (34–76), they shared a deep connection to and admiration of these environments. The professionals we spoke with included wilderness guides, park infrastructure managers, conservation biologists, and a communications specialist.

Walking interviews, particularly sensory ones, are widely used in ethnographic research to explore people's place-based experiences and their shifting sensory environments (e.g. Aula 2018; Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Järviluoma and Murray 2023; Ojanen 2018; Pink 2007). In our study, the researchers walked with and behind the interlocutors, engaging in open-ended conversations to elicit sensory memories and experiences (cf. Venäläinen 2023). During the walks, we focused on the ways of perceiving nature, interacting with it, and the use of digital tools. Discussion revolved, for example, around the participants' hiking routines, their use of digital devices to document the experience, and their habits around taking and sharing photographs – whether for personal memories, social media, or private networks.



Photo 3: One researcher also carried a handheld recorder because the body camera did not always capture the interviewer's voice clearly (Author: Tiina Seppä, Viiankiaapa, 9 September 2023)

3

The research material consists of 15 interviews conducted in the context of the DigiFREN research project in 2023–2024. The data is held by the research project.

Our walking interviews typically lasted between one and four hours, shaped in part by the terrain of these expansive mires, where trails are long, and resting points like lean-to shelters offer opportunities for pauses and conversation. Generally, the interlocutor led the way, choosing the route, while the situation was documented using a body camera strapped to the participant's chest. To ensure high-quality audio, one researcher also carried a hand-held recorder because the body camera did not always capture the researchers' voices clearly. Given the remote nature of these areas, a lunch break was often necessary, and interviews frequently ran over our planned time, uncovering topics we had not anticipated.

The body camera added a unique dimension to our data, capturing not only the surrounding environment but also the digital interactions taking place between the interlocutor and their devices. As with any recording device, the footage also reveals what otherwise easily remains unnoticed: the weather, the terrain, and the flow of conversation that all influence the experience (see Ojanen 2018).

To analyse the research material, we employed a combination of inductive and concept-driven qualitative content analysis (e.g. Schreier 2012), focusing on how digital technologies influence aesthetic engagement with mires. We explored digitally mediated nature experiences through the lens of aestheticization and affect.

AESTHETIC AND AFFECTIVE MIRES

Mire environments have long been overshadowed by the more “sublime” and canonised Finnish landscapes of lakes and forests. It wasn't until the turn of the 21st century that the aesthetic value of mires began to gain broader recognition both in Finland and globally (Hakala 1999; Sepänmaa 1999). Despite Finland's unique status as one of the most peatland-rich countries relative to its land area, not a single mire has been designated a “national landscape”⁴.

Historically, appreciation for peatlands was primarily rooted in their utility – the affordances of berries, game, timber, or peat – rather than their visual appeal. Again, when drained and converted into farmland or used for forestry and peat extraction, peatlands were valued for their direct material benefits to humans. Today, as awareness of the environmental crisis grows, the perspective on peatlands has changed drastically. Climate change has drawn attention to the role of mires as vital carbon stores, carbon sinks and biodiversity havens, simultaneously reshaping how we *view* these landscapes. Mires, once dismissed as aesthetically unremarkable, are being reframed as places of intrinsic ecological beauty. In media coverage on peatlands, the beautiful aerial photographs made possible by drone technology present the mire landscape almost like an abstract work of art, where the enchanting colours and countless details celebrate the ecological diversity of these environments (see e.g. Elonen 2024).

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National landscapes are cultural symbols celebrated for their aesthetic or historical significance, and mires, while present in certain regions like North Karelia's hill villages and the Pallastunturi area in Lapland, have traditionally not been included in this category (Ympäristö.fi n.d. b).

Aesthetics, in its everyday meaning, relates to the human experience of beauty and harmony. The term is rooted in the Greek *aisthētikós*, meaning “pertaining to perception.” Thus, aesthetics is about more than just visual pleasure: it encompasses a bodily and multi-sensory engagement with the world (Berleant 2015; Mikkonen 2024). Although an individual sensory experience – whether visual, auditory, olfactory or tactile – can evoke aesthetic satisfaction, true aesthetic appreciation arises from the interplay of the senses (Berleant 1999: 16–17).

In Western post-industrial societies, an emphasis on aesthetics has grown across various domains of life (Naukkarinen 2000: 133). Two lines of thought stand out in discussions of *aestheticization* within environmental aesthetics: one claims that appreciating nature aesthetically requires scientific understanding, while the other emphasizes direct, embodied engagement with the environment (see e.g. Mikkonen 2017: 16–23). In our approach, we are not thinking only of the current technological possibilities (from highly capable mobile phone cameras to affordable consumer drones) for creating stunning visual imagery, but also the more strictly etymological sense of how the modes of perceiving the world change at the same time, as well as the fluctuating relations between media technologies, environments, and sensory experiences (see Tiainen 2023).

In our research, which employs senso-digital walking as a method, we engage physically with nature: walking on the narrow and wobbly duckboards, but also stopping to touch plants, inhaling different scents, tasting berries, listening to the birds and the soft squelch of the boggy ground beneath our feet, sitting on tussocks, duckboards or beside a campfire. Through such embodied interaction, we physically take part in the landscape, and this participation evidently shapes how we perceive and appreciate its aesthetic qualities. Nature, in turn, influences our movements: the length of our strides, the pace of our walk, the direction of our gaze, and even the moments we choose for photography or for opening a mobile application to identify a plant. This kind of engagement reveals the aesthetic aspects of nature that might remain unnoticed when viewed from a distance or from the perspective of a detached observer (Kupfer 2003: 77–78).

Aesthetic experiences are deeply intertwined with emotions and sensations, which are inseparably linked to our relationships with nature and culture. Sensory experiences not only connect us to the material world but also to the social world (Howes 2003: xi). Our bodily experiences are never purely physical; they carry cultural meanings and associations (Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk 2012: 6, 130). Unconscious gut feelings – what we refer to as affects – precede and shape emotions, thoughts, and actions (Massumi 1995; Rinne, Kajander and Haanpää 2020: 6). In the research walks, it was these subtle, pre-verbal sensations that surfaced most strongly, rather than clearly articulated emotions.

Affect is often portrayed as a precursor to emotion. It is less culturally shaped and harder to put into words than the named, verbalised emotions we typically recognise (Wetherell 2012). While emotions are identified through a shared vocabulary and an assumption of a certain level of universality and commensurability (“everyone knows what it means to feel sad”), affects are much more ambiguous, lacking a predetermined meaning or interpretation, and having a potential for unexpected outcomes. Affect is not a stable construct, but

more a kind of a sudden pulsation that emerges when being exposed to unpredictable stimuli from the environment. In fact, affect plays a crucial role in perception (Massumi 1995). For example, the sensations stirred by a visual encounter may contradict the more structured emotion that follows once we interpret and articulate it. As Brian Massumi notes, the initial reaction to visual stimuli – i.e. the affect – can precede and even conflict with the emotions generated by our later, more conscious interpretations (Massumi 1995). It is a force that moves us, even if we cannot always fully name or express it.

In the context of mires, affects are often verbalised through the sensations of freedom or relaxation. Sometimes, mires can also give rise to more articulated emotions, such as fear. Fear, according to Sara Ahmed, is not something that simply “happens” in the body; it is a social and cultural construct, a mediated emotion, and a tool of control (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 69). Mires have long been the subject of such fears, often seen as dangerous and foreboding spaces where the unpredictable depth can instil a lingering unease. Although our study participants did not express such explicit fears, the latent fear of sinking into a mire was present in our conversations, if only through negation (Laurén 2006: 98–101).

SENSING (ON) THE DUCKBOARDS

The watery abundance of mires shapes not only how one moves through the mire but also the nature of digital observation, particularly in the choice of photographic subjects. During our fieldwork, especially at Patvinsuo mire, water was ever-present, sometimes so much so that parts of the trails and the duckboards were submerged beneath it. We often found ourselves searching for higher, drier ground, leaping from tussock to tussock to avoid newly formed pools. On the interview recordings, one can hear the wet splashing sounds of our walk and the squelch of the saturated soil. Sometimes the water wasn't just underfoot – it found its way into our shoes, too. In this way, our bodily engagement with the mire was deeply intimate, with the water and peat soil becoming part of our sensory experience.

In the mires, water and moisture are the key elements that awaken the senses, creating a distinctive smellscape – one can often smell the mire long before it comes into view. Certain plants, like northern Labrador tea (*Rhododendron tomentosum*), are frequently mentioned in our interviews as typical of this environment, their scent filling the air with a pungent aroma that clings to the senses. Humid moss and the layers of peat formed from decomposition also stand out for their distinct texture underfoot. These sensory encounters – intertwined with movement, physical sensation, and sensory memory – were typically enjoyed and described in positive terms by our interlocutors (see also Kaukio 2022; Piirainen and Laurén 2023).

In one of the walks in the spring of 2023, while transitioning from a forested section of Patvinsuo to the open expanse of the mire on duckboards, the interlocutor's attention immediately shifted to the intensified odours of the humid mire air:

It's the odour that comes from it, and it's so intoxicating at times [...]. The odour of the mire is the first thing that hits you, that gives you the initial impact. [...] And as we move from the forest to the duckboards out here, you can smell it more because it's wetter here. [...] Then, after that, comes the sense of wilderness. (Wilderness guide, Patvinsuo, P1)

Although vision is often privileged in Western cultures, scent was frequently highlighted in our interviews as a key element of the mire's sensory landscape. The particular odour of the mire was repeatedly described as "intoxicating" and was often the first thing noted when entering these environments. The scent was not only a source of pleasure but also a central part of the mire's aesthetic appeal (see also Laurén and Piirainen 2022: 32). As hikers moved along the duckboards, scents would intensify or fade, depending on the moisture levels in the ground, the plants nearby, and the weather conditions.

H1: It's lovely here...

H2: Yeah, this is one of those... this scent, it's not like...

H1: This is it.

H2: The scent of the mire.

H1: The scent of the mire. It's always, whenever I come here...

H2: Yeah, in summer...

H1: When you have a keen sense of smell, it's...

H2: In the summer, when it's hot, it's even stronger, but now with the wind, it blows it away. But in summer, when it's warm, it's...

H1: But now the colours of autumn are starting to show...

H2: The scent here is really intoxicating.

(Hikers 1 and 2, joint interview, Viiankiaapa, V6)

In the previous exchange, we see how scent and sight work together in the mire. The hikers begin with the olfactory experience, which then triggers a shift to the changing colours of autumn. This interplay of the senses is central to the aesthetic experience of mires, even though only the visual can be captured in a photograph. When focusing solely on the visual, as in a photograph, there's a risk of distancing oneself from the full sensory immersion that the mire environment offers (Lehari 2005: 98). On the other hand, the obviously unisensory appearance of a photograph might be understood as a reminiscence and a sort of a memento of the multifaceted sensory experience in situ – which is curiously also something that can be shared and that people wish to share online with others who have experienced something similar (cf. the discussion on "likenessing" in Pöllänen 2023).

While no one in our interviews mentioned recording sounds or taking videos that captured both sound and image, it was clear that being physically present in the mire and responding to the researchers' questions brought the multisensory aesthetic dimension of these spaces to the fore. The interlocutors noted the limitations of photographs, particularly when it came to capturing smells. They remarked that while social media posts featuring mire landscapes could evoke memories of the scent for those already familiar with mires, the actual olfactory experience remained beyond the reach of an image. However, on platforms like Instagram, captions, comments and hashtags can help convey a sense of the mire atmosphere, enriching the image with sensory cues that go beyond sight alone.

Describing scents, along with other sensory experiences, has long played a significant role in travel narratives, even before the age of visual documentation (Kostiainen et al. 2004: 152). This focus on odour persists today, including in the verbal depictions that accompany social media images of mires. The moisture of a mire – and the distinct scents it generates – sets this environment apart from others. The absence of drainage keeps the mire wet, preserving the low vegetation and maintaining what is considered the mire’s natural state.

What do people photograph in mires, then? Mires, like oceans, plains, and deserts, often captivate through their vastness, the rhythmic patterns within the landscape, and the expanse of sky stretching above them (Sepänmaa 1999: 11). At the same time, the open and flat landscapes can be difficult objects of photography, as they often lack specific focal points which would immediately catch the eye and attention. For this reason, the “Instagrammability” (e.g. Arts et al. 2021) of mires depends on the reproduction of subtle nuances, for example, in experiencing the colours of the landscape. Most of our interviews took place in early autumn, as the first signs of seasonal colour changes were beginning to appear. Our interviewees frequently paused to capture the vibrant yellows and reds of the mire, with the duckboards extending into the distance catching their attention.

Footage from the body cameras worn by the interviewees shows that pauses were prompted not only by the picturesque views but also by the materiality of the duckboards. Wider sections provided natural stopping points where hikers could take out their phones and snap a photo, and simultaneously to give way to oncoming hikers when necessary. In this way, the duckboards and phone cameras became integral parts of the experience, encouraging moments of stillness and reflection. Without these elements, the hike would likely have continued uninterrupted (cf. Aula 2018).

When asked what specifically drew them to photograph certain subjects, many interviewees found it difficult to articulate exactly what fascinated them about a particular view or scene. This highlights the affective, emotional quality of aesthetic experiences in nature, which are not easily reducible to a single sensation or observation in general (cf. Wetherell 2012), but especially not in the case of open mire landscapes. The beauty of nature often blends reality with imagination and creativity, especially for those, like visual artists, who see the mire as a space for passionate expression. As one interlocutor explained:

The emptiness, or maybe something like that... The autumn colours aren’t that impressive this time. I expected more. I can’t really explain it, but there’s that... Like with the last three pieces I did, especially the one where there’s nothing but grass [gestures toward the vast mire], there’s really nothing there. But I painted it with such passion. (Visual artist, Parvinsuo, P5)

While mires often captivate through their expansive views, they also offer intimate details – plants, insects, and mosses – that can be closely observed when stepping off the duckboards. However, in national parks, visitors are required to stay on the designated paths to protect the sensitive ecosystems. On Instagram, images of dogs on the duckboards are common, though

their leashes may not always be visible. Some hikers edit the leashes out of their photos, considering them an aesthetic distraction (Expert, A3), even if the park regulations or the code of conduct require keeping dogs on a leash. The interlocutors noted that they rarely took selfies, focusing instead on photographing their dogs, which often appear in picturesque spots within the mire:⁵

Yeah, when my dog is with me on those maintenance trips, I think I mostly end up taking pictures of it, you know, sitting on top of a shelter or somewhere else. (Maintenance worker, Patvinsuo, P4)

At Viiankiaapa, a popular subject for photos is Viiankijärvi, a lake often viewed from afar, with waterfowl frequently visible from the duckboards. As hikers proceeded from the forested areas onto the mire, the expansive views often prompted them to take out their phones and start photographing. Pauses for pictures were common, especially at scenic spots or when interesting plants or animals caught their eye (see also Ojanen 2018).

Although duckboards, marked trails, and other infrastructure alter the landscape, they also facilitate aesthetic observation and engagement with these challenging environments. Duckboards make it possible to immerse oneself in the mire, allowing access to areas that would otherwise be inaccessible. These human-made paths are not simply practical structures: they shape how the mire is experienced and photographed. Duckboards are a symbol that makes the mires recognisable in the photographs. As one interlocutor put it, without the duckboards, a mire might just resemble any other field:

It's really tricky to get that "wow" shot with a mire. It's much easier with old-growth forests or fells. Like, in Pyhä-Luosto National Park, there's that subarctic mire (tunturiaapa) with the duckboards leading towards the fell, so it's easy to get that dramatic shot. (Expert, A1)

Duckboards provide a relatively solid platform for capturing detailed images of the mire without the risk of sinking into the wet ground. While walking across the mire, one must keep moving to avoid becoming stuck in the peat. On the duckboards, however, one can stop, stand, or even sit or lie down without worry, allowing for deeper engagement with the mire, both visually and through digital devices.

While duckboards protect sensitive mire ecosystems from excessive foot traffic, they also expose these environments to increased human presence. In conservation areas like Patvinsuo and Viiankiaapa, both cultural and ecological values are significant. The goal is to balance public access with environmental protection, ensuring that people can experience and appreciate these landscapes while learning to value conservation efforts. As an expert interviewee involved in planning the routes explained:

It's important that people can come here, experience this for themselves, and through that, learn to appreciate it. There are health benefits, too, and it raises awareness about conservation. We can't just say people shouldn't come here because it's too valuable. (Expert, A3)

5

Our analysis of the social media imagery of the fieldwork sites supports the same observation: in a computer vision-based categorisation of ca. seven thousand photos from the Patvinsuo National Park, only two percent of the images were clustered in the category identified as selfies. See Venäläinen, submitted for review.

During our walks, many hikers expressed a preference for weathered, old duckboards, which they found more visually appealing than the newer metal grates or gravel paths that have been introduced in some of the most frequently visited national parks (see Korhonen 2015). The aging wooden structures seem to blend better into the environment, becoming part of the landscape over time and gradually shedding the signs of extraneous human intervention. In contrast, metal duckboards – while more durable and better-suited for the growing popularity of mountain biking and e-biking – are often seen as *aesthetically* too modern and out of place in these natural settings, even if they increase the accessibility of the routes for hikers and reduce the wear on the terrain.

NAVIGATING SAFELY

In narrations of experiencing mire environments, experiences of getting lost are often mentioned, as well as the fear it evokes and respect for the mire's unpredictability. In these situations, the environment, which is ordinarily perceived as aesthetic, relaxing, and unique, takes on a threatening and unfamiliar character, as is typical in experiences of getting lost (Knuuttila 2003: 143). Digital devices and applications are thought to enhance safety during outdoor activities, and at times, the interviewees report that even their relatives have encouraged them to use these tools.

Digital maps and location apps provide additional safety even for experienced navigators and nature enthusiasts. Especially in wet and challenging terrain, map apps offer information about the area and can help with route selection. A GPS device helps to pinpoint one's exact location:

Interviewer (I): So, is the GPS more of a safety device for you?

Hiker (H): Yes, it's a safety device.

I: Right, to help you find your way back?

H: Yes, and I can use it to estimate distances. It's on the map, but it's still quite hard to follow where exactly you are. (Hiker, Viiankiaapa, V2)

Digital devices that aid navigation can help avoid getting wet or extending travel time, allowing for more relaxed movement and enjoyment of nature. However, the challenges of digital devices include limited battery life and constrained network coverage in remote areas, which is why longer trips still require a traditional compass and paper map as backup (see also Talvensuu 2021: 117–118; Santaoja and Peltola 2023: 15–16). Once someone has been lost in the wilderness, their attitude toward digital mapping services tends to become more positive. As one of our interviewees who frequently visits mires remarked:

Well, after my friend and I... four years ago, the police had to come find us in the forest where we were hunting chanterelles in the middle of the night. Since then, yes, I've used [map services] thankfully. (Visual artist, Patvinsuo, P5)

Many interviewees also mentioned using various apps for species identification through photos or recordings (e.g. Muuttolintujen kevät n.d.). The interviews frequently

highlighted the idea that knowledge about natural phenomena, such as species identification, enhances the experience of enjoying nature. More generally, our interlocutors often emphasized their knowledge-based relationship with the environment (see also Kaukio 2022). They frequently mentioned the convenience of species identification apps, which replace the need for bulky nature guides that they would have carried with them during their hikes before the era of smartphones (Hiker, Viiankiaapa, V₂). A profound understanding of the biological characteristics of the mire can also significantly aid navigation through this complex environment:

There are these specific bog trails that lead to Sakattikumpu or Petäjäsääri. They can break off, and then you have to... turn back and try the next one, see if it gets you where you want to go. And then, of course, knowledge of botany helps; if there's string sedge [*Carex chordorrhiza*], it might hold because its roots are strong and dense, and if there's enough bogbee [*Menyanthes trifoliata*], it forms a kind of cushion. Not everyone knows bogbee well enough to say, "Yeah, I can walk on this." (Hiker, Viiankiaapa, V₃)

Seasonal changes in the mire drastically affect how people move through it. In the winter, the experience of freedom is often highlighted. Frozen mires allow for skiing with forest skis⁶ across areas that are impassable in summer, and the duckboards, which guide summer visitors, no longer limit or dictate routes. Skiers can glide wherever they please, though meal breaks are typically taken at designated campfire sites. Equipment is also easier to transport in winter, especially when the snow crust is firm enough to pull supplies on a sled rather than carry them:

For me, there's never been a particular season that stands out as the absolute best – each has its own advantages. Every season brings something amazing, moving, or remarkable. Like in early spring, you can ski to places that are inaccessible in summer because the open mire is too wet. (Visual artist, Viiankiaapa, V₃)

We conducted one winter interview on skis at Patvinsuo in early April 2024. There was still plenty of snow, but it was melting rapidly as the day went on. Despite the snow cover, restrictions to protect nesting birds meant we had to stay on the duckboards, which limited the freedom typically associated with mire visits in winter. As the day progressed, the snow supporting our skis softened, and our poles started to sink through it. At our lunch spot at the Teretti lean-to shelter, water pooled around us, making it difficult to start a fire in the middle of what felt like a pond.

One particularly interesting aesthetic observation from this skiing interview was related to the duckboards. While the old boards lay hidden beneath the snow, planks for a new section of the trail had been placed on top of the snow crust, awaiting installation in the spring. Captured on a phone camera, these planks appeared distorted, almost broken, offering a curious and unusual variation on the classic mire landscape (see Figure 4).

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Forest skis are long and wide cross-country skis designed for traversing deep, untouched snow without sinking.



Photo 4: Screenshot from the body camera footage during the skiing interview, Patvinsuo mire, 9 April 2024

CONCLUSION

Technological mediations of nature are not merely “re”-presentations of nature that come after the fact, but more and more they are becoming an integral part of our “natural” capabilities of how we engage with the sensory richness of the world. What captivates mire visitors time and again, and what they seek to capture through photography, is the overwhelming sense of vastness in the flat and open environment. The endless duckboards stretching into the distance, the treeless expanse, and the boundless feeling of space invite the mire visitor to pause and take a photo.

The impulse to digitally capture the vastness of the mires speaks to a similar aesthetic yearning as watching a lake or ocean horizon, yet the distinct dampness of the peat, the water, the characteristic mire vegetation, the smells, sounds, and tactile sensations combine to offer a unique, multi-sensory experience, which can only be hinted at in the photographic representations. For the mire regulars that we interviewed, Patvinsuo and Viiankiaapa mires hold a dual significance: they are both familiar and special, revisited across seasons, for both work and leisure. The act of photographing emphasizes the mire’s uniqueness and the attentiveness required to continuously rediscover its aesthetic appeal. At the same time, photographs serve as personal keepsakes and reminders of special moments in nature.

While mires often evoke positive sensations and feelings – such as a sense of relaxation and connection with nature – they can also stir up fear, which is rooted in folklore about people sinking into mires or getting lost, and more tangible dangers, like the unpredictability of snow and ice. Digital technologies intersect with these experiences: fears are mitigated by the reassurance of being able to call for help or navigate using map apps, while

aesthetic experiences are captured and shared through digital photography, either on social media or within more private circles.

In our research walks, a knowledge-based, cognitively grounded appreciation of mire aesthetics recurrently emerged. Acquaintance with the mire ecosystems and characteristic species often seemed to be an underlying assumption in the discussions, sometimes even in the form of implicitly questioning our credibility as researchers to delve into mire aesthetics and the related culture of outdoors recreation without the proper (biological) expertise. According to the view that underlines the cognitive element in nature aesthetics, knowledge of mire species and habitats enhances the aesthetic experience, turning it into something deeper, more layered, and more intensively affective. Contemporary relationships with mires are also characterised by an ecological and ethical consciousness, intertwined with feelings of enjoyment and a sense of community (Laurén, Kaukio and Latvala-Harvilahti 2023; see also Hankonen 2021: 225–228).

The allure of mires is often described as a hard-to-define affective experience – something elusive and not always tied to conscious thought, let alone conclusive scientific explanation. Mires evoke sensations that resist easy articulation: the smell of moist soil, the expansive view, the play of light, and the sense of space, all of which are regularly mentioned in our interviews. The phone camera becomes an unobtrusive tool for capturing these fleeting moments, merging seamlessly with the aesthetic experience. Based on our material, it seems clear that digital photography has become an integral part of the human relationship with nature.

The multisensory richness of the mire experience is evident throughout our research. Although our questions initially focused on visual aesthetics, other sensory dimensions quickly became central – especially smell, which emerged as an essential feature that cannot be captured by photography. This multisensory aspect, combined with the difficulty of verbally describing the mire experience, underscores the affective power of the environment.

The act of walking itself also highlights the affective nature of being in the mire. With its deep cultural resonances, the mire is an inherently affective place – emotionally charged both in terms of individual experiences and collective societal discourses. Once considered marginal, both aesthetically and geographically, mires have recently gained prominence, propelled by issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and the EU's restoration regulations.⁷ Moreover, mires have become a flashpoint in debates around the ecologically and societally acceptable uses of natural resources. For example, the proposed Sakatti mine in Viiankiaapa mire has become a highly contentious issue, stirring emotions and societal discussions that link mire environments to broader questions of sustainability, ecology, and even mythology. Despite these diverse and sometimes conflicting narratives, what remains at the core is the essence of these mires: they are vital habitats, supporting a vast range of species from fungi to frogs, whose survival is intricately tied to these fragile ecosystems.

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The EU's Nature Restoration Law came into force in August 2024 and aims to restore ecosystems, habitats, and species across EU land for the purposes of biodiversity recovery and mitigating climate change. See European Commission n.d.

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INTERVIEWS

Expert interviews:

A1: 11. 9. 2023, Rovaniemi. Special expert in nature conservation. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen, duration 1 hour

A2: 17. 10. 2023, Joensuu. Expert. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration 1 hour

A3: 30. 11. 2023, Joensuu, remote interview. Special expert in communications. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration 1 hour

Walking interviews in Patvinsuo:

P1: 21. 8. 2023. Wilderness guide, b. 1975. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén, Tiina Seppä, and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration approx. 5 hours

P2: 15. 9. 2023. Biologist, b. 1971. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén and Tiina Seppä. Duration approx. 2.5 hours

P3: 25. 9. 2023. Hiker, b. 1961. Interviewers: Juhana

Venäläinen and Sanni Puustinen. Duration approx. 2.5 hours

P4: 25. 9. 2023. Maintenance worker, b. 1981. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Kirsi Laurén. Duration 1 hour 15 minutes

P5: 22. 9. 2023. Visual artist, b. 1944. Interviewer: Kirsi Laurén. Duration approx. 3 hours

P6 (skiing): 9. 4. 2024. Hiker, b. 1982. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration 4 hours

Walking interviews in Viiankiaapa:

V1: 8. 9. 2023. Hiker (and dog), b. 1989. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén and Tiina Seppä. Duration approx. 3 hours

V2: 8. 9. 2023. Hiker, b. 1969. Interviewers: Juhana Venäläinen and Sanni-Maaria Puustinen. Duration approx. 3 hours

V3: 9. 9. 2023. Joint interview, visual artist b. 1959 and hiker, b. 1947 (and dog). Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén, Tiina Seppä, and Sanni-Maaria Puustinen. Duration approx. 2.5 hours

V4: 9. 9. 2023. Reindeer herder, b. 1962. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén and Sanni-Maaria Puustinen. Duration 1 hour

V5: 10. 9. 2023. Joint interview, hiker, b. 1978, and hiker, b. 1974 (accompanied by a child whose birth year is unknown). Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration approx. 2.5 hours

V6: 10. 9. 2023. Joint interview, hiker, b. 1964 and hiker, b. 1967. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén and Sanni-Maaria Puustinen. Duration approx. 2 hours

POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje vlogo digitalnih tehnologij pri estetskem dojemanju in doživljanju finskih močvirij, krhkih ekosistemov z bogato biodiverzitetjo. S pomočjo intervjujev, opravljenih na čutno-digitalnih sprehodih v naravnih parkih Viiankiaapa in Patvinsuo, proučuje, kako mobilne kamere, družbena omrežja in navigacijske aplikacije oblikujejo način našega dojemanja in interaktiranja s temi okolji. Te tehnologije uporabnikom in uporabnicam omogočajo dokumentiranje in deljenje estetskih ter ekoloških značilnosti močvirij, ob tem pa usmerjajo njihovo čutno delovanje, ki vodi bodisi v poglobljanje povezanosti z naravo bodisi odmikanje od nje. Raziskava na podlagi sprehajalnih intervjujev z dokumentiranjem čutnih izkušenj – vizualnih, vonjav in zvokov – ugotavlja, kako udeleženske in udeleženci na pohodih uporabljajo digitalna orodja. Analiza je pokazala, da digitalno usmerjanje krepi estetsko doživljanje, vendar pa vpliva tudi na dojemanje in včasih povzroča odmik od neposredne, utelešene interakcije. Študija se ukvarja z vprašanjem, kako digitalna orodja ustvarjajo afektne odzive, kot sta sprostitvev ali nelagodje, in prispevajo k uživanju močvirnih okolij, osnovano na poznavanju.

Razprava se prav tako dotakne širših družbenih in okoljskih razsežnosti močvirij, vključno z izzivi ohranjanja, vplivi rudarstva in tehnološkim upravljanjem narave. Članek prikazuje, kako tehnologije, kot so aplikacije za prepoznavanje vrst in digitalna fotografija, ne le dokumentirajo izkušnje, temveč tudi dejavno oblikujejo človeške odnose z naravnim svetom.

Prispevek sklene, da digitalne tehnologije s ponujanjem novih načinov občudovanja in varovanja občutljivih ekosistemov na novo opredeljujejo človeške interakcije z naravo. Ta raziskava s spajanjem vizualne, čutne in ekološke razsežnosti osvetljuje dinamično sovplivanje tehnologije, dojemanja in prostora ter spodbuja debate o digitalizaciji izkušanja narave.