

LONA PÄLL

Bridging the disconnections:  
An ecosemiotic approach to place-lore in  
environmental conflict communication





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Department of Semiotics, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

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Working toward a PhD can be an isolating, exhausting, and turbulent process. However, despite the challenges of this journey, one thing I have never had to experience is loneliness. Quite the contrary, I have been fortunate to be surrounded by a close and diverse circle of people who have provided unwavering solidarity and strong emotional and practical support.

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Academic journeys do not just happen—connections must be made, opportunities created, and guidance offered by those who see potential in us. I vividly remember the said meeting at the archives, which later became my workplace, in Room 143, with a large Estonian map covering the wall. When I shared my interest in place-lore and my search for a specific place or region to study, Mari-Ann Rimmel, the head of the place-lore work group, pointed to the map and suggested, “What about Kakerdaja Bog?” My research on place-lore would not have been possible without Mari-Ann, who has established the field of place-lore studies in Estonia and formed a research group that has since become my closest community of colleagues and friends. Thank you, Mari-Ann, Jüri Metssalu, and Valdo Valper for inviting me to be part of this group.

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For me, research is fundamentally a collaborative process, made meaningful by the people I write with, for, and about. Throughout my PhD studies, co-writing has given me insights that working in isolation never could, and for that, I extend my sincere appreciation to my co-authors. Piret Pungas-Kohv, I am truly thankful for our collaboration—an equally fun, challenging, and fruitful dialogue between

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For me, intellectual paths are intertwined with physical ones. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a place-lore researcher, both the places that I write about and the places where I write have significantly shaped my work. This dissertation would not have been possible without the opportunity to step away from time to time, to wander and draw inspiration from places that hold significance to me. Much of the writing and idea formation for this dissertation took place in Saaremaa—during daily walks on a small road in Ninase village in the autumn of 2022, or on the Tagamõisa Peninsula, in Viidumäe, Loona, and the island of Vilsandi. Other

locations that have left their mark on this process are the Karuse railway station, Võsu, Paluküla Hill, Kakerdaja Bog, Kolga in Lahemaa National Park, Salevere Hill, Viljandi, Kudina, and the small Niilusoo Bog. Also, my time at the University of Aberdeen, the University of Washington in Seattle, and my experiences in Vancouver, Rome, and New York shaped my thinking and led to the work presented in this dissertation.

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## LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

- I Päll, Lona 2022. An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore. *Sign Systems Studies* 50 (2/3): 185–216. <https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2022.50.2-3.01>
- II Päll, Lona 2021. The Role of Place-lore in Environmental Conflict Discourse: The Case of Paluküla Sacred Hill in Estonia. *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (2): 198–220. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2021-0024>
- III Päll, Lona; Piret Pungas-Kohv 2024. How can storytelling help restore mires? Applying place-lore fieldwork methodology in ecological restoration. *Environmental Communication* [Advance online publication]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2024.2420789>
- IV Jonuks, Tõnno; Päll, Lona; Rimmel, Atko; Kadakas, Ulla 2022. Sõjakas kaitse – konfliktid loodus- ja kultuuripärandi hoiu kujundamisel. *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica* 24 (30): 156–183. <https://doi.org/10.7592/methis.v24i30.22112>

The contribution of the author in jointly written papers:

Article III: The article was the result of long-term collaborative work. Piret Pungas-Kohv formulated the fieldwork questionnaire and conducted the fieldwork in the Estonian Fund for Nature’s LIFE Mires Estonia project, which served as the case study for our article. While preparing the fieldwork, she consulted me and my colleagues in the place-lore research group at the Estonian Folklore Archives. The original initiative to write an article about applying place-lore fieldwork in mire restoration was proposed by me. Consequently, I completed an internship in 2021 at the Estonian Fund for Nature to gain deeper insight into the activities of the LIFE Mires Estonia project and the materials collected during the fieldwork. Together, we developed the structure and central argument for the article. We both coded the interview materials. I wrote the theoretical and methodological background, while Piret wrote the case study overview and results. However, we collaborated on editing all sections. The introduction, discussion, and conclusion were written jointly, and I was responsible for the final editing and revisions.

Article IV: The authors of this article concentrated on different topics and case studies, resulting in each of us writing different sections. However, we collaborated intensively during the editing phase. I was mainly responsible for establishing the theoretical framework and consequently concentrated more on the introduction and discussion. Additionally, I contributed to the sections on conflicts over sacred natural sites and forest management in Estonia (respectively sections “Hiiesõjad” and “Metsasõda”) and also added insights to the Haabersti White Willow case in the section on local conflicts (“Lokaalsed (linna)looduse kaitsmise juhtumid”).

## INTRODUCTION

Local, contextual, environmental-related narratives—whether called place-lore, indigenous knowledge, eco-narratives, or simply local stories—are often on the front lines of environmental conflicts. Consider the Dakota Access Pipeline protests as an example. An 1886 km long pipeline planned to be built from North Dakota to Illinois posed multiple environmental threats and endangered the ancient burial grounds of the Sioux people. Narratives of Sioux sacred land being destroyed by the pipeline construction were powerful triggers for widespread indigenous communities’ protests while #NODAPL flooded Twitter with millions of shares in 2016 (e.g., Brígido-Corachán 2017; Hunt, Gruszczynski 2021). In the spring of 2017, the pipeline was being completed in the U.S.—despite being temporarily halted by Obama, the pipeline received the greenlight as one of Donald Trump’s first actions as president. Around the same time, Estonian society experienced something that can be called “protest fatigue.” After years of protesting against the over-management of forests, construction of the Rail Baltica railroad, and the planned construction of a large pulp mill in southern Estonia, the public appeared drained. Somehow, however, a rather erratic spark started a new fire. During the construction of the Haabersti intersection in Tallinn in spring 2017, where 795 trees were slated for removal, a group of protesters set up camp around one of the willow trees. They promoted a narrative that it was a “Mother Tree,” a sacred tree, and a symbol of hope, freedom, and peaceful resistance. These claims marked the first time anyone had considered the tree remarkable in any way. This opposition became a media spectacle. While writing the proposal for the PhD program—the result of which you are now reading—I watched a live stream of police dragging a protester from a tree to allow machinery access for cutting it down<sup>1</sup>.

### Context and problem

Narratives are not only represented, but re-stored, re-framed, and created in conflicts. Local narratives activate in conflicts as part of identity politics, because they manifest something relevant, such as cultural heritage, tradition, and place identity (e.g., Hafstein 2012) but also have become part of how people tell the story of crises, oppositions, and breakdowns. Small-scale vernacular narratives have become more acknowledged in environmental crises, as reflected for example in the emerging dialogue between expert and traditional or local knowledge regarding environmental issues (e.g., Adams et al. 2014; Jessen et al. 2022; Berkes 2021) and popularity of storytelling as a communication or participation

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<sup>1</sup> See Uwe Gnadenteich „The white willow farce had a violent end” Postimees, June 29, 2017, <https://news.postimees.ee/4161529/the-white-willow-farce-had-a-violent-end> Accessed December 4, 2024.

practice in social movements or science communication (e.g. Canning, Reinsborough 2010; Bloomfield 2024). Nonetheless, when it comes to actual conflicts and disputes, vernacular or folkloristic narratives are often marginalized, ignored, or employed as ideological instruments in resistance. The relationship between these narratives and the environmental realities they represent—as well as the semiotically complex nature of this relationship, particularly in environmental conflicts—has yet to be thoroughly acknowledged and explored.

Public environmental debates are now even more at the forefront of public discussions in Estonia than when I started my research in 2017. Against the backdrop of the climate emergency<sup>2</sup> and ongoing adaptations required for the green transition, additional challenges are emerging in the Baltic Sea region—such as the Russian war in Ukraine, and economic crisis—that are speeding up the need to re-new transport and energy infrastructure. Large projects like Rail Baltica<sup>3</sup>, the construction of wind farms in the Baltic Sea<sup>4</sup>, mapping preliminary locations for a possible nuclear power plant<sup>5</sup>, and expanding the Nursipalu military training area in Southern Estonia<sup>6</sup> for national security purposes, have sparked heated public and legal debates. All this mirrors the worldwide trends of

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<sup>2</sup> In spring 2019, The Guardian, a leading news media platform known for its collaboration with scientists, announced changes to its language regarding climate change to follow leading scientists and raise accuracy: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/17/why-the-guardian-is-changing-the-language-it-uses-about-the-environment>. The way we name things, and whether our language and terminology are open to processes in the environment, is the cornerstone of adequate environmental communication. Therefore, in this text, terms like „climate emergency“ or „environmental emergency“ are preferred over others.

<sup>3</sup> „Protests in Tallinn against the current shape of Rail Baltic project“ Estonian Public Broadcast, April 23, 2017, <https://news.err.ee/591437/protests-in-tallinn-against-current-shape-of-rail-baltic-project> Accessed May 17, 2024; Liepina, Inese; Roonemaa, Holger; Laine, Martin; Černiauskas, Šarūnas „Who is afraid of Rail Baltica?“ Rebaltaica, February 8, 2020, <https://en.rebaltaica.lv/2020/02/who-is-afraid-of-rail-baltica/> Accessed May 17, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> „Court rejects Saaremaa councilor wind-farm planning complaint“ Estonian Public Broadcast, June 28, 2022, <https://news.err.ee/1608642058/court-rejects-saaremaa-councilor-wind-farm-planning-complaint> Accessed December 4, 2024. „Opponents to Saaremaa offshore wind farm project voice concerns“ Estonian Public Broadcast, October 13, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609131947/opponents-to-saaremaa-offshore-wind-farm-project-voice-concerns> Accessed December 4, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> „Fermi tells local residents about their plans to construct nuclear plant“ Estonian Public Broadcast, November 21, 2022, <https://news.err.ee/1608795436/fermi-tells-local-residents-about-their-plans-to-construct-nuclear-plant> Accessed December 4, 2024; „Letipea residents: ‘No communication with locals over nuclear plant plans’“ Estonian Public Broadcast, November 3, 2022, <https://news.err.ee/1608777004/letipea-residents-no-communication-with-locals-over-nuclear-plant-plans> Accessed December 4, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> „Over 300 people protest Nursipalu military training area expansion“ Estonian Public Broadcast, February 25, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1608897095/over-300-people-protest-nursipalu-military-training-area-expansion> Accessed December 4, 2024; „Nursipalu military training area expansion town hall meeting gets heated“ Estonian Public Broadcast, October 7, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609125350/nursipalu-military-training-area-expansion-town-hall-meeting-gets-heated> Accessed December 4, 2024.

growing local and regional environmental conflicts because of the energy transition, rapid technological innovation driving up the need for resources, and radical social disruptions triggered by the climate emergency (e.g., Avila 2018; Scheidel et al 2020; Brown et al. 2024).<sup>7</sup> Labeling these local conflicts as mere opposition to change would be misleading; rather, these conflicts often represent reactions to the physical and semiotic disruptions of landscapes and place identity. How these conflicts are managed—in particular, which semiotic relations are addressed and whose meanings and narratives are emphasized—has become increasingly critical, as this determines the trajectory of transition and adaptation in the context of the environmental emergency.

## Central concepts and fields of research

My dissertation centers on three key concepts: place-lore, environmental conflicts, and ecosemiotics. Each brings distinct research histories, practices, and methodologies into the dialogue I aim to establish, making it necessary to clarify the role of each concept within this work. Ecosemiotics represents the theoretical frame and a way to ask questions, the ecosemiotic approach or viewpoint is the one concentrating on semiotic relations (Maran, Kull 2014; Maran 2020a). My research object is not place-lore itself but rather how environmental conflicts, as specific situations, create new contexts for narratives. Thus, in this work, environmental conflicts serve as a framework that reveals the multiple potentials of place-related folklore. At the same time, conflicts also constitute a significant issue in their own right—one that motivates this study. Place-lore, as a phenomenon, is closely linked to folkloristic studies in Estonia, as the archive collections, fieldwork methodology, and the concept itself are shaped by the scholarly practices of Estonian folkloristics. Thus the concept needs to be discussed in the dialogue space between object level (actual stories and story-telling practices) and metalevel (practices and discourses of folkloristics). For example, folklore about certain places or environments reflects both human relationships with these environments and the types of questions folklorists have posed, as well as the narratives researchers themselves have mediated through popular writings (e.g., Metsalu 2008; Pungas-Kohv et al. 2015).

The concept of place-lore has its roots in the Estonian research tradition where place-lore research emerged as a distinct field of study in the 1990s (see Rimmel 2001; M. Hiiemäe 2001, 2004; Västriik 1998; Tuisk 2001). This research is deeply intertwined with Estonia's extensive folklore collections that contain place-lore collected since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see more Järv, Sarv 2014). Place-lore can be explored through various lenses, such as local folklore, indigenous knowledge, local knowledge, or situated knowledge (see Haraway 1988), and place attachment. It can also be paralleled with various terms such as geographical lore

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<sup>7</sup> Tracking the evolution of local environmental conflicts, the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice provides valuable insights, see: <https://ejatlas.org/>. Accessed January 4, 2025.

(see e.g., Meredith 2002), environmental lore (e.g., R. Hiimäe 2024), eco-narratives (Stibbe 2024), and story-places (e.g., Kaniava 2022), among others. While the phenomenon itself—such as local stories and imaginations expressing engagements with the environment—is broad and extensively researched in the humanities and social sciences, the term “place-lore”—and the methodologies developed around it—are distinctively original and characteristic of the Estonian context for reasons I will discuss further in Chapter 1.1.1. The unique study of place-lore has yet to be placed in dialogue with the wider international research frameworks and concepts mentioned here. Moreover, place-lore has the potential to serve as a model concept for environmental humanities and environmental management to more practically understand various ways in how contextual vernacular representations can express environmental relations. The dialogue established in the articles included in the dissertation between ecosemiotics and place-lore studies takes an initial step toward this integration.

I approach place-lore within the context of environmental conflict, which I broadly define as struggles, disputes, or disagreements where environmental issues serve as the source or central focus. I emphasize the semiotic dimension of conflicts, focusing on place-based, local conflicts and exploring how they provide a new representational context for place-lore and, at the same time, serve as a context for creating and re-establishing place-lore. The study of environmental conflicts is diverse, spanning multiple disciplines: from sociology (e.g., Hannigan 2006) and environmental communication studies (e.g., Lester, Hutchins 2013; Cox, Pezzullo 2017) to anthropology and philosophy (e.g., Latour 1993; Kohn 2015), and, more recently, to environmental justice (e.g., Martinez-Alier 2023). These fields, especially environmental communication studies tend to be practically oriented, which makes their dialogue with semiotics especially fruitful. In this dissertation, I draw insights mainly from environmental communication studies and anthropology when proposing principles for a semiotic study of conflicts to address key questions: Who are the participants in this communication, and how can we include them? Are the so-called “stakeholders” only humans, or do entities such as trees or seals also count? How can we involve these non-human entities, especially when direct communication with them is not possible due to differences in sign repertoire and use? These questions are more practical and urgent than they are philosophical or conceptual.

My theoretical framework departs from ecosemiotics, which understands meaning-making in culture and ecosystems as an interconnected process and semiosis being always embedded in pre-symbolic sign processes (Maran, Kull 2014; Maran 2020a; Kohn 2007, 2013). My discussions on the relationship between place-lore and the environment derives from the ontological perspective, in the sense that I recognize the environment as being semiotically self-sufficient of specific cultural representations and therefore being able to express non-concordance with cultural interpretations and influence these representations (see also Low 2008; Kohn 2013); but at the same time not isolated from representations itself. Ecosemiotics acknowledges that the relationship with the environment is culturally modelled, and also built up by semiotic capabilities and specific

sign repertoire, and is therefore only partially perceivable, or we can also say *Umwelt*-specific (e.g., Maran 2014; Maran, Kull 2014; Magnus 2023). However, place-lore that represents certain environments (whether it's Tartu or bog pool in Kakerdaja mire) is always inherently multivocal, already containing multiple human and non-human perspectives that are negotiating, sometimes dissenting with each-other but retaining dependence on a shared semiotic environment. When I refer to “environmental reality” in this work, I consider the environment as a dynamical object (cf. immediate object in a Peircian sense, see CP 2.228 and Low 2008: 55–56), and semiotically distinct, but not isolated, from our interpretations and perceptions.

Considering these principles, ecosemiotics in this dissertation is combined with folkloristics, environmental communication studies, and insights from conflict and peace studies, media studies, and environmental anthropology. Both local narratives and conflict communication are semiotically complex and dynamic; therefore, the methodological toolkit must be reinvented by adopting a more de-disciplinary approach (Torop 2006: 288–289), which means combining methodologies based on the characteristics of the research object rather than adhering to strict disciplinary boundaries when building the analysis. Moreover, place-lore in the context of conflicts requires an intradisciplinary dialogue between different branches of semiotics. For example, when analyzing how contextual narratives are interpreted and transferred in conflict, and how they serve as cultural self-descriptions or symbolic expressions, the cultural semiotic framework is useful—particularly Lotman's concepts of gradual and explosive dynamics in culture; or the concept of (cultural) symbol.

## **Research questions, sources, and applied methods**

The dissertation aims to answer two research questions, one of which was the starting point of my dissertation, and the second became relevant during my research journey. When I started my Ph.D., I had worked at the Estonian Folklore Archive's (EFA) place-lore research group for three years. Communities, institutions, and individuals turn to archives to seek validation, proof, or answers about the uses or meanings of certain places when these places are under threat or undergoing changes (e.g., the construction of new mines or infrastructure, and deforestation). I noticed how archived materials I worked with daily or stories I heard in fieldwork, were often de-contextualized, re-storied, and sometimes manipulated or dismissed in heated public environmental debates, e.g., over protecting certain sacred natural sites, forests, wetlands, etc. The transformation of stories retold for folklorists by the kitchen stove or during long hikes through the marsh into those presented in newspapers or public reports was not only interesting but also harmful, politicized, and dismissive of the original semiotic relationships within these stories. From that ground, I started with the following question:

## **1) How does environmental conflict affect the semiotic multivocality and referentiality of place-lore?**

With this question, I also had—if not a hypothesis—an empirically informed assumption that the new context of conflict allows different meanings, motives, or functions of place-lore to emerge, while the coherence between different levels of interpretation (collective-individual, modern-historical, etc.) recedes. At that time, there was no critical analysis in Estonia of why, how, or by whom place-lore—or folklore in general—should be involved in contemporary public discussions about environmental issues, with some exceptions regarding its use in discussions about sacred sites (see Jonuks et al. 2014; Jonuks 2017). The question of the relevance of place-lore in environmental conflicts became even more significant to me as my research progressed. Meeting various people from “behind the scenes” of public conflicts, such as leaders from local communities or NGOs, I began to understand the reasoning behind emphasizing these narratives in conflict communication.

For example, these narratives help explain and highlight the semiotic relationships people have with a place and their broader understanding of the environment. As a result, I also became more interested in:

## **2) How can the study of place-lore contribute to advancing productive conflict communication?**

This shift in focus led me from studying how stories are used in conflict communication to the direction of how they can be helpful in conflict communication. Recently, more than the content of narratives itself, I have become interested in storytelling as a methodology—how studying stories or storytelling itself as practice can help us to make sense of conflicts. The research journey described here can also be seen as a transition from studying place-lore in conflicts with an emphasis on elimination and disconnections to exploring the potential of empowerment and interconnectedness these narratives can motivate in conflicts.

The case studies examined in this doctoral dissertation include both new locations and those for which folklore sources date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the systematic collection of folklore began in Estonia. However, the primary focus is on how place-lore—whether historical or contemporary—is represented in modern environmental discourse in Estonia. The conflict cases analyzed in the articles and revisited here in the framing chapter (see Figure 1) provide a representative overview of environmental conflicts in Estonia from the 2000s. Moreover, these case studies provide a broad perspective on how place-lore is actualized and interpreted in contemporary Estonia in general. This is especially true, given the diversity of the case studies examined. The folklore discussed in this dissertation is not limited to a specific period, region, or type of environment; rather, it represents both urban and rural contexts, broader areas, individual landscape features, marginalized landscapes, and heritage sites.



Figure 1: Case study locations discussed in the dissertation. Darker-marked locations indicate where conflict discussions and/or related folklore have been analyzed in-depth, while lighter-marked locations have been addressed briefly as illustrative examples.

Derived from theoretical dialogues across various fields and a wide range of case studies involved, the practical methods for collecting and analyzing data in this dissertation are diverse. I have conducted place-lore-centered fieldwork or relied on similar fieldwork outcomes produced by other researchers. This methodology, developed by Estonian place-lore researchers, is in some ways present in my articles with Article IV discussing its practical applications in nature restoration. The methodology itself is further introduced in Chapters 1.1.1 and 2.4.2. Additionally, I have employed qualitative text analysis and coding on a media text corpus for the Paluküla conflict (Article II) and on interviews conducted as part of the mire restoration project (Article III). Media texts—along with reports, expert opinions, court documents, webpages, etc.—have formed important background material on specific conflict cases in Articles II and IV. In Article IV, I also tested quantitative methods for media text corpus analysis in case studies on the Haabersti White Willow conflict and the “forest war.” In all case-study analyzes, I have combined several methods, because along the way, I have often found specific discipline-bound methods to be insufficient for studying complex ecological and cultural complementarity characteristic to place-lore. This is particularly true because the data for the type of analysis I aim to conduct is diverse and must be so, as I explain later in this work. Reflecting on methodologies and finding suitable methods is relevant, especially in the final chapters of my work.

## Summaries of articles

The set of articles includes a theoretical article that describes the conceptual framework of approaching place-lore through ecosemiotics (Article I), two case-study articles that provide “adverse” (Article II) and “beneficial” (Article III) examples of integrating place-lore in environmental conflict communication, and an overview article on how the most significant environmental conflicts of the past decades have shaped environmental discourse in Estonia (Article IV). In the following, I provide summaries of each.

### **Article I “An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore”, *Sign System Studies* 50 (2/3), 2022**

This article develops the theoretical foundation for studying place-lore through ecosemiotic theory and proposes a new definition of “place-lore”. It offers an overview of Estonian place-lore studies from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the emergence of a distinct field of study in the 1990s, with a focus on the evolving terminology. The article also identifies a research gap, where Estonian scholars have primarily focused on collecting and archiving material, often defining place-lore based on specific types of material. This has led to varying, descriptive definitions that do not consider the environmental-cultural complexity of place-lore and fail to offer a metalevel tool for analysis. The article then turns to ecosemiotic concepts, particularly those from biosemiotic criticism developed by Timo Maran, and outlines how vernacular traditions and the environments they represent are semiotically connected. Ecosemiotics enable explaining how place-lore is multi-voiced (encompassing both human and non-human agencies) and open to the various meanings in the environment. Building on this theoretical foundation, the article proposes a new definition of place-lore, centering on the relationship between folk narratives and the environment: place-lore can be defined as a part of folklore that is 1) localizable, 2) represents the characteristics of place, and 3) mediates place experience. These three characteristics constitute a core or ideal form of place-lore. This article uses folklore related to mires as empirical material, specifically focusing on the Kakerdaja Bog in Northern Estonia. The material includes archived texts and recordings; fieldwork diaries; and interviews from the Estonian Folklore Archive, the Institute of the Estonian Language, and the author’s fieldwork (2011–2015).

### **Article II “The Role of Place-lore in Environmental Conflict Discourse: The Case of Paluküla Sacred Hill in Estonia.” *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (2), 2021.**

Combining ecosemiotics, environmental communication studies, and place-lore research, this article explores how the new context of public discussions and the

logic of conflict communication influence how place-lore is re-contextualized and re-storied. The article analyzes the public discussion surrounding Paluküla Hill in Central Estonia—a well-known site with diverse uses, including a sacred place, a hiking destination, and a venue for sports and events. A major conflict arose in 2004 when the local government approved a project to build a ski resort on the hillside. Place-lore related to the hill played a significant role in conflict discussions. A corpus of 138 Estonian news articles (2001–2019) on the Paluküla conflict were analyzed to explore place-lore references, highlighting several key aspects: 1) In public discussions, place-lore was often considered as factual knowledge, with narratives treated as direct reflections of historical worldviews and practices rather than interpretations; 2) Media coverage selectively highlighted meanings, narratives, or motifs that aligned with conflict parties' agendas. In addition, archived folklore was considered more credible, while everyday vernacular interpretations were dismissed as subjective; 3) The conflict discussion focused on opposing views of the hill's functions—practical versus religious—while narratives exploring nuanced perspectives were largely overlooked. At the same time, folklore and natural science data indicate that the hill has been a semiwild ecosystem used in various ways. These findings demonstrate how, in heated public conflicts, the semiotic relationships with the environment manifested in place-lore are often dismissed, leading to ignoring multi-vocality, environmental referentiality, and the social and environmental “dissent” expressed in these narratives.

**Article III “How can storytelling help restore mires? Applying place-lore fieldwork methodology in ecological restoration”.** *Environmental Communication*, 2024.

Co-authored with Piret Pungas-Kohv, this article explores the potential of applying place-lore studies in ecological restoration by analyzing the Estonian Fund for Nature's LIFE Mires Estonia project (2015–2021), where place-lore fieldwork was integrated with other restoration activities. The article first explains that environment-related vernacular interpretations are not isolated cultural constructs, but are semiotically linked to biological processes, partly emerging from them, reflecting, and referring to them. Place-lore, being highly contextual and local, is part of environmental communication, encompassing both cultural and ecological meanings. The article also presents an overview of the place-lore fieldwork methodology developed by Estonian folklorists and used in the LIFE project. Semiotic complementarity between environment and folklore is noticeable in folklore related to mires. Mires in Estonia are controversial, evolving over the past century from marginalized peripheries to popular tourist destinations, with diverse opinions still evident in restoration debates. At the same time, practical concerns such as changes in land use or the water regime can trigger conflict in restoration. Analysis in the article discusses both the researchers' experience applying place-lore fieldwork in the project and the interview material

gathered through interviews with 31 participants, which was transcribed and coded to explore emerging topics related to wetlands, views on mire restoration, and new information relevant to restoration efforts. Results showed how integrating place-lore into restoration activities can enhance restoration outcomes by: 1) focusing discussions on environmental issues by bringing the semiotic potential of the environment, or “environmental dissent” into the conversation; 2) collecting valuable data often overlooked in traditional scientific methods; 3) addressing stakeholder concerns (“social dissent”) and detecting potential conflicts through direct fieldwork communication; and 4) offering an alternative participation method for those unable to engage in public meetings or traditional formats.

**Article IV “Sõjakas kaitse – konfliktid loodus- ja kultuuripärandi hoiu kujundamisel”** (Eng. “Protection Wars: Navigating Conflict in Estonian Natural and Cultural Heritage Preservation”) *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica* 24 (30), 2022

The article, co-authored with Tõnno Jonuks, Atko Remmel, and Ulla Kadakas, explores the tense conflict situations that have evolved in natural and cultural heritage protection in Estonia since the 2000s, which the participants have occasionally referred to as “wars.” The article analyzes media representations, documents, reports, and, in some cases, fieldwork data, as well as quantitative analysis of news media texts to identify 1) who participate in conflicts, 2) what their reasons and arguments are, and 3) what kind of rhetoric they use. At first, the article provides a brief pre-story of environmental conflicts in Estonia. Then it takes a closer look at conflicts over sacred natural sites dominant in the 2000s, the “forest war” since 2016, and a few notable single incidents from the past decade, such as the protection of the willow tree in Haabersti suburb of Tallinn and a community forest in Treimani-Metsapöole in Pärnu County. The discussion represents key insights from the analysis regarding conflict parties, arguments, and rhetoric. Single large environmental conflicts in Estonia have led to the emergence of new movements and NGOs, especially through the “forest war;” the adoption of novel protesting practices and more emotional and opposing rhetoric; and the establishment of new and officially acknowledged participation methods. In all these conflicts, the opposition between natural values and economic interests stands out. The way arguments for protecting nature and heritage have been constructed has also remained relatively consistent, being built around nationalistic and religious narratives. The analysis demonstrates how conflict serves as a structuring element in shaping environmental discourse. Consequently, conflicts can be seen as potential cultural catalysts and productive turning points rather than merely negative phenomena.

# 1. THEORETICAL DIALOGUES

In the first part, I integrate the three cornerstones of my work—place-lore, eco-semiotics, and environmental conflicts. I approach both place-lore and environmental conflicts as objects of ecosemiotic study, while also considering theoretical perspectives from related fields, such as folkloristics and environmental communication studies. These dialogues establish the foundation for further analysis of conflict cases by exploring various ways how place-related folklore is part of communication with and about the environment.

## 1.1. Rethinking place-lore through an ecosemiotic lens

The theoretical basis of my work lies in the fruitful dialogue between ecosemiotic theory and place-lore studies. In Estonia, place-lore has been primarily studied by folklorists. In the following, I demonstrate a research gap in previous studies: the disconnect between the semiotic multivocality of the material and the theoretical framework used by researchers to study it, which has led researchers to focus on practical questions instead. I also explore how place-lore studies have evolved into a field that dominantly describes processes of conflict and adaptation. Then, I turn to ecosemiotics and demonstrate how it enables the study of place-lore by placing environmental relations at the core of the inquiry, thereby addressing an increasingly critical research gap. In the final subchapter, I explain the role of environmental meanings and environmental semiosis as the foundation for the semiotic potential of place-lore.

### 1.1.1. Overview of the earlier studies of place-lore and identifying a research gap

In its development, Estonian folkloristics followed a similar path with Northern Europe and the Baltics and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also, to some extent, with Eastern Europe (Kuutma 2005; Җencis et al. 2013; Valk 2004). Estonian folkloristics got its origin with the rise of the National awakening in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when intellectuals Jakob Hurt and Matthias Johann Eisen started the campaign of collecting the folklore, or “old treasure” as it was named back then (Valk 2004, 2005; Västriik 2010). Before that, rather incidental descriptions of Estonian folklore, mainly documented by Baltic German scholars, can be found in historical sources such as chronicles (Västriik 2017). The institutional origin for folkloristics became possible after Estonia gained its independence from Russia after World War I. In 1919 the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore was opened at the University of Tartu; and in 1927, the Estonian Folklore Archives (EFA) was established. Both theoretical research on folkloristics and practical collection work go hand in hand from the very beginning of Estonian folkloristics.

Local, place-related folklore has always been a large part of archive collections (Rimmel 2014b), long before the term “place-lore” was established. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shaped the development of Estonian folklore studies and archival collections, significantly influencing the field today, as a considerable part of the folklore materials researchers work with originate from this period. Romantic and evolutionist perspectives broadly shaped early folklore research (see also Hafstein 2001), with the historic-geographical method developed by Finnish folklorists playing a dominant role and leading researchers analyzing transformation and adaptation of concrete folklore forms. During this time, major international connections were established, particularly with Finnish and German folkloristics (see e.g., Västriik 2010). Local folklore was viewed through a romanticized rural and national lens, and material recorded in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Estonia was expected to adhere to the ideal of retrospective tradition, remaining as untouched by literary influences as possible (Valk 2005). After the Soviet occupation in 1941 and during the Soviet regime folkloristics was part of literary studies, further motivating the somehow more closed, text-centered approach in the study of folklore (see more Kulasalu 2017). At the same time, interest in place-related lore or place perspective narrowed (Rimmel 2014b: 16–18). The new interest in place-lore from researchers and the public arose after Estonia regained its independence in the 1990s. These different ideological and metadiscursive practices in folkloristics shape how we understand folklore or place-lore (see more Briggs 1993). The research practices of Estonian folklorists, varying over periods, have shaped also which places and environments were considered significant and are thus represented in folklore collections. For example, until the 1990s and sometimes until now, rural areas were regarded as “authentic,” while other environments, such as mires or urban landscapes, were often seen as marginal. More on this is covered in Article III.

Tiiu Jaago (2000: 10–12) has described the development of Estonian folkloristics as an alternation between open and closed (or specialized) phases: following the broadening phase of the 1930s and the closed period of the Soviet era, a new broadening phase emerged after Estonia regained its independence at the beginning of the 1990s. This was exactly the time when place-lore research and the term itself emerged, with the fresh winds in Estonian cultural studies. At this time, more attention began to be paid to the extratextual—the context of storytelling, folklore’s relationship with performers, performativity, and also the landscape, as several disciplinary “shifts” became widely acknowledged in Estonia (Kuutma 2010). Place-lore was a new and appealing topic in the 1990s among other topics that emerged at this time such as internet folklore, school lore, family lore, etc. However, place-lore was only one of these new branches that became institutionalized when researcher Mari-Ann Rimmel established the EFA place-lore research group at the end of the 1990s (see more Hiimäe, Rimmel 2020; Rimmel 2002).

Place-lore research can be understood as a discipline centered on conflict and adaptation, a perspective that is evident from 1) how the field is developed, 2) the

thematic and regional interests of researchers, and 3) how place-lore is acknowledged or understood outside an academic context. The emergence of place-lore as an independent field of study in the 1990s was not motivated merely by theoretical interest, but also, more significantly, by researchers' reaction to various rapid and wide socio-cultural changes that directly affected landscapes, such as restructuring of agriculture, urbanization, etc. Mainly, folklorists saw themselves as "crisis workers" and defined their role as preserving or supporting local, historical identities in the context of rapid transformations of landscape and social system in the Estonian countryside (see e.g., Rimmel 2014b; Hiimäe, Rimmel 2020). These transformations affected the researchers' home regions and motivated their research choices. For example, Mari-Ann Rimmel has published several books on the place-lore of Harjumaa (Rimmel 2011, 2017) where she emphasizes concerns about formerly rural and peripheral landscapes being transformed by urban development.

The understanding of place-lore research as a discipline rooted in conflict and adaptation is evident in the significant role place-lore plays within Estonian culture and society. In broader public and media discussions, the study of place-lore and the collections of the EFA have often become topical, gaining recognition and renewed attention in the context of conflicts. Culture, including folklore, had a central role in past controversies concerning managing wetlands, forests, and natural resources. In the 2000s, place-lore was adapted to heated discussions surrounding various natural sacred sites that were threatened by forestry management or infrastructure developments; these cases are mapped in Article IV on environmental conflicts in Estonia's recent history. Probably the most known of these sacred national site conflicts—the "Paluküla war"—was analyzed in Article II. The field inventory of sacred natural sites led by the Estonian National Heritage Board<sup>8</sup>, which has been one of the activities for members of the EFA place-lore research group, was a direct result of "the sacred natural site wars" in the 2000s. And again, over the recent decades, we can see similar relevance of place-lore in conflicts regarding new energy or transportation infrastructure being built to accomplish green transition, such as Rail Baltica and a possible nuclear power plant in northern Estonia; well-known place-lore narratives become activated also in conflicts concerning new sites such as Haabersti White Willow.

Despite the efforts of folklorists to expand and organize archive collections and mediate them to the public, a significant gap remains in the theoretical study of place-lore. This can be summarized as a lack of dialogue between practical research and theoretical frameworks. While place-lore researchers have acknowledged the importance of both the narratives and the environments these represent

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<sup>8</sup> Originally initiated through the development plan "Sacred Natural Sites in Estonia: Study and Maintenance 2008–2012", the inventory process is carried out region by region, with a significant portion of Estonia already surveyed. Using archival materials, researchers identify these sites within the landscape, assess their condition, and recommend their protection. More information about the inventories can be found here: <https://www.muinsuskaitseamet.ee/kultuuriparand-eestis/malestised/looduslikud-puhapaigad>

(Rommel 2014b: 31)—and even emphasizing the relationship between people and the environment central in place-lore (Tuisk 2001)—these understandings have not been translated into theory. There are several reasons why semiotic relations with the environment, evident in the material, have been overlooked in theory. The development of Estonian folkloristics, including the focus on archive collections and the integration of folkloristics into literary studies during the Soviet period, contributed to this. In addition, although the establishment of the EFA place-lore research group coincided with the broadening of Estonian folkloristics and the introduction of new theoretical trends (e.g., the spatial turn, performative turn, and new focuses on subjectivity and contemporary genres; see Kuutma 2010), place-lore researchers prioritized practical, empirical work on organizing, widening, and mediating archive collections. This was likely driven by its perceived urgency.

In contemporary Estonian place-lore research, two trends are evident. First, a focus on practical and empirical work has led to the development of a unique fieldwork methodology by EFA place-lore researchers over recent decades. Technical advancements and collaborations, such as with the Estonian Land Board<sup>9</sup>, have further enabled tailoring the fieldwork methodologies and applications that capture both narratives and the environments they represent. An overview of this fieldwork methodology is provided in Article III and will also be discussed in Chapter 2.4. Second, place-lore as a theoretical concept has gained more recognition in international folkloristics through the works of the University of Tartu folklorists and their cooperation with Scandinavian and Baltic researchers (see e.g., Valk, Sävborg 2018b; Kivari et al. 2022; Valk et.al forthcoming). In these works, place-lore is examined within contemporary and subjective practices, with less focus on earlier archive collections. The landscape's symbolic potential, particularly in religious and supernatural contexts, is emphasized, but the physical place and the ecological microlevel represented by these narratives are approached rather scarcely (see e.g., Kaniava 2022; Kivari forthcoming). My dissertation aims to extend this dialogue by focusing on place as an ecological entity and argues for broadening the discussion beyond cultural symbolism.

### 1.1.2. Place-lore as a research object for ecosemiotics

Ecosemiotics deals with locality and contextuality in a sense that it aims to analyze local and grounded relations—meanings that are rooted in referential surroundings—and discover interconnections in ontological rather than (merely)

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<sup>9</sup> The Estonian Land Board's geoportals include the Place-lore Map Application as one of its data layers, which originated from the Memory Landscapes project collecting place-lore from Estonian national parks and is now being expanded to include place-lore from other regions of Estonia. The map features texts, videos, photos, and audio recordings. See <https://geoportaal.maaamet.ee/est/Kaardirakendus/Kohaparimus/Kohaparimuse-kaardirakendusekirjeldus-p474.html>

discursive level (Maran 2023; Kohn 2013: 94). Various subtopics, interests of study, and focuses have emerged in ecosemiotics; each of which conceptualize locality differently, e.g., studying meanings in ecological relationships (Nöth 2001; Farina 2006; Farina Napoletano 2010) and processes focusing on the perspective of non-human species (Magnus 2023; Magnus, Mäekivi 2023; Whitehouse 2015). Other focuses have also emerged exploring cultural representations of the environment (e.g., Maran 2007, 2013; Wheeler 2008; Siewers 2014); cultural practices related to the environment (Hornborg 2001; Kohn 2013); and environmental and cultural semiosis in the context of environmental problems (Posner 2000; Low 2008; Tønnessen 2021). For studying place-lore, the most relevant branch of ecosemiotics is the one examining cultural and textual representations of nature, such as nature writing. This field has primarily developed through the analysis of texts by Estonian (fictional) literary authors (Maran 2013; Vilu 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017; Tüür 2009). At the same time, place-related narratives are shaped by the semiotic influence of the specific ecological surroundings they represent. Moreover, narratives have a tangible impact on the environment and non-human entities. Therefore, semiotic relations on various levels must be considered, consequently, a tight integration of these different ecosemiotic approaches is essential.

There hasn't been direct disciplinary dialogue between place-lore research and ecosemiotics. However, some ecosemioticians have used folklore materials to examine environmental-cultural relations from various perspectives, e.g., people's relationships with plants in ethnobotany (Sõukand, Kalle 2010), folklore related to sacred places (Heinapuu 2016) or wetlands (Pungas-Kohv et al., 2015), and in studying fears associated with forests and the sea (Väljaots 2013). The lack of more comprehensive dialogue may be related to institutional and historical differences. At the same time, ecosemiotics and place-lore research have developed somewhat parallel to each other since the late 1990s and into the 2000s within Estonian cultural, ecological, and scientific spaces. Moreover, researchers from both fields have defined their objects of study in similar ways, emphasizing the same ecological-cultural complementarity. While ecosemioticians often begin by forming theoretical frameworks, typologies, and metalevel descriptions to capture the complex relationships between ecological and cultural spheres, place-lore researchers in Estonia tend to focus on identifying traces, signs, and meaningful ecocultural patterns within landscapes and archives.

Applying ecosemiotic theory to study place-lore means, at the very fundamental level, re-framing the research object itself. From the point of view of (Estonian) folkloristics and (eco)semiotics, the place-lore as an object of research has a different scope: folkloristic methods have approached a place or environment primarily as a context, which is both constructed and described through place-lore, somehow similarly to social, historical, etc. contexts (Kuutma 2010: 693). However, by describing the physical environment as one of the contexts (like, for example, in Jaago 2011; Metsvahi 2015; Valk 2009), the question of what role environmental sign processes or communication between people and their surroundings have in folklore, has yet to be explored. This, in turn, makes

it impossible to address various core research questions regarding place-lore, such as: Why are these narratives created and re-told? What kind of relationships with places do they express? What happens when the environment rapidly changes, or when cultural transformations erase narratives? What role do they play in the global environmental emergency and the responses of adaptation, survival, and coping?

So far, researchers have focused on specific topics, such as folklore related to water bodies (Rommel 2014c), churches (Rommel 2014a), or sacred springs (Metssalu 2022) and attempted to create typologies and descriptions based on archived folklore. Yet contemporary place-lore is created and mediated in highly hybrid or artificial environments, and the environmental reality that place-lore represents is undergoing rapid transformations. Thus, understanding the functions, meanings, and changes of these narratives requires shifting focus on semiotic relationships through which place-related folklore is created, mediated, and re-storied rather than focusing on describing separate subtopics. In other words, there is a need for a metalevel, i.e., an analytical description of the research object. To address this need, I developed a new definition of place-lore in Article I, reframing it as an object of study within ecosemiotics. I proposed that place-lore should not be defined solely through textual characteristics, but through the semiotic relationships these texts have with the environments they represent. My proposed defining characters of place-lore are described as 1) place-lore is always localizable, as there is a specific extra-narrative location the narrative refers to; 2) a certain place, and its characteristics, have an important role in the narrative, i.e., narrative represents a place not only names it; and 3) place-lore expresses the experience of a place. These three characteristics form the core of place-lore and describe semiotic dynamics that bridge environmental realities and cultural interpretations of place.

When developing a new definition of place-lore, my initial aim was also quite practical, as there was no concrete analytical definition available to use as a conceptual or methodological tool. Researchers have proposed various object-level descriptions of place-lore based on the material or topic they studied. A comprehensive analysis of previous definitions is given in Article I. The definition I propose can serve as a preliminary analytical framework and can also help address practical issues in fieldwork or when working with archive collections. For example: How can we distinguish place-lore from more general local lore when compiling various databases? What should be the basic criteria for the primary levels of description, such as database keywords? How can we create fieldwork questionnaires for collecting place-lore that are general rather than based on specific regional idiosyncrasies or topics? The proposed definition, when used in practical work, enables a focus on local, contextual relationships without being merely descriptive or imposing limitations on material, context, or environment.

### 1.1.3. Semiotic logic of place-lore: Place-lore as a way of adapting to the environment

Ecosemiotics has a diverse set of concepts and models (see also Maran 2023) that have potential applications for studying place-lore in a backdrop of complex environmental and cultural changes. I have used some of these models analyzing case studies presented in the articles, mainly being part of the “biosemiotics criticism” framework (see Maran 2014), such as modeling relationships between environment and text (Maran 2014) and types of relations between the natural environment and literary works (Maran 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). From the set of ecosemiotics concepts, I have also used the typology of environmental signs (Maran 2017) and dissent (Low 2008). In general, these ecosemiotic models have enabled me to show two things about place-lore: 1) the environmental meanings, or semiotic activity in the environment have a crucial role in these narratives, and 2) environmental meanings are perceivable in nature-related representations such as place-lore and can be made accessible through these narratives in conflict communication. Building on these foundations and introducing some additional ecosemiotic models, I articulate the distinctive semiotic potential of place-lore for conflict communication.

Previously, the landscape was primarily seen by folklorists as a symbolic entity, something to which people ascribe meanings; place-lore describes these meanings. Approaching place-lore through models that describe the semiotic relationships between environment and text, enables us to notice that the way people make sense of and describe certain environments comes partly from the characteristics and semiotic structure of these environments; interpretations like place-lore are built on what the environment *affords*<sup>10</sup>.

Here, I am not referring to large-scale natural or climatic conditions—which, as 1970s developed tradition ecology has shown (Honko 1972, 1981), undoubtedly influence the meanings, adaptations and migration of folklore. Discovering such large-scale relations between environmental conditions and folklore does not leave room for perceivable, small-scale semiotic engagements with surroundings. Rather, I keep in mind the complex communicative relations that determine where and for what place-lore makes sense in the first place—how people adapt to, perceive, interpret, and engage with specific environments.

The motivation for place-lore is rooted in interpreting and explaining environmental signs, i.e., mainly pre-symbolic sign relations grounded in the environment, linked to the ecological processes and material environment (see more Maran 2017) as I demonstrated in Article I. When studying texts that represent nature, researchers have emphasized how the author’s subjective perception or

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<sup>10</sup> James Gibson’s concept of “affordances” (see Gibson 1979), introduced within ecological psychology to denote the actionable possibilities an environment offers to an organism based on its perception, is widely applied in ecosemiotics and biosemiotics. However, it is important to acknowledge how this usage can diverge from the concept’s original meaning and context (see also Chong, Proctor 2020).

nature experience guides the texts, thereby highlighting the relevance of iconic and especially indexical sign relations, sign relations with physical or perceivable causality (Wheeler 2008: 143–144; Maran 2014). Alf Hornborg (2001: 128–130) would call this a “sensory sign system”. Acknowledging the need for an in-depth study of how place-lore integrates various environmental meanings, I want to highlight the role of indexicality, but also the relevance of iconicity—similarity-based sign relations—in place-lore. Place names often rely on iconicity and resemblance, such as referencing the shape of landscape features or associating a place with an object, animal, or other element that shares similar characteristics like color or smell. “The location inspires,” as folklorist Mall Hiimäe (2001: 94) put it. Iconic relations can be seen as a basis of the “mental map,” which is essential for navigating and adapting to the environment. These relations tend to be more permanent and memorable than indexical relations, such as signs of activity of other species, and being memorable has practical relevance. Resemblance or iconicity that inspires narratives or place names often reflects the affordances of specific environments—that is, what landscape features offer or provide to humans and non-humans alike. The relevance of iconic relations is particularly evident in folklore collected in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when researchers in Estonia primarily focused on collective, seemingly historical, folklore (see also Valk 2005), which sought certain motifs and forms rather than narratives based on subjective environmental experiences. In short, environmental meanings are physically manifested and these kinds of semiosis is relevant in place-lore, while these sign relations are also relevant for creating symbolic meanings, cultural interpretations. Different kinds of sign relations are not separated, symbolic interpretations are grown out from natural ones (Wheeler 2008).

There is a great variety of possible processes and characteristics that can be perceived as meaningful and thus can inspire place-lore. For example, physical features of the landscape, ecological conditions, and temporary processes such as seasonal dynamics, and often also the intentional and non-intentional activity of various species; inter- and intraspecies communication; etc. In the latter sense, place-lore can express or manifest biotranslation—a situation in which “some signs in one Umwelt are put into a correspondence with some signs in another Umwelt” (Kull, Torop 2011: 318). Biotranslation can be expressed in place-lore, for example, when stories describe communication between animals and people, or when animals’ behavior is meaningful for people. Moreover, narratives can describe experiences and emotions that both human and non-human inhabitants understand, such as struggles of access, meeting barriers, and disconnections when moving around. On a fundamental level, place-lore can be viewed as a description of the semiotic structure of a certain environment. The transition from environmental meanings to place-lore is not, of course, direct but fragmented, partial, etc. Our human Umwelt limits our physical perception or abilities to form semiotic connections or understand other beings, which is why species like large mammals or predators play a bigger role in folklore. For instance, we also can

observe occurrences where biotranslation is not possible or the (original, biological) sign relation becomes hidden, for example in the case of so-called fairy rings (see also Maran 2017), when creative interpretation bridges the “ambiguity” (Bird 2002).

Understanding how place-lore is part of environmental communication and incorporates meanings from outside the textual-cultural sphere is crucial for grasping its role in expressing environmental meanings and, therefore, its relevance in conflict communication. In my articles, I show how place-lore makes environmental characteristics, as well as meanings created by various environmental actors, accessible and understandable, while acknowledging the semiotic potential of the environment. Can we also consider this as *environmental agency*? The discussion of agency is, of course, broad and fundamental in semiotics and beyond, drawing on questions of intentionality or choice. While several (eco)-semioticians aim to maintain a clear distinction between communication in living systems and the meaning potential or effect of inanimate entities, like objects in the physical world (Hornborg 2021; Magnus 2023: 29–30), several researchers find it fruitful to develop a dialogue between semiotics and new materialism, for example in the context of material ecocriticism (Maran 2023, 2014; Iovino 2012; Wheeler 2008, 2014; Iovino, Oppermann 2014), or Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) (e.g., Law 2009) that enables describing various kinds of meanings and agencies in the natural and cultural world within the same inclusive network. These latter dialogues also mark the ontological turn in (eco)semiotics (see e.g., Maran 2023).

In my work, the environment—as a complex ecological-cultural system—is the focus. Thus, the question of which organisms or objects possess agency or intentionality, must give way to describing the various kinds of meanings that are present, recorded, mediated, motivated by, and perceivable in the environment. These meanings may arise from intentional inter- or intraspecies communication, or from the effects of processes or inanimate entities. All these meanings have the potential to influence someone’s perception or actions—in other words, they possess agency to make a difference (Kohn 2013: 92; Wheeler 2008: 141). Thus, while we cannot claim that the environment itself (as a general, multiple whole) has agency, we can talk about environmental agency in terms of the semiotic activity within the environment, the meaning potential that can make differences and challenge representations. However, I am critical of attributing agency to certain environments in a metaphorical or animistic sense, a topic I will return to in Chapter 2.3. When describing agency and the semiotic independence emerging from the environment, I prefer the term “dissent” (Low 2008), which I explain in Chapter 1.2.2. In short, “dissent” describes situations in which environmental processes or actors unexpectedly contradict or diverge from our representations of them.

Expressing environmental meanings in place-lore is not direct, but it can be described as a process of translation or modelling, as Timo Maran has noted (Maran 2014). Place-lore is far from being mere documentation or a rational description of the surroundings people live in. As mentioned above, environmental signs are relatively fragmentary, which contributes to their potential to

inspire (see more Maran 2017). However, filling the gaps and explaining environmental ambiguity (Bird 2002) is a creative and playful process. The way the environment is interpreted in tradition—through storytelling, incorporating former narratives, adapting migratory legends or motifs, and positioning oneself within the landscape—is thoroughly explained in previous research (Remmel 2014b; Valk, Sävborg 2018b).

## **1.2. Semiotic study of environmental conflicts: Connecting ontological and discursive environmental communication**

A broad definition—one that multiple disciplines may agree on—views environmental conflicts as disagreements, disputes, or struggles arising over the use, management, or interpretation of the environment. In other words, environmental issues serve as the source of conflict or play a central role in it (see, e.g., Fisher 2022; Le Billon 2015; Swain & Öjendal 2018; Lee 2019). In this dissertation, I adopt this broad definition while focusing on localized environmental conflicts rather than broader environmental disputes, as the cases I analyze are situated within specific spatial and temporal contexts. In the following, I provide a brief overview of the study of environmental conflicts and outline a niche for ecosemiotics in examining these conflicts.

### **1.2.1. Conflicts and environment: Semiotic foundations and research positioning**

Collective (violent) conflicts are traditionally studied within conflictology and sociology (see e.g., Hannigan 2006), while the interplay between environmental degradation and violent conflicts (wars), as well as the potential for peacebuilding through environmental actions, is an expanding field that integrates various subfields of the social sciences and beyond (e.g., Swain & Öjendal 2018; Lee 2019). Additionally, several practical handbooks have been published with the aim of supporting environmental conflict management and resolution (Clarke, Peterson 2015; Fisher 2022). Practical insights have also led to publishing collections of articles and case studies (Lester, Hutchins 2013) as well as contributions from environmental communication on approaches to conflict communication, management, and resolution (Cox, Pezzullo 2017). Also, environmental conflicts are one of the core focuses in political ecology (see overviews Martinez-Alier 2023 and Le Billon 2015). Discussions about the fundamental roots of environmental struggles and alternative ontologies to cope with these are studied in environmental anthropology and philosophy (Latour 1993; Kohn 2015). Besides being the study object, the concept of conflict itself serves as a valuable research frame or model, enabling structuring, organizing, and outlining the complex dynamics of environmental discourse. Conflicts can be viewed as cores or focus points that

transform environmental discussions, perception of global environmental emergency, or ways to adapt. For example, we explained in Article IV how conflicts have significantly influenced Estonian environmental discourse in recent decades.

Since environmental conflicts are studied under various disciplines, their definitions and approaches tend to emphasize different aspects, such as social dimensions (e.g., power relations in political ecology; Le Billon 2015), natural aspects (e.g., resource struggles; Swain & Öjendal 2018), management struggles (Fisher 2022), or cultural aspects (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. 2022), among others. From an (eco)semiotic perspective, conflict is an essential part of the meaning-making process, whether it is part of—or in most cases entangled with—social, ecological, and cultural dimensions. There is the potential for different interpretations in semiosis, and different interpretations can often lead to misunderstandings, disconnections, and disruptions. Thus, the potential for conflicts can be seen as a crucial and inevitable part of signification and communication. Moreover, conflict from the semiotic point of view is not inherently or only negative; conflict can bring forth alternative or innovative meanings. Different interpretations and knowledge are even more relevant for fruitful dialogue as shared knowledge (Lotman 1990: 143). In addition, conflicts are always semiotically grounded in material processes. No contemporary conflicts are entirely de-contextualized from the physical surroundings or without influences on them. For instance, the environmental impact of the Russian war in Ukraine is significant (e.g., Leal Filho 2024).

Many contemporary environmental conflicts arise from scarcity, competition over resources, and ecosystem management issues, especially in the times of environmental emergency. They do not appear to be primarily or initially semiotic problems. However, underlying the different resource needs, such as food, habitat, and shelter are differences in semiotic repertoires, affordances utilized, modes of communication required, and so forth. Ultimately, conflicts boil down to incompatible goals or needs (Bartos, Wehr 2002: 30; Fisher 2022: 3, 13), which is fundamentally a semiotic problem. This is not to suggest that all contemporary conflicts can be attributed solely to biosemiotic factors, such as differing semiotic needs or the use of distinct sign repertoires. Issues like economic exploitation, unequal climate change impacts, and disparities in access to natural resources can often be traced to specific exploiters, decisions, or recurring patterns of violence, while their fundamental root cause remains semiotic in nature.

There are two-fold communicational disconnections when talking about environmental conflicts (see Figure 2). Firstly, the opposing or conflicting ideas, imaginations, values, or needs regarding the environment. These disconnections arise at the discursive level, in symbolic discussions or interpretations of nature, which is the primary focus of most environmental communication studies and environmental management (e.g., Clarke, Peterson 2015; Fisher 2022; Cox, Pezzullo 2017). Environmental communication studies aim to move beyond merely discourses; they also aim to connect their studies with political and social contexts more tightly (e.g., Hansen 2011). Of course, scientific data that plays a central role in the resolution and management of environmental conflicts, can be

seen as representing environmental reality. However, this data is adapted to social and cultural negotiations and is not always logically referential to specific ecological systems or contextualized through lived experiences.

Secondly, there is a more fundamental disconnection between people and the environment (see Figure 2). In other words, there is a disconnection between the realm of environmental semiosis and cultural semiosis (anthroposemiosis). This divide, its origins, and possible solutions have widely been discussed by philosophers, environmental anthropologists, sociologists, etc. (Latour 1993; Kohn 2013; Abram 1996; Descola 2013). From the ecosemiotic point of view, various limitations affect our ability to understand and perceive environmental meanings. Environmental meaning-making is inherently fragmented; no single Umwelt can fully mediate the entire environment, which leads to potential misinterpretations or oversights (Maran 2017). Humans' ability to communicate with non-human species is limited due to differences in Umwelts. The same applies to landscapes or broader environments—certain environments are more accessible because they align with our physical and cognitive abilities to navigate or inhabit them. Moreover, this disconnection is reinforced by the characteristics of anthroposemiosis, the semiotic capacity of humans (Hoffmeyer 2009: 265–269). Symbolic and cultural representations, which are arbitrarily detached from their points of reference, often tend to transform, manipulate, exert control, differentiate, and construct “the other,” thereby separating culture from nature (Kull 1998; Hornborg 2001: 142–143).

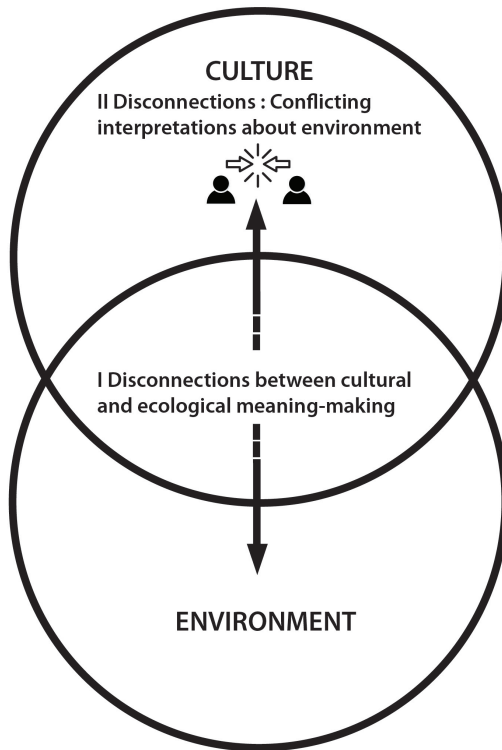


Figure 2: Disconnections on two (i.e. ontological and discursive) levels of environmental communication.

These disconnections are neither symmetrical nor parallel, nor do they necessarily escalate one another. In some cases, cultural narratives and imaginations can address the divide between the environment and the ways it is culturally perceived—an idea I will return to later. What is important here is that the semiotic study of conflicts must account for both types of disconnections. David Low (2008: 48) argues that the detachment between two dimensions of environmental communication—how we think about the environment and how the environment itself is meaningful and semiotically active—is a fundamental cause of the environmental crisis. Thus, the primary gap to address with semiotic study of conflicts is between these two levels: the ontological and the discursive.

### 1.2.2. Towards an ecosemiotic study of environmental conflicts

Contemporary environmental conflicts are complex, wicked, multi-actor processes (Fischer 2022: 39–46), which ecosemiotics is well equipped to study. Timo Maran (2023) has outlined key aspects of ecosemiotic research that can also serve as general principles for studying environmental conflicts: dynamicity, historicity, multi-layeredness, and contextualization. Ecosemiotics allows the analysis of both ecological and cultural meaning-making (Maran, Kull 2014) and thus can

offer one way to connect two approaches of environmental conflicts, or two different kinds of disconnections—on the discursive and ontological levels—outlined in the previous chapter. However, I see potential for ecosemiotic study of environmental conflicts beyond that, namely in asking new kinds of research questions altogether, such as: How do we create more authentic and grounded environmental discussions? Research must not only provide a coherent, complex, and thorough analysis but also challenge the ways we negotiate in environmental conflicts. At its core, this is a question of justice: environmental discussions can be just only when being grounded and authentic, i.e., involving the ecological and local context they rise from, and when they embrace environmental and cultural multivocality.

What should be kept in mind when talking about authentic conflict communication? Authenticity is a volatile concept in folkloristics and other fields of study analyzing tradition. Discussions in multiple disciplines have agreed that authenticity cannot be an inherent or static characteristic of a specific folk tradition in culture itself. However, what I keep in mind here is the reverse of how, for example, Regina Bendix (1997) approached the concept in her relevant criticism of the study of authenticity in folkloristics. Folkloristics and ethnology, along with the humanities more broadly, have emerged from a pursuit of the “authentic,” yet they ultimately end up constructing it themselves, thereby cultivating an essentialist view of tradition or representations as fixed and “pure” expressions of cultural identity (Bendix 1997, but see also Dégh 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995 and Briggs 1993: 399–404). In the context of environmental communication, I conceptualize authenticity as the semiotic richness of relationships—e.g., the variability of relationships—that also carries semiotic groundedness, i.e., perceivable referentiality to the environmental reality. Authentic communication in an ecosemiotic sense is communication that is not isolated and does not exclude social contextuality or environmental semiosis and non-human agency. Authenticity, defined this way, refers rather to minimal mediation, minimal isolation, and minimal (external) construction. This is different from the approach to authenticity as constructed, made-up, or performative realness in folklore studies, and is also opposite, for example, to simulation as described by Baudrillard (1994). Ironically, archived folklore texts from the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century that make up a significant part of place-lore collections in EFA were considered more “authentic” or legitimate by earlier scholars (see Valk 2005) and sometimes still are in public discussions today (see Article III). In fact, however, many of these texts are less authentic when including the perspective of environmental communication. That is because subjective, contextual, and experience-related narratives or elements were often excluded in earlier collection and archive practices.

It is, nevertheless, extremely important to acknowledge and seek those kinds of contextual, local semiotic relations in place-lore, especially when analyzing their role in environmental conflicts. What makes studying environmental conflicts different from studying social conflicts is that both the semioticity of the environment and its role in conflict, along with the social interpretations of different groups and communities, must be considered (Douglas, Verissimo 2013,

100–101; Low 2008). In the case of environmental conflicts, the focus of analysis and applications cannot focus only on making sense of the complexity of different social agendas and interpretations about the environment, i.e., on a discursive level. The way I understand the question of authenticity can be explained by drawing parallels with the concept of deterritorialization as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). The lack of authenticity, as a core issue preventing the resolution of environmental conflicts, results from deterritorialization—where discussions are removed from their established context and even from the subject matter itself. The study and resolution of conflicts must account for all kinds of sign processes involved in or influenced by particular conflicts, including environmental semiosis.

In practice, this kind of ecosemiotic analysis means understanding inter- and intraspecies communication, environmental affordances, ecosystem responses to environmental changes, along with a complex web of socio-cultural interpretations and practices related to certain environments. Such an approach requires fundamentally different methodologies that are open to environmental meanings while fostering social dialogue. Various fields have made efforts to incorporate environmental agents and meanings into environmental communication, with the most notable contributions coming from new materialism and Actor-Network Theory in environmental anthropology and sociology, as outlined in Chapter 1.1.3. However, at the methodological level, ecosemiotics offers a unique advantage by enabling the analysis of both ecological and cultural data, working simultaneously across different levels of environmental communication. For example, mapping environmental affordances and potential conflicts between *Umwelts*, analyzing the semiotic structure of ecosystems—including their historical development—and integrating these insights into active dialogue with cultural representations.

To outline the importance of authentic environmental communication in conflicts, David Low's concept of "dissent" is relevant. I find it very exact and right-to-the-point to describe the importance of considering ecological meaning-making to adequately understand and resolve the conflicts. Broadly, the term refers to the environment's non-concordance with human (cultural) representations. Drawing on the semiotics of C. S. Peirce's sign model, Low uses a distinction between the dynamical object and the immediate object, and illustrates how the environment, as a dynamical object, can evoke and motivate diverse interpretations while challenging the immediate object—concrete cultural representations of the environment (Low 2008: 55). The semiotic activity of the environment, or dissent, of course, is not directly perceivable but enters the discussions related to environmental conflicts through the discussion parties' interpretive relations with the environment (Low 2008: 49). I have shown in both of my case-study articles (Articles II and III) how place-lore can also be viewed as a source of dissent, as it expresses various ecological realities and meanings.

Our perception of and access to environmental problems are often conflict-based, as much of the information we receive about these issues comes through event-focused and short-term media coverage rather than our own experience.

Scholars have highlighted the challenges associated with conflict-centered or event-centered media coverage of environmental issues (Dunaway 2015; Lester 2016; Hansen 2011; Cox, Pezzullo 2017: 115–123), noting that such coverage tends to emphasize episodic, easily observable, and temporary acts of violence while overlooking underlying structural oppression and struggles. In other words, it emphasizes “subjective violence” over “systemic violence” (Žižek 2008) or “spectacular violence” over “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) within a constantly fast-paced and fragmented landscape of newsworthiness and affective representation (Cox, Pezzullo 2017: 120–122; Hansen 2019: 87–88; Papacharissi 2016). The researchers stress the need for more in-depth coverage of environmental issues. Another fix for the problem, one that is more within the control of researchers, is to change how we study and manage environmental conflicts. By analyzing conflicts not only at the discursive level (i.e., conflicting representations of the environment) but as a kind of hub of interaction among various semiotic actors, we can begin to recognize the disruptions, disconnections, and harm that are often unseen or difficult to address. In this way, conflicts have the potential to become events where environmental actors are made visible and are acknowledged.

## **2. OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS**

The following part of the dissertation presents the results and answers the two research questions: how conflict alters the semiotic referentiality of place-lore, and how contextual and referential nature of place-lore can enhance communication in conflicts. This part also explores how media coverage and characteristics of public discussions influence the re-storying of place-lore—an essential aspect of understanding environmental conflicts—that was rather briefly addressed in the articles. Considering that the development of methods is one of the outcomes of this work, I conclude this section with a discussion on how studying local narratives in transforming ecological and cultural conditions can help advance ecosemiotic methods.

### **2.1. How does conflict communication change place-lore? From vernacular communication to conflict communication**

Using place-lore in environmental conflicts marks the shift from vernacular communication to conflict communication. This transformation also means 1) adapting a new logic of mediatized environmental conflict, which leads to 2) the de-contextualization of place-related folklore from its former local, historical, and environmental context. This transformation affects all aspects of how these local, contextual narratives are represented, introducing, for instance, new ways of mediating narratives, new audiences, new functions, and different ideological messages for which folklore is adapted.

#### **2.1.1. The influence of media coverage on adapting place-lore in public conflicts**

The ways in which place-lore is mediated and represented are in constant transformation, and some changes since the 2000s have become particularly evident. For example, the shift in the performance media of folklore has replaced immediate narrative situations with digital communication, while transmedial interpretations and performances have emerged. Performance contexts have become increasingly multimodal, especially in social media environments, where audiovisual elements now accompany verbal communication. These changes have also led to the emergence of new functions for place-related folklore. As a result, local cultural heritage and local stories are increasingly integrated into tourism (Bacchilega 2007; Kindel 2005), local identity construction, new religious practices (Bowman 2020; R. Hiimäe 2017), and place-branding. These stories are now more frequently shared in digital media and hypermedia environments, shared in local Facebook groups and Twitter more than through face-to-face communication (see Briggs 2020; Blank 2013; Flinterud 2023). In addition, as discussed in Articles II and IV, folklore and the work of folklorists have historically been

part of power relations and public discussions as being part of nation-building and nature protection debates in Estonia (see also Remmel, Jonuks 2021). Therefore, place-lore is multi-voiced, often ideological, and communicated through various channels well before and beyond the scope of public conflict discussions explored here.

Yet, in contemporary environmental conflicts, these shifts in contexts, functions, mediation methods, re-telling, and blending of different discursive practices are explosive and fast-paced. The potential for diverse interpretations grows exponentially through public discussions. Juri Lotman's distinction between gradual and explosive dynamics is particularly useful here (see Lotman 2009: 7–9, 138). Gradual changes occur when existing hegemonic structures are replaced slowly. In contrast, during periods of explosive change, the existing semiotic structures are shattered, leading to a high level of unpredictability and an explosive growth of new meanings and interpretations (Lotman 2009: 14, 158). Many competing development scenarios emerge during these kinds of disruptions. Similarly, we can identify periods of gradual and explosive changes in landscapes or cultural practices and self-descriptions, where sharp epochs—such as wars, revolutions, or rapid environmental changes—cause disruptions and disconnections. Conflicts can also be seen as moments of explosion, where multiple narratives are activated, rediscovered, and retold, while new narratives emerge. This process creates a broader range of possible interpretations and engagements with the surroundings, ultimately influencing environmental reality itself.

Folklorists have described the complex process of transitioning or mediating folklore into media communication (e.g., Briggs 2020) and in digital or hypermedia environments (see edited volumes providing an overview e.g., Blank 2012; Blank, Howard 2013). But—considering semiotic complementarity with the environment, characteristic of place-lore—it is important to acknowledge the effect mediatization has on semiotic relations manifested in folklore. When place-lore is switched into public conflict communication, every aspect of vernacular communication is transformed. I revisit hereby the Dakota Access Pipeline case to create a general roadmap illustrating changes in transforming vernacular to public environmental conflict communication. When narratives—as part of vernacular and heritage discourse—about the sacred land and the unique relationship Sioux people have with water are communicated in public media debates, it marks a shift in the context of communication. These narratives are now presented in discussions over legal rights, land ownership, environmental policies, etc. and are not referring to meaningful places or environmental processes in of themselves. In environmental conflicts, authoritative knowledge typically consists of data from the natural sciences and, in cases like the Dakota Pipeline conflict, from archaeology and cultural heritage. As a result, vernacular or traditional narratives are often introduced into debates, either as factual knowledge or alongside it, often aiming to challenge or complement existing scientific data. Thus, place-lore can serve as evidence or a basis of argumentation. However, through this kind of objectification, it often loses its semiotic complementarity and responsiveness with ecological processes. This dynamic is further explored in Article II on the Paluküla conflict.

Along with the storytelling context, the audiences also change in public conflicts. In the Dakota Pipeline conflict, “spokespersons” of folklore were community leaders or protesters, illustrating the visibility dynamics of mediatized conflicts that is shaped not by personal engagement with particular environments, but by factors such as perceived authority, political power, and media access (Lester 2010; Konkes 2018; Hutchins, Lester 2015). While in mediatized environmental conflict, the audiences are multiple; the messages along with folk narratives are often tailored regarding specific audiences. In Article II on the Paluküla case, I describe how the use of folk narratives by different parties in the conflict, in their claims-making and argumentation, was selective and biased.

Contemporary environmental conflicts unfold at the intersection of diverse media forms (Hutchins, Lester 2015), with narratives being re-told in various formats. The Dakota Pipeline case illustrated some of these, such as social, state, local, and alternative media, and in various social media environments; litigation, official documents, face-to-face meetings, protests, rituals, and site visits; but particularly forms of digital or so-called live-stream activism (Martini 2018). In Article IV, we also briefly explore how new media practices have shaped the development of Estonian environmental discourse and how the mediatization of conflicts has evolved. However, understanding the very practical effects of routines and technologies of contemporary (news) media requires closer examination, as it is essential for addressing the de-contextualization and detachment of place-folklore from its semiotic connections to the environment. Therefore, I touch upon some aspects of the news media coverage of the Haabersti White Willow conflict also analyzed in Article IV.

The conflict broke out in June 2017 when activists began protesting the removal of one of the willow trees obstructing the construction of a new intersection in Tallinn’s Haabersti district. The tree was one of many of its kind and was not associated with any previous folklore; the protesters were not locals. However, the media coverage of the conflict was unusually intense within the Estonian context, encompassing video and photo reports, live-streams, interviews, portrait stories, expert commentary, and thousands of social media posts and comments. At the same time, several public figures, environmental organizations, and politicians spoke out about the white willow, seeking to gain visibility through their involvement. To understand the broader reasons behind the disproportionately intense coverage, I collaborated with Laura Annast and Anne-Liis Rämson on a digital humanities research project to compose a comprehensive text database of the media representation of the conflict.<sup>11</sup> In our analysis of the text database, we first identified temporal patterns that help understand how the

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<sup>11</sup> The creation of text corpora was part of the project “EKKD72: The Use of Textual Materials in Digital Humanities Case Studies on the Example of Estonian Newspaper Collections (1850–2020)”. The corpus covering the Haabersti White Willow conflict contains a total of 329 texts. In analyzing the texts, we experimented with various quantitative methods such as Word Frequency Analysis, Topic Modeling, and Named Entity Recognition. Part of this work has been published in the blog of the National Library’s Digital Laboratory (Annast et al. 2022a; Annast et al. 2022b). Some of the study’s data is also reflected in Article IV, but most of the results has not yet been published.

timing and duration of media coverage may have influenced the topics, focuses, and narratives involved.

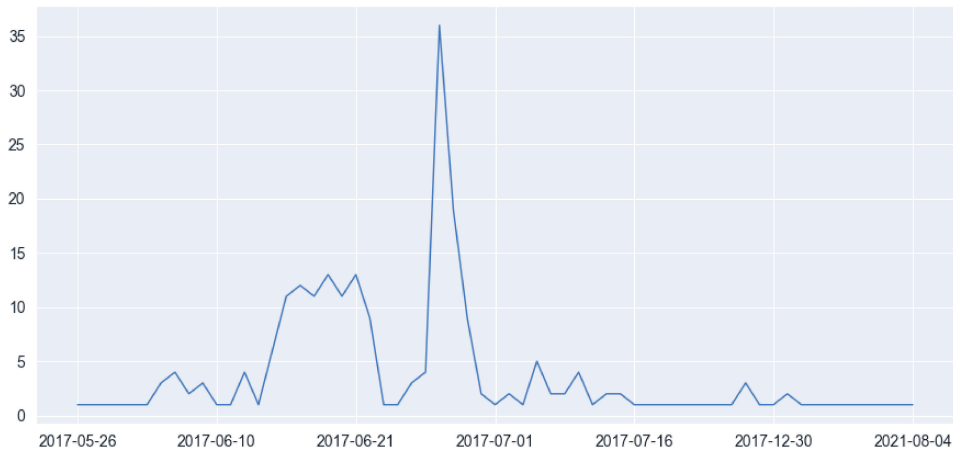


Figure 3: Media coverage of the Haabersti White Willow conflict (2017–2021) by month.

The timeline confirms that arresting the protesters and cutting the tree on June 27th was the most intensively covered, leading the discussion to focus more narrowly on protest actions (Figure 3). The high level of media interest was also driven by the protests' playful nature and visual appeal: protesters set up a camp, lit fires, sang and danced, and used various visual symbols such as flags and signs. Furthermore, the time dynamics of coverage were influenced by more practical factors. The media coverage timeline, divided by month (Figure 3), shows that the protests and media coverage were not correlated. For instance, Midsummer Day on June 24th, a public holiday, marked a sharp decline in coverage, even though protests continued. The effect of the event-based coverage was also visible in the Paluküla conflict described in Article II. This and several other conflicts involving sacred natural sites, received more coverage around traditional holidays when there were opportunities to organize rituals at the sites at the center of the conflicts. Thus, the types of narratives involved in the conflict are shaped by their connection to specific events or by the parties representing them.

Media researchers highlight how news media tend to cover large-scale and complex ecological and climate emergencies through episodic and short-term events, thus concentrating on the struggles that are easy to represent and have a direct and obvious impact (Hansen 2011: 14), or so-called spectacular violence (Nixon 2011). Looking at the coverage of the Haabersti White Willow conflict over a longer time scale, it is clear that the conflict did not lead to broader or more lasting discussion. There was a sharp decline in coverage after the protests stopped (Figure 4), even though the topic of nature in urban spaces continues to be relevant in Estonia. For the construction of the new Haabersti intersection, nearly 795 trees were permitted to be cut down, and due to the large-scale project, the area's water regime changed, green spaces decreased, and traffic intensified. On a smaller scale, this mirrors broader issues of symbolism in nature conservation,

as seen in the emphasis on symbolic landscapes or “cultural keystone places” (Cuerrier et al. 2015). Similar to the focus on charismatic species in species protection (e.g., Douglas, Verissimo 2013) or tourism (Milstein 2008), this kind of biased focus may obscure complex ecological and cultural challenges and make it more difficult to protect less charismatic species or landscapes. A parallel issue is discussed in Article II, where the selective use and over-romanticized framing of folk narratives have shaped the imagination of sacred natural sites, which does not align with their representation in folklore (see also Jonuks et al. 2014).

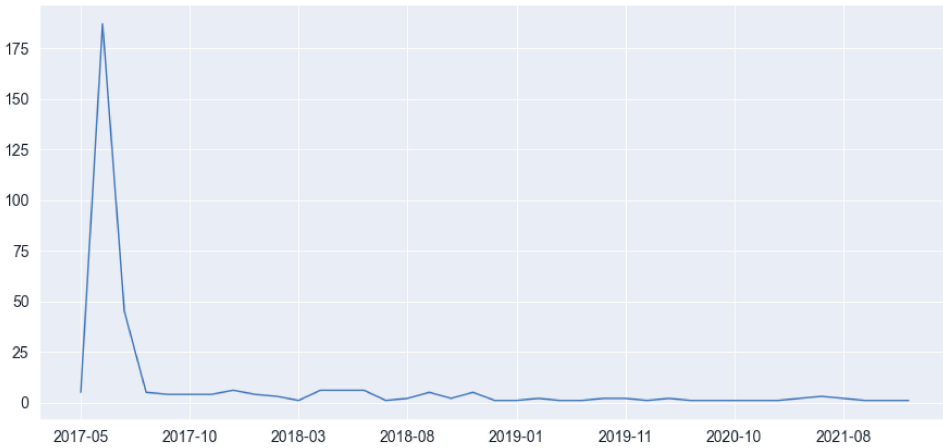


Figure 4: Media coverage of the Haabersti White Willow conflict (2017–2021) by year.

A qualitative analysis of the text corpus provided additional insights from the perspective of place-lore. The Haabersti White Willow case highlighted how media often dictates whose stories are told and which narratives are prioritized. In this instance, it was the “tree protectors” whose accounts took center stage in media coverage. Given the high newsworthiness of protests in environmental discussions (Lester 2016), the tree protectors had an opportunity to solidify their narrative of the tree as sacred. Furthermore, in the context of hypermedia and emotionally charged public discourse, core narratives that are both emotional and memorable tend to capture the most attention. For example, in the case of the Haabersti White Willow, social media comments on news articles drew parallels between the tree’s felling and key historical events in Estonia marked by violence and resistance, such as the Soviet deportations (1941–1953); the Forest Brothers guerrilla movement during and after World War II; and the relocation of the Soviet World War II monument, the Bronze Soldier, in 2007.

### 2.1.2. De-contextualization of place-lore in public conflict discussions

Local vernacular narratives do not necessarily become simplified, homogenized, or less nuanced when they enter public media discussions, although this may happen through opposing, emotionally charged communication, as illustrated in

the Paluküla case (see Article II). Mediatization, instead of diminishing complexity, is intertwined with the process of traditionalization—these two processes are not oppositional (Briggs 2020). The richness of new interpretations is characteristic of a conflict's emergence and escalation phases<sup>12</sup>, which can be compared to an explosive cultural shift described by Lotman (2009: 14, 158). Heated public discussions often lead to transmedial interpretations, engaging new audiences and interest groups, while the fragmented and multi-channel nature of (hyper)-mediation further expands the range of possible interpretations. However, this also leads to geographically and historically situated narratives becoming disconnected from their original context. In other words, the shift from vernacular communication to conflict communication described in the previous chapter results in the de-contextualization of place-lore from the environmental reality it originally represented.

The de-contextualization of folklore in contexts such as media or marketing is well-studied (Bacchilega 2007; Briggs 2020). However, the public sphere itself, where conflicts take place, has become increasingly hybrid, fragmented, and dynamic (Bruns 2018, 309–317), and also detached from a local context. Andreas Hepp (2013: 108–115) discusses communicative deterritorialization in the context of the globalization of media communication, highlighting the growing mediation and global spread of media. As a result, territorial, regional, and location-specific aspects become less relevant, with various media forms—including news media—and their audiences being seen as part of translocal networks. Both the physical deterritorialization and communicational deterritorialization result in a fundamental shift in meaning for place-lore, as place-lore is inherently referential to the environmental reality it represents, as explained in Chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3. Place-lore is based on interpreting specific ecological environments and environmental signs, and expressing very particular, non-symbolic environmental meanings through narratives. In conflict communication, audiences unfamiliar with the environment—including its ecological conditions and characteristics—may not fully grasp the meaning of such narratives. This is due to the semiotic complementarity between place-lore and the environment it describes. For instance, stories about raised bogs in Estonia makes the most sense for people who have, at the very least, experienced such environments firsthand.

Public conflict discussions can be understood within the framework of affective communication (Papacharissi 2016), characterized by immediacy, urgency, and the dissemination of messages that are neither controlled nor reviewed. In environmental conflicts, the urgency to express emotions—often driven by a sense of threat to place identity and belonging—can partially explain the emergence of simplified narratives, such as claims that the willow tree is hundreds of years old. Affective communication often leads to non-constructive conflict

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<sup>12</sup> Various conflict cycle phases models have been adapted to environmental conflicts. While the some kind of emergence, escalation and resolution stages in environmental conflicts are generally agreed upon, the dynamics can be highly diverse. See one possible overview in Fisher (2022: 52–61).

where people involved in a particular conflict no longer aim to achieve their goal but aim to harm or oppose the other party (Jurin et al. 2010: 258). Discussions can also become a goal in themselves, as participants in the discussion aim to stay in the dispute and make themselves seen, while the goal of solving the original problem becomes secondary (Jurin et al. 2010: 260). So, although the place narratives may be used in negotiation, manipulation, etc., the motivation might not be to express the content or information present in these narratives, i.e., to represent the environmental reality. The initial question of whether to cut down the willow tree or not, whether the hill could stand to build a ski resort, or how much forest can be clear-cut without damaging ecosystems irreversibly will be replaced with discussions over the authority of values or imaginations.

Any environment or place is inherently more complex and dynamic than its cultural representations (Maran 2023: 135). Therefore, any form of modeling can only offer a partial understanding. The scientific knowledge prevalent in environmental discussions recognizes the variability, complexity, and dynamism of ecological systems, while also acknowledging that our access to these systems is always limited. Ironically, this nuanced understanding of scientists is often misinterpreted as uncertainty, allowing misinformation to spread and further widening the consensus gap in public discourse (Ding et al. 2011). Affective debates focused on confrontations tend to overlook the scientific understanding of the polyphonic and complex nature of the environment, but they also fail to recognize how selective and partial the representations of the environment are. When environmental reality is marginalized in place-based narratives, the ecological and traditional knowledge embedded within these narratives is overshadowed. Such communication does not challenge cultural or social representations or connect them to environmental realities. As a result, there is a significant risk of fostering hermetic, dogmatic, and alienated communication that distances itself from the environment (see also Low 2008).

The new interpretations and versions of narratives created in conflict are not necessarily environment-related stories and may not refer to places that are localizable, rather they often combine various interpretations and are essentially symbolic. This means they do not convey the environmental particularities, the semiotic agency, or iconic and indexical meanings from certain environments (Favareau 2015; Kohn 2013: 55–56). The point of reference for these stories is an imagined environment, or rhetorical place (Endres, Senda-Cook 2011) often manifesting pre-existing cultural metanarratives or cultural frames. These kinds of rhetorical places are created during the protest by building on pre-existing symbolic and material meanings (e.g., spectacular characteristics of the environment, its accordance to cultural imaginations), temporarily constructing the meanings (e.g., attaching sacrality or national symbolism), and repeating reinterpretations over time (e.g., organizing yearly rituals) (Endres, Senda-Cook 2011: 259). In Estonia, environmental discussions have historically been intertwined with national identity discourse (Remmel, Jonuks 2021; R. Hiimäe 2023), and they are therefore embedded with narratives like Estonians' closeness to nature or sacrality of nature (Thurfjell, Remmel, 2024). Researchers have pointed out how environmental discourse in Estonia is nationalistic. For example, problems

like overmanaging forests are well acknowledged and widely discussed. At the same time, the climate protests have been rather marginal (Kaljundi 2018, 2019; Rennit 2022).

This was well illustrated in the case of the Haabersti White Willow, the qualitative analysis partly presented also in Article IV demonstrates how new narratives created during the conflict took references from historical symbols or mainstream imagination of sacred places in Estonia. The sacredness, historicity, and national symbols were attached to the willow tree in discussions, although there weren't any previous narratives about the tree<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, the sacred place at Paluküla Hill was described as thousands of years old in various opinion articles, which is, of course, inaccurate, as archaeological, historical, and folkloristic sources about the hill trace back only two or three hundred years. However, the age of an actual tree or hill is not relevant in these discussions. The temporal perceptions described in media reflect the idealized place and correlate with the romanticized imagination of ancient sacred sites, which is common in mainstream public discourse (see Jonuks et al. 2014 for further details).

## **2.2. The problem with over-symbolization and hypermediatization of place-lore in environmental conflicts**

When media attention, and especially social media or live-stream activism helped make #NODAPL protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline project in 2016 and 2017 a true international media event, media also provided an ending to the battle without a solution. Even before Trump signed the memo approving the pipeline's completion, the media shifted its focus away from the issue. Instead, discussions about topics like the 2017 Academy Awards nominations dominated the news on the same day the executive order was signed.<sup>14</sup> The protests for the Sioux sacred land become a marginal and quickly forgotten topic. All the environmental issues need to win a battle of relevance and urgency and gain visibility in a mediated world of poly-crisis (Hannigan 2006: 63–72; Hansen 2019: 46–49). From an ontological perspective—where environmental issues are seen as symptoms of a real-world crisis requiring attention—their neglect due to short attention spans pose a significant problem.

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<sup>13</sup> The symbolic status of the tree is also illustrated by how the wood of the felled willow was distributed to schools so children could give the tree a “new life” in their craft lessons, see: <https://eeter.err.ee/632488/haabersti-hoberemmelgas-saab-kooliopilaste-kates-uue-elu> Accessed December 4, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> “Social Media Made the World Care About Standing Rock—and Helped It Forget” <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/social-media-made-world-care-standing-rock-helped-forget/> See also an overview of media framing and frequency here: <https://newsframes.globalvoices.org/2017/03/01/fighting-for-not-fighting-against-media-coverage-and-the-dakota-access-pipeline/> Accessed December 4, 2024.

Characteristics of (hyper)mediatized environmental conflicts and what I call over-symbolization—resulting in the de-contextualization of narratives, as described in the previous chapter—become a concern in the context of environmental conflicts. This is especially true because these processes deepen the divide between how we think about the environment and how and how the environment is meaningful in of itself or “asserts its own being” (Low 2008: 48). I understand over-symbolization here as a process where communication, which otherwise refers to the environment and contains largely non-symbolic meanings, becomes overwhelmed or replaced by purely symbolic and discursive meanings that ignore iconic and indexical reference to material structures or processes. Nevertheless, it is important to remind that in biosemiotic sense, symbolic signs are also grounded in non-symbolic, environmental meaning-making and biological processes (Wheeler 2008: 143–144), but symbols derive their meaning from systemic relationships with other symbol, allowing reference beyond the immediate material and temporal context (Kohn 2013: 55–56). Thus, the problem is excessive and overuse the symbols leading self-contained making-making, not the cultural or symbolic meaning making itself.

Hypermediatization feeds the process of over-symbolization by transforming the previously established semiotic relations between culture and nature. Hypermediated communication can lead to unnecessary or irrelevant information, affecting various aspects of place-lore. Semiotician Ronald Posner (2000) has used the concept of semiotic pollution to characterize situations where sign systems and/or sign mediation break down due to internal or external disturbances (Posner 2000: 293). Semiotic pollution can interfere with every aspect of communication, for instance, a channel may be broken, the context overloaded with noise, or the message itself may become incomprehensible due to external or internal pollution (Posner 2000: 293–294). Despite focusing on the sensory or perceptual dimensions of communication, Posner (2000: 293) provides various examples of semiotic pollution in contemporary culture and communication, such as informational overload; hardly understandable specific languages or discourses; and over-coded messages. When place-lore, which often conveys highly contextual messages, becomes embedded in a hypermediated reality with a high potential of semiotic pollution—where it is increasingly filtered, framed, or constructed with nonlinear frequency across diverse storytelling modalities—its connection to the material realities of the environment becomes diluted. This disconnection risks reducing environmental issues to abstract representations, thereby undermining their urgency and the authenticity of their real-world implications.

The concept of semiotic pollution mirrors Baudrillard’s (1994) concern with the breakdown of sign systems. In hypermediated environments, the noise, or semiotic pollution, of excessive symbols, informational overload, and over-coded messages overwhelms clear communication but also leads to loss of referentiality. Signs in a hyperreal system no longer refer to reality but to other signs, and in hyperreality, environmental semiosis is either absent or pushed to the margins of communication. For place-lore, becoming part of this kind of communication means the loss of fundamental meaning and function of these stories. But even

more importantly, in environmental conflict communication, this loss of referentiality often shifts the focus away from the original problem or subject matter of the conflict. Diversity, along with increased repetition and transformation of narratives, is not inherently negative, as it enables the activation of narratives, generates interest in heritage (Hafstein 2012), and raises relevant issues, particularly during the dynamic phases of emerging and escalating conflict (Fischer 2022: 54). However, an abundance of cultural interpretations often does not translate into functional, authentic, and productive environmental communication, because they lack the semiotic potential to represent environmental realities. Therefore, these cultural interpretations do not lead to authentic and adequate conflict communication. For example, in the Haabersti White Willow case, the tree itself became a symbol and represented strongly ideological historical narratives and events while its ecological characteristics and role were not considered relevant. Also, animals, insects, and birds—for whom big urban trees offer shelter, feeding possibilities, etc.—were never mentioned in discussions.

Replacing small-scale contextual meanings in place-lore with symbolic imaginations leads to ignoring environmental as well as social “dissent” as was illustrated through case-studies in Articles II and IV. What kind of narratives—whether contextual or abstract—are used in conflict discussions and in what way they are mediated and re-storied, have an actual ecological and social effect. The case-studies I approached as well as many others illustrate that conflict storytelling has material consequences: whether or not pipelines, railway lines, or nuclear power plants are built; they are built elsewhere; or a place can be transformed through protest activities or outcomes in multiple ways (see also Enders, Senda-Cook 2011). Such transformations can occur by implementing, creating, or reducing protected areas; changing cultural or natural protection measures; building tourism infrastructure, visiting places, and performing rituals. These processes and decisions affect non-human ecological actors, the same ones whose agency is very difficult to highlight or model in conflict communication and management because they have different semiotic repertoires and ways of communication.

Human semiosis is, in general, de-contextualizing and transformative (Maran, Kull 2014: 45), replacing nature with a more human-faced surrounding, or as Kalevi Kull (1998) put it “cognitive manipulations of the environment are followed by its physical manipulation, leading to the culturization of nature”. Timo Maran and Kalevi Kull (2014: 45) write that the tendency of anthroposemiosis to deconstruct meanings and environments forms a ground for contemporary environmental degradation. Yet, there are some practices and representations with a greater capacity to consider or mediate the environmental semiosis than others, and purely symbolic and affective communication do not belong to those. On the contrary, these discussions are often closed to environmental meanings and environmental dissent, without perceivable references to environmental reality as a dynamical object (Low 2008: 55). In the next chapter, however, I will show that environment-related small-scale narratives based on perception can be a protest, or *dissent* against destructive, abstract culturization.

### **2.3. The ambivalent potential of place-lore: Toward authentic conflict communication**

The Whanganui River in New Zealand was the first river and the second natural entity in the world to be granted legal personhood. This 2017 decision sparked a global trend. The main issue addressed by granting legal identity was that nature has no voice in the legal system. Legal personhood would provide the river with rights and interests, making it more difficult to harm it, and, at least theoretically, enabling its protection (see e.g., Kurki 2022). However, part of the reasoning extended beyond practical management and preservation issues, as the symbolically strong decision emphasized recognizing natural entities like rivers as living beings within Māori iwi values, thereby highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and its connectedness with humans as persons alike. While legal personhood is undoubtedly instrumentally useful, these legal actions shift the so-called “voice of nature” to the symbolic level, where the river and its non-human habitats are represented by human-appointed representatives in courtrooms, rather than the natural entities themselves being recognized as influencing humans by representing and acting for themselves (see also Kohn 2007). Legal rights are a powerful human symbol that silences the environmentally relevant meanings that undoubtedly exist in that same local tradition. Therefore, granting personhood to natural objects may unintentionally diminish the environment’s voice by empowering cultural symbols over the acknowledgment of the environment’s inherent semioticity.

Granting legal personhood to the Whanganui River was the result of a long-standing effort by the Whanganui iwi, and it ultimately gained significant traction, sparking widespread global discussion and interest. The tendency to turn to symbols, religious imagination of the distant past, or the wisdom of indigenous groups to emphasize the agency, liveliness, and acknowledgment of nature is noticeable and characteristic in environmental communication research, degrowth movement (Hickel 2020: 229), and ecosemiotics (Siewers 2014; Wheeler 2014), etc. These perspectives are drawn from criticism of Cartesian duality and objectification and often rely on the work of environmental anthropologists. While this approach is justified and necessary, considering indigenous, religious, or historical representations alone does not lead to recognizing the environment as part of discussions or acknowledging its meaning-potential. For example, considering plants as subjects or stressing the sacrality of nature often shifts the focus toward a symbolic-metaphorical narrative of balance and equilibrium. Additionally, and sometimes instead of this, emphasizing the semiotic agency of non-human nature in contemporary environmental struggles requires acknowledging the meaning potential of the environment in a grounded, small-scale, and accessible form—e.g., in the narratives and practices that are an inevitable part of how both humans and non-humans engage with and dwell in any environment. In other words, the environment must be present in environmental communication and management not only as a metaphor or cultural symbol but as a semiotic and physical subject.

For this reason, environmental communication specialists have emphasized the need of grounding discussions and returning them to root questions, causes, and subject matter (Jurin et al. 2010: 260). Researchers from various fields, both in natural and cultural studies, have increasingly sought ways to integrate lived experience with scientific knowledge—whether referred to as Indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, or everyday knowledge (e.g., Higgs 2005; Fitzpatrick 2022). I explore this further in Article III. Also, more recently, environmental communication specialists have developed wide agreement that communication of the climate emergency must incorporate local, small-scale stories and frames that enable people to connect their everyday experiences with the complex, large-scale changes currently unfolding (e.g., Scannell, Gifford 2013; Jones, Peterson 2017; van der Linden et al. 2018). This aim presents a methodological challenge: how to communicate environmental conflicts and design management measures that account for semiotic multivocality and the diversity of social and environmental actors—including non-humans—by situating these relationships within their ontological context, thereby supporting authentic conflict communication, as discussed in Chapter 1.2.2.

One example of developing methods to seek authenticity, presented in Article III, acknowledges semiotic multivocality, both social and environmental dissent. In this article, we explore the application of place-lore fieldwork in ecological restoration, drawing on the experiences from the LIFE Mires Estonia project led by the Estonian Fund for Nature. In this project, restoration experts applied a unique place-lore methodology developed by the EFA place-lore research group over the past decades. In general, this methodology seeks to capture the semiotic relationships between place-lore and the environment by combining folkloristic methods with insights from archaeology and geography. The central element in the fieldwork is in-depth interviews or walking interviews with informants, where locations mentioned in narratives are visited. Both historical and contemporary folkloristic data (e.g., archival materials) and environmental data (e.g., maps, databases, info from field inspections, etc.) play an important role in preparatory work and analysis. The fieldwork emphasizes recording both the narratives and storytelling situations, as well as the environments, through various forms of audiovisual material (photos, videos, and sound recordings). The concrete phases and tasks in the fieldwork process are described in Chapter 2.4. In the LIFE Mires Estonia project, the initial goal of the fieldwork was to document information about heritage sites potentially impacted by restoration and to capture people's memories of historical practices related to six specific mire areas restored in the project. Along the way, restoration experts discovered that place-lore-centered fieldwork was not only effective in documenting people's relationships with the mires, but also in creating a new communicative space for addressing possible conflicts and rendering authentic discussions.

Unlike many other contemporary methods, such as sociological surveys or public engagement events (meetings), focusing on place-lore brought people's relationships with the wetlands to the center of discussions. As a result, emotionally charged or contentious debates about mire restoration, if they occurred,

arose from the ground where a multiplicity of relationships and characteristics of the specific environment were also acknowledged. In addition, as place-lore is both culturally and ecologically multivocal and open to environmental semiosis, emphasizing these narratives and storytelling practices during fieldwork allowed environmental dissent, manifested in, for example, information and experiences about specific species, their behavior, reactions to environmental changes, shifts in water levels, and the complex effects these had on people and ecosystems.

Grounding the mire restoration discussions by centering them on the environmental reality and the multiple semiotic actors involved was not the only advantage noticed in applying place-lore fieldwork. The in-depth interviews focusing on place-lore helped break traditional hierarchies between experts and other interest groups typically involved with nature restoration projects. This fostered collaboration between restoration experts and local people as they worked together to study place-lore. This kind of practice can be seen as an inquiry approach that opposes the fact-based closed communication in environmental matters (Low 2008: 28–50). Storytelling itself, by motivating people to share folklore in fieldwork situations, enabled the emergence of multivocal dialogue and provided a platform to address diverse concerns, worries, and fears—whether practical or conceptual. Thus, not only the content of narratives but storytelling itself became a valuable methodological tool (see also Iseke 2013; Barclay et al. 2023), enabling the addressing of a range of issues that often lead to conflict in mire restoration, such as changes to the visual and functional aspects of the environment, land use and concerns about water levels.

Allowing or encouraging different, sometimes even conflicting expertise and experiences, or social dissent, avoids closed and futile discussions. Here, a parallel to Lotman’s view on communication can be noted. For communication to be possible, at least two languages must be involved. To make communication fruitful, there must be difference, with the most valuable communication often occurring in the spaces of difference—those parts that resist easy translation (Lotman 2009: 5–6, 1990: 143), or that express dissent. In fieldwork, place-lore enabled reaching conversations based on very different social values or needs. This approach also helped to manage potential conflicts and miscommunications without relying on negotiation or persuasion, taking a step toward more authentic environmental communication.

The experiences from applying place-lore-centered fieldwork in the mire restoration project introduce a different, and even opposing, view on the role of place-lore than described in the cases of Paluküla Hill, Haabersti White Willow, or the “forest war” in the above chapters. These contrary examples, however, do not mean that place-lore can be approached as a mere communication tool or instrument, as they were sometimes used for escalating conflict or to create diverse discussions. Rather, these examples illustrate the ambivalent semiotic potential of these narratives. Place-lore is strongly rooted in interpreting and adapting to certain environments, and is open to environmental semiosis, thus referring to environmental and non-human meanings as explained in Chapter 1.1.3. At the same time, environmental semiosis is relatively fragmentary (see

more Maran 2017), as it is always interpretable and accessible only partially, and the perception of the environment is always Umwelt-based, so interpreting non-human, non-cultural meanings hold significant creative potential, as well as significant potential for various kinds of interpretations when addressing the semiotic “ambiguity of the landscape” (Bird 2002). Conversely, place-lore, has consistently been shaped by and adapted to environmental discussions in Estonia and beyond (see Annus 2022; Remmel, Jonuks 2021; Kaljundi 2018). These identity narratives and cultural imaginations about nature, often rich in symbolic potential, are themselves complex and creative, frequently conflicting with one another.

Drawing from the above description, it is important to distinguish between the intrinsic semiotic potential of place-lore and its meaning potential in specific communication situations. While place-lore as a phenomenon is semiotically multivocal, only a fraction of its potential meanings is activated in specific communicative contexts, depending on the medium, audience, and their knowledge of the environment it represents, etc. In certain situations, this multivocality and contextuality of place-lore may be altered or constrained—for instance, during the archiving of folklore, or representing it in media. In other cases, it can be both necessary and beneficial to intentionally limit or frame this multivocality, such as in the context of nature management and cultural heritage preservation. In contrast, there are instances where restoring or emphasizing the multivocality of place-lore becomes essential to foster more authentic and dialogical communication, as demonstrated in the case of the mire restoration project.

The mire restoration case in Article III enables further understanding of the practical possibility of addressing conflicts through environment-related narratives. One of the principles outlined by Maran and Kull (2014) in how eco-semiotics approaches its object is that environmental semiosis is not inherently narrative or symbolic; narrative descriptions, they argue, are inadequate for capturing non-symbolic processes. They explain (Maran, Kull 2014: 46):

A narrative description of ecological events is always metaphoric. Yet, the involvement of narrative accounts may be inevitable as part of the iconic modelling of ecological events. It should be recognized, however, that narrative description itself (including in the sciences and the arts) is part of high-level human interpretation and tends to give rise to symbolization when fed back into the environment.

Symbolic modeling of the environment is always partial and simplified, thus there is no doubt that narratives cannot entirely mediate environmental meanings or communication. Nevertheless, my work on the ecosemiotic analysis of place-lore challenges the claim that narrative descriptions are always metaphorical and give rise to symbolization. Certain types of narratives can instead re-contextualize, counteract, and ground over-symbolization. In local, small-scale narratives, environmental processes and their cultural descriptions are interconnected through sign processes, i.e., through the creation of these narratives.

## **2.4. Grounding ecosemiotics: Contributions from the study of place-lore**

Ecosemiotics has offered a rich theoretical framework for studying place-lore in environmental conflicts. In the following chapter, I aim to shift the dialogue between ecosemiotics and place-lore studies the other way around, offering brief notes on how research on place-lore and my work contribute to the development of ecosemiotic theory and methods. I highlight two critical aspects that contribute to expanding ecosemiotics: 1) Place-lore, as a research object for ecosemiotics, allows for the development of ecosemiotic theory to more thoroughly consider situative and processual aspects of how environmental meanings are integrated into culture, particularly when studying environment-related representations that are part of vernacular practices. 2) The fieldwork methodologies and research practices developed by Estonian place-lore researchers offer ecosemiotics an opportunity to critically analyze and develop its own fieldwork approaches.

### **2.4.1. Broadening ecosemiotic theory through the study of situative relationships**

The main task of ecosemiotics in studying environmental conflicts and environmental crises, in a broader sense, is to seek ways of fostering more authentic, grounded communication, as I described in Chapter 1.2.2. Some other semioticians have stressed similar objectives. Ronald Posner (2000: 301) argued that semiotics must develop methods for diagnosing, measuring, and reducing semiotic pollution. Timo Maran viewed semiotic methods as tools for breaking down cultural self-enclosure and reconnecting culture with nature (Maran 2020a: 34). I want to continue this dialogue on ecosemiotic theory and methods, particularly those suitable for studying cultural representations in a backdrop of environmental conflicts. Alf Hornborg (2001: 124), has written that Amazon with its indigenous cultures and rich ecosystems can be approached as a laboratory for ecosemiotics, and I similarly claim hereby that place-lore has the potential to serve as a model concept for ecosemiotics to understand contextual vernacular representations that encompass environmental relations.

Both the potential and strength of ecosemiotics has been integrating the study of ecosystems and the cultural representations of these systems, and that principle is also fundamentally relevant when approaching environment-related vernacular representations such as place-lore. In practice, ecosemiotics has often been balancing between two focuses—sometimes referred to as the ecological and cultural branches of ecosemiotics (see Nöth 2001; Maran, Kull 2014)—concentrating either on describing ecological systems or cultural representations, depending on the disciplinary backgrounds of researchers, tools used, and other factors. The need for integrating these two dimensions has been stressed before, as in the context of semiotic study of landscapes (see Lindström et al. 2011: 28–29). Without fixating on an unnecessary ideal of perfect equality, it remains important to continue seeking this balance in methods, as ecosemiotics has defined its

research object as ecologically and culturally complex. Applying ecosemiotics to the study of place-lore provides yet another opportunity to integrate these two research realms more thoroughly. What necessitates this integrative approach in place-lore studies is the need to concentrate on the complex process of environmental communication, rather than merely describing place-lore as a cultural representation.

Ecosemiotics has generally emphasized the theoretical conceptualization of pre-existing representations or data, while works that provide a theoretical foundation and develop ecosemiotic principles for fieldwork or data collection methods remain relatively rare (see, for example, Magnus, Mäekivi 2023; Tønnessen 2020). This may be one reason why ecosemiotic models tend to be metaphorical and well-suited for studying phenomena that are already organized and framed—essentially, for analysis at the level of theoretical modeling—rather than for working in the field. Nevertheless, it is precisely this latter aspect that can be further developed by adjusting existing ecosemiotic models and theories for the study of place-lore. Research that addresses nature-culture relationships—especially in such dynamic and complex situations, as studying place-lore in conflict communication has demonstrated—requires methodologies focused on describing complex dynamic practices, with an understanding of their empirical grounding.

From a practical standpoint, studying place-lore facilitates the development of ecosemiotic models and tools that describe how texts or other environment-related representations are mediated, re-storied, and de-contextualized. For instance, I suggested expanding the types of relationships between textual representations and the environment in Article I. As discussed in Chapter 1.1.2, the study of vernacular environmental representations can benefit from the so-called ecocritical branch of ecosemiotics, which has been developed by studying, for example, nature writing. In this context, researchers have already explored various relationships between textual representations and the environment, including representational, mimetic, complementary, and motivational relations (Maran 2013; Maran, Tüür 2017). These types of relationships are valuable for describing how place-lore is semiotically connected to the environment it represents as I demonstrate in Article I. Yet, I identified an additional need to emphasize how environmental meanings influence place-lore through the immediate storytelling situation. I proposed a *situative relationship* to complement the previously described text-environment relations, highlighting how re-storying or creating vernacular narratives is shaped by the immediate storytelling situations or context.

The need to describe the situative aspect of environmental meaning-making in folklore arises from the fact that place-lore is open toward the environment in different ways than authored (written) representations. The environmental experience that motivates people to create or re-tell stories and manifest this experience in folkloristic representations (see also the motivational relation in Maran, Tüür 2016: 290) is not temporally distinguishable. Place-lore is both a textual and storytelling practice, where the immediate space and situation of storytelling play a significant role. In re-telling narratives, a specific environment

functions simultaneously as both the object of representation and a medium. Thus, examining situative relationships provides an additional way to describe the semiotic activity or “dissent” of the environment, but also diagnose disconnections or “semiotic pollution” in the processes of interpreting, transforming, and re-creating cultural representations.

How is the situative relationship expressed in the actual storytelling context? Drawing examples from place-lore related to bogs, empirical grounding in Article I and III can be helpful. Movement in the mire is difficult for people and requires constant interpretation of the environment, which is why the environmental characteristics are often emphasized in folklore. The usage and interpretation of certain narratives, including well-known motifs about bottomless bog pools or losing track, often depend on specific environmental conditions such as weather; water level; seasonal changes or activities; and communication of other species. Expression of characteristics of the mire environment is, of course, approachable over time when looking at a set of narratives about the same place. For example, the bog pool named “Big Bog Pool” began to be called a “Dry Bog Pool” after extensive drainage in the 1970s that caused the bog pool to dry up. Another example is the place name Kakerdaja, which refers to the characteristic movement of black-throated loons (*Gavia arctica*), a species that was once common in this particular mire but is now rare. However, environmental conditions and the communication of other species also influence folklore in more immediate ways, through storytelling situations, this is what I mainly describe with situative relationship. On numerous occasions during my fieldwork in Kakerdaja bog, when I went on hikes to observe tour guides, I witnessed how guides or locals would create new place names upon encountering certain species; they would re-tell the same story about drowning in the bog pool differently in winter versus summer or alter the story based on their own memorable experiences of getting lost in the bog. This is not to say that variations in place-lore are always determined by environmental changes—as the mire restoration study, for instance, showed how restoration created new interpretative frames—but rather to emphasize the role of environmental semiosis.

Focusing on a situative relationship involves more than just describing another type of semiotic connection between environmental semiosis and cultural representations; it also encourages a rethinking of ecosemiotic methods. How can local, contextual, and situative meaning relations be accessed by (eco)semioticians? As explained earlier, methods must integrate various tools for analyzing ecosystems and the logic of cultural interpretations. More importantly, these methods must consider representations within the context of the practices and situations in which they are mediated and expressed—in other words, they must be fieldwork-based. Establishing ecosemiotically informed data collection and fieldwork methods is essential to understanding the complex ontologies of the research object. The study of cultural practices related to the environment through fieldwork has primarily been emphasized by environmental anthropologists, many of whom also use semiotic theories (e.g., Kohn 2013; Whitehouse 2015).

Focusing on fieldwork does not mean ecosemioticians should become an alternative version of environmental anthropologists. Rather, I emphasize that when analyzing local cultural interpretations and addressing the question of authentic communication, the center of analysis needs to be shifted back to the space where meanings emerge and are continuously transformed.

#### 2.4.2. Towards ecosemiotic fieldwork methods

Ecosemiotics have borrowed study material and practical tools from literary studies (e.g., Maran, Tüür 2017), social sciences, and anthropology (Magnus, Mäekivi 2023; Tønnessen 2020; Maran 2020b; Hornborg 2001), or made use of historical sources (Siewers 2014). In contrast, ecosemiotic theory has provided insight into environmental anthropology (e.g., Kohn 2013; Whitehouse 2015) or ethnobotany (Sõukand, Kalle 2010). In the following, I suggest that ecosemiotics would benefit from integrating and adapting practical tools and methods from place-lore studies, especially from the set of practical fieldwork tools. As explained in the previous subchapter, fieldwork provides one possible context in which the complex semiotic relationships between nature and culture can be accessed.

The methodology developed by the place-lore research group since the 2000s can be characterized as “eco-semiotic,” even though it has not been explicitly named or recognized as such. The aim of place-lore fieldwork is to study and record the semiotic relationships between the environment and people in various ways. Collecting and analyzing place-lore involves, beyond simply recording narratives, a description of the semiotic structure of a specific environment. Therefore, the methods developed by EFA not only record cultural representations of the environment but also study the environmental affordances and meaning-making processes of non-human actors. This kind of methodology is open to both environmental and cultural semiosis.

The set of ecosemiotic methods is diverse (see more in Maran 2023), and from that variety of study focuses, the place-lore fieldwork can be especially useful for researchers focusing on a study of environment-human relationships in a specific ecological and cultural context. This is also the case for analyzing (urban) environments with high human influence or ecological and cultural complexities and conflicts in hybrid environments. As described in the previous Chapter, the ways ecosemioticians collect empirical data must therefore be open to environmental meanings and enable observing and recording these in various ways.

The methods of practical place-lore study involve collecting and organizing scientific and cultural data through fieldwork to analyze narratives within the context of specific ecological and cultural structures. Workflows include studying various kinds of previous archive data collections and datasets, while the core of these fieldwork methods is walking interviews to visit places described by informants. This can also be replaced with using maps or photographs if a walking interview is not possible. The methodology of place-lore fieldwork includes studying environmental affordances and characteristics; considering the historicity of concrete environments or ecosystems; while also noting their previous

usages and practices related to these places as well as species who lived or live there, etc. A combination of tasks must give an idea of ecological and cultural complexity represented in local folklore.

In the left column of the following table, I outline the basic phases and tasks that constitute the place-lore fieldwork methodology developed by the EFA research group, which was also applied in the mire restoration project discussed in Article III. I put this workflow into dialogue with research questions or aims relevant for ecosemioticians who study environment-human relationships through place-based analysis, described in the right column. The tasks on both sides of the table are not presented in a fixed order, nor are they mandatory elements in all cases. For example, fieldwork can be viewed as a process of inquiry into complex and dynamic semiotic relationships (see also Low 2008), and, depending on the situation, follow-up interviews or field trips may be necessary. Researchers may also need to revisit and revise data collected during the preparatory phase after conducting fieldwork on the landscape. Similarly, the list of tasks undertaken by ecosemioticians is a map of possibilities, the application of which depends on the specific focus of the study.

Table 1: The process of place-lore fieldwork and ecosemiotic questions or focuses that fieldwork can address

<b>Description of place-lore fieldwork methodology</b>	<b>Possible insights for ecosemiotics</b>
<p><b><i>Preparatory work</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collecting and reviewing cultural heritage and scientific data</li> <li>• Localizing and contextualizing data for fieldwork</li> <li>• Creating a list of dominant landscape elements and places (and coding)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studying the semiotic structure of the environment</li> <li>• Studying historical development of ecosystems or landscapes</li> <li>• Mapping possible key species and Umwelts</li> <li>• Mapping possible key elements in landscape</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Fieldwork</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview, phase I (with a focus on narratives)</li> <li>• Interview, phase II, spatial documentation of narratives (using map, schemas, and photos)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping cultural narratives representing the specific environment</li> <li>• Diagnosing possible conflicts between landscape functions</li> <li>• Understanding dominant elements in the landscape</li> <li>• Understanding (and revising) the basic semiotic structure of the landscape</li> </ul>

<b>Description of place-lore fieldwork methodology</b>	<b>Possible insights for ecosemiotics</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview, phase III: walking interview, visiting places together with informant</li>   <li>• Observations on site, recording video, photo, and voice material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describing inter- and intraspecies communication</li> <li>• Understanding the situative relations: how the environment influences re-telling narratives</li> <li>• Mapping affordances (for humans)</li> <li>• Detecting semiotic pollution</li>   <li>• Mapping possible conflicts regarding affordances</li> <li>• Mapping conflicting ecofields</li> <li>• Mapping affordances for humans and non-humans</li> <li>• Detecting semiotic pollution</li> </ul>
<p><i>Post-fieldwork analysis</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing interview materials (and fieldwork notes, photos, and videos)</li> <li>• Creating content summaries, of interviews, basic coding</li> <li>• Organizing material based on specific places/locations</li> <li>• Spatial and temporal contextualizing of material (in the database, on the map, etc).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding environmental and social dissent</li> <li>• Understanding conflicts between ecofields</li> <li>• Understanding conflicts between Umwelts</li> <li>• Understanding conflicts regarding affordances</li> </ul>

The above table illustrates how the practical tools of place-lore fieldwork can be helpful for ecosemiotic analysis in various ways, for example, by providing insights for affordance analysis or place-based Umwelt analysis. The fieldwork process described above follows the principles of ecosemiotic study described by Timo Maran (2023: 134), namely dynamicity, historicity, multilayered-ness, and contextualization. The semiotic study of the environment and human relations in certain locations requires considering the development of specific ecosystems or environments, their existing state, and future potential and conflicts. Ecosemiotic analysis focuses on semiotic relationships, which means that fieldwork practices are relevant, including methods that enable accessing environmental meanings; accessing relations that influence cultural interpretations; and methods that consider the environment itself as a medium. In particular, walking interviews, i.e., visiting the places with informants, are the dominant element of fieldwork (see more Remmel 2014b) and these are also relevant to studying the situative relationships described in the previous chapter.

### 3. TO THE FUTURE

Hereby, in the third part, I return to the central focus of the research—analyzing the semiotic potential of place-lore in environmental conflicts through an eco-semiotic approach that concentrates on cultural-environmental relations—and consider how to move forward from the foundation established in this work. I also consider emerging interests in related fields and highlight two key questions for future research and practical management, addressing the urgent needs arising from the contemporary environmental crisis.

#### 3.1. How to open environmental discussions to small-scale, contextual narratives?

The question of how to develop methodologies that encourage authentic and more just communication is not only relevant for ecosemiotics but must be central to the study and practice of environmental communication, management, and conflict resolution on a broader scale. In this dissertation, I discussed the role of vernacular narratives in achieving this goal. However, it represents just a fraction of the possibilities to work with when aiming to prevent or overcome close, hermetic communication (see Low 2008: 48–50) and create multivocal dialogue. In this work, I argued for turning to contextual vernacular narratives to semiotically ground conflict discussions and challenge the so-called hegemony of symbols (see Maran 2020a: 19–25; Hornborg 2001: 144). But I did not touch, for example, the role of fictional text or storytelling in environmental communication (e.g., Zwaal 2008; Jones, Peterson 2017), in artistic (digital) storytelling practices, and various transmedial adaptations of vernacular narratives, or for example, environmental aesthetics. These are intensively studied in, for example, (material) eco-criticism and various practically oriented fields, such as environmental education, environmental resource management, etc. While I believe it is crucial to maintain a deepening dialogue with these fields, I see that their focus lies elsewhere—not necessarily on creating authentic and inclusive environmental communication, but rather on empowering and transforming human perceptions of the environment.

Seeking grounded and authentic environmental communication in conflicts is first and foremost a question of justice. Place-related narratives, while semiotically contextualized in the surroundings they represent, are always also embedded in ideologies, cultural descriptions, and hierarchies, including those that are violent, oppressive, or ignorant toward nature. Recognizing and acknowledging these structures becomes essential when applying place-lore-related methods or concepts in practical work in nature conservation or conflict management. Whose stories are present? Who has a say and why? These questions intersect with issues of both socioeconomic and environmental justice. To date, the issue of justice has been central to research and practice in fields such as environmental anthropology and political ecology (e.g., Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. 2022; Martinez-Alier 2023;

Goodling 2024). Ecosemiotics theory could engage in a fruitful dialogue with research focused on environmental justice—a dialogue already initiated, for example, by Morten Tønnessen’s (2021) ecosemiotic analysis of envisioned societal transformations. Combining the semiotic study of environmental communication with actionable knowledge of policymaking and activism in environmental justice is crucial for translating theoretical insights from this work into tangible change.

Acknowledging and studying environment-related narratives in conflicts is not enough. Likewise, merely recognizing different forms of expertise in nature conservation is insufficient—there must be ways to integrate and communicate them effectively (Gosselin et al. 2018). Communication modes, methodologies, genres, and discussions must change in a way that enables them to prioritize and encourage narratives like place-lore. Article III on mire restoration took a step in this direction by explaining how fieldwork methodologies for studying place-lore can motivate storytelling, which in turn fosters diverse dialogue and expertise that can enhance restoration outcomes. However, the case we described is more applicable to smaller restoration or conservation projects and requires extensive knowledge and preparation. These methodologies need to be diverse and multiple. Furthermore, integrating place-lore-based practices into environmental management, education, or conservation is more or less a controllable and safe way to prevent and mediate conflicts. The role of local, vernacular narratives in active public conflicts must also be urgently rethought, as these are situations that require quick and flexible solutions. Such conflicts also represent a window of opportunity for larger changes.

In public conflicts, subjective, i.e., non-authoritative, narratives are often used for sensational purposes, such as creating clickbait. For example, portraying individuals losing their homes to the construction of the Rail Baltica railway can be easily leveraged in an affect-driven media environment. More commonly, vernacular small-scale narratives are excluded from communication and dismissed as instances of the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) syndrome<sup>15</sup> particularly when they are not recognized as part of “authentic,” “official,” or “old” traditions. However, the imagination of authority is often shaped by prior meta-discourses in folklore studies and mainstream stereotypes of tradition. While symbolic metanarratives like “Estonians are forest people” or “nature is sacred” get a hold in these discussions, how can we make small-scale, environment-related narratives apparent? Or the other way around: What kinds of discussions, genres, and

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<sup>15</sup> The terms NIMBY and NIMBYism are controversial, as they have often been used to dismiss concerns about the potential impacts of planned developments or transformations on communities and the environment, frequently stigmatizing local communities or activists: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/04/nimbys-nature-destruction-wildlife-developers> Accessed December 4, 2024. Another perspective on NIMBYism suggests that residents' defensive reactions indicate a strong place attachment or place identity, which may be threatened by proposed projects or developments (Devine-Wright, Howes, 2010)

ways of communicating are necessary to grant these narratives relevance and authority, and what are suitable formats for mediating these?

There are some good examples in this realm already, such as attempts to guide discussions into new kinds of mediums, for example, organizing hikes, fieldtrips or other engaging forms of discussion instead of, or in addition to, public participation meetings. Some communities at the center of conflict have come together and organized themselves to document place-based narratives, study the local environment, and communicate their findings to decision-makers. A good example is the protection of the small Niilusoo bog in Viljandimaa<sup>16</sup>. There were plans to expand peat mining into this bog, but residents opposed it. Their protest was based on what Low (2008) describes as *inquiry-based* communication, which focused on gaining knowledge about the local nature. This is also an example of aiming for a more authentic, considerate conflict resolution. Also, in Estonia, there have been novel attempts to translate narratives like place-lore into policy and decision-making processes such as developing place-lore map applications that can be used for officials and experts<sup>17</sup>. This kind of representation mediates place-lore without over-symbolizing it or losing its contextual meanings but frames narratives in a meaningful form for the spatial planning and decision-making process.

While emphasizing local, place-related semiotic meanings, the aspect I haven't touched in this work is the temporal dimension of environmental conflicts. When analyzing or applying local narratives in conflicts, conflict phases or conflict escalation curves (see Fisher 2022:52–61) are important to consider. At what stage of the conflict do different stakeholders become involved? When is diverse expertise—such as folklore or vernacular knowledge—incorporated? If participation and engagement processes begin too late or are absent altogether, it becomes difficult for interest groups and other actors to influence decision-making and express their claims. Moreover, in these cases, discussions may potentially turn out to be closed management processes rather than open inquiries (Low 2008: 48–50). Subsequently, local communities may feel that their only option is to use heritage or place-lore as an “ideological weapon,” seeking protection through natural or cultural heritage measures. This is illustrated in Article II's analysis of the Paluküla discussion and in various cases explored in Article IV.

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<sup>16</sup> Insights into NGO Niilusoo's aims and activities are based on a conversation with one of its initiators and local resident, Sandra Urvak, on December 13, 2022. See more about the NGO's activities here: <https://www.facebook.com/niilusoo/> Accessed December 4, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the Place-lore Map Application was initially established as part of the *Mälu-maastikud* (Memory Landscapes) fieldwork project, aimed at contributing to the management plans of Estonian national parks. See <https://geoportaal.maaamet.ee/est/Kaardirakendus/Kohaparimus/Kohaparimuse-kaardirakenduskirjeldus-p474.html>

### 3.2. How can storytelling help adapt to a crisis?

For many people, Estonia has become a battleground for preserving open spaces, untouched nature, or personally relevant and memorable environments. Several energy and infrastructure projects are being planned or constructed simultaneously under the goals of the green transition, disrupting local landscapes and communities, particularly in regions where large-scale development has been scarce until now. In Saaremaa, residents feel their access to the sea and fishing rights are threatened by the planned wind farms, while communities in Southern Estonia are concerned about the expansion of the Nursipalu military training area. Protests against expanding the military area have centered around the distinctive heritage of the Võrumaa region. In northern Estonia, plans for a potential nuclear power plant have led Letipea resident and former journalist Enno Tammer to write a book titled “The Nuclear Power Plant Behind the Garden Fence”<sup>18</sup>, which chronicles the struggle of residents against the planned plant.

My work here has analyzed how place-lore is adapted in conflict communication and briefly touched on how these narratives can contribute to more productive conflict resolution. However, the question of how folklore or other local representations can be resourceful in adapting the environmental emergencies has started to be recognized. Researchers (e.g., Scannell, Gifford 2013, 2013) have shown that a lack of attachment to place is a key barrier to climate action. Conversely, discussions about the environment can activate narratives that prompt people to engage more deeply with places and landscapes, fostering a stronger sense of locality. For instance, Erin Goodling (2024) described how a sense of place emerged through protest, using resistance to pollution from Portland Harbor as a case study. The participants in these protests were not originally locals, yet through their activism, they developed a growing connection to the place.

From this perspective, contextual, small-scale narratives like place-lore can be seen as a way of coping with conflict or crisis, grounding the anxiety it creates (a similar effect has been described in communication with non-humans; see, e.g., Whitehouse 2015) and re-establishing engagements and connections with the surrounding environment. This perspective aligns with discussions on storytelling as a means of overcoming personal and collective trauma (e.g., Kiser et al. 2010; Ingemark 2013). In this sense, local and contextual storytelling can serve as a method of place-making or reterritorialization, aiming to rebuild new boundaries or systems in response to deterritorialization, disconnections, and detachment.

Place-lore, like local folklore in general, expresses creative, subjective, and sustainable ways of adapting and living. This potential in sustainability communication has been recognized recently (see e.g., R. Hiimäe 2024). These stories require critical analysis in this direction—analysis that does not romanticize indigenous or traditional lifestyles—because finding creative and dynamic ways of coping with crises and creating change is crucial as we look ahead. A recent study on how Estonian people perceive the climate emergency and green transition

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<sup>18</sup> In Estonian “Tuumajaam aia taga” (2023).

measures undertaken to address it revealed<sup>19</sup> previously noted trends (e.g., Kalle et al. 2023) that EU and state-level initiatives often overshadow and ignore local, historical, and creative ways in which people respond to and cope with crisis, scarcity, etc. Similar trends have been observed also on a larger scale, for example in Northern Europe (Holzhausen, Grecksch, 2021), highlighting the need to move away from simplified, unified measures and emphasizing the importance of place-based relations and contextuality in adaptation strategies. These tendencies are concerning also because unified and detached practices lead to standardization and simplification in semiotic relationships and rapport in communicating with non-humans, a more-than-symbolical world (see also Hornborg 2001:143–144).

It is possible that negotiating, discussing, and making use of local narratives in conflicts in various ways enables making sense of new realities in an environmental emergency. Conflicts can be seen as a form of traditionalization. Bauman and Briggs suggested that the process of traditionalization is “part of the symbolic construction of discursive continuity with a meaningful past” (1990: 77). In addition to constructing new narratives and reinforcing existing interpretive frames, conflict also revises or creates practices. In Estonia, the practice of visiting sacred sites and leaving offerings has re-emerged since the 2000s, largely due to the activities of the Maausk movement (Jonuks, Äikäs 2019), which gained prominence particularly through conflicts. Also, the example of conflict over Treimani-Metsapooole forests presented in Article IV illustrates one of many local conflicts around clear-cutting in State Forest Management Centre forests. That altogether led to the creation of “community forests” or KAH-areas<sup>20</sup> (“kõrgendatud avaliku huviga alad,” i.e., areas of high public interest) in Estonia. Both ecosemiotics and folkloristics have crucial roles in addressing traditionalization and re-interpreting former narratives in conflicts: from the semiotic perspective, contextualizing discussions, and from the folkloristic perspective, critically rereading and reflecting on narratives used in conflicts to avoid imbalanced and stereotypical interpretations.

As discussed earlier, conflicts can be seen as moments of explosion, where an increase in information leads to greater unpredictability—resulting in multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations and an overwhelming proliferation of narratives and motifs (Lotman 2009: 14, 10). While I have shown that the production of new meanings and interpretations in public debates can be harmful—particularly when narratives become semiotically de-contextualized or detached from their ontological context—these explosive moments of conflict can also be fertile ground for meaning-making. Combining creative moments of explosion

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<sup>19</sup> Full report of the study is available here: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/cl/fi/9btmr6oxvmbkw5dgsbn3p/Rohep-rde-antropoloogilise-uuringu-raport.pdf?rlkey=fewmms6ejg21xo3syi4h17vmg&e=1&dl=0>. See also our overview of the study in Sirp: <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/kuidas-asetub-rohepoore-inimeste-igapaevaelu/>

<sup>20</sup> See more on the activist-led webpage <https://kah-alad.ee/>. KAH areas are also marked in the State Forest Management Centre’s forestry work map: <https://xgis.maaamet.ee/xgis2/page/app/rmk>.

with methodologies that facilitate dialogue, multi-voiced discussions, and contextuality can be an extremely fruitful step forward. The moment of explosion is followed by the self-reflection and (re)organization of meanings in a new way (Lotman 2009: 15, 125–126). But what will this new way look like?

## CONCLUSION

Since the moment I watched, via live stream, police dragging protesters down from the willow tree in Haabersti before it was cut down—while I was writing the proposal for this dissertation—I have gained a deeper understanding of why people turn to stories in conflicts and how these stories can either disconnect them from or strengthen their connection to their surroundings. In the following conclusion, I summarize this insight and outline six key contributions of my work.

My dissertation is devoted to analyzing the role of local narratives, which are semiotically contextual and grounded in the environment they represent, within environmental conflicts. This focus required establishing a dialogue between eco-semiotics, place-lore studies, and environmental communication studies, which I did in Chapter 1 “Theoretical dialogues”. In Chapter 1.1.1, I showed how place-lore researchers have developed characteristic fieldwork methodologies and mediated folklore material for the public. At the same time, theoretical foundations of place-lore research, including a conceptual definition of the field, were yet to be established. In Chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3, I demonstrated how eco-semiotics models enable describing semiotic complementarity and complexity between place-lore and the environment expressed through these stories, enabling metalevel description of place-lore. This was also the aim of Article I, where I defined the key features of place-lore as localizability, the representation of a place’s characteristics, and the expression of place experience. Therefore, the first relevant contribution of this work is the development of a new and analytical definition and theoretical foundation for the study of place-lore in a way that considers the phenomenon’s semiotic complexity. Defining these characteristics offers an essential base to continue working with place-lore, which is more than ever revisited, discussed, re-storied, negotiated etc. in the current context of environmental emergencies. The other relevant dialogue I established was between eco-semiotics and diverse research around studies of environmental conflicts in Chapters 1.2.1 and 1.1.1, and this dialogue also continued through Articles II and III. Defining the main goal and scope of the eco-semiotic study of environmental conflicts was the second relevant contribution of this work. I also argued that the foremost question in eco-semiotic conflict study is how to make conflict resolution more authentic and just.

The dissertation evolved from two research questions: 1) How does environmental conflict influence the semiotic multivocality and referentiality of place-lore? And 2) how can the study of place-lore contribute to advancing productive conflict communication? Chapter 2 (“Insights and Reflections”) addresses these questions. In Chapters 2.1.1 and 2.1.2, I demonstrate how environmental conflict communication and media coverage alter place-lore, placing these local, contextual, often small-scale narratives in a novel context and thereby shifting the relations and semiotic meanings represented in place-lore. In Chapter 2.2, I explained the issue of de-contextualizing and oversimplifying local narratives in conflict communication. These processes often lead to the exclusion of

relationships or engagements people have with the environment and sometimes ignoring the environment itself as a meaningful entity in conflicts. The case study of the Palukūla conflict in Article II and several cases in Article IV illustrated the same issue. Building on this, the third contribution of my dissertation is the analysis of how conflict communication mediates place-lore, addressing the over-symbolization and hypermediation of environmental cultural narratives within a semiotic framework. The second part of “Outcomes and Reflections,” starting with Chapter 2.3 and also in more depth in Article III on the case-study of mire restoration, discusses how to bring back the contextuality and multivocality of place-lore into heated discussions and whether it is possible to advance conflict communication and debates around environmental topics with the help of local narratives. I demonstrate that studying place-lore with an emphasis on allowing “environmental dissent”—that is, the environment’s non-concordance with human (cultural) representations—along with the expression of various social disagreements, can lead to more authentic and just discussions, helping to move beyond isolated, symbol-based conflict narratives. The fourth contribution of this work is presenting a concrete methodology and its potential application in using place-lore-centered fieldwork to address conflicts in nature protection.

Both the risk of overly symbolized discussions and the proposed solution—emphasizing the perceivable, referential aspects of folklore—stem from the same semiotic logic of place-lore, which is further explored in Chapter 2.3. In one respect, place-lore is deeply rooted in the interpretation of and adaptation to specific environments, making it an effective means of connecting people to the non-human, environmental reality, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their surroundings. However, the environmental semiosis embedded in place-lore is fragmented, variable, and open to multiple interpretations. While this open-endedness offers creativity and flexibility, it also creates a potential for ambiguity and conflicting interpretations. Not to mention conflicting interpretations in the tradition, practices and imaginations regarding different environments. Building on this, in Chapter 2.4 I discuss how ecosemiotics can access and analyze semiotic relationships between the environment and folklore, and how research into place-lore can advance ecosemiotic theory and methods. The fifth contribution of my work is advancing ecosemiotic models and methods toward considering the situative aspect in studying environmental representations in culture and connecting ecosemiotics with the fieldwork methodology developed in place-lore studies to inspire ecosemiotically informed fieldwork practices.

Chapter 3 of the dissertation, “To the Future,” is inspired by the constructive potential of integrating local narratives into conflict communication and suggests several next steps, focusing not only on research but also on practical applications. Two key directions are explored under the future directions: Chapter 3.1 discusses how to open environmental discussions to local narratives, what their role should be, and how to prevent them from being dismissed, while 3.2 examines the potential benefits of vernacular interpretations offered in addressing environmental emergency and how to unlock these possibilities.

In the framing chapter, the Haabersti White Willow and the Dakota Access Pipeline conflicts served as a through-line, however, I also analyzed a wide range of examples, utilizing various types of materials and methodologies. Therefore, the sixth contribution I want to highlight is a more comprehensive study of contemporary Estonian place-lore; how it is re-told and interpreted; and what part of the place-lore tradition is considered relevant in contemporary public discussions. These examples also illustrate how place-lore became meaningful and important to people, allowing them to negotiate, reframe, and explain their relationship with their surroundings—the things we need to keep doing most in environmental emergency.

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## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

### **Semiootiliste ühenduste taastamine: ökosemiootiline vaade kohapärимuse rollile keskkonnakonfliktides**

Minu doktoritöö on pühendatud kohapärимuse ehk kohalike, kontekstuaalsete ja keskkonnaeoseliste narratiivide rollile keskkonnakonfliktides. Kohapärимus on vaadeldav osana keskkonnakommunikatsioonist, sest selles avalduvad semiootilised suhted keskkonnaga ning need lood väljendavad ka keskkonna märgilisust. Teisalt on kohalikud narratiivid seotud kohaidentiteedi, kultuuripärändi ja traditsiooniga, ning aktiveeruvad konfliktides sageli siis, kui eelnimetatud väärtused tunduvad olevat ohustatud (Hafstein 2012). Keskkonnateemalised avalikud arutelud on keskkonnakriisi süvenedes üha arvukamad nii Eestis kui rahvusvaheliselt<sup>21</sup> ja oleks eksitav pidada sääraseid kohalikke juhtumeid pelgalt vastu-seisuks muutustele. Pigem osutavad need konfliktid olulistele füüsilistele ja semiootilistele katkestustele maastikus ja kohatajus. See, kuidas nende konfliktidega toime tulla – milliseid semiootilisi suhteid käsitletakse ning kelle tähendusi ja narratiive rõhutatakse – on muutunud üha olulisemaks, kuna see mõjutab otseselt toime tulemist ja kohanemisvõimet keskkonnakriisi kontekstis.

Doktoritöös loon esmalt dialoogi ökosemiootika, kohapärимuse uurimise ja keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringute vahel. Sellele on pühendatud töö esimene osa „Teoreetilised dialoogid”. Peatükis 1.1.1 kirjeldan kohapärимuse kogumist ja mõtestamist Eestis alates 19. sajandi lõpust ja vastava distsipliini esile tõusmist 1990. aastatel. Samas peatükis kaardistan ka peamise uurimislünga: ehkki Eesti kohapärимuse uurimine on maailma mastaabis unikaalne ning teadlased on teinud olulist tööd materjali täiendamise, organiseerimise ja vahendamisega, pole seni leitud häid teoreetilisi mudeleid ja kirjelduskeelt, mis võimaldaks uurida kohapärимust tervikliku ja kompleksse looduskultuurilise nähtusena. Peatükkides 1.1.2 ja 1.1.3 näitan, kuidas ökosemiotika teoreetiline raamistus võimaldab kirjeldada kohapärимuse ja keskkonna vahelisi semiootilisi suhteid ja paljuhäälsust, mida need lood väljendavad. Sama eesmärki täidab ka I artikkel, mis pakub ühtlasi ka uue kohapärимuse definitsiooni. Defineerin kohapärимuse kolme omaduse kaudu: lokaliseeritavus, konkreetse keskkonna representeerimine ja keskkonnakogemuse vahendamine. Vajadus kohapärимuse uurimisala uue, senisest konkreetsema piiritlemise järgi oli praktiline, sest seni olid uurijad lähtunud konkreetsest uurimismaterjalist, piirkonnast või maastikuobjektidest (Västriik 1998; Rimmel 2001, 2014b; M. Hiimäe 2001, 2004; Tuisk 2001), ent praktilised tegevused nagu arhiivitööd, andmebaaside arendamine ja välitöödeks valmistumine vajavad senisest hõlmavamalt definitsiooni. Kohapärимuse piiritlemine sellisel viisil, mis keskendub keskkonna ja folkloori suhetele, loob baasi

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<sup>21</sup> Ülevaate keskkonnaküsimusega seotud konfliktidest saab näiteks leheküljelt the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice: <https://ejatlas.org/> Vaadatud 4. detsembril 2024.

kohapärimuse edasiseks uurimiseks ka hübriidsetes keskkondades või kiirete keskkonnamuutuste ja kultuuriliste katkestuste kontekstis.

Teine oluline dialoog, mille aluseid esimeses osas kirjeldan, toimub ökosemiootika ja teiselt poolt keskkonnakonfliktide analüüsivate uurimissuundade vahel, mida selles töös esindab eeskätt keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringud. Sama dialoog jätkub ka II ja III artikli teoreetilistes osades. Toon esile, kuidas semiootilisest vaatest on keskkonnakonfliktide käsitlemisel kõige olulisemaks küsimuseks, kuidas hõlmata uurimisse nii see, kuidas erinevad inimgrupid keskkonda tõlgendavad kui ka keskkonna enda semiootiline aktiivsus, keskkonnasemioos ja teiste liikide kommunikatsioon. Teisisõnu, keskeks probleemiks on diskursiivse ja ontoloogilise vaate sildamine keskkonnakonfliktides. Nende kahe tasandi sidustamine võimaldab suunata konfliktidiskussioone produktiivsemaks ja autentsemaks. Autentsust on käesolevas töös mõistetud kui suhete mitmekesisust ja keskkonnaseoselisust, ehk olukorda, kus diskussioonid on viitelised keskkonna suhtes, mille üle neid peetakse. Autentne kommunikatsioon ökosemiootilises mõttes on kommunikatsioon, mis ei ole isoleeritud või suletud abstraktne arutelu, vaid on juurdunud keskkonna tähendusloome protsessides. Sellises kasutuses on mõiste tähenduselt hoopis vastupidine autentsuse mõistele nagu seda kultuuriteadustes sageli kasutatud on – konstrueeritud, väljapoolt antud väärtuse tähenduses –, ja mille kasutamist folkloristikas on kriitiliselt analüüsinud näiteks Regina Bendix (1997).

Doktoritöö sissejuhatuses püstitan kaks uurimisküsimust: 1) Kuidas keskkonnakonflikt mõjutab kohapärimuse potentsiaali vahendada ja väljendada semiootilisi suhteid inimeste ja nende keskkonna vahel, ja 2) Kuidas kohapärimuse uurimine saab aidata esile tuua inimeste ja keskkonna suhteid ning edendada produktiivset konfliktikommunikatsiooni. Need küsimused saavad vastused 2. peatükis „Tulemused ja arutelu”. Peatükis 2.1 näitan, kuidas keskkonnakonflikti kontekst muudab kohalike, kontekstuaalsete narratiivide seotust keskkonnaga ja nende võimet konkreetset keskkonda representeerida. Selles on oma osa nii konflikti loogikal kui ka meedia toimimisel, näiteks mõjutab kohapärimuse vahendamist ja tõlgendamist konfliktides hüpermeedia keskkond, uudisväärtus, meediakajastuse lühiajalisus või afektiivne kommunikatsioon. Doktoritöö II artiklis analüüsitud Paluküla konflikt ning artiklis IV kirjeldatud juhtumiuuringud on näidanud, kuidas pärimuse kasutamine konfliktidiskussuses on konflikti osaliste poolt alati selektiivne ja situatsioonipõhine ning seetõttu sageli ka kallutatud, vastavalt konflikti osapoolte huvidele. Avalikes aruteludes muutub konkreetne keskkond vähem oluliseks ja arutelud kipuvad keskenduma sümboltasandile, erinevatele väärtustele ja kultuurilistele tõlgendustele keskkonnaga seoses. Peatükis 2.2 sõnastan konkreetsemalt probleemi, mis taolise kontekstist eraldavast ja sümbolikesksest representatsioonist tuleneb. Kohalike narratiivide kontekstist lahti ühendamine ja lihtsustamine konfliktikommunikatsioonis viib mõnede keskkonnasuhete kõrvale jätmiseni, ja keskkonna enda kui tähendusliku subjekti välistamiseni konfliktides. See aga muudab arutelud keskkonna tähenduste suhtes suletuks ning sageli ka sotsiaalses mõttes hermeetilisteks. Teises osas 2. peatükist, nimelt peatükkides 2.3 ja 2.4 ning põhjalikumalt

ka artiklis III kirjeldan võimalusi, kuidas taastada kohapärimuse kontekstuaalsus ja paljuhäälsus konfliktikommunikatsioonis. Näitan, et kohapärimuse uurimine võimaldab konfliktikommunikatsiooni tuua eri vaatepunkte, seejuures ka keskkonna enda erimeelsust (*environmental dissent*, Low 2008), ehk teisisõnu esile tuua keskkonnaprotsesside mittevastavust inimeste (kultuuriliste) representatsioonidega. Keskkonna tähenduste, keskkonnasemioosi esindatus konfliktides on oluline, sest keskkonnakonfliktide lahendamiseks tuleb mõista semiootilisi ja füüsilisi protsesse ning konkreetsete ökosüsteemide toimimist. Samuti aitab keskkonna tähenduste arvestamine diskussioonides vältida sümbolipõhiseid, suletud ja vastandavaid arutelusid. III artiklis esitatud analüüs kohapärimuse välitöömetoodika kasutamisest soode taastamise projektis näitas, kuidas kohapärimuse uurimine ja vahendamine võib aidata loodushoiu ja kultuuripärandiga seotud kommunikatsioonikonflikte lahendada. Pärimus on paljuhäälneline, väljendab väga mitmekülgsed maastikuga suhestumise viise ja kui konfliktides kipuvad teatud väärtused või suhestusviisid vastandlikeks muutuma, siis võib pärimus olla tasa-kaalustavaks jõuks, näidates, et erinevad vaatepunktid on kõik mingil hetkel traditsioonis olemas ja olulised olnud ning üks pole teisest tähtsam. Teisalt on pärimuse talletamisel ja uurimisel ka praktiline roll konfliktide lahendamisel – välitööd panevad inimesed suhtlema ja kaasa mõtlema, võimaldavad luua turvalise õhkkonna eri osaliste, näiteks loodushoiu spetsialistide ja kohalike suhtluseks. Sellisel viisil võib kohapärimuse välitööd näha ka alternatiivse kaasamisviisina.

Doktoritöös olen seega käsitlenud kohapärimuse mitmetist rolli konfliktides. Ühelt poolt on nende narratiivide abil võimalik konflikte eskaleerida ja opositsioone süvendada, ning narratiivide selektiivne kasutamine jätab osa semiootilistest suhetest kõrvale. Teisalt võimaldab kohaliku pärimuse väärtustamine ja teadlik kaasamine konflikte mitmehäälsemaks ja konfliktikommunikatsiooni autentsemaks muuta. Peatükis 2.3 on selgitatud, kuidas need kaks võimalust tulenevad mõlemad kohapärimuse semiootilisest loogikast. Kohapärimuse tähenduspotentsiaal on mitmetine – sellise pärimuse tuumaks on keskkonna tõlgendamine ja keskkonnakommunikatsioon, ent seejuures on keskkonna enda tähendused alati fragmentaarsed, mittetäielikud ja vahendatud läbi traditsiooni. Traditsioon omakorda sisaldab erinevaid suhestumisi keskkonnaga, mis võivad teineteisega ka vastuolus olla: näiteks metsamajandamise debatis sisalduvad seisukohad metsast kui eestlaste identiteedi ja kultuuri seisukohalt olulisest maastikust või metsast kui Eesti majanduse olulisest ressursist. Vastavalt konfliktisituatsioonile on võimalik kumbagi tähenduskomplekti – keskkonnaseoselist või sümbolikeskset – võimendada.

Peatükis 2.4 arutlen, missugused meetodid aitaksid ökosemootikal kohakeskseid kultuurilisi representatsioone senisest ammendavamalt uurida. Kui seni olen töös kasutanud ökosemiootika teooriat kohapärimuse uurimise toetamiseks, siis selles peatükis keeran dialoogi teistpidi ja küsin, mida on kohapärimuse uurimisel, sh Eesti kohapärimuse uurijate välja töötatud välitöödemetoodikal pakkuda ökosemiootika edasi arendamiseks. Kirjeldan, kuidas kohapärimuse meetodeid on võimalik arendada sellises suunas, et nad võimaldaksid analüüsida

ka keskkonnasemioosi vahetumat, situatsioonipõhist mõju kultuurilistele tõlgendustele ning pakun peatükis 2.4.1 välja situatiivse suhte mõiste täiendamaks varem kaardistatud suhtetüüpe keskkonna ja tekstiliste väljenduste vahel (vt Maran 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). Taolised olukorrad, kus keskkonnas toimuv vahetult tõlgendusi mõjutab, hõlmavad näiteks lugude jutustamist matkates või keskkonnas orienteerudes. Sellistel juhtudel on keskkond on ühtviisi nii representeeritavaks kui meediumiks. Peatükis 2.4.2 kirjeldan, missugust tuge võiksid kohapärimuse välitöömeetodid pakkuda ökosemiootikale ning esitan ülevaatliku tabeli, asetamaks dialoogi ühelt poolt kohapärimuse välitööde eri etapid ja tegevused ning teisalt küsimused, millele ökosemiootiline analüüs tugineb.

Doktoritöö viimane ehk 3. peatükk, „Tuleviku poole” arutleb edasi võimaluste üle, kuidas kohalike, keskkonnaseoseliste narratiivide kaudu on võimalik üha sagedasemaid konflikte leevendada või lahendada. Peatükk vaatab kaugemale teaduslikust käsitlusest ja küsib praktiliste tegevuste kohta peamiselt kahes suunas: kuidas avada keskkonnadiskussioonid kohalikele, väikestele narratiividele ja missugune võiks olla nende roll konfliktides. Ning teisalt, kas neist lugudest võiks olla kasu üha süveneva keskkonnakriisiga, sealhulgas kiirete keskkonnamuutustega kohanemises. Mõlema küsimuse lahendamise aluseks on konfliktide kontekstis uut moodi kommunikatsiooniviiside välja töötamine, mis oleksid avatud nii kultuurilistele kui keskkonnaomastele tähendustele. Tulevikuperspektiivide arutelu kaardistab mõned võimalikud koostöösunad praktiliste meetodite edasi arendamiseks ja esitab ka mõned näited sammudest, mis on juba autentsema, kaasavama konfliktilahenduseni tehtud.

## **Artiklite kokkuvõtted**

Doktoritööle lisatud neljast artiklist esimene kirjeldab kontseptuaalset raamistikku kohapärimuse uurimiseks ökosemiootika kaudu ja on seega baasiks konkreetsete analüüside juurde liikumisel. Teine ja kolmas artikkel on juhtumiuuringud, millest üks on näide, kuidas kohapärimuse kaudu saab konflikti eskalearida ja diskussiooni pidurdada ning teine on produktiivne näide, keskendudes sellele, kuidas kohapärimuse uurimine võib diskussioone autentsemaks ja mitmekesisemaks muuta. Viimane ehk neljas artikkel on ülevaateartikkel, mis käsitleb viimaste aastakümnete olulisemate keskkonnakonfliktide rolli keskkonnadiskursuse kujunemisel Eestis. Järgnevalt annan lühiülevaate igast artiklist eraldi.

### **I artikkel “An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore”, *Sign System Studies* 50 (2/3), 2022**

Artikkel ehitab teoreetilist vundamenti kohapärimuse uurimiseks ökosemiootilise teooria kaudu ja pakub välja kohapärimuse mõiste senisest konkreetsema ja analüütilisema definitsioon. Esmalt annab artikkel lühiülevaate Eesti kohakeskse

folkloori uurimisest 19. sajandist kuni 1990. aastateni, mil kohapärimuse uurimisest sai Eestis eraldi uurimissuund. Artikkel keskendub ka terminoloogia arengule ja toob esile varasemad kohapärimuse määratlused, mis on kõik olnud pigem kirjeldavad, seotud konkreetse materjali või keskkonnatüübiga, ning ei ole arvesse võtnud kohapärimuse kui nähtuse loodus-kultuurilist komplementaarsust. Artikkel pöördub seejärel ökosemiootiliste mõistete poole, saades tuge eeskätt Timo Marani arendatud biosemeootilise kriitika suunalt, ja toob esile, kuidas kohakeskne folkloor ja keskkond, mida see representeerib on eri viisidel semiootiliselt seotud. Ökosemiootikale toetudes on võimalik näidata, kuidas kohapärimus on paljuhäälneline ja avatud keskkonnas leiduvatele tähendustele. Sellelt teoreetilisel alusel lähtudes pakub artikkel välja uue kohapärimuse määratluse, mis keskendubki kohapärimuse ja keskkonna suhtele: kohapärimus on folkloori osa, mis on 1) lokaliseeritav, 2) representeerib konkreetse paiga omadusi ja 3) vahendab kohakogemust. Need kolm omadust moodustavad kohapärimuse tuuma. Empiirilise materjalina kasutab artikkel soodega seotud folkloori, kus keskkonna ja folkloori seosed on iseäranis hästi esil, keskendudes eelkõige folkloorile, mis seostub Kakerdaja rabaga Põhja-Eestis. Materjal sisaldab arhiivitekste ja -salvestisi, välitööpäevikuid ja intervjuusid Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivist, Eesti Keele Instituudist ja välitöödest Kakerdaja rabas aastatel 2011–2015.

**II artikkel “The Role of Place-lore in Environmental Conflict Discourse: The Case of Paluküla Sacred Hill in Estonia.”** *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (2), 2021.

Kombineerides ökosemiootikat, keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringuid ja folkloristikat, uurib artikkel kohapärimuse taasjutustamist ja tõlgendamist konfliktis kontekstis. Artikkel analüüsib avalikku arutelu Raplamaal asuva Paluküla hiiemäe ümber. Mägi on piirkonna inimestele tuttav ja palju külastatav ning sellel on olnud mitmeid funktsioone: pühapaik, matkamise ja sportimise paik ning ürituste korraldamise koht, samuti on tema veerel talud ja põllud. Suurem konflikt lahvas 2004. aastal, kui kohalik omavalitsus kiitis heaks projekti suusakeskuse rajamiseks mäe nõlvale. Kohapärimus mängis olulist rolli järgnenud aruteludes. Selleks, et leida avalikust arutelust viiteid kohapärimusele, analüüsisin 138 konfliktit kajastavat artiklit Eesti uudismeediast vahemikul 2001–2019. Analüüsi tulemusena selgus kuidas 1) avalikes aruteludes peeti kohapärimust sageli faktiliseks teadmiseks ja narratiive käsitleti pigem ajalooliste väärtushinnangute ja praktikate otseste peegeldustena, mitte subjektiivsete tõlgendustena; 2) konfliktit kajastuses kasutati narratiive, motiive ja tähendusi valikuliselt, vastavalt konfliktit osapoolte eesmärkidele ja sõnumitele ja lisaks peeti arhiveeritud folkloori usaldusväärsemaks kui igapäevaseid rahvapärased tõlgendusi; 3) avalikes aruteludes konfliktit kontekstis tekkis vastandus mäe pühaduse ja praktilisemate kasutuste vahel, samas kui varasem pärimus mäe kohta väljendas nüansi-

rohkemaid vaatenurki. Tegelikkuses näitab nii varasem pärimus kui ka loodusteaduslikud andmed, mida artiklis samuti paralleelselt folklooriallikatega esitati, et Paluküla hiiemägi on olnud mitmekesise kasutuse ja inimõjuga paik. Paluküla konflikti analüüsi tulemused näitavad, et ehkki kohapärimuse keskmes on semiootilised suhted representeeritava keskkonnaga, samuti on pärimus sotsiaalselt mitmehäälne, jäävad need konfliktides sageli tähelepanuta. See viib omakorda suletud ja vastanduva kommunikatsioonini, kust on sageli välja jäetud ka kõnealune keskkond ise.

### **III artikkel “How can storytelling help restore mires? Applying place-lore fieldwork methodology in ecological restoration”. *Environmental Communication*, 2024.**

Artikkel, mis on kirjutatud koos Piret Pungas-Kohviga, analüüsib kohapärimuse uurimise rakendamist ökoloogilises taastamises, vaadeldes juhtumiuuringuna Eestimaa Looduse Fondi projekti LIFE Mires Estonia (2015–2021), mille raames viidi taastamistegevuste kõrval läbi ka kohapärimuse välitööd. Artikkel selgitab esmalt, et keskkonnaga seotud rahvapärased tõlgendused ei ole isoleeritud kultuurilised konstruktsioonid, vaid on semiootiliselt seotud bioloogiliste protsessidega, neist võrsudes, neid väljendades ja neile viidates. Kohapärimus, olles tugevalt kontekstuaalne ja lokaalne, on osa keskkonnakommunikatsioonist, hõlmates nii kultuurilisi kui ökoloogilisi tähendusi. Artikkel tutvustab ka Eesti kohapärimuse uurijate arendatud kohapärimuse välitööde metoodikat, mis keskendub ühtviisi kultuuriliste ja ökoloogiliste tähenduste talletamisele, ja millest juhinduti ka LIFE projektis. Semiootiline komplementaarsus keskkonna ja pärimuse vahel on eriti nähtav soodega seotud folklooris. Eestis on sood vastuolulised maastikud, olles viimase sajandi jooksul muutunud marginaliseeritud viljatutest äärealadest populaarseteks turismiobjektideks. Säärased eri tõlgendused võivad taastamise kontekstis konflikte esile kutsuda, samuti on inimestel mitmeid praktilisi muresid, näiteks maakasutuse või veerežiimi muutused. Artiklis esitatud analüüs käsitleb nii LIFE projektist saadud kogemust kohapärimuse välitööde rakendamisel kui ka välitöödel talletatud intervjuumaterjali. Intervjuud tehti 31 inimesega, need transkribeeriti ja kodeeriti. Analüüsis otsisime küsimusi sellele, missugused teemad soodega seoses esile kerkisid, kuidas suhtusid inimesed taastamisse ning missugust uut või eripärast teadmist välitööde kaudu saadi. Tulemused näitasid, kuidas kohapärimuse uurimise kombineerimine ökoloogilise taastamise teiste tegevustega võib parandada taastamise tulemusi järgmistel viisidel: 1) fookustades arutelud keskkonnale, tuues keskkonna semiootilise potentsiaali või „keskkondliku erimeelsuse“ (*environmental dissent*) diskussioonidesse; 2) lisades väärtuslikke andmeid, mida teised allikad või uurimismeetodid ei võimalda leida; 3) võimaldades lahendada muresid ja väljendada eri seisukohti läbi vahetu ja süveneva arutelu välitöödel, ning seeläbi ennetades võimalikke konflikte; ja 4) pakkudes alternatiivset osalus- ja kaasamisviisi avalike kohtumiste või sotsioloogiliste uuringute kõrval.

#### **IV artikkel “Sõjakas kaitse – konfliktid loodus- ja kultuuripärandi hoiu kujundamisel” *Methis Studia humaniora Estonica* 24 (30), 2022**

Artikkel, mille autoriteks on lisaks minule Tõnno Jonuks, Atko Rimmel ja Ulla Kadakas, uurib pingelisi konfliktolukordi, mis on kujunenud Eesti looduse ja kultuuripärandi kaitses alates 2000. aastatest. Osalejad on neid konflikte nimeetanud ka “sõdadeks“. Artikkel analüüsib meediakajastuste, dokumentide, aruannete, mõnel juhul ka välitööde andmete ja uudismeedia tekstide kvantitatiivse andmeanalüüsi kaudu 1) kes osaleb konfliktides, 2) millised on konfliktides kasutatavad argumendid ning 3) millist retoorikat neis kasutatakse. Esmalt annab artikkel lühikese ülevaate keskkonnakonfliktide ajaloost Eestis. Seejärel vaadeldakse põhjalikumalt 2000. aastatel domineerinud looduslike pühapaikade konflikte, alates 2016. aastast kestnud „metsasõda“ ja mõningaid silmapaistvaid üksikjuhtumeid möödunud kümnendist, nagu Haabersti hõberemmelga konflikt või Treimani-Metsapoolse kogukonnametsa kaitsmine. Järgnev diskussioon esitab peamised järeldused konflikti osapoolte, argumentide ja retoorika kohta. Artiklis käsitletud leidnud suuremad keskkonnakonfliktid on viinud uute liikumiste ja kodanikeühenduste tekkimiseni, eriti tõuseb siin esile „metsasõda“, millest kasvab välja mitu uut organisatsiooni. Samuti on hakatud just konfliktidest kannustatuna katsetama uusi protestimise viise, kasutama emotsionaalsemat kommunikatsiooni ja vastanduvat retoorikat, samuti on enam kasutatud sotsiaalmeediat. Konfliktide tulemusel on aga hakatud välja töötama ka kaasamis- ja osalusmeetodeid, mis varem olid puudulikud. Kõigis nendes konfliktides paistab aga silma loodusväärtuste ja majandushuvide vastandamine. Ka looduse ja pärandi kaitsmiseks kasutatud argumendid on olnud suhteliselt sarnased, tuginedes suurel määral rahvuslikele ja usulistele narratiividele. Artikli tulemustest selgub, kuidas konflikt võib toimida struktureeriva elemendina keskkonnadiskursuse kujundamisel. Seetõttu võib konflikte käsitleda mitte ainult negatiivsete nähtustena, vaid ka potentsiaalsete kultuuriliste katalüsaatoritena ja produktiivsete pöördepunktidenä.

#### **Doktoritöö panus**

Kokkuvõttes sõnastan doktoritöö kuus peamist panust. Esimene oluline panus on kohapärimuse mõiste uue ja analüütilise määratluse loomine ning teoreetilise aluse arendamine kohapärimuse uurimiseks viisil, mis arvestab nende narratiivide semiootilist kompleksust. Teiseks oluliseks panuseks on keskkonnakonfliktide ökosemiootilise uurimise välja kirjeldamine – mismoodi ökosemiootika saab konfliktide uurimisse panustada ja mis on peamised küsimused. Doktoritöö kolmas panus seisneb kohakesksete kultuuriliste kirjelduste (üle)vahendamise problemaatika senisest ammendavam analüüsis. Töö süveneb küsimusse, kuidas nähtused nagu ülevahendamine, üle-sümbolistamine ja emotsionaalne kommunikatsioon mõjutavad kohakeskset folkloori ja mis on selle peamiseks negatiivseteks tulemusteks. Neljandaks panuseks võib pidada konkreetse

metoodika kirjeldamist ja rakendamist konfliktide vahendamisel ja leevendamisel loodushoius. Doktoritöö raamis ja IV artiklis käsitletav juhtumiuuring kirjeldab Eestimaa Looduse Fondi LIFE Mires Estonia projekti kogemust kohapärimuse välitööde metoodika rakendamisel ökoloogilise taastamise kontekstis, tuues välja õppetunnid ja luues aluse metoodika edasiseks rakendamiseks. Töö viies panus on ökosemiootiliste mudelite ja meetodite edendamine arvestades situatiivset aspekti keskkonna kultuuriliste tõlgenduste uurimises ning kohapärimuse uurimisest tuleneva sisendi andmine ökosemiootika välitöömeetodite arendamiseks. Kuuendaks panuseks võib pidada kaasaja Eesti kohapärimuse senisest põhjalikumat uurimist, eeskätt selles osas, missugused lood on avalikes diskussioonides esil, missugune osa folkloorist aktualiseerib erinevate huvigruppide kasutuses ja missugust osa kohakesksest folkloorist peetakse oluliseks Eesti looduskultuurilise identiteedi seisukohast.



## **PUBLICATIONS**





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# An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore

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**Abstract.** Place-lore, which has been systematically collected and archived in Estonia since the 19th century, is a part of various national, communal and institutional practices. Until now, Estonian researchers have resorted to conceptualizing place-lore from the perspective of archival texts, and the focus has been on collecting and archiving the material. At the same time, theoretical study of place-lore has remained in the background. In the article I approach place-lore from the perspective of ecosemiotics and suggest a new definition of place-lore that is based on semiotic relations these narratives have with the environment they represent. Outlining different ways of how vernacular tradition and the environment it represents are semiotically related, and analysing the ways in which these relations are expressed in place-related folklore allows seeing how place-lore can be defined through (1) localizability, (2) representation of the characteristics of a place, and (3) manifestation of place experience. Defining place-lore and presenting the preliminary conceptual tools is much needed in practical collection work and archiving and serves as an important prerequisite for studying the place-related folklore in the context of contemporary challenges, such as changing textual practices, cultural disruptions, and environmental crisis. Examples are drawn from folklore associated with mires, specifically from narratives about the Kakerdaja Bog in northern Estonia.

**Keywords:** ecosemiotics; environmental communication; environmental signs; bio-semiotic criticism; place-lore; folk narratives

## Introduction

Bog pools are believed to be bottomless – this internationally spread vernacular belief is also represented in Estonian folk narratives. In one version of the story, a pot suspended by a rope is lowered into a bog pool to fathom its depth, yet the pot never reaches the bottom. However, as it is pulled out, a blood-soaked

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lamb's head is found inside.<sup>2</sup> Such stories, associated with specific places and narrated to represent social and ecological reality, serve various functions, such as mediating information about the landscape, explaining the peculiarities of a specific environment, entertaining, and, more generally, emphasizing the local sense of belonging, to name a few (see Rimmel 2014b: 52–53). In this article, I approach this kind of folklore, known as place-lore (Est. '*kohapärimus*')<sup>3</sup>, as a manifestation of engagements between the environment, or extra-narrative reality, and the collective, or the individuals. As such, these stories belong to the sphere of hybrid natural-cultural phenomena that are the research object for ecosemiotics (see e.g. Kull, Maran 2014: 42; Maran forthcoming).

Although contextuality and referentiality towards the environment are apparent in the material, the role of non-human surroundings in creating and interpreting vernacular narratives has so far not been acknowledged in Estonian place-lore research. The study of place-lore has developed into a distinctive research field over the last thirty years, and has been focusing on expanding the folklore collections and mediating these in public (see Västriik 2012<sup>4</sup>), yet the broader theoretical analysis of place-lore remained scarce. The researchers have mainly discussed practical questions related to the archiving or fieldwork (see Rimmel 2014b). Moreover, previous text-centred research methods that until the 1990s remained central in Estonian folkloristics have led researchers to focus on the representational level of texts; even after the social and situational context of folklore started to be taken into consideration (see e.g. Jaago 1999), ecological reality still remained overlooked. Thus, the research of place-lore has so far neglected important processes and topics emergent in contemporary folklore (e.g. environmental and cultural shifts, conflicts, changes, etc.), the study of which requires focusing on the structural and semiotic complexity and dynamics of natural-cultural relations.

The lack of a metalanguage and theory for approaching place-related folklore as a polyphonic natural-cultural tradition has also resulted in a vague definition

<sup>2</sup> For other examples of similar narratives, see Hiimäe 1988: 222. More about the belief in bottomless bog pools in an international context can be found in Meredith 2002.

<sup>3</sup> The word '*pärimus*' derives from the Finnish word '*perinne*' ('tradition') and in Estonian contexts it can be translated as '(oral) tradition'. The term became popular in the 1990s and while '*pärimus*' is often used synonymously with '*folkloor*' ('folklore'), it has a broader semantic field. Thus, '*pärimus*' can be seen as the equivalent of the English word 'lore'. On the changes in terminology and definitions of folklore in Estonian folkloristics, see Jaago 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Västriik 2012 refers to an abstract in a published collection of abstracts; in writing the article I have also been able to consult the unpublished full text of Ergo-Hart Västriik's presentation delivered at the 6th Nordic-Celtic-Baltic Folklore Symposium *Supernatural Places* held in Tartu, Estonia, 4–7 June 2012.

of place-lore. The way different scholars define or frame the concept of place-lore varies highly (see e.g. Remmel 2001a, 2014b; Tuisk 2001; Västrik 1998). In this paper, I aim to propose a novel definition of place-lore that focuses on semiotic relations between texts<sup>5</sup> and the environment they represent. By doing that, I show how these semiotic relations with the environment, i.e. interpretative, communicative and perceptual interactions with the surroundings, can be regarded as the core of place-lore. I am developing the new definition by establishing a dialogue between place-lore research and the theoretical framework of ecosemiotics, especially biosemiotic criticism (see Maran 2014). Devising a more comprehensive and analytical definition is a first step towards building a primary research frame for analysing place-lore in a more coherent way than before and can aid archival practices and fieldwork.

In the wider framework of environmental humanities, human experience manifested in vernacular or local cultures is seen as both unavoidably natural and cultural. The realization has led researchers to see that previous theoretical tools for the study of traditional culture are insufficient for analysing people's relations with material non-symbolic phenomena. This has been demonstrated by anthropologists and sociologists such as Kohn (2013), Descola (2013), Viveiros de Castro (1998), and Latour (1993), several of whom have been relying on semiotics. Instead of focusing on cultural representation (i.e. how humans, different groups, and societies interpret the environment or nature), researchers must turn their attention to the relationship between nature and culture, especially hybrid forms and interactions between humans and the surroundings (Kohn 2013: 9, 21–22; see also Favareau *et al.* 2017: 16–17). I consider the recent trends in ecosemiotics, e.g. connecting ecological and cultural branches of ecosemiotics, creating applied methods with a strong ontological foundation, and outlining the key principles of ecosemiotics that focus on eco-cultural diversity (see Maran, Kull 2014; Maran forthcoming; Wheeler 2008), as an integral part of the aforementioned methodological developments. Thus, conceptualizing place-lore through ecosemiotics will make it possible to integrate the study of Estonian place-lore in the dialogue taking place in contemporary environmental humanities.

This research is the first attempt to study place-lore in an ecosemiotics framework. However, various other local or nature-related representations have been studied by ecosemioticians: for example, describing the “herbal landscape” in ethnobotany (Sõukand, Kalle 2010), cultural and ecological interpretation of

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Place-lore texts’ indicated in the article can be loosely understood as cultural texts or textual representations in the context of vernacular communication, but not necessarily, or only, formal (recorded, written, transcribed etc.) texts.

mires (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015), and sacred natural sites in national history and conflict discourses (Heinapuu 2016; Päll 2021) deserve mention. One of the branches of eco- and biosemiotics has been closely intertwined with ecocritical studies (e.g. Tüür 2017; Maran 2007; Wheeler 2008), while biosemiotic criticism developed by Timo Maran (2014) serves as one of the most relevant examples of this research trend. Several ecosemiotic models concerning textual representations of the environment have been applied in the study of Estonian nature writing (e.g. Vilu 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). Estonian nature writing is occasionally intertwined with local folklore in the Estonian cultural context and there are some functional and structural similarities between these texts (see Maran, Tüür 2017). Besides providing models for analysing textual representations of the environment, ecosemiotics allows us to study ecological processes and functions of landscape (e.g. Lindström, Kull, Palang 2011: 104). Integrating these two dimensions is crucial for studying place-lore, because vernacular interpretations are rooted in practices and engagements concerned with non-human surroundings.

The illustrative material included in this article is drawn from place-lore related to mires as these wetland areas represent a unique environment where dwelling and moving around is challenging. Thus, environmental experience tends to be clearly expressed in mire-related folklore and is at the fore primarily because of the ecological characteristics of mires. On the other hand, mires represent a type of environment which has undergone a significant interpretational shift as the attitudes towards inland wetlands have radically changed in the past fifty years in Estonia – once considered useless, they are now one of the most loved environments (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015). Therefore, analysing the place-lore related to mires enables us to explore a wide variety of possible subjective and collective engagements with the physical surroundings. In order to narrow the illustrative material down to one region, the article focuses on folklore related to the Kakerdaja Bog in northern Estonia. The Kakerdaja Bog is one of the best known and most visited mires in Estonia, its popularity deriving from well-known local stories about the bog and from pieces of nature writing in which these folk narratives have a prominent role.<sup>6</sup> Folklore material about the Kakerdaja Bog, collected since the early 20th century up to 2016, is rich and versatile.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Kakerdaja Bog is one of the central places in the writings of the beloved Estonian nature writer and photographer Fred Jüssi (e.g. Jüssi 1972, 1995, 2003), but the bog and its narratives have also been present in several other authors' works over time (e.g. Lunts 1936; Relve 2008; Allas 2016: 46–53).

<sup>7</sup> The earlier material, most of which is collected in the 1930s, 1960s, and 2000s, includes archived folklore texts and recordings, notes on collecting expeditions (fieldwork diaries, field notes from the more extensive field trips to the region in 1965 and 2003), and photos in the

The article is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the previous development and application of the concept of place-lore and describes how the contextuality and place-referentiality of place-related folklore have been studied earlier. The second section adapts concepts and methods of ecosemiotics to study place-lore and describes how semiotic relations with the environment are relevant in place-lore. Section three focuses more specifically on the issue of defining the concept of place-lore: relying on the previous definitions suggested by Estonian scholars, the central defining features that are characteristic of place-lore as a special type of folklore tradition are proposed. Some future directions about the study of place-lore are included in the conclusion of the article.

## 1. Earlier research into Estonian place-lore

The Estonian concept of '*kohapärimus*', which this article aims to reframe, has been influenced by wider trends in Estonian folkloristics and, through that, also by social and historical contexts. Understanding how the concept is developed, and what kind of semiotic relationships it has been used to describe is crucial for establishing a new definition and research frame. Thus, before placing the concept in a dialogue with ecosemiotics, I (1) discuss previous terminology and the research context where the concept of place-lore was established; and (2) outline some aspects of place-lore-centred fieldwork and archiving methods as these have developed rather independently from theory and are practically oriented.

### 1.1. Developing the concept

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the consistent yet dynamic tradition behind the relatively new concept of place-lore. Since the early days of systematic folklore collection in 19th-century Estonia, folklorists have been highlighting the part of folklore that represents the surrounding environment or expresses locality in a broader sense. The terminology used by different researchers has been heterogeneous, and the description of the material has varied, ranging from

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Estonian Folklore Archives and the Estonian Cultural History Archives, as well as toponymic explanations mostly deriving from the 1920s–1930s and 1950s–1960s in the collections of the Institute of the Estonian Language. Newer material includes sound and video recordings, notes, letters, and photos from my fieldwork carried out in 2011–2015 to collect place-lore related to the Kakerdaja Bog and its surroundings. I conducted interviews with nature photographers, locals, nature guides, and nature protection officials who have had professional or personal connections with the Kakerdaja Bog (for a more thorough ecosemiotic analysis of the material see Päll 2016).

using broader categories to specific terms (Rimmel 2014b: 23–25). For example, two most prominent initiators of folklore collecting in 19th-century Estonia – Jakob Hurt and Johann Matthias Eisen – used the terms *‘kohalised jutustustused’* (Hurt 1989[1896]), meaning ‘local tales’, and *‘kohalised eesti muinasjutud’* (Eisen 2000[1882]), meaning ‘local Estonian folktales’, which refer to narratives describing natural locations. Jaan Jung, an amateur historian, used the German word *‘Ortssage’*, from which the Estonian term *‘kohamuistend’* (‘place legend’) was later derived (Rimmel 2014b: 24).<sup>8</sup> During the Soviet regime (the 1940s–1990s), the concept of the place legend came to be regarded as the definite core form of place-related folklore (Västrik 2012; Kindel 2002: 104). The contemporary term *‘kohapärimus’* (‘place-lore’) emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, (e.g. Rimmel 1997, 2001a; Västrik 1998; Tuisk 2001) to indicate a wider thematic category of folklore.

With the emergence of the new concept, research into place-lore also became disciplinarily independent in the 1990s when Mari-Ann Rimmel founded the place-lore research group at the Estonian Folklore Archives (EFA). The emergence of the field was made possible by several developments in Estonian culture studies, for example the overall widening of the scope of Estonian folkloristics that called for the study of more genre-synthetic and loose categories for folklore (Västrik 2012; Kuutma 2010: 690), or the spatial turn, that reached Estonian culture studies in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kuutma 2010). At the same time, work of the EFA place-lore research group can be seen as a reaction to intense searches for local and national identity in the period following the restoration of the Republic of Estonia (Rimmel 2014b: 19). In these discussions, nature-related tradition has an important role (see Rimmel, Jonuks 2021; Annus 2020). The EFA place-lore research group have been recording additional material and making archived material available in cooperation with local communities and institutions either by publishing anthologies on specific regions (see Potter, Rimmel, Valk 2001; Rimmel 2004; Valper 2010; Rimmel 2011; Rimmel 2017) or through other forms of cooperation, such as drawing up an inventory of sacred natural sites,<sup>9</sup> or contributing to local or national cultural heritage management and nature protection,<sup>10</sup> etc.

<sup>8</sup> In 19th- and 20th-century Estonian folklore studies, both the choice of terminology and classification practices were influenced by the German and Finnish research context, and since the 1940s also by Soviet research trends (further on this, see Jaago 1999)

<sup>9</sup> For more, see Development Plan 2008 or <https://www.muinsuskaitseamet.ee/et/ajaloolised-ja-looduslikud-puhapaigad>.

<sup>10</sup> For example, place-lore collection projects in Estonian national parks (2006–2017) aimed to contribute to cultural heritage management – see more at [http://folklore.ee/era/teema/kohad\\_rakendus.htm](http://folklore.ee/era/teema/kohad_rakendus.htm). Place-lore research is also integrated into the mire restoration project led by the Estonian Fund for Nature, see <https://soo.elfond.ee/>.

The contemporary concept of place-lore has largely developed based on the study of the material in the EFA collections, which were started in the late 19th century and built up mainly in the 20th century.<sup>11</sup> However, the collecting and archiving of place-lore has not been even or uniform in terms of themes, areas, and periods; therefore, the concept of place-lore has represented certain relationships with the environment and views on nature more than others. For example, the earlier body of place-lore, collected at the beginning of the 20th century, can be viewed against the backdrop of establishing a national identity, and the national romantic interpretations of this material have influenced later place-lore (see e.g. Metssalu 2008; Heinapuu 2016). A significant part of the earlier material on place-lore was collected in the course of a collection campaign of the EFA initiated by Richard Viidalepp in 1938–1939<sup>12</sup> (Kindel 2002; Hiiemäe 2005a: 245–247), and the aforementioned romantic motifs as well as literary interpretations are clearly noticeable in this material. Another large corpus of widely used archive material on place-lore consists of narratives related to giants such as Kalevpoeg, Suur Töll, etc. (see Valk 2002: 415–417); these were mainly collected in the Soviet period when this kind of popular mythological tradition with significant influences from literature was regarded as ideologically “safe” (Västriik 2012).<sup>13</sup>

Particular thematic foci on collecting and studying place-lore are also clearly noticeable, for in the context of contemporary Estonian folkloristics, place-lore research remained rather traditional and fixed. Archive-centred research (see Västriik 2012) and scarce international contacts with environmental humanities scholars resulted in the continuation of the existing research focus into the 1990s. The dominant interests have largely proceeded from the traditional 19th- and 20th-century peasant culture, including historical sacred sites and archaeological sites (e.g. Remmel 1998, 2014a; Kõivupuu 2009), or bodies of water (Metsvahi 2018; Remmel 2014c), as well as the relations between place-lore and calendar holidays and the human life cycle (Hiiemäe 2005b; Remmel 2001b) and treasure

<sup>11</sup> On the development of the EFA collections see Valk 2004, 2005; Järv, Sarv 2014; Västriik 2010. The collections hold ca. 1,528,800 manuscript pages. It is virtually impossible to determine the share of place-lore within this total folklore corpus as no topic-based differentiation analysis of the kind has been conducted yet. The number of texts incorporated in the digital database of place-lore is currently over 36,000. The database is available at <http://galerii.kirmus.ee/koobas/>. In addition to earlier material, the EFA place-lore working group has recorded at least two thousand hours of sound recordings and hundreds of hours of video recordings within different cooperation as well as independent projects since the 2000s.

<sup>12</sup> The campaign resulted in 16,158 pages of place-legends sent to the archives by school-children all over Estonia (Kindel 2002: 105).

<sup>13</sup> This resulted in anthologies on Estonian giant lore in the series *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae*: see Laugaste, Normann 1959; Laugaste, Liiv, Normann 1963; Laugaste, Liiv 1970.

lore (Kalda 2011). Student theses have been written about contemporary layers or interpretations of place-lore such as the use of place-lore in tourism (Kindel 2005; Reha 2014) or place-lore in urban environments (Päll 2012; Vahtmäe 2008). Outside folkloristics, studies based on place-lore as a resource have remained rare (e.g. Kama 2016, 2017; Pae, Rimmel 2006; Palang, Paal 2002).

## 1.2. Applying the concept

While the study of place-lore still lacks a substantial theoretical framework, its fieldwork methods and the practices of archiving recorded materials were developed intensely and rather independently from theory. The collecting and archiving practices stem from an established set of processes characterized by diachronic continuance (or reliance on older archive material), and synchronic coherence (or recording the narratives and their environmental context as a whole). These methods take into consideration the symbolic nature of place-lore, and at the same time also the semiotic reality and agency of extra-narrative space.

Ergo-Hart Västriik (2012) has pointed out that the 1990s witnessed a shift from text-centredness to place-centredness in the fieldwork methods of place-lore research. For instance, the central activity in the fieldwork methods of the place-lore research group of the EFA is visiting the sites mentioned in oral lore together with the informant (Västriik 2012). However, even earlier fieldwork materials reveal that researchers have defined the relationship of place and folklore as a relevant object of their study. Thus, in the general context of text-centred folkloristics in Estonia, the fieldwork methods of researchers interested in place-lore have been rather ethnographical and open towards the landscape, being similar to methods used by environmental anthropologists. Fieldwork notes or written (folklore) texts have been complemented with information on the environment, such as descriptions of the natural conditions and peculiarities, site plans, drawings, photos, maps, etc. For example, on her visits to the Noku farm at the edge of the Kakerdaja Bog during the 1965 and 2004 field expeditions, the folklorist Mall Hiiemäe added detailed descriptions of the environment, which today well illustrate the transformation of the site from a peripheral forest ranger's house at the edge of a bog into a modern tourist object, and the impact of the changes on the mire environment.<sup>14</sup>

Semiotic relations with the environment that are expressed in the material have also affected archiving practices. In addition to being familiar with the oral tradition, knowledge of natural sciences such as the ability to recognize species,

<sup>14</sup> Mall Hiiemäe's fieldwork diaries [RKM II 195, 663/5 < Järva-Madise parish – Mall Hiiemäe (1965) and EFA II 45, 243/5 < Järva-Madise parish – Mall Hiiemäe (2004)].

familiarity with geological and geographical terminology, and skills in interpreting landscape by means of maps or archaeological data, has also been a prerequisite of the archiving methodology of place-lore. Historically, one of the bases of the systematization of material in the EFA has been the administrative and/or geographical region where the material has been collected (Jaago 2005: 54; more in Järv, Sarv 2014). However, for place-lore research exact topographical data and information about the environment are essential for systematizing the material: for example, metadata of texts or database keywords are not based only, or mainly, on the narratives (e.g. plots, variants, narrative elements), but also on the location or the (natural) object described in the text. Digital databases also enable linking to geographical coordinates and display textual data in their spatial context. Thus it becomes evident from the methods researchers of place-lore are using that, despite the lack of a supportive theoretical frame, they have understood and addressed the important role of environmental structures and qualities in the formation of place-related traditions.

## **2. Semiotic relations with the environment as the core of place-lore**

In this section, I approach place-related folklore as an ecosemiotic phenomenon and explain (1) the relevance of environmental semiosis in place-centred folklore and (2) how the semiotic relations between texts and extra-narrative reality come forth through concrete representations and storytelling situations. In order to explore the complex semiotic complementarity between place-lore and the environment it represents I adapt the concepts of environmental semiosis and environmental signs and develop further the framework of biosemiotic criticism (see Maran 2014) that has formerly been used to analyse works of nature writing.

### **2.1. The role of environmental semiosis in place-lore**

From an ontological perspective, place-lore as cultural description cannot exist outside the ecological semiotic sphere, since symbolic sign processes are grounded in biosemiotic processes (see e.g. Kohn 2007; Wheeler 2008). Therefore, when studying place-lore attention must be paid to the role of both symbolic, i.e. conventional and cultural, sign relations, as well as iconic and indexical ones, i.e. sign relations that are physically manifested or rely on resemblance. Moreover, as place-related narratives are established in the surroundings and through physical perception, it is imperative not only to study the interpretive sphere of place-lore against the background of cultural narrative processes, but also to observe this

tradition as a unique part of environmental communication. The relevance of the semiotic potential of the environment in place-lore is well demonstrated by the toponymic explanations<sup>15</sup> of the Kakerdaja Bog:

Kakerdi [bog] has been named after long-shinned birds. They had legs under their tails and could neither walk nor fly very well. There were many of these birds and they were friendly with people. The bog came to be called the Kakerdi Bog. A bird like that could still be seen there 20 years ago.<sup>16</sup>

The example illustrates the ways in which the characteristics of the specific environment, inter-species communication, and the physical perception of people can be expressed in place-related folklore. The Estonian verb '*kakerdama*' ('to waddle'), illustrates the movement of people and other animals or birds on an unstable surface. The vernacular word '*kakerdi*' was also used to refer to loons and grebes (Mäger 1967: 13, 16), species of waterfowl that are not adapted to walking on the ground, which is why their movement on the ground seems strange. According to various earlier narratives, the toponyms *Kakerdaja* and *Kakerdi* derive from the vernacular name of black-throated loons (*Gavia arctica*), but in contemporary stories, the toponym has been interpreted more as a reference to characteristic movement on bog surface. One of the informants, a wildlife photographer, explained the relevance of *Kakerdaja* as a bog name as follows: "[...] if you consider that a waddler... it could also stand for a person's way of walking in the bog, doesn't it? That you are kind of waddling here."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the interpretation of the unique characteristics of the mire environment such as the soft and unstable ground surface (see Fig. 1) is central in this toponymic explanation.

<sup>15</sup> Estonian toponymists have studied vernacular place names in some Estonian regions in more depth and analysed the role of nature in creating place names. On the relationship between toponyms and the environment and the principles of naming see e.g. Saar 2008. On place names connected with birds and animals see FASTER, Saar 2013, on hydronyms see e.g. FASTER 2018.

<sup>16</sup> *Kakerdi on saanud oma nime pikakoivaliste lindude järgi. Nende jalad olid olnud saba all ja nad pole kuidagi käia saanud, ega lennata hästi. Neid olnud sääl palju ja olid inimestega väga sõbralikud. Inimesed hakkasin raba kutsuma Kakerdi rabaks. Kakerdis oli näha veel sellist lindu 20. a. eest. [ERA II 219, 448 (22) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Peedu village, Aida farm – Harry Loog < Richard Loodis, 43 years old (1939).]*

<sup>17</sup> *[...] kui mõelda, et kakerdaja... see võib ka olla inimese liikumine soos, eksole. Et sa nagu kakerdad siin. (Interview with nature photographer I. M., 28.04.2015).*

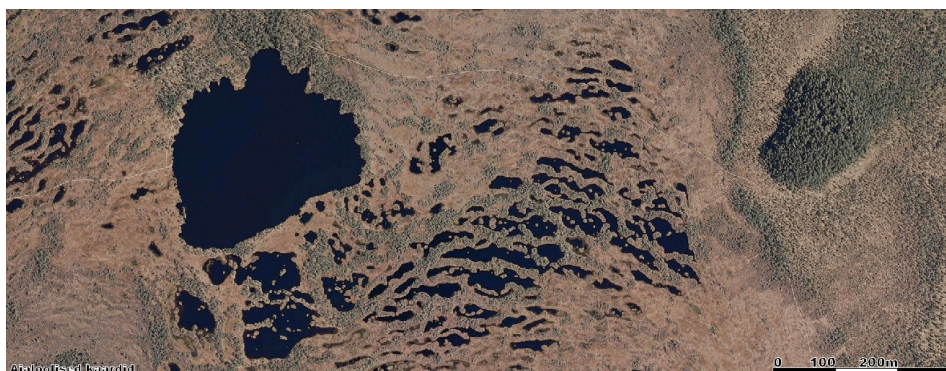


Figure 1. Orthophoto of the Kakerdaja Bog: the lake where black-throated loons were spotted, tricky bog pools system, and the bog island Hiiesaar on the right (Source: Republic of Estonia Land Board's Geoportal, 2007).

Narratives related to wetlands make it possible to explore different ways of expressing semiotic relations with the environment in place-lore. The uniqueness of the mire environment is reflected in narratives about people drowning or sinking in bog pools, or supernatural narratives in which mires swallow people or lead them astray (see e.g. Meredith 2002; Hiimäe 1988; Pungas, Võsu 2012). At the same time, this kind of cultural interpretations are always influenced by human biology, such as perception modalities or the way of moving – in other words, these interpretations are *umwelt*-specific (Wheeler 2008: 141, 144): for example, humans' ability to move and operate in a mire landscape without special devices (e.g. bog shoes) is hindered. Also, the markings of communication and expressions characteristic of non-human species are often evident in texts representing nature (Maran 2014: 304) – in the case of toponymic explanation of the Kakerdaja Bog, it is the activity of the black-throated loon.

Anthropologist and folklorist Elizabeth Bird has explored how local narratives, including place-related narratives, are attached to the surroundings. Bird discusses the issue in the context of local and immediate interpretative relations, rather than on a wider historical geographical scale, which makes the discussion approachable for ecosemiotics. She inquires why narratives are attached to some places more easily than others (Bird 2002: 525). Mall Hiimäe, who has studied Estonian nature-related lore, has discussed the same tendency: the qualities or peculiarities of landscape (e.g. prominent relief forms, single large trees, and boulders) are attached to relatively similar migratory motifs so that one could say that “the location inspires” it (Hiimäe 2001: 94). Bird (2002: 526) suggests that place-related stories can be seen as an attempt to explain the ambiguity, distinctiveness,

or prominence that people notice in the environment. Ambiguity, in the present context, can be seen as a certain semiotic potential in landscape, something that is noticeable or distinguishable or catches attention.

Explaining the ambiguity or distinctiveness in the environment can also be seen as an interpretation of environmental signs in the vernacular semantic frame. Environmental signs are physically manifested causal and non-conventional sign relations (Maran 2017: 356) that are open to cultural interpretations (Maran 2017: 360). In conventional language signs, the code that connects the sign (representamen) and its object is internal to culture and immediately accessible to humans. In environmental signs, on the contrary, the correlation between the sign and the object originates outside of human culture. This creates ambiguity, fragmentariness and obscurity of various kinds (Maran 2017: 360). For instance, in folklore a circle of mushrooms is interpreted as a “fairy ring”, or various folk narratives describe people seeing will-o’-the-wisps on mires.<sup>18</sup> In these cases, the ecological sign relations between the object and the representamen remain non-accessible for the perceiver (Maran 2017: 359–360). Furthermore, the objects behind sign relations may be general or manifold in themselves and therefore difficult to perceive (Maran 2017: 362). These kinds of situations may inspire a variety of potential culture-specific interpretations. The lack of information or need for an explanation that motivates new vernacular interpretations has also been pointed out by Elizabeth Bird (2002: 526) as she discusses the ambiguous objects or phenomena of landscape.

## 2.2. Representing environmental semiosis in place-lore

In the previous subsection I discussed how vernacular interpretations can be rooted in environmental semiosis to a considerable extent. However, semiotic relations with the environment are not directly expressed in concrete folkloristic representations, but are intertwined with the tradition-based logic of folk narratives, such as migratory and local tale motifs, genre traditions, and storytelling practices. Timo Maran (2014) has addressed a similar dynamics between environmental experiences and the tradition of nature writing in the context of biosemiotic criticism proposed by him. He has described the relationship of

<sup>18</sup> Non-accessibility of sign relations pointed out by Maran is a good example of the semiotic impulse in the origin of folk narratives: according to Maran, the missing part of the sign relation is compensated by narrative. However, in the actual vernacular communication the persistence of motifs like fairy rings mostly remains an issue of choices on the symbolic or narrative level (i.e. the level of the interpretant). Although people can be aware of the biological context of the phenomena, they can choose to consider alternative explanations.

literary texts and the nature they represent as integration of two semiotically complex and multidimensional spheres, which can also be seen as a modelling relation (Maran 2014: 301). Combining the levels of modelling suggested by the Tartu-Moscow School on the one hand and those described by Thomas A. Sebeok on the other, Maran (2014: 303) illustrates how, in nature writing, modelling takes place in close interaction between zoosemiotic, linguistic, and artistic levels. These three levels can be studied also in place-lore texts. While the linguistic and artistic dimensions of modelling are more dependent on the characteristics of a particular tradition (e.g. language, genre logic, and performance contexts), zoosemiotic modelling takes place through the environmental perception of the storyteller and is manifested in texts, for example as references to the environment and other species or as descriptions of physical and environmental experiences (Maran 2014: 304).

The concept of zoosemiotic modelling makes it possible to notice iconic and indexical sign relations of environmental semiosis in textual representations and thus allows seeing place-lore texts as a dynamic part of environmental communication. Moreover, this kind of modelling based on perceptual and physical relations with the surroundings is relevant in environment-related folklore because these narratives are mostly created and interpreted through tangible and immediate engagements with the surroundings (see e.g. Kohn 2013). For example, in mire-related lore, the level of zoosemiotic modelling is mainly expressed in descriptions, place names, experiences, etc. related to the terrain or surface. Moving and operating in a mire environment is physically challenging and requires careful interpretation of environmental signs (e.g. weather conditions or the composition and colour of vegetation). Also, avoiding sinking into the mire surface or getting lost in an unvaried disorienting landscape requires a sharpened perception and awareness of one's physical body and movement. This is the reason why folk narratives related to mires predominantly describe the dangers and struggles of physical movement or the surrounding environment (see Hiimäe 1998; Meredith 2002).

Ecosemioticians have mapped complex semiotic relationships between the environment and texts, through which the references to the environment are established and created in texts. These relationships describe how creating of specific representations is based on both the semiotic agency of the environment and the recognition of the storyteller. For instance, a *motivated* and *mimetic relationship* describes the occasions when the motivation or impetus that inspires the creation of specific representations proceeds from nature (Maran 2014: 301; Maran, Tüür 2017: 289–290). The motivated relation correlates with the ambiguity of the landscape as a stimulus for place narratives referred to by Bird (2002: 526–

527). The *representational relation* describes how the environment is mediated at the textual level through the modelling, and the *complementary relation* enables us to describe how literary works are not entirely understandable without their environmental context (Maran 2014: 301) and, at the same time, the extra-narrative space can be interpreted through the textual knowledge (Maran forthcoming). In the case of vernacular interpretation, however, the semiotic activity of the environment can also have a direct impact on narratives through the storytelling practices, which requires complementing the relationships described in previous ecosemiotic research.

I am hereby proposing a *situational relation* to describe spatially and temporally (more) immediate semiotic relations between textual interpretations and environment. A place or an environment presented in a folklore text often coincides with the site where the narratives are told – in this case, the represented environment itself is present. The situational relationship describes the occurrences when semiotic activity of environment interrupts and engages with the interpretations in storytelling situations such as hiking, tour guiding, etc., and directs people to varying or changing the stories by offering hints, twists, or new meanings. This way, the environment as an interface plays an important role in mediating and retaining vernacular narratives (Gunnell 2009: 307–308). Interviews conducted with wilderness guides, local people, and photographers in the Kakerdaja Bog illustrate how interpretation and variation of well-known narratives is often a response to the experiences of the environment or changes in its appearance (see Päll 2016). For instance, the species that one can see in the environment, or, for example, the time, place, season, weather, and context of narrating can lead to telling the stories differently. A situational relationship differs from motivated or complementary relationships as it describes not an interpretational frame, but an immediate feedback loop between the environmental and textual spaces.

Consequently, it is fair to conclude that compared to, for example, nature writing, place-lore is semiotically more open towards the extra-narrative space as non-human semiotics is present through a shared communicational space without major temporal or spatial distances. One of the possible ways to analyse the situational relationship in representations is by means of the same level of zoosemiotic modelling (see Maran 2014: 304), and, in addition, by observing the variations of the narratives and motifs in different contexts. Although the changes, shifts, and reactions in narratives motivated by the situational relation can be visible at the representational level, the interpretive context of specific representations becomes analysable only by using fieldwork methods that enable the study of the storytelling context and practical engagements with the surroundings.

### 3. Reframing the concept of place-lore

In the following, I briefly address previous definitions of place-lore and propose a new definition that focuses on semiotic relations between narratives and the environment. So far, the lack of an analytical definition of place-lore has been causing difficulties on various stages of place-lore research ranging from preparing for fieldwork to the digitization of archival material. For instance, how we distinguish place-lore from local lore in general has a direct influence on the content and extent of collections and public applications, and also on possible research topics. The number of texts in the database depends on the range of the boundaries of the concept of place-lore (see Remmel 2014b: 35–36). The new set of defining characteristics I am suggesting here can provide the basic criteria for the primary levels of description, such as database keywords or fieldwork questionnaires for collecting place-lore.

So far, the most widely used definition of place-lore is the one formulated by Mari-Ann Remmel: “Place-lore is mostly narrative lore which is bound to some toponym, site or landscape object, and which includes (place) legends, place-bound beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore, memories, etc.” (Remmel 2001a: 21). Other folklorists have either used definitions of place-lore similar to Remmel’s (e.g. Kindel 2005; Valk 2008, 2009), or suggested somewhat different definitions of the concept in introducing specific topics, e.g. Västriik (1998) in the context of Votian folklore; Tuisk (2001) in the tradition of Estonian communities in Siberia; and Hiiemäe (2001, 2004) in the context of landscapes-related vernacular practices.

As Remmel’s definition illustrates, scholars have tried to delineate place-lore by genre, naming for example legends, beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore, reports, memories (Remmel 2014b: 31; Västriik 1998: 132) or vernacular knowledge about landscape (Hiiemäe 2004: 66). The usage of genre-specific descriptions stems from the previous research tradition; however, when introducing place-lore as a broader and hybrid term to replace the former term ‘place legend’, researchers already acknowledged that genre criteria are not decisive and place-lore can be seen as a thematic field (Remmel 2014b: 29; Västriik 1998: 132). Ülo Valk (2008: 10) has pointed out how place-lore serves as a “synthetic device to study various genres in their connection with environment”.

Leaving aside genre typologization, the definitions of place-lore so far have proceeded from

- (1) (natural) objects represented in place-lore (see Västriik 1998; Hiiemäe 2001, 2004). Hiiemäe (2004: 66), for example, has listed “both natural and artificial objects such as mounds, valleys, forest groves, bogs, bodies of water, fields, rocks, primeval trees, graves, chapels, churches, roads, administrative units”;

- (2) topics of place-lore, or information place-related folklore mediates: place-lore represents places and tells tales associated with places (see Remmel 2001a, 2014b; Västrik 1998). Västrik (1998: 132), for example, argues that in place-lore, “information is mediated [---] about places and archaeological monuments, their origins, special features, the events that have occurred in that place or the rituals that have been performed there” (Västrik 1998: 132); or
- (3) the (subjective) relationship between an individual and a place (Tuisk 2001: 78).

The definitions proposed so far have highlighted important characteristics but remain descriptive and dependent on the context of the specific topics or landscape type the earlier material represent. The objects and topics of place-lore and the ways in which it is related to the environment change in time – for example, next to natural objects, also urban spaces or places of artificial environments are represented in place-lore (see e.g. Vahtmäe 2008); or else the folklore of village communities has been replaced by folkloric interpretations in heritage tourism (Kindel 2005; Reha 2014) which, in turn, represent an altogether different experience of place. Thus it is important to describe characteristics that can reveal the more general reciprocal relations between the environment and textual space. Considering the former definitions introduced above, but focusing on the relations of folklore and the extra-narrative environment, in the following I am proposing three key criteria for defining place-lore.

### 3.1. Localizability

Localizability, the association of a narrative with a specific location in the extra-narrative landscape, has been emphasized as a particularly characteristic aspect of place-lore (Remmel 2014b: 39; Hiimäe 2001: 87; Västrik 1998: 132). Mentioning or highlighting a particular place in folklore is also seen as a primary criterion of place-lore (Kindel 2005: 11). Place-lore is therefore clearly different from folklore that relates to certain environments or landscapes as such, e.g. narratives about forest spirits, haymaking, or hiking stories that are not place-specific.<sup>19</sup> In general, localizability is about creating a primary association between a place and a narrative, a spatial framework marking the semiotic relations between the location represented in folklore and the external environment. Consider, for example, the

<sup>19</sup> Proceeding from the Finnish cultural anthropologist Matti Sarmela's concept *'ympäristökertomukset'* ('tales of the environment') Mari-Ann Remmel has proposed the term *'keskkonnapärimus'* ('environmental lore'; Remmel 2014b: 28), which can point to non-localized narratives; she also refers to the more general 'landscape-related narratives', the so-called geographical lore.

toponymic explanations of the name Seljapealis,<sup>20</sup> a prominent sand ridge located in the southeast of the Kakerdaja Bog:

Seljapealis – an old path dating back to the period of Swedish rule, a sand ridge right through the bog. It is wider in some places and the width of a road in others. It runs up to Kervenurk, through the spruce forest.<sup>21</sup>

Toponymic explanation in general illustrates a *motivated relationship* between landscape and narratives (Maran 2014: 301) and, in the case of Seljapealis, also the relevance of iconic sign relations in place-lore: place names, or narratives about the origins of places are often motivated by the similarity between landscape and certain objects. However, localizability of place-lore does not necessarily have to mean mentioning concrete place names in texts. Adding place names or explicit descriptions often serves as a methodological need motivated by a fieldwork situation: collection methods and questions have encouraged the focus on place names or more detailed descriptions. In local vernacular communication, location specificity often manifests in a much more implicit and at the same time manifold manner because the environment is already present in the narrative situation, and it is familiar both physically and through socially shared experience (see e.g. Gunnell 2009: 308–309). Thus, the localizability in folklore can be expressed by referring to specific ecological conditions, activities related to locations, descriptions of the environment as illustrated by the example of Seljapealis, but also the self-positioning of the narrator. For example, Hiisaar ('the sacred grove island', see Fig. 2),<sup>22</sup> situated in the Kakerdaja Bog, has been described through differences in the landscape which is distinctive from the surrounding bog: "In the middle of the Kakerdi Bog there rises a sacred mound. It is surrounded by impassable wetland and bog pools and only a single pathway leads there. [...]"<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The Estonian name translates literally as 'of the ridgeback'.

<sup>21</sup> *Seljapealis – vana ruotsi aegne tie, ravast läbi, liva seljandik. Menes kohas läheb lajemaks ja menes kohas on tie laijune. Läheb Kervenurgale kuoksemetsast läbi.* [EKL, KN Place-names from Järva-Madise parish, collected by Velly Roots from Ludvig Palmiste, 66 years old (1960).]

<sup>22</sup> In Estonian, the word 'hiis' stands for a sacred place.

<sup>23</sup> *Keset Kakerdi raba asub kõrgemal kohal hüemägi. Ümberringi on läbipääsmatu raba ja laukad ainult üks tee viib sinna. [...]* [ERA II 219, 447/8 (21) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Peedu village – Harry Loog < Richard Loodis, 43 years old (1939).]



*Figure 2.* Mire environment in the Kakerdaja Bog; the higher forested area is the bog island Hiiesaar (photo: Lona Päll, 2015).

In any case, localizability reveals the defining and framing of the represented place in one way or another, proceeding from the extra-narrative landscape, a specific place, its cultural (e.g. objects of cultural landscape) or ecological elements (e.g. species composition). For instance, a mire environment is a visually uniform expanse, and lacks clearly distinctive points of reference or boundaries (Pungas, Vösu 2012: 92). Thus the localizability in place-lore related to wetlands is often based on sensory experience of the environment and expressed on the level of zoosemiotic modelling. The boundaries and transitions in the mire landscape can depend on the weather, seasonal changes, biological composition, or the colour of plant coverage. On the other hand, framing a locality or the surroundings in mire-related place-lore depends on the way a person moves in the mire, either using bog shoes, skis, or a boat on the bog pools. The spatial boundaries are constructed through interpretation of environmental signs and ecological conditions.

Even though the localizability is the basic characteristic and pre-condition of place-lore, the location specificity is not the only or the main characteristic of place-related narratives. Connecting the narrative events with specific locations is a defining feature of legends (Tangherlini 1994: 22) and characteristic of local (historical) tales that are told as true stories (Gunnell 2009: 308). Naming

a place, but also naming the time, characters, etc., and describing the details of the environment, trajectories of movement, is part of the rhetoric of truth and renders the narration lively and believable (Oring 2008: 147–148). Thus, naming or describing a specific place in folklore does not necessarily mean that place is in any way relevant or significant, considering the function of the plot or the narrative.

### 3.2. Representation of place

In addition to naming and structuring a place, semiotic relations with the environment in folklore are also expressed on the level of theme or content – place-lore describes or represents features characteristic of an environment through the events, characters, or information it gives. Place-centredness primarily on the thematic level (place-lore “speaks” about places) is what Remmel had in mind when she argued that place-lore is a thematic area of folklore involving a diverse range of genres (Remmel 2014b: 39). Västriik (1998: 132) has also stressed the function of place-lore as a defining characteristic – place-lore mediates information about origins of places, qualities of places, or events related to places.

In other words, representation of certain environments in place-lore is semiotically more complex than being explicitly referential towards extra-narrative space (e.g. naming, framing or describing). Place does not only serve as a contextual background of an event but is continuously reconstructed as a special location (Bird 2002: 524). Characteristics of extra-narrative environment can be seen as shaping the course of a narrative, i.e. conceptualizing an event, person or emotion. At the same time, not all local stories, for example stories about local characters or belief narratives, explicitly represent the specific place. The place or location may be irrelevant in these stories and the focus may be on life stories, historical conditions, etc. What differentiates place-lore from other local narratives is semiotic complementarity between the environmental and narrative spheres that is similar to texts of nature writing (Maran 2014: 301). Place-lore is not easily transferrable – a narrative cannot be recounted about another physical place or type of environment without a change of meaning (Tuisk 2001: 74–75).

Place-lore related to mires illustrates how characteristic ecological conditions have been shaping possible motives and narratives. In addition to various stories about the origins of mires, mire-related lore includes reports about supernatural beings and/or experiences, bottomless bog pools, will-o’-the-wisps or sinking through the bog surface (being “swallowed up by a quagmire”; Hiiemäe 1988). In the lore about the Kakerdaja Bog, specific environmental characteristics are expressed, such as its unique stretches of bog pools, and expanses of low areas, a deep bog lake formed of merging pools, and the steep elevation in the western part

of the bog. Among the many narratives about the Kakerdaja Bog, the most popular one, which is also featured in the archives with the largest number of variants, is the story about the drowning of Aksel Pokmann, the son of a family living on Noku farm at the edge of the bog, and his friend:

There [is] this cross in the Kakerdaja Bog (see Fig. 3), set up to commemorate the young men who perished; it is a juniper cross. It is the original cross. It must have been in 1943 when the two of them – one was the son of the old man of Noku – decided to come through the Kakerdaja Bog on Martinmas Eve, they even had the instrument [accordion] with them. They had nearly come out from among almost all of the bog pools, only a last few were left, when they sank in [and drowned].<sup>24</sup>



Figure 3. Cross marking the place where two young men drowned in the 1940s (photo: Lona Päll, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> *Kakerdaja raba peal see rist, mis on pandud hukunud noormeeste mälestuseks, see on kadakane rist. See on originaalrist. See pidi siis olema 1943. aastal, kui nad kahekesi – üks oli Noku taadi poeg, hakkasid üle Kakerdaja raba tulema mardiõhtul, pill veel seljas. Tulid laugaste vahelt peaaegu juba välja, veel viimased laukad olid, kui nad olid sisse vajunud.* [EFA II 45, 185 (12) < Järva-Madise parish, Albu municipality, Mõnuvere village – Mall Hiimäe < Age-Li Liivak, born 1941 (2003).]

The story is motivated by real events, in the course of which two youngsters drowned due to misorientation in a tricky environment and difficult weather conditions in late autumn. Events of sinking or losing the track in mires easily become part of place-lore, and these narratives are usually widely known and re-told because they carry a warning function: mire environment can be dangerous. The above narrative is not easily transferrable to a different environments, or even a different mire as the specific bog environment with its major seasonal changes and tricky bog pools constitutes a central interpretation frame of the narrative. Moreover, in the specific case the complementarity between the narratives and the environment is further established by the cross erected in the bog to mark the specific location of the events. The cross itself has become a material reference of the events and the story, and motivates re-telling of the story (see e.g. Bird 2002: 539–540).

### 3.3. Manifestation of place experience

Place-related narratives do not just concern the place or environment itself but also the particular meanings and experiences connected with or proceeding from these. In other words, place-lore explains the relations between individuals and places (Tuisk 2001: 78). In Estonia, the manifestation of experience in a sense of subjective perception or interpretation in nature-related folklore has been studied mainly in the past couple of decades (e.g. Väljaots 2013) and it has been associated with the widening scope of Estonian folkloristics since the 1990s (Remmel 2014b: 21). In the folklore collecting practices before the 1990s, the subjectively expressed experience of informants was often not considered worthy to be recorded or outlined. Sometimes the focus on experience has been considered characteristic of specific topics or genres, e.g. personal experience stories or memorates – personal experience narratives that often include a supernatural aspect (e.g. Remmel 2014b: 31). Therefore, most of the earlier researchers or folklore collectors have not regarded the expression of place or environmental experience as one of the primary or core characteristics of place-related folklore as such.

However, mediation of place experience can be considered a significant criterion for defining place-lore because place-lore is to a great degree based on interpreting the physical environment. A place or an environment is not mediated in place-lore only as narrative wisdom – place-lore is motivated by pre-symbolic sign relations and related to physical experiences or practices related to the surroundings. Subjective experiences and perception of environment are often manifested in place-lore through local ecological knowledge: folklore is related with practically or symbolically relevant places, it is associated with knowledge

of the topography of the place and is part of the communication and vernacular interpretations related to the environment. However, experience is not always explicitly expressed in the text – it can be manifested in descriptions of activities, knowledge of place names, and descriptions of environmental conditions, species, etc.

Widely known narratives or motifs (e.g. drowning in bog pools or losing orientation in a mire) are also contextualized in relation to the familiar environment that the person knows or associates the stories with. For instance, the above story of the young men who drowned in the Kakerdaja Bog is known in dozens of variations, which, at a closer look, may be associated with the environmental experience of the narrator, including seasonal changes or various other environmental conditions he or she notices. Sometimes the same person retells the story differently depending on the storytelling context or situation. Studying these different variations reveals a *situational relationship* between texts and the environment, the interpretations of a well-known story depend on the narrator's experiences with a certain environment in a particular time. The following example of how one of the nature tour guides I interviewed interprets the story of the boys drowned in the Kakerdaja Bog illustrates this:

[...][The boys went across the Kakerdaja Bog] to meet some girls at the Martinmas village dance, and they took a shortcut over the bog pool because the roads are too far away over there. And as they had crossed [the bog] a hundred times, [...] there must have been something leading them off the path. It usually snows on Martinmas for the first time and there may be ice and so it is very easy to get lost and sink in a bog pool, even for those who know the bog.<sup>25</sup>

The impulse of vernacular interpretation can be the immediate environmental experience; this, however, does not mean that in place-lore the environmental experience is modelled mainly on the so-called zoosemiotic level, or through the subjective prism of “the experience of being in an environment”. For example, the unique environment of mires has shaped the imagination of mires as liminal environments characterized by being “in-between”, or “on the threshold”. The ecological liminality of wetlands is obvious and based on the water regime: the mire is neither mineral land nor a body of water (Pungas, Võsu 2012: 88, 91). At the same time, in folklore mire-related narratives also refer to liminal and supernatural

<sup>25</sup> [...] [Poisid läksid üle Kakerdaja raba] Mardipäeva simmanile tüdrukutele külla, aga üle lauka on poole otsem, sest et seal teed lähevad muidu ju väga kaugelt. Ja kui nad on sada korda [üle raba] käinud [...], siis pidi olema mingisugune eksitav juhus. Mardipäeval on esimene lumi ja jää võib olla ja ongi see, et väga lihtne on ka nendel, kes tunnevad raba, ära eksida ja laukasse jääda. (Interview with nature tour guide T. P., 02.04.2012)

forces and experiences (Pungas-Kohv *et al.* 2015: 247). Mire-related lore entails characters who are often either marginalized – paupers, hermits, healers, spinsters, madmen, partisans, etc. – or in the role of a social trickster (Pungas, Võsu 2012: 93). Thus, the place experience in folklore is ambivalent and mediated variously through different ways of modelling.

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According to the above-mentioned features, place-lore can be defined as a part of folklore that is localizable, represents the characteristics of place, and mediates place experience. These three characteristics are built up by semiotic relations between folklore and the environment it represents, and they constitute a core or ideal form of place-lore. While the localizability – the connection to a certain extra-narrative location – is a fundamental pre-requisite of place-lore, the way how and to what extent these three characteristics appear depends on the specific representations and the storytelling situation. Moreover, in concrete vernacular interpretations, these three levels of characteristics are inevitably integrated. For example, the name of the Kakerdaja Bog, which alludes to both a bird and a way of moving, entails location specificity, mediates information characteristic of, or central to, the referred place (which species inhabit the place), and mediates the experience influenced by the unique environment (waddling as a way of moving).

## Conclusion

My aim in this article was to propose a novel definition of place-lore that considers the semiotic relations between place-lore and the environment that it represents. While the fieldwork methods that Estonian place-lore researchers have developed aim to record to a certain extent the semiotic complementarity between environment and folklore, the previous research has been lacking a theory for considering place-lore as a dialogical eco-cultural phenomenon. Adopting ecosemiotics enables the developing of much-needed dialogical models and methods for place-lore research. The question of environmental sign relations is central and unavoidable in the theoretical conceptualization of place-lore because these narratives are shaped at the convergence point of ecological sign systems and tradition-based cultural sign systems.

I have demonstrated how place-lore is not only part of vernacular communication, but also part of environmental communication as it expresses characteristics of a specific environment, inter- and intraspecies communication, and perception

of people who engage with the surroundings. These narratives are rooted in indexical and iconic sign relations present in the environment, they are based on interpreting environmental signs or explaining the environmental distinctiveness and ambiguity. At the representational level, in concrete texts environmental interpretations are, of course, mediated through symbolic interpretations, but manifested also on the level of zoosemiotic modelling: as descriptions or references to perception, movement, or characteristics of the environment (for more, see Maran 2014: 301). Thus, the place-centredness, which previous researchers have highlighted as a fundamental aspect of place-lore, is not only about instrumental references, such as mentioning place names in folk texts, but folklore has complex and dynamic semiotic relations with the extra-narrative environment.

Different kinds of semiotic relationships between textual space and the environment have been outlined by previous researchers, mostly on the basis of the study of nature writing (see Maran 2014; Maran, Tüür 2017). I have shown how the motivated, mimetic, representational, and complementary relationships can be used to describe how the semiotic potential of the environment is actively engaged as motivating also in vernacular interpretations, representing the environment in place-lore texts, and interpreting the narratives. However, I claim that place-lore is semiotically more open towards the environment than nature literature as an authored text, as in the case of folklore the semiotic potential of the environment actively guides meanings also through immediate storytelling situations. Thus, I have developed the existing types of relationships further and suggested adding the situational relationship between texts and the environment to study place-based textual practices where the environment itself is present, for example storytelling in the context of field trips or nature tours, etc.

Outlining various ways of how the semiotic potential of the environment is manifested in folklore has enabled me to show how semiotic relations with the environment are at the core of place-lore. Therefore, I suggest defining the concept of place-lore not by textual characteristics of the material but through semiotic relations that these texts have with the environment. I propose three defining features of place-lore: place-lore is localizable, it represents the characteristics of a place, and mediates place experience. On the most practical level, these three components can serve as a methodological tool to organize or describe the material in archival and fieldwork practices and thus address the increasing interest as well as the need to work with the material. However, and most importantly, a new and analytical definition is a necessary precondition for a more in-depth study of place-lore than has been carried out so far.

While previous researchers framed place-lore based on certain topics or engagements with the environment (e.g. traditional village life, sacred natural

sites, etc.), an analytical definition I propose makes it possible to study place-lore as a dynamic and polyphonic tradition. It is necessary to include new topics and research foci because both the landscape-related practices and performance contexts and media of folklore (e.g. tourism, heritage protection) are changing rapidly. The definition provided in the article can serve as a primary research level for describing how the aforementioned changes are manifested on different levels of place-related folklore – localization, representation, and mediating the experience. For example, could the construction of board walkways, informational signs, and developing apps for orienteering in bogs neutralize narratives of fear and uncertainty that are persistent in narratives related to wetlands? Or how is digital and transmedia storytelling affecting the narratives that are mainly re-storied in the same physical and social context they are representing?

Finally, and most importantly, focusing on the sign processes between cultural expressions and the environment allows a more efficient analysis of folklore in the context of changing or conflicting ecological and social circumstances, such as increased mobility, environmental conflicts, social disruptions, etc. Due to the semiotic feedback loop between vernacular interpretations and the environment they represent, possible conflicts are immediately reflected on some interpretative level in folklore. For example, changes in how people localize narratives or describe the environment can also indicate the changing relationship with certain species. Studying place-lore as a dialogical natural-cultural phenomenon also has an ethical relevance. David Low (2008: 47–48) has argued that environmental conflicts and problems can be regarded as “disconnections between our ways of thinking about an environment, and the ways an environment asserts its own being”. The study of environmental relations in place-lore provides an opportunity to identify potential conflicts and cases of miscommunication and address them directly.

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- RKM – Manuscript collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1945–1996)

### **Ekosemioottinen näkemys folkloristiikasta: paikallisperinteen käsitteen uudelleenkehittäminen**

Paikallisperinteillä, joita Virossa on järjestelmällisesti tallennettu jo 1800-luvulta lähtien, on tärkeä rooli erilaisissa kansallisissa, yhteisöllisissä ja institutionaalisissa käytännöissä. Virolaiset tutkijat ovat tähän mennessä käsitteellistäneet paikallisperinteitä arkistotekstien näkökulmasta, ja pääpaino on ollut aineiston keräämisessä ja arkistoinnissa. Samalla teorian kehitys on jäänyt taka-alalle. Tässä artikkelissa lähestyn virolaista paikallisperinnettä ekosemioottisesta näkökulmasta ja ehdotan uutta määritelmää paikallisperinteen käsitteelle, joka asettaa semioottiset yhteydet perimätiedon ja siinä esitettävän ympäristön välillä keskeiseen asemaan. Analyysissäni tarkastelen, millä tavoin erilaiset ympäristöyhteydet ilmenevät perinneteksteissä, ja sen kautta voidaan hahmottaa, miten paikallisperinteitä luonnehtivat (1) paikallistettavuus, (2) tietyn paikan tai ympäristön esittäminen ja (3) paikkakokemuksen välittäminen. Paikallisperinteen uudelleenmäärittely ja sitä kautta myös alustavan analysointikehyksen luominen on erittäin tarpeellista käytännön keruu- ja arkistointityön kannalta, mutta toisaalta se luo myös perustan jatkotutkimukselle, jonka avulla voidaan tarkastella paikallisperinteitä nykypäivän kehityksen kontekstissa, kuten esimerkiksi tekstikäytäntöjen muuttumisen, kulttuurihäiriöiden ja ympäristökriisin viitekehyksissä. Artikkelissa esitetty esimerkkiaineisto on soihin liittyvää paikallisperinnettä, tarkemmin Pohjois-Virossa sijaitsevaan Kakerdaja-rämeeseen liittyviä tarinoita.

### **Ökosemiootiline vaade folkloorile: kohapärimuse mõiste ümbermõtestamine**

Kohapärimus, mida on Eestis süstemaatiliselt talletatud 19. sajandist, on ühtlasi oluline osa erinevatest rahvuslikest, kogukondlikest ja institutsionaalsetest praktikatest. Kuni praeguseni on Eesti uurijad kontseptualiseerinud kohapärimust arhiivitektide perspektiivist ning fookus on olnud materjali kogumisel ja arhiveerimisel, samas kui teooriaarendus

on jäänud tagaplaanile. Käesolevas artiklis käsitlen Eesti kohapärimust ökosemiootilisest vaatenurgast ja pakun välja kohapärimuse uue määratluse, mis tõstab keskmesse semiootilised seosed pärimuse ja selles representeeritud keskkonna vahel. Analüüsin, mil viisil erinevad keskkonnaseosed pärimustekstides avalduvad, mis võimaldab näha, kuidas kohapärimust iseloomustab (1) lokaliseeritavus, (2) konkreetse paiga või keskkonna representeerimine ja (3) kohakogemuse vahendamine. Kohapärimuse uue määratluse ja selle kaudu ka esialgse analüüsiraami loomine on väga vajalik praktiliseks kogumis- ja arhiveerimistööks, ent loob ka aluse edasiseks uurimistegevuseks, mis võimaldab käsitleda kohapärimust selliste kaasaegsete arengute kontekstis nagu muutunud esituspraktikad, kultuurilised katkestused ja keskkonnakriis. Artiklis kasutatud näitematerjaliks on soodega seotud kohapärimus, konkreetsemalt Põhja-Eestis asuva Kakerdaja rabaga seotud lood.



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## THE ROLE OF PLACE-LORE IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF PALUKÜLA SACRED HILL IN ESTONIA\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a critical study of how local place-related narratives, i.e. place-lore, is integrated into environmental discussion and how it has significant potential to illustrate local and public, as well as vernacular and institutional, meanings concerned with the environment. Combining the frameworks of ecosemiotics, environmental communication studies, and place-lore research, the article explores how a new storytelling context, ideological selection, and the logic of conflict communication influence the re-contextualisation and interpretation of place-lore. The theory is applied to an empirical examination of public discussion of Paluküla sacred hill in Central Estonia. Tracking references to previous place-lore about Paluküla Hill in the media coverage of the conflict allows a demonstration of how the contextuality and referentiality towards an extra-narrative environment that are originally present in place-lore are often overlooked or ignored in conflict discourse. This, in turn, leads to socially and ecologically disconnected discussion.

KEYWORDS: place-lore • ecosemiotics • environmental conflicts • sacred natural sites • cultural heritage

### INTRODUCTION

Place-lore as part of folklore that is localisable, represents the characteristics of a specific environment, and mediates place experience, can be seen as a part of environmental communication because it manifests complex semiotic relationships between people and their surroundings (Päll forthcoming). At the same time, place-related folklore has also been involved in socially constructed environment-related ideologies, practices,

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and discussions that convey various collective and institutional power relations and hierarchies. Hereby, I aim to study the ways in which place-related folklore is adapted in environmental conflicts and how the new context of conflict communication affects the interpretations of these stories. The study asserts that while in local, or community-based, communication, place-lore is semiotically contextual and related to the specific environment it represents, conflict communication can disrupt this ecological and social contextuality.

I position the analysis in the framework of ecosemiotics. Becoming disciplinarily independent in the 1990s, ecosemiotics is rooted in the Estonian scientific and cultural space along with influences from German, Italian, and Norwegian semiotics to name a few (Maran 2018). Ecosemiotics approaches its research objects as a complex hybrid natural-cultural phenomenon. The methods and concepts of ecosemiotics allow researchers to study ontological as well as discursive levels of nature-culture relationships (see more in Maran and Kull 2014; Maran 2020). Fruitful links in researching vernacular environmental interpretations in the ecosemiotics framework have already been established, for example, in analysing the 'herbal landscape' in ethnobotany (Sõukand and Kalle 2010), discussing the cultural and ecological interpretation of mires (Pungas-Kohv et al. 2015), and studying sacred natural sites in national history discourse (Heinapuu 2016). Ecosemiotics has also been used to develop an analytical definition of the concept of 'place-lore' (Päll forthcoming). To consider both semiotically complex relations between people and their surroundings, and the specific discourse of public discussion, public participation, and conflict management, I link ecosemiotics with environmental communication studies, especially David Low's (2008) application of semiotic methods in environmental communication.

In Estonian environmental discourse, place-lore has a unique role. The narrative of Estonians' strong relationship with nature, in which place-related folklore is relevant, has been a considerable part of the historical and contemporary self-image of Estonians (for example Kaljundi 2018; Rimmel and Jonuks 2021). Since being connected to identity discourse, place-lore is open to ideological interpretation (more on Metsalu 2008; Heinapuu 2016) and emerges constantly in public discussion related to, for example, environmental issues or cultural politics. Place-lore is also integrated into different discursive practices and policies with direct environmental effect, for example in tourism (Kindel 2005; Ü. Valk 2009; Reha 2014) or cultural heritage and nature protection.<sup>1</sup> The most noteworthy example of the practical and ideological importance of tradition is using place-lore in the policies of protecting sacred natural sites (Jonuks et al. 2014).

This unique relevance of place-lore arises from Estonian folklorists' strong tradition of collecting and archiving nature-related folklore (Rimmel 2014b; Hiiemäe and Rimmel 2020). Place-lore research became a disciplinarily distinctive area of study in the 1990s, and the concept itself is well known and widely used in everyday discourse in Estonia (Hiiemäe and Rimmel 2020: 385). At the same time, Estonian folkloristics has so far lacked a critical approach to the different usages of place-lore in contemporary contexts (see more Päll forthcoming). There is a need to link place-lore research with critical topics in international cultural studies and environmental humanities and analyse place-lore in the context of changing ecological and social circumstances such as environmental change or cultural disruption. Previous folkloristic study of sacred natural sites demonstrates this research gap. The folklore concerning these sites is well

presented in archive material, although the majority of the material is represented and studied in the context of traditional 19th- and 20th-century peasant culture (for example Remmel 1998; 2014a; H. Valk 2009; Hiimäe and Remmel 2020). Thus, folklore related to sacred sites has been framed as a fixed and historical, even nostalgic, tradition (for example Remmel 2014b). Less attention has been paid to changing vernacular interpretations related to sacred sites (for example Kõivupuu 2009; Hiimäe 2017).

Recent research on sacred natural sites in Estonia has been developed not so much around the place-lore but has rather positioned the topic in the context of the new religious movements, especially the Estonian native faith movement and its connections with national identity politics (for example Västriik 2015; Heinapuu 2016) and its role in contemporary heritage discourse (Jonuks et al. 2014; Jonuks 2017). The ideology of the Estonian native faith movement, *maausulised* (literally 'Believers of the Earth'),<sup>2</sup> and their representative organisation Maavalla Koda (formed in 1995), has a crucial role in contemporary discussions related to sacred sites as well as to nature protection and environmental communication discourses in Estonia. The contemporary *maausulised* movement has its ideological origins in national Romanticism and the 1930s' national paradigm (Västriik 2015: 134–141). However, they have similarities with other neopagan or native faith movements in Europe and especially in the post-Soviet region, for example, the reconstructivist view of earlier folk tradition, stressing continuity with earlier belief systems, syncretism, etc. (see also Gregorius 2015; Peers 2015; Szilagyí 2015). *Maausulised* see themselves as part of the national culture paradigm, i.e., spokespersons for tradition, rather than a religious movement (Västriik 2015; Jonuks 2017; Jonuks and Äikäs 2019: 122; see also Peers 2015).

Maavalla Koda has managed to establish the concept of the sacred natural site in the public domain (Jonuks and Äikäs 2019: 122), finding intellectual support from international organisations for example the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and some international religious movements (Jonuks et al. 2014: 96–97). Maavalla Koda has taken an active role in discussion of development projects that relate to sacred sites. Moreover, these discussions have given the native faith movement the chance to introduce the idea of sacred natural sites in the public domain, as well as authorise their position as spokesperson for tradition. Some noteworthy conflicts have related to Kunda sacred hill (2003), Purtse sacred hill (2006), a sacred site on Panga cliff (2007), and Paluküla sacred hill (2003–...). The case-study of this article, the conflict surrounding the plan to build a ski resort near Paluküla sacred hill in central Estonia, is one of the longest place-centred environmental conflicts in contemporary Estonia. Moreover, Paluküla is a good model conflict for studying the role of place-lore in similar conflicts. Since the beginning of the conflict, it has been characteristic of the debate to involve references to and discussions of oral tradition, and also to question, compare, and use place-related vernacular knowledge and narratives as part of the argumentation. Tracking references to previous place-lore about Paluküla Hill in the news media allows me to show how earlier folklore materials have been (de)contextualised and re-storied during the conflict.

The article is divided into six sections. The first section approaches place-lore as a semiotically dialogical and polyphonic tradition and presents its semiotic potential at local and institutional levels of environmental communication. The second part gives a brief overview of the conflict over Paluküla Hill, while the third part introduces materi-

als and methods. Previous folklore about Paluküla Hill is briefly described in the fourth section. The fifth part describes the role of place-lore in media discourse by outlining the representation context of folklore in the conflict discourse by giving a selection of narratives or topics, and by highlighting claims based on place-lore. The last part, the Discussion, interprets the results of the media analysis and draws some conclusions.

#### THE SEMIOTIC POTENTIAL OF PLACE-LORE IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

Place-lore, similarly to other environmental-related textual representations (see for example Maran 2014) is dialogical in essence, as place-related stories connect our collective and subjective interpretations with environmental or extra-narrative reality. Although Estonian folklorists have studied place-lore mainly as cultural representation, by focusing on the discursive dimension of place-lore they have acknowledged the important role of environmental structures and qualities in forming place-related tradition (see Remmel 2014b). The semiotic activity of an environment and the interpretative relations between culture and nature come to the fore through place-related narratives. The semiotic activity of the environment can be understood as inter- and intra-species communication, the temporality of the environment and processes that are based on temporality and the environmental response to human activities and disruptions. The activity and features of other species and processes in the environment are perceived as meaningful and integrated into place-related stories, place names, and various vernacular interpretations.

The relevance of environmental characteristics in place-related folklore is well demonstrated by the toponymic explanations of the ridges and valleys of Paluküla hill. The following story was collected from Liivaku farmhouse on the north-eastern side of the hill:

##### *The Sacred Hill*

The surroundings of Palu Village are very hilly with very high hill ridges and steep valleys. The earth is sandy and now covered in fields. The highest of its ridges is covered with alder forests with some spruce trees interspersed. The hill was believed to be in honour of the ancient Estonian god Hiie, thus it is called The Sacred Hill [*Hiiemägi*].

A steep elongated valley called Tõnni Hollow is located near Hiiemägi in between other hills. It was presumably the location of an altar. Estonians would bring fresh meat as a sacrifice when killing an animal, as well as sacrifice a part of their yield for every harvest, shearing, monetary earning, or similar. It is also assumed that an ancient Estonian fortress was situated on these hill ridges.<sup>3</sup>

As this story illustrates, place-lore reflects the cultural and ecological dimensions of collective environmental experience: what kind of species grows in a specific place, what are the characteristics of the landscape, etc.? Place-lore is contextual and refers to the environment it represents, thus, place-related stories are not entirely understandable when one does not know the environment to which they refer. Timo Maran (2014) has described the same tendency in the case of Estonian nature literature.

Place-lore narratives are often motivated by environmental semiosis, and thus, interpreting environmental signs is an important basis for these stories. To understand this, the differentiation between cultural and environmental sign processes must be highlighted. Departing from Charles Sanders Peirce's sign theory, we can see how symbols are cultural and arbitrary while the indexical and iconic signs are based on continuity and similarity and have a perceivable relationship with the object to which they refer (see for example Wheeler 2008; Maran 2017). Environmental signs belong among the latter as they are mainly physically manifested causal and non-conventional signs, i.e. indexical and iconic sign relations that we and other species interpret in the environment (Maran 2017: 356). These can be, for instance non-intentional (for example, plant cover, weather conditions), and intentional sign relations in the environment, especially interspecies communication and interpretation of the activity of other species. At the same time, symbolic interpretations are often rooted in pre-symbolic signs – indexes and icons (Wheeler 2008; Maran and Kull 2014). Environmental signs are open to cultural interpretation because the causal relationship between the object is often vague and remain unclear for the observer. For example, the concept of the will-o'-the-wisp in mires or so-called 'fairy rings' can be viewed as vernacular interpretations of environmental signs (Maran 2017: 360).

Local narratives can be viewed not only as a discursive phenomenon but as a part of environmental communication, as part of environmental practice. In addition to these narratives referring to an environment, the storytelling context of place-lore is also related to the physical surroundings that these narratives represent. People tell stories about familiar surroundings, or about their engagements in an environment that is being talked about. In addition, a place or an environment presented in a folklore text often coincides with a site where folklore is mediated or spoken about, in which case the represented environment itself is present. In these situations, the environment often motivates meanings, facilitates the remembering of narratives or motifs, influences the choice of narrative, etc. (Rommel 2014b: 40–41, 54). Therefore, the environment as an interface plays important role in mediating and retaining vernacular narratives (for example Gunnell 2009: 307–308; Päll forthcoming).

Place-lore thus represents a multilevel communication relationship between the environment and the subjects inhabiting it. However, when including these kinds of contextual and environmental-related narratives in conflict communication, the narrative may become disconnected or de-contextualised from the environment represented. In the conflict of Paluküla Hill, as in other environmental debates, it is possible to distinguish between two intertwined communication levels, the communication between the environment and people, and communication between different groups. Ideological discussions, different public representations, etc., focus attention on the latter, i.e. the discursive or representational level. David Low (2008: 48) has argued that the root problem of environmental problems are "disconnections between our ways of thinking about an environment and the ways an environment asserts its own being". Low referred to situations where the representations, talking about the subject matter (for example the environment) become separated from the subject matter itself.

Low's perspective, which connects semiotics and environmental communication studies, is relevant because it illustrates the importance of considering different experiences, viewpoints, and narratives in environmental communication. Low stresses how

various, sometimes even conflicting, knowledge of the environment helps to acknowledge 'dissent' (ibid.: 48–50). The concept of dissent is crucial: it can be understood as part of enquiry-based environmental communication where parties to a discussion seek to understand the subject matter at an ontological, not only discursive, level. Ignoring or 'over-managing' different interpretations and experiences may lead to hermetic or dogmatising communication (see more ibid.: 50–54). Moreover, environmental agency and environmental semiosis enter the discussion through the interpretative relations people have with the environment (ibid.: 49). Place-lore or vernacular interpretations of the environment, in general, are one way to allow and encourage dissent as place-related narratives already manifest complex and multiple ecological and social relations.

However, in addition to noticing the relevance of local, environmental-related stories in conflict discussion, attention should be paid to how place-lore is used in conflict communication to express social dissent or conflicting interpretations of the environment. In environmental conflicts such as the Paluküla case, place-lore has an important position in the rhetoric of different interest groups, and in the argumentation itself as part of various discursive practices. When place-lore becomes part of topical discussions in the public sphere, the dialogical contextual relations between the environment and narratives are shifted (Rommel 2014b: 52). At the same time, the alternative or inherent narrative potential of certain motifs or stories may be activated when the community or interest groups preserve the sites or heritage as endangered. For example, when cultural heritage becomes suddenly endangered, its relevance to identity discourse and cultural memory will often become more noticeable (Hafstein 2012: 500–501).

Discussions concerning natural sacred sites are a good example of how environment-related and contextual meanings are intertwined with ideological and symbolic ones. When place-lore is adapted to cultural heritage or religious discourse, it participates in creating sacred places by establishing new arbitral distinctions, i.e. by differentiating sacred from non-sacred, setting new hierarchies, and attaching conceptual meanings to places (Barroso 2017: 343). The environment itself may become a sign or symbol of something else (ibid.: 347). Moreover, as in the Estonian context, sacred natural sites manifest various dominant meanings other than the religious. Ott Heinapuu (2016), who has studied traditional sacred sites in the context of ecosemiotic theory, has described how the sacred sites of traditional agrarian society have transformed into national monuments, and how since the 1930s such sites have been regarded as important for national identity. Thus, on the general discursive level, the topic of sacred natural sites is related to the topics of national pride, worth, and identity.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PALUKÜLA HILL CONFLICT

Paluküla Hill (literally 'Palu village hill') or Paluküla Hiimägi ('Palu village Sacred Hill') in Kehtna Municipality, Rapla County, has a height of 106.9 m and is the highest peak in central and north-west Estonia. The hill, which is actually a plateau with several ridges and hollows (see Figure 1), is well known in the region and frequently visited. It has been under nature protection since 1964<sup>4</sup> due to its ecological and geological characteristics and visual prominence (see Photo 1). Although there have been some previous discussions on how to manage the area, a conflict over the hill occurred in autumn 2003

when the local government of Kehtna Municipality approved a project that included a ski resort near the hill. Some of the locals as well as members of the Maavalla Koda responded with criticism of the plan and claimed that the place has traditionally been untouched and sacred, and therefore large-scale economic or recreational activity was not appropriate on the hill. Another part of the local community and municipal officials saw the ski resort project as an opportunity to create jobs, provide better conditions for different sporting activities, and raise Paluküla's importance as a tourist attraction.

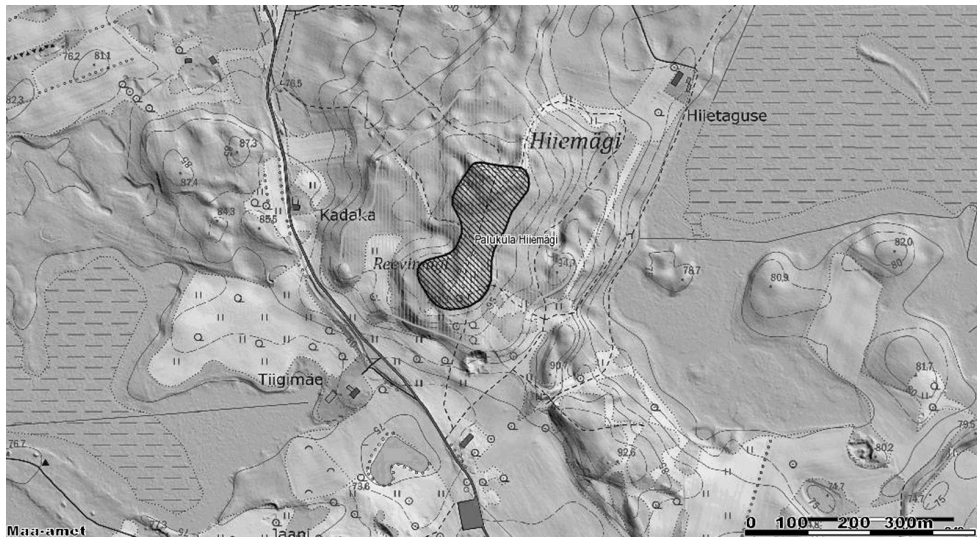


Figure 1. Paluküla Hill on a map. The blue area marks the part currently under heritage protection. Base map: Estonian Land Board 2021.



Photo 1. The south side of Paluküla Hill, also called Reevimägi ('Reevi Hill'). Photo by Lona Päll, December 2019.

The conflict has been widely covered in the local and national media. The conflict culminated in autumn 2004 when activists gathered on the hill and attempted to stop bulldozers from preparing the site for a ski lift. The event has been labelled 'Paluküla War' in public discussions. Apart from intense media coverage, videos and films were made by parties to the conflict, and signatures were collected against building the ski resort as well as in favour of the planned developments. Over the years, the discussion involved researchers from various fields, and experts from public institutions (for example the Environmental Board, the National Heritage Board, and the sacred natural sites expert group under the Heritage Board) and religious organisations, i.e., Maavalla Koda. In addition, some non-government organisations were established during the conflict, such as Union Protecting Paluküla Sacred Hill (founded in 2004), whose proclaimed aim is to push back large-scale development in the hill area, and the Paluküla Club (founded in 2013), which actively seeks opportunities to promote sports activities on the hill and manages the recreational infrastructure there. From 2008 until 2013, the case was discussed at all levels of the Estonian court system, and protectors of the hill also applied to the European Court of Human Rights.

Legal, political, and public discussions have not resulted in an agreement, and discussion over possible development in the area continues. Some nature and heritage protection measures in the area have changed over the years,<sup>5</sup> and part of the hill was taken under heritage protection in 2004. The original large-scale ski resort project has been dropped due to changed economic, political, and legal conditions. However, the unresolved discussion has occasionally intensified (for example in 2015 and 2017) when the government of Kehtna Municipality and local communities sought ways to develop the area, and protectors of the hill responded with queries, complaints, and public statements. The two dominant views on the usage of the hill have remained the same: the hill as an important sacred place, and the hill's appeal and potential as a place of sport and recreation. Paluküla Hill itself has turned into a medium of conflict. Any activity held on the hill (playing Frisbee golf, cutting down trees, holding prayers and ceremonies) may heat up the discussion again. The conflict also often intensifies in connection with wider environmental or cultural discussions in Estonia, such as the heated discussion of forest management in Estonia that has taken place in recent years.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

To analyse how place-lore is integrated into the public discussion concerning Paluküla Hill, I studied coverage of discussions around Paluküla in news media between 2001 and 2019. I used the keywords 'Paluküla hiiemägi' and 'Paluküla mägi' to search for articles.<sup>6</sup> The analysed texts constituted a corpus of 138 articles. These reflect data from all prominent Estonian news platforms and newspapers, from local newspapers (*Raplamaa Teataja*, *Valla Vaatleja*), and some relevant and topical articles about the Paluküla conflict published on smaller sites like environmental portal *Roheline Värav* or cultural weekly *Sirp*. The number of articles included in the analysis corpus varies per year and reflects the timeline of the conflict itself. The media coverage was most intense in 2003–2005 when a large-scale ski resort plan was announced, and again in 2015 when there were discussions about the new management plan of the Kõnnumaa nature pro-

tection area. While the intense conflict and protests around 2004 were covered widely, the new rather small-scale development ideas for the Paluküla area discussed between 2016 and 2018 were mainly covered in the local media.

The analysis corpus contains only articles that reflected opposition around different activities or plans related to the hill. For instance, news describing sports events or rituals on Paluküla Hill without a focus on conflict were left out, but some stories about ski centre developers or opinion pieces were included if these were clearly part of the ongoing discussion around the hill. In the text corpus, I marked various usages of and references to folklore in these texts. I noted the occasions when: (1) narratives were added or quoted; (2) certain narratives, topics, or information from place-lore was mentioned or referred to; and (3) discussion was generally supported by reference to folklore/tradition/history/heritage. To map out how and to what extent the statements made in public discussions about folkloristic interpretations of Paluküla Hill are related to earlier archival material and local narratives, I looked into previously collected place-lore about the hill and its close surrounding. Additionally, I studied interviews with conflict participants conducted in 2015 by folklorist and archaeologist Jüri Metssalu as part of his report to the National Heritage board. These interviews gave a sense of vernacular interpretation currently shared and communicated by locals that may not be reflected in earlier folklore, but also their attitudes regarding different activities and narratives related to the place.<sup>7</sup>

Although I analysed a corpus of news articles, the media and public representation of the conflict was wider. To be able to contextualise and justify news media coverage, I familiarised myself with wider background material such as information on the web pages of various organisations, reports from public meetings, blog posts, short films,<sup>8</sup> social media discussions, public documents, and expert opinions, etc. Moreover, the relevance of place-lore in environmental conflict is not always explicitly noticeable in discussions but is also manifested in policies, regulations, and various representations of place (for example tourist materials, information boards, maps). Conversations with people involved in protests or research into Paluküla and several visits to the hill helped me understand the variety of practices related to the hill and experience the ecological conditions.

#### A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PLACE-LORE RELATED TO PALUKÜLA HILL

I found overall 30 texts or recordings about Paluküla Hill, the earliest of these from 1906 and the latest from 2009. The earlier material from folkloristic, archaeological, language, or cultural history collections and from popular science journals includes 21 texts dating back to 1906–1948. The more recent material from the 2000s includes nine recordings collected as part of different small-scale projects.

Two of the texts from the earlier material give archaeological data about the hill,<sup>9</sup> five texts are descriptions of rituals, customs, or bringing the offerings to the sacrificial stone and/or Tõnni Hollow on the hillside.<sup>10</sup> One text collected from the nearest farmhouse mentions farming on the hill and bringing offerings to Tõnni Hollow.<sup>11</sup> Three texts laconically mention the hill location,<sup>12</sup> and two are more detailed landscape descrip-

tions including wider surroundings or other toponyms in Paluküla village.<sup>13</sup> Two stories are versions of the same narrative about Estonian giant hero Kalevipoeg throwing stones,<sup>14</sup> the motif is common in Estonia and these stories are not environment-specific. Earlier material also includes six toponymic explanations: four of these from 1948 are short mentions and localisations of Hiemägi, Taaralepa mägi, Tõnni auk or Reevimägi, i.e., hollows and ridges relating to Paluküla Hill.<sup>15</sup> Two toponymic explanations are collected by Endel Varep probably in the 1960s: a description of offering at Tõnni Hollow, and a description of farmland on the hill and cellars on the hillside.<sup>16</sup>

Recent material includes nine recordings from 2000 to 2009. Four stories collected during local heritage inventory by the State Forest Management Centre describe cellars on the hillside, farming on the hill area, finding a vodka bottle at Tõnni Hollow, and a discussion about the boundaries of the sacred area on the hill.<sup>17</sup> Two texts collected during fieldwork organised by the Estonian Folklore Archives describe sports events on the hill and visiting the place on special occasions such as birthdays,<sup>18</sup> as well as making a midsummer bonfire.<sup>19</sup> The latest material also includes three short memories collected in 2000 by local Lembi Sepp who was a history student at the time and participated in the protest against the ski resort. Stories describes bringing offerings to Tõnni Hollow, and in one text about excavating on the hill, are also mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

Interviews made by Jüri Metssalu in 2015 aimed to study people's opinions in the context of the ongoing discussion but these include contemporary vernacular narratives shared among the community, neighbours, or family that complemented the previous folklore about Paluküla. 31 people, most of who were locals, were asked about their relationship to the place, from where they get information about the place and discussions around it, why the place is important on a personal and collective level, how they feel about different developments in the area, etc. In general, practical engagements and subjective memories were more emergent than the place's relevance as a heritage site, tourist site, or well-known symbol. The interviews showed how collective vernacular narratives and meanings related to place became clearly acknowledged in the conflict discourse but were rarely discussed before the conflict started. Some core oppositions among activities and meanings of place also emerged, i.e. seeking silence and entertainment/sports, economic and spiritual activities, contemporary and historical values. All of the interviewees expressed how they were tired of the long-lasting conflict and lack of shared understanding.

#### PLACE-LORE IN THE PALUKÜLA CONFLICT DISCOURSE

Media analysis and interviews showed that a variety of groups, organisations, and individuals involved in this discussion are internally heteronomous and the groups partly overlap. While media analysis detected some key groups, such as members of Maavalla Koda and local municipality officials, whose messages were more prominently present in public discussion, some general patterns of using vernacular interpretations in discussions were noticeable. Thus, in the following, I will outline some patterns, modes, and practices related to usages of place-lore that emerged from public discussions. More precisely, I discuss the following aspects: (1) in what contexts place-lore appeared in discussions, (2) which narratives or motifs were included in discussions and if some

narratives or topics were missing, and (3) how folklore or tradition was used to build up claims in the conflict. I will contextualise these results with theory from environmental communication studies and research on sacred places.

*Shift of Representation Context: Folklore as Part of Fact-based Communication*

All the parties in the conflict in one way or another referenced place-lore narratives. However, in the media discourse, folkloristic sources appeared more in articles, press releases, or opinion pieces, with representatives of Maavalla Koda, experts, or locals critical of the development project explaining their positions. Particular archive texts were quoted or referred to as evidence to illustrate how the place has been one of the most prominent sacred places in the region,<sup>21</sup> or various historical sacred usages of the hill,<sup>22</sup> or events celebrated on the hill.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, supporters of larger developments on the hill referred to the photograph from 1935<sup>24</sup> (see Photo 2) to justify managing the forest on the hill, and occasionally also referred to local knowledge and memories describing activities at Paluküla. Using historical sources and place-lore as proof to identify sacred places is logical, as there is usually little archaeological evidence that refers to sacral practices in these places in Estonia (Jonuks et al. 2014: 101–102).



*Photo 2. Paluküla Hill in 1935. Photo by Gustav Vilbaste.*

However, using the place-lore sources as evidence also marks an important shift in the context in which folklore appears. In the discussion about Paluküla Hill, folklore has become part of the authorised knowledge and official discourse: different parties in the discussion have referred to place-lore in the same way as national laws or international agreements and documents are often referred to. For instance, references to folklore were used as a source next to legislative acts, documents, and development plans (for example, the 2011 IUCN guidelines on sacred natural sites, the 2015–2020 Sacred Natural Sites in Estonia development plan, the natural conservation plan up to 2020).<sup>25</sup> Folklore sources were also used in expert opinions commissioned from folklorists and archaeologists<sup>26</sup> from where these entered the media discourse.

Considering folklore texts as a part of fact-based communication does not mean that particular narratives, some of which contain supernatural motifs<sup>27</sup> and figurative elements,<sup>28</sup> were considered factual; rather, these narratives claimed to directly represent certain historical worldviews, practices, and experiences without acknowledging these texts as interpretations. For example, narratives describing how cutting down the trees from sacred site resulted in farm animals dying in village is very common and often re-told by protectors of sacred places. A similar story about Paluküla<sup>29</sup> was cited in public discussions.<sup>30</sup> In other words, place-lore, which is essentially variable, subjective, and multivocal and expresses different, sometimes even opposing concepts on the environment, was considered univocal and coherent. However, the semiotic heterogeneity and tension between different interpretative levels in place-lore did not disappear entirely from the public discussion. For example, the relativity and subjectivity of folklore texts were more noticeable in discussions about Paluküla when local people referred to family and personal memories and activities on the hill to oppose or verify the 'official' folklore, i.e. archive source.<sup>31</sup>

Environmental communication studies have shown that communicating and stressing facts and authorised knowledge is a common strategy for different parties in the conflict to set their agendas (Low 2008: 49–50). Thus, in conflict discourse, participants aim to present their messages as credible and support their statements with facts and evidence. In environmental discussion, scientific knowledge has historically been considered a prominent source of authority (see for example Nisbet and Scheufele 2009), and in conflict communication, scientific or factual knowledge is often placed in opposition to emotion and opinion (Low 2008: 50–54). While considering vernacular knowledge in environmental-related discussions can be highly relevant, as explained earlier, there is a risk of dogmatising and stereotyping folklore, i.e. showing it as uniform and fixed, in conflict discussion. In the case of Paluküla, the folklore itself acts as scientific knowledge, without any critical or contextual analysis. However, it is important to note how considering folk tradition as an authoritative source in cultural heritage or landscape-related discussions is also common in the Estonian public domain (see more Remmel and Jonuks 2021).

#### *The Basis of Narrative Selection in the Conflict: Tradition over Subjectivity*

While place-lore is semiotically polyphonic, only part of its semiotic potential is activated in a particular communication situation. In the context of fact-based communi-

cation, where folklore acts as evidence, the usage of narratives or motifs is selective because the parties in the discussion choose narratives and meanings that support their arguments and interpret folklore in a way that justifies their agenda in the conflict. Media coverage indicated how some meanings, events, or motifs reflected in folklore were present in discussions and become authoritative sources in the course of the discussion. At the same time, others were left aside. For example, members of Maavalla Koda, folklorists, archaeologists, and various officials typically referred to earlier archive materials from the 19th and 20th centuries from the Estonian Folklore Archive, which emphasise the sacred site function of the place.<sup>32</sup> These narratives constituted a distinctive core or canon of place-lore used in the conflict. At the same time, a few earlier texts from the 1930s or 1940s that mentioned practical uses of the hill along with sacred ones,<sup>33</sup> and stories about giant hero Kalevipoeg, were not referred to.

As a result, the idea that earlier folklore presented Paluküla Hill as an untouched sacred site became dominant in the public discourse. In other words, sacredness was communicated as the tradition- or folklore-based view, and this assumption set the course of discussion and served as a basis of argumentation for different parties in the conflict. It is important to note that these dominant narratives in the discussion did not reflect the existing vernacular meanings and narratives either adequately or entirely. Mainly because part of the tradition was left out in the conflict discourse. While the earlier and 'traditional' archived narratives were considered to be more authoritative and were dominant, the vernacular interpretations of current locals and their stories about the hill were underrepresented in the public conflict discourse, even though some of the local families have lived in Paluküla for centuries. In addition, the earlier archive materials were not referred to or interpreted by all of the parties in the conflict. It is easy to claim that they did not feel that earlier tradition supported their agendas, but another reason may be that previously collected folklore is not equally accessible to all parties. Reaching and analysing these materials requires time and resources, digital competence, and special skills to access the archive sources (for example understanding metalanguage).

Despite being underrepresented in the discussion, the alternative interpretations of former folklore, as well as alternative narratives, exist and are apparent in local communities as well as in other groups (officials, members of the Maavalla Koda, etc.) involved in the discussion. For instance, some locals tried to oppose claims that were based on archive material. Reports of public participation meetings and local government meetings published in newspapers described how some locals questioned the folklore sources that indicated sacred uses of the hill and stressed the practical uses. For instance, they claimed that the function of the stone fences on the hill was not ritual, but practical – to mark the borders of farmlands – and midsummer festivals were more related to active local community life than ritual events.<sup>34</sup> A greater variety of functions and activities related to Paluküla was noticeable in materials collected by the State Forest Management Centre during local heritage inventory<sup>35</sup> in 2009 and in interviews conducted by Jüri Metssalu in 2015. The interviews showed a variation of entanglements with the place that are relevant to a small circle, among the community, neighbours, family, for example celebrating events on the hill, seeking silence, meditating, taking guests and friends to visit the hill, taking regular walks or maintaining other recreational or spiritual habits related to the hill, etc.

Another reason why using the place-lore in conflict discussions was rather biased is the arbitrary distinction between authoritative and nonauthoritative folklore sources that appear in discussions. As mentioned before, citing folklore texts was part of the conflicting rhetoric. As researchers and interviewees define genre boundaries differently, written documentation automatically makes the traditional text seem more reliable (Bacchilega 2012: 452). Archived texts seem less subjective or ideologically influenced. This is also well perceived in fieldwork situations where people tend to read and share archive materials with folklorists and do not rely on their own memory because they consider it 'vague' or 'subjective' (see for example Remmel 2014b: 40). However, archive sources cannot be considered more objective or reliable as archive material is influenced by such aspects as the ideological background of folklore collecting, or the archiving choices (see more Valk 2005; particularly about place-lore Remmel 2014b). These contexts are usually not visible in the media discourse, for example, the folklore texts about Paluküla were not commented on, and there was no contextual information added about archiving or collecting these texts.

However, apart from stressing official or institutional authority there was another important strategy apparent in legitimising the claims made based on folklore: stressing the historicity and continuity of folklore or tradition. This was noticeable in the discussion about Paluküla Hill, but illustrates the use of folklore in similar discussions in general and is also dominant in the constructivist discourse of the neopagan and native faith movement in Estonia and more widely (see more Gregorius 2015; Västriik 2015; Jonuks 2017). Folklore is represented as reflecting historical, old, even ancient values and meanings, and through the use of these stories, the historical importance of Paluküla Hill is also emphasised. In the Paluküla conflict, the folkloristic timeframe constantly clashed with geological time scale, for example, when "the glacial period relief forms"<sup>36</sup> and the cultural importance or claim that activities related to and events held on the hill being "thousands of years" old were mentioned together.<sup>37</sup> However, the first documented folkloristic source about Paluküla dates back to 1906.<sup>38</sup> Giving folklore authority by stressing historicity and the long timeframe of narratives implies that a later or contemporary part of the tradition is less valid or adequate.

### *Supporting Argumentation with Place-lore: Focusing on and Creating Oppositions*

As illustrated in previous sections we can see that conflict discussion focuses on the opposition between two main functions of the hill – the practical use of the land, and its sacred purpose. Groups who are strongly against building ski resorts argue that any non-sacred activity in this place is not appropriate as the place has traditionally been untouched. Religious comparisons are also common in their rhetorics, for example, the head of Maavalla Koda, Ahto Kaasik, claimed that "We wouldn't build a ski resort in a churchyard the same way as we wouldn't build it on a sacred hill. Both are sacred places."<sup>39</sup> The groups and people who support or are not clearly against possible development refer to different kinds of practical activity that take place on the hill today<sup>40</sup> as well as to these activities that have taken place there in the past.<sup>41</sup>

In public discussions about Paluküla Hill, practical use of land and sacred purpose are in conflict. However, in the oral tradition related to the hill and in folklore related to

natural sacred sites in general, these functions are not necessarily contradictory to each other. Moreover, the concept of untouched natural sacred sites is problematic (see for example Jonuks et al. 2014; Heinapuu 2016). Although most (traditional) sacred natural sites have been regarded as unaffected by human activity, there is no evidence that being 'untouched' or 'natural' are logical prerequisites of considering certain natural places sacred. Rather, the concept of sacred natural sites is re-constructed as representing a certain culture-specific image of nature or people's relationship with nature. In the Estonian case image of 'untouched' sites is rooted in national romanticism (see more Heinapuu 2016). At the same time, archaeological and folkloristic analysis has shown how human impact is clearly noticeable in these places (for example, sacrificial objects, footpaths, walkways, bonfire pits, altars, fences, etc.), also some sacred places have been managed as cultural landscapes (for example Jonuks et al. 2014: 96–97; Heinapuu 2016: 167–169).

The folkloristic and ecological data shows how Paluküla Hill has also been a semi-wild ecosystem and managed in different ways. The opposition between the sacred and practical functions of the place is prominent in public discussion, while in earlier folklore, the question of land use is not relevant, but is noticeable in the texts collected since the 2000s after the conflict broke out. For instance, in texts collected during fieldwork in 2009 organised by the Estonian Folklore Archives are clearly approachable in conflict discourse as informants discuss the different functions and previous uses of the hill. Various activities on the hill are noticeable in earlier folklore, but they are not opposed. Apart from reports on religious rituals held on Paluküla Hill, both the older and more recent folklore accounts reflect other functions and meanings apart from religious rituals. Local people from Paluküla remember, and earlier archive texts and ecological data express, how part of Paluküla Hill was used as farmland for herding and mowing, sand was excavated from the hillside, and the forest on the hill was managed (see EFR). The hill has also been viewed as an immediate home surrounding and connected with family history, and in more recent years the hill has been seen in various ways, such as a place of recreation or a tourist spot. Interviews recorded by Metssalu in 2015 illustrate a wide spectrum of contemporary practices related to the hill. Moreover, these interviews reflected various subjective and alternative religious or spiritual practices related to the place that do not adhere to earlier Estonian religious practices.

The question of land usage and the different functions of a place reflects the problems with using archive sources in the conflict because these sources cannot be used as proof of different activities at the place. A dominant part of the earlier material about Paluküla, dating to the first half of the 1900s, was collected in the course of fieldwork or as a result of the folklore archive's collection campaigns, the stated aim of which was to collect and archive narratives about sites of folkloric significance. Folklorists did not collect data about practical, everyday, or subjective, experiences; fieldwork diaries reflect how these were not considered relevant. Thus, the early reports on the Paluküla sacred hill do not necessarily allow the conclusion that the hill was considered equally sacred by all the people living there or that the site did not serve other, more practical, functions, as these were probably not deemed important enough to be documented.

The case of Paluküla Hill illustrates the role of public discussion or conflict in constructing and shifting of, for example, the sacredness of a certain place. Paluküla Hill was not regularly used as a sacred place at least since the 18th century. However, after

the conflict broke out in 2003, members of Maavalla Koda started to hold prayers (usually in November and January) on the hill, notifying the media on these occasions and revisiting the issue of Paluküla's fate in one way or another.<sup>42</sup> Thus, sacredness should not be viewed as a logical premise derived from place-lore, it can also be approached as a concept devised in the course of conflict.

## DISCUSSION

In conflict discourse, folklore is mediated and represented differently compared to everyday vernacular communication. For example, instead of the social media groups of the local community or casual communication in a family or community circle, the narratives have become part of public, official, and institutional discussions in news articles, reports, or expert opinions. An intersection of different descriptive levels, such as vernacular and official, local and national, private and public, and a variety of new media (written and visual media, protest campaigns, rituals, tours) allow novel trans- and intermedial interpretations of folk narratives, but also interfere with the semiotic reality that these narratives represent.

The opposition around Paluküla Hill originally arose from plans to change the local environment; however, nature is approached in the conflict communication through national, religious, and bureaucratic categories associated with cultural heritage discourse. The environmental topics are discussed clearly on the symbolic level, and the place itself is double-symbolised (Barroso 2017: 342–343), being coded through new cultural meanings and also becoming a symbol itself. During the conflict, place-related narratives become relevant as a part of self-identification and self-preservation strategies of various interest groups, and at the same time, practical functions and subjective or immediate experiences manifested in place-lore remain in the background. Thus, while place-lore is dialogical on two levels – manifesting relations between human and environment, and manifesting different cultural imaginations about place – the latter, the discursive level, i.e. interpretations of the environment, become central in the conflict.

In the conflict of Paluküla Hill, a rather arbitrary distinction emerged between authoritative sources of folklore (i.e. archival material) and everyday vernacular interpretations, which were often overlooked in discussions as subjective and biased. At the same time, the ideological context of the archived material, the selections of folklorists, and the fragmentation of archive sources were not acknowledged in the discussion. Considering place-lore as fixed knowledge can be problematic because the ecological, social, and cultural processes itself that these narratives express are dynamic and complex. Place-related narratives, being part of local communication, can make social and environmental processes visible, for example, environmental disruptions become interpreted in folklore. However, considering folklore as factual or conclusive, and thus independent of dynamic social and ecological context, alters this feedback loop between narratives and the environment.

The selective use of tradition, which is often characteristic of conflict communication and was evident in the Paluküla case, can also cause a diminishing of the semiotic coherence and polyphony in place-lore. The relations with the environment and environment-related practices are manifested in vernacular tradition specifically through

different, sometimes even conflicting narratives (see Päll forthcoming). When part of practices, activities, or ways of relating with the place are ignored in the discussion, the possible semiotic relationships with the environment also become neglected. Discussion of land use on Paluküla Hill illustrates how part of the tradition and thus extra-narrative experiences were ignored. While place-lore about Paluküla Hill expresses a multitude of possible experiences and practices, the public discussion focused on the hill's function as a sacred place. Undoubtedly, religious meanings have a relevant role in previous folklore related to the hill. However, while the discussion focused on opposition around practical and sacred, other personal and collective narratives were ignored. Furthermore, syncretic religious practices related to sacred sites can be viewed as part of tourism, the new age movement, various nature-related practices, etc. (Jonuks and Äikäs 2019). These creative, subjective, and alternative practices do not necessarily adhere to the idea of authentic native faith common in public discourse dominant in discussions of Paluküla.

The potential of place-lore to reflect the multilayered, even conflicting ways of adapting and interpreting the environment is crucial in environmental discussions because a diversity of interpretations enables us to consider the semiotic activity of environment, or its 'dissent', to paraphrase Low (2008: 60). For instance, previous folklore about Paluküla Hill expresses the characteristics of the environment as well as the ecosystem's responses to different human activities. Nature was described, dealt with, manipulated, used, valued, and in short, interpreted in multiple ways. However, in media coverage of the conflict, nature is not talked about unless it has an instrumental function. For instance, the European red wood ant (*Formica polyctena*), called *palukuklane* in Estonian (a name that refers to the certain type of dry forest environment – *palu* – it inhabits), appears in discussions in the context of forest management issues as well as when new ski trails were planned and some ant nests were removed. Excluding the non-human agency and overlooking ecological characteristics in environmental discussions can deepen the "disconnections between our ways of thinking about an environment and the ways an environment asserts its own being" (Low 2008: 48) that are the basis of environmental problems in the first place.

Different vernacular practices and narratives are not only the source of environmental 'dissent' but also crucial for social dialogue and cooperation. Seeking and allowing social 'dissent' in a sense of different or conflicting views in discussions can help to avoid hermetic, closed communication (see more in Low 2008: 53–54). In the Paluküla case, social dissent was apparent when different parties to conflict interpreted or contested the authoritative or institutionalised views on place-lore by bringing fourth personal memories or narratives that have been absent from archive materials or official discourse. However, these contextual or subjective vernacular interpretations did not hold a dominant position in the public discussions as officials and institutions (i.e. Maavalla Koda) were more capable of getting their messages out. Ignoring locals' points of view, intentionally or unintentionally, can create miscommunication and deepen the divide between cultural heritage and nature protection officials and communities. At the same time, including local knowledge (see for example Berkes 2008) and bridging the gap between official and practical dimensions of environmental communication (see for example Pilgrim and Pretty 2010) has been increasingly stressed in various fields in environmental and cultural heritage management.

The results of this study indicate that discussing place-lore at the discursive level of conflict communication resulted in altering and transforming the dialogical potential of place-lore, that is reflecting the multilayered ways of adapting and interpreting the environment. The Paluküla conflict illustrates how the issues originally about the environment can become strongly loaded symbolic discussions, which may lead to ignoring extra-textual ecological reality. When the conflict escalated, the main question was not about what kind of human activity the specific environment can tolerate and how these new activities (such as building the ski resort) related to existing landscape practices; instead, the main question became whose idea of nature use is more valid. Moreover, in the case of Paluküla Hill, practices like heritage management, nature protection, ritual events, recreation, and protests were triggered and influenced by interpretations raised in public conflict discourse. Thus, decontextualising folklore in conflict communication can have a direct impact on the extra-narrative environment itself, and for this reason, critical analysis on vernacular interpretations in conflict discussion is not only discursively, but also ontologically, relevant.

## NOTES

1 For example, place-lore collection projects in Estonian national parks (2006–2017) aimed to contribute to cultural heritage management (see ELB, Place-lore). Place-lore research is also integrated into the mire restoration project led by the Estonian Fund for Nature (see ELF).

2 The term was coined in 1992 (Västriik 2015: 138), see more on the terminology in Kuutma 2005.

3 EKLA, f. 199, m. 46, l. 31a < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Liivaku farm < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Magaski farm – Marta Sorgsep < Jaan Mass, 54 years old, Ann Magnus, 74 years old (1930).

4 In 2000 the hill was included in the newly formed Kõnnumaa landscape protection area (see more on protection measures see in CMP and Landscape Protection Area).

5 Some restrictions were added and management activities changed on the hill in 2015 when the management plan of the Kõnnumaa landscape area was renewed.

6 To find the articles I used the Digar database and the Estonian Reference Corpus. Since all newspapers from the period under consideration were not equally represented in databases, I conducted additional searches on newspaper sites, Google, and Keeleveeb to complement the data.

7 The report aimed to assess the existing borders of the area under heritage protection and propose changes if needed. Fieldwork was one part of the study, Metssalu also analysed a variety of earlier archaeological, geographic, and folkloristic data. The report is archived at the National Heritage Board but is not publicly available.

8 The relevant example is a series of short films about Estonian natural sacred sites directed by Anna Hints. In one of the films, writer Kristina Ehin talks about Paluküla Hill, stressing the folkloristic and sacred importance of the place (Hints 2015).

9 Jung 1910: 88; AK Juu: KK, Urgart 1925, 8.

10 ERA II 19, 534/5 (2) < Juuru parish, Kaiu municipality, Salutsi village – Rudolf Põldmäe < Juhan Klaan, 75 years old (1929); EKLA, f. 200, m. 15:2, p. 11 < Rapla parish, Paluküla village – Emma Tensmann (1930); ERA I 5, 723 (1) < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Kruusimäe farm – Leida Varner < Tõnis Varner, 63 years old (1937); ERA I 5, 745 (3) < Rapla parish, Ingliste

municipality, Paluküla village, Põlma farm – Erna Põllumets < Jaan Klaan, 86 years old (1937); ERA II 225, 87/8 (26) < Rapla parish, Rapla municipality, Paluküla village – Asta Muusikas < Mari Treier, 72 years old (1939).

11 EKLA, f. 199, m. 46, l. 31a < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Liivaku farm < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Magaski farm – Marta Sorgsep < Jaan Mass, 54 years old, Ann Magnus, 74 years old (1930).

12 AIF 22 s. 73.8 < Rapla parish, Paluküla village; KKI/N (Koski 1967, p. 61); ERA II 24, 287 (2) < Türi parish, Vahastu municipality, Vahastu village, Kuusiku farm – Richard Viidebaum < Jaan Klaas, 82 years old (1930).

13 See Preisberg 1913: 98; Vilbaste 1935.

14 EKS 37, 28 (1) < Rapla parish, Valtu municipality – Hans Kanketer (1906); E, StK 11, 39/40 (12) < Rapla parish – Linda Pärt (1921).

15 EKI KN Place names from Kehtna parish, collected by L. Lipstuhel (1948).

16 EKI KN Place names from Juuru parish, collected by Endel Varep.

17 See ELB, Local heritage.

18 ERA, DH 282 (19) < Juuru parish, Maidla village, Välja farm < Juuru parish, Maidla village, Künimäe farm – Epp Tamm < Ülo-Mihkel Väljaots, born 1933 (2009).

19 ERA, DH 497 (23) < Rapla parish, Rapla town < Juuru parish, Lau village, Väljaotsa farm – Kadri Tamm, Valdo Valper < Rein Haggi, born 1948 (2009).

20 The recordings are not archived but included in Jüri Metssalu's report.

21 AC: *Nädaline*, March 4, 2004 (“Ekspertrühkogu tegi ettepaneku võtta Paluküla Hiimägi muinsuskaitse alla”).

22 AC: *Eesti Loodus* 7–8, 2001 (“Mis toimub Kõnnumaa maastikukaitsealal?”); AC: *Nädaline*, October 4, 2003 (“Hiis on põlisrahva pühamu”); AC: *Postimees*, November 4, 2003 (“Plaanitava suusakeskuse maa-ala võeti kaitse alla”).

23 AC: *Nädaline*, March 4, 2004 (“Ekspertrühkogu tegi ettepaneku võtta Paluküla Hiimägi muinsuskaitse alla”).

24 AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, December 2, 2015 (“Kõnnumaa maaomanik Kehtna vald soovib leebemaid piiranguid”).

25 See for example AC: *Bioneer*, September 27, 2008 (“Riik raiub oma juuri”); AC: *Postimees*, July 30, 2017 (“Arvi Sepp: miks tahetakse Paluküla hiimäel mets maha võtta?”).

26 Reports were written by folklorists Mall Hiimäe, Mari-Ann Rimmel and Ergo-Hart Västrik (2004), by archeologists Tõnno Jonuks (2003) and Heiki Valk (2004).

27 For example narrative about beer as a ritual offering ERA I 5, 723 (1) < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Kruusimäe farm – Leida Varner < Tõnis Varner, 63 years old (1937).

28 For example narrative about Kalevipoeg, EKS 37, 28 (1) < Rapla parish, Valtu municipality – Hans Kanketer (1906).

29 ERA I 5, 723 (1) < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Kruusimäe farm – Leida Varner < Tõnis Varner, 63 years old (1937).

30 AC: *Nädaline*, October 4, 2003 (“Hiis on põlisrahva pühamu”); AC: *Roheline Värav*, April 13, 2005 (“Paluküla hiimägi on sümbol kogu Eestile”).

31 For example AC: *Nädaline*, January 8, 2004 (“Paluküla puhke- ja spordikeskus kompromisside otsingul”).

32 For example, AC: *Eesti Loodus* 7–8, 2001 (“Mis toimub Kõnnumaa maastikukaitsealal?”); AC: *Nädaline*, March 4, 2004 (“Ekspertrühkogu tegi ettepaneku võtta Paluküla Hiimägi muinsuskaitse alla”); AC: *Nädaline*, October 4, 2003 (“Hiis on põlisrahva pühamu”); AC: *Roheline Värav*, April 13, 2005 (“Paluküla hiimägi on sümbol kogu Eestile”).

33 For example EKLA, f. 199, m. 46, l. 31a < Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Liivaku farm, Rapla parish, Paluküla village, Magaski farm – Marta Sorgsep < Jaan Mass, 54 years old, Ann Magnus, 74 years old (1930).

34 AC: *Nädaline*, March 4, 2004 (“Ekspertrühokogu tegi ettepaneku võtta Paluküla Hiimägi muinsuskaitse alla”).

35 ELB, Local heritage.

36 AC: *Nädaline*, October 7, 2003 (“Hiimäele ei ole vaja suusatõstukit”).

37 For example, AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, November 11, 2015 (“Kohalviibijana Hiimäel ehk umbusklik prügikorjaja maausuliste hingedepäeva aegu Palukülas”); AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, December 2, 2015 (“Vastuseks Kehtna vallavalitsusele”).

38 EKS 37, 28 (1) < Rapla parish, Valtu municipality – Hans Kanketer (1906).

39 AC: *Eesti Päevaleht*, October 7, 2003 (“Külarahvas võitleb hiimäele suusakeskuse rajamise vastu”).

40 For example, AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, January 13, 2016 (“Raplamaa rahval on oma maakonnas õigus tervisele ja turvalisusele”); AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, July 4, 2018 (“Raplamaa turvalisuse nõukogu seisukoht Kõnnumaa maastikukaitseala eeskirjade eelnõu kohta”).

41 For example, AC: *Nädaline*, January 8, 2004 (“Paluküla puhke- ja spordikeskus kompromisside otsingul”).

42 For example, AC: *Raplamaa Sõnumid*, November 12, 2014 (“Maausulised tähistasid Paluküla hiimäel hingedepüha”).

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Author’s materials:

AC = Analysis Corpus consisting of news media texts.

Manuscript collections:

AI – Archaeological Collections of Tallinn University

AK – Collections of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Tartu

EKI, KN – Place name Collection of the Institute of the Estonian Language. <https://www.eki.ee/kohanimed> (accessed November 30, 2021).

EKLA – Estonian Cultural History Archives

EKS – Folklore collection of the Estonian Literary Society (1872–1924)

ERA – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944)

ERA, DH – Folklore collection of digital recordings of the Estonian Folklore Archives (2003–...)

E, StK – Folklore Collection of J. M. Eisen’s Fellows Scholars (1921–1927)

KKI – Collection of the Institute of Language and Literature (1941–1984)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How Can Storytelling Help Restore Mires? Applying Place-lore Fieldwork Methodology in Ecological Restoration

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## ABSTRACT

As ecological restoration changes the landscape and influences various social and ecological actors, restoration also needs to seek methodologies that integrate different kinds of knowledge and create multi-voiced discussions. We show how studying local environment-related narratives, i.e. place-lore, can be adopted in restoration activities. We argue that as place-lore expresses relationships between people and environment and such stories involve semiotic meanings from the environment, they have a great potential to motivate authentic and diverse discussions in restoration. As an example, we focus on wetland restoration and discuss the experience from the LIFE Mires Estonia (2015–2021) project where place-lore fieldwork was integrated with other restoration activities. Results from the project indicated how integrating the study of place-lore into restoration activities facilitates collecting various kinds of valuable data, addressing different stakeholders' concerns, detecting possible conflicts, and, most importantly, empowers environmental relations and knowledge that benefit restoration outcomes.

## KEY POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

- Enabling different, even conflicting viewpoints around ecological restoration is crucial, to prevent closed, hermetic, or dogmatizing communication.
- Restoration discussions need to be open to methodologies that focus on small-scale local narratives because the ecological expertise that these kinds of narratives express can directly benefit restoration outcomes.
- Place-lore fieldwork serves as a participatory method that allows for more inclusive and diverse dialogues between restoration experts and people influenced by restoration.

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## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the ecological and social value of wetlands in today's world. Various authors (e.g. Costanza et al., 1997; Mitsch et al., 2015) discussing the value of nature from the perspective of ecosystem services state that after coral reefs, wetlands offer the most valuable ecosystem services. Yet ecologically, wetlands are declining: the “long-term and recent trends in global wetland area, based on a review of 189 reports of change in wetland areas finds that the reported long-term loss of natural wetlands averages between 54% and 57% but that loss may have been as high as 87% since 1700 AD” (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016, p. 14). In this context, the importance of

restoration is crucial and in this article, we discuss how restoration can give more consideration to social and cultural context.

Conflicting interests between different stakeholders have been considered one of the greatest challenges in restoration (Cortina-Segarra et al., 2021). In the case of mires – common inland wetlands in Estonia, defined as “peatland with a peat layer at least 30 cm depth which is continuously forming and accumulating / ... /” (Paal & Leibak, 2011, p. 11) – the restoration activities, such as cutting trees and closing ditches, can alter landscapes familiar to people. These transformations are often visually apparent (e.g. Santaoja, 2023) and influence various engagements and practices people have with these environments (e.g. Veski, 2018), which can lead to conflicts among stakeholders. The principles of ecological restoration proposed by organizations like the Society for Ecological Restoration (Gann et al., 2019) aim to engage various communities and their diverse cultural knowledge and researchers have sought to develop best practices to do this (e.g. Egan et al., 2011; Gobster & Hull, 2000; Hourdequin & Havlick, 2016). However, there is still a lack of methodologies that can bridge the ecological and social dimensions of restoration on both fundamental and practical levels. Conflicts and barriers in nature management and restoration cannot be labeled purely social or ecological, they are always complex, including ecological and cultural semiotic relations, thus resolving these conflicts requires understanding complexity of the environment and its cultural interpretations (Gobster & Hull, 2000; Gross, 2006).

We suggest integrating the study of place-lore, i.e. folklore related to specific locations, into restoration activities. We argue that place-lore is incipiently part of environmental communication practices and discourse because place-related stories are highly contextual: they embody various types of relationships with the surroundings and express ecological actors and processes. While previous studies have examined folklore related to Estonian mires (e.g. Hiimäe, 1988; Päll, 2022; Pungas & Vösu, 2012; Pungas-Kohv et al., 2015), our research focuses on the practice of place-lore (i.e. storytelling) rather than its content, specifically explaining how the study and collection of place-lore can improve restoration efforts. Making place-lore visible in the restoration process is crucial for authentic dialogue where various social and ecological actors, as well as different types of knowledge and experience, can enter restoration discussion. Also, we show how multi-voiced dialogue motivated by place-lore fieldwork can support planning and establishing restoration activities. Although we focus on mire restoration, the methods we are describing can be used more widely in conservation, restoration and management projects.

Place-lore (Estonian *kohapärimus*), as we discuss it in this article, denotes highly contextual environmental-related folklore: narratives, vernacular descriptions, place names, etc. (see more Päll, 2022; Rimmel, 2014; Valk & Sävborg, 2018). The concept has been developed and used mainly in the Estonian academic space since the 1990s, where there is a strong historical tradition of collecting, archiving, and communicating local stories, led mainly by the researchers at the place-lore research group of Estonian Folklore Archives (EFA) (Hiimäe & Rimmel, 2020). However, the term refers to a more widespread phenomenon of local environmental-related stories and is similar but not entirely overlapping with such concepts as local legends (see, e.g. Bird, 2002), geographical lore (e.g. Meredith, 2002) or environmental narratives (e.g. Robertson et al., 2000). In general, place-lore expresses local ecological knowledge and is part of environmental communication, i.e. how people relate to non-human surroundings and talk about it. Therefore, it has a significant potential to inform topical discussions about integrating local knowledge with expert knowledge in environmental decision-making (Gross, 2006; Higgs, 2005), the role of narratives in environmental communication (Collier & Scott, 2008; Holzhausen & Grecksch, 2021; Robertson et al., 2000), and using methods from humanities and social sciences in environmental conflict management (Vining et al., 2000; Whitehouse, 2015).

We conceptualize place-lore as a manifestation of semiotic relations between the human and non-human spheres (Päll, 2022). We frame our claims with theoretical insights from ecosemiotics, that has been defined as a branch of semiotics that studies “sign processes as responsible for ecological phenomena” (Maran & Kull, 2014, p. 41) and “human relationships to nature which have

a semiotic (sign-mediated) basis” (Kull, 1998, p. 351). Ecosemiotics studies not only specific cultural representations of nature, but also enables analyzing complex relationships that ties culture with biological and ecological processes (Maran & Kull, 2014; Wheeler, 2008). In the context of restoration, the integrated view of ecosemiotics can offer a framework for engaging multiple social and ecological agencies in a dynamic restoration process; this need has been convincingly stressed (e.g. Gross, 2006, p. 173; Higgs, 2005; Robertson et al., 2000). A variety of models and tools of ecosemiotics (see Maran, 2023) have been used in analyzing and improving conservation efforts (Magnus & Mäekivi, 2023), evaluating landscape usages and functions from different species (Farina & Napoletano, 2010) or managing environmental discussions and conflicts (Päll, 2021).

As an example, we present the practical experience of integrating place-lore fieldwork in the LIFE Mires Estonia project that was carried out by the Estonian Fund for Nature (EFN) in six Estonian mire areas in 2015–2021. *Ca.* 22% of Estonia’s territory was covered with mires at the beginning of the twentieth century (Orru & Orru, 2008). However, a recent inventory of Estonian mire habitats (Paal & Leibak, 2011) indicated that nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of former mires have been converted into forest or agricultural land by melioration or have remained under settlements. The most excessive drainage projects were carried out under the Soviet regime in 1950–1980s; the unique ecological values of mires started to become more widely recognized in the 1960s (Masing, 1968, 1970a, 1970b). Restoration activity in the ecological sense, defined as “the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed” (Clewel & Aronson, 2013, p. 3) started in a larger scale in a second decade of the twenty-first century (Küttim et al., 2018). Shifts in values and practices related to mires can also be noticed in Estonian folklore: narratives before the twenty-first century describe mires as marginal landscapes to be avoided (Hiimäe, 1988). For example, the metaphor “end up in a mire” has been used to express the idea of reaching a dead end or becoming stuck in a problematic situation. Today, due to the influence of conservation efforts and tourism, mires have become integral to national identity discourse and are regarded as valuable, pristine, and beautiful environments (Pungas-Kohv et al., 2015; Pungas-Kohv & Soovik, 2019).

## 2. Theoretical and methodological background

In the following, we explain the concept of place-lore and how it can be seen as an ecosemiotic phenomenon that includes both environmental and cultural meanings. We also discuss why this ecological and cultural interconnectedness makes place-lore relevant in environmental discussions. Additionally, we provide an overview of an established set of fieldwork methods developed by the EFA place-lore research group in Estonia, which were also adapted in the LIFE Mires Estonia project.

### 2.1. Ecosemiotic basis of place-lore

The core of place-lore consists of semiotic relations between an ecological sphere and a cultural tradition (see more Päll, 2022). Place-lore is not limited by genre, but represents a variety of narratives, descriptions, toponyms, sayings that represent the specific environment. Thus, place-related folklore (or folklore in general, see e.g. Ben-Amos, 1971) does not include only traditional stories that express a mythological or supernatural experience. Rather, place-lore covers various vernacular expressions of environment relations – including historical and contemporary, subjective and collective, everyday and extraordinary (Rommel, 2014; Valk & Sävborg, 2018). Three basic criteria can define place-lore: it is (1) localizable, place-lore represents certain realistic extra-narrative locations and these narratives are often told as a part of practices related to physical surroundings (e.g. hiking, berry picking, or visiting sacred places); (2) place-lore represents the characteristics of the specific environment: environmental processes, conditions or species can be seen as shaping the course of narratives; and (3) place-lore mediates environmental experience (Päll, 2022).

One of the impulses for formulating place-lore is to interpret environmental signs, i.e. sign relations linked to the ecological processes and material environment (see more Maran, 2017). Humans (and other species) interpret environmental signs when moving around, orienting, noticing a change of seasons, and recognizing familiar places. However, humans access these through cultural and symbolic interpretation, for example, folk narratives. According to C.S. Peirce's sign theory, symbols such as language and cultural signs are conventional, while environmental signs are physical and have a directly perceivable relationship with what they represent (Maran, 2017). For instance, environmental signs can be indexical, like clues or tracks, which rely on proximity, or iconic, resembling the objects they signify (see, for example, Kohn, 2013, pp. 51–52; Wheeler, 2008, pp. 143–144). This differentiation is important because we claim hereby that, while place-lore is cultural and symbolic itself, it still enfolds various kinds of meaning-making going on in the environment – processes, shapes, characteristics, communication of other species, etc.

There is semiotic complementarity between the narratives and the specific environments these narratives represent. Place-lore is not easily transferable – a narrative cannot be recounted about another place or type of environment without significant change of meaning (Tuisk, 2001, pp. 74–75). Various ways how environmental meanings can motivate place-lore are especially apparent in folklore about mires as mires are difficult environments for humans to access, requiring constant interpretation of the stability of ground, water conditions, and surroundings. In other words, moving in mires requires constant interpretation of environmental signs. The soft and unstable mire surface and the visual emptiness of these landscapes are reflected in narratives about people sinking in bog pools or losing their way (see, e.g. Hiimäe, 1988; Meredith, 2002; Pungas & Vösu, 2012). Environmental changes and dynamics in ecosystems are reflected in narratives as well. For example, Laukasoo, one of the six mire areas being restored during the LIFE Mires Estonia project, got its name from a bog pool in the middle of the area (*laugas* – bog pool; *soo* – mire). In the 1970s, as a result of decades of extensive drainage in the area, the bog pool dried up and got a new name Kuivlaugas (Dry bog pool). Thus, place-lore may reflect ecological changes and environmental reactions to human activity.

We, therefore, claim that place-lore entails both cultural and ecological meanings. Environmental-related vernacular interpretations are not isolated, closed cultural constructions, but are semiotically connected to biological processes and refer back to these (Kohn, 2013, p. 54; Maran, 2020, p. 32). Environmental processes and agencies are manifested in the narratives through references to other species or their communication, or as descriptions of environmental conditions, processes, and for example, in the case of place-lore related to mires, physical and sensory experience is also clearly present and forming these narratives. In other words, talking and storytelling about the environment includes semiotic structures from the environment because our communication, interpretation, and experience are grounded in specific surroundings. In further sections we will show how semiotic activity of the environment itself and other species can in some cases enter into restoration discussions through place-narratives along with variety of social opinions.

## **2.2. Place-lore as part of environmental communication**

Recently, several authors have been approaching place-lore in the context of environmental communication rather than as belonging to an exclusively folkloristic realm (e.g. Päll, 2022; Rimmel, 2014). Place-lore can be viewed as a part of environmental communication on two intertwined levels: (1) ontologically, these narratives manifest various engagements between the human and the non-human world in general (i.e. communication with environment); and (2) discursively, place-lore is integrated into environmental discourse and discussions (i.e. communication about environment) thus being part of environmental communication explicitly.

In an ontological sense, place-lore mediates and expresses communication between people and their ecological surroundings, as we explained in the previous (1.1) section. On a discursive level, place-lore forms a relevant part of particular environmental discussions and affairs. Place-lore is

part of both communication practices and messages, similarly to local ecological knowledge or local narratives in general (see e.g. Berkes, 2008; Choy, 2011; Zwaal, 2008). In the context of Estonia, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of place-lore in environmental and nature protection discourse. Folklore has been relevant in national identity discourse, and also an important inspiration for forming and communicating the narrative of Estonians as a “forest nation” (see Annus, 2022; Rimmel & Jonuks, 2021). Folklorists (e.g. Hafstein, 2012, pp. 500–501) have shown how (local) heritage may become especially noticeable and topical when there is a threat or likely change in the area, e.g. new infrastructure projects or updating of management plans of nature parks. In these cases, place-lore is often resorted to by one or several parties of the debate to support their argumentation and persuade the public (e.g. Jonuks et al., 2022; Päll, 2021).

To better understand the relevance of place-lore in environmental discussions and its potential for conflict management, the concept of “environmental dissent” introduced by David Low (2008) can be helpful. Low relies on C. S. Peirce’s differentiation of dynamic and immediate object when explaining it: an object (or reality, or environment) is complex and changing (dynamical object) and acts independently from how it appears to us through concrete cultural representations (immediate object) (Low, 2008, p. 55). Dissent is semiotic activity and meaning-making of environment that can challenge our current understandings. Dissent, thus, describes the same idea referred to in the previous section (1.1) – environment is not constructed or isolated, environmental reactions, processes, or semiotic activity of other species are independent from our knowledge and interpretation. We cannot perceive environment as a direct communication partner in discussions, but we can acknowledge environmental dissent when studying different and even conflicting representations and experiences regarding the environment (Low, 2008, p. 53).

We claim that place-lore is also an expression of environmental dissent as it expresses environmental experiences and knowledge, changes in the environment, activities of various species, etc. For instance, environmental response to human activities was noticeable behind adopting the place name of Kuivlaugas mentioned above. Low has argued that environmental communication can be viewed as a method of inquiry and, instead of fixed representations and static fact-based messaging, it must encourage various knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints on the subject matter to allow dissent to freely arise (Low, 2008, pp. 48–49; see also Päll, 2021). Matthias Gross (2006, p. 173) has similarly stressed the principle of authentic communication in the context of restoration – restoration means exploring nature and its changes, and thus the restoration process must be open to environmental dynamics, changes, and reactions.

### **2.3 Methodology of place-lore fieldwork**

The study of place-lore has been rather practically oriented in Estonia, the EFA place-lore research group focused on digitizing and publishing archive material, organizing fieldwork projects in cooperation with local communities, and providing expert knowledge for nature protection and heritage management. As a result of various folkloristic and archeological fieldwork projects since the 1990s, the group has developed an established and characteristic set of fieldwork methods that connect elements from folkloristic fieldwork with landscape-oriented fields like archeology or geography (Hiimäe & Rimmel, 2020). The same methodology was used in the LIFE Mires Estonia project which is the case study of this article. The core of this methodology lies in locating and contextualizing both the historical and the current narratives within the contemporary environment; so it is concerned with recording environmental relations rather than only narratives (see Päll, 2022; Rimmel, 2014.) In addition to studying folklore, researchers aim to get to know the environmental characteristics and ecological conditions of the region (see more Päll, 2022).

Preparatory work preceding the fieldwork concentrates on analyzing earlier (archive) material (place names, narratives, ethnographic data), and both historical and contemporary natural conditions such as geological and geographical conditions, notable species inhabiting the place, and interpretation of the landscape by means of maps or archaeological data to develop interview

questions concerned with a specific landscape. The center of the fieldwork is an interview, usually a walking interview during which researchers visit the sites mentioned in place-lore together with the informant. This may be accompanied or replaced by locating places mentioned in the narratives on a map. In interview situations, the environment serves as a medium or interface, helping people to remember and engage; thus, the environment takes part in motivating the meanings, facilitates remembering the narratives or motifs, influences the choice of narratives, etc. (Rommel, 2014, p. 8). Recording diverse audio-visual material, e.g. videos, photos, sound recordings of the environment itself and places mentioned in folklore has also been important. Place-lore with additional information (coordinates, descriptions, photos) is stored in the database (Estonian Folklore Archive, n.d.) or in the map application (Estonian Land Board, n.d.).

Thus, the fieldwork methods of researchers interested in place-lore have been focusing on semiotic relations between the narrative and extra-narrative environment, and this kind of methodology is, therefore, contextual and open towards the environment. The methodology that motivates environment-related storytelling can be used in contexts where practices and values related to the specific landscape as well as their ecological influence need to be explored, e.g. environmental management or (cultural) heritage management. For example, place-lore fieldwork has offered an important input into nature protection management plans of Estonian national parks through the “Landscapes of memory” (2006-2017) project (Loodusveeb, 2012) or the inventory of Estonian natural sacred sites (Estonian Heritage Board, n.d.).

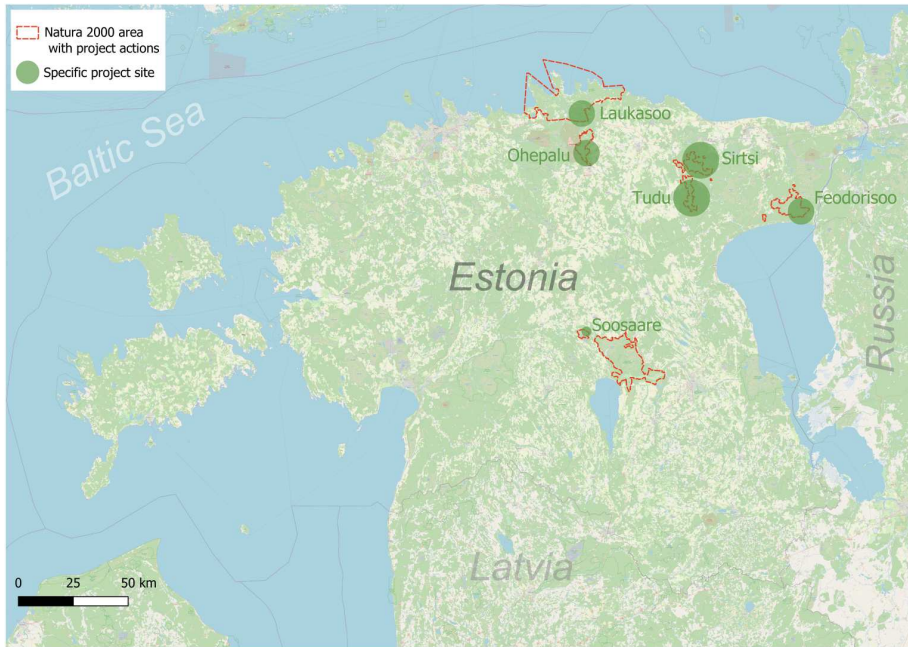
### 3. Overview of the case-study

The discussed case study applying place-lore fieldwork methodology concerns the project “Conservation and restoration of mire habitats” (LIFE14 NAT/EE/000126). The project was implemented with the contribution of the LIFE financial instrument of the European Commission and Estonian Environmental Investment Center during 2015-2021. Project activities affect ca. 7900 ha state-owned and protected mires in six locations in Estonia: Ohpalu, Laukasoo, Sirtsu, Tudu, Soosaare and Feodorisoo (Figure 1).

The LIFE Mires Estonia project, led by NGO the Estonian Fund for Nature, involved collaboration with state institutions (e.g. Environmental Board, State Forest Management Centre), and researchers, while also engaging local communities through information exchange and service provision.

According to their stages of development, Estonian mires can be divided into fens, transitional mires, and bogs. The main aim of the LIFE Mires Estonia project was to restore NATURA 2000 habitats, which are part of a European Union network dedicated to protecting habitats and bird species (see European Environmental Agency, n.d.). Specifically, the project focused on active raised bogs (7110\*), bog woodland (91D0\*), and Fennoscandian deciduous swamp woods (9080\*). Restoration activities included drainage closure and removal or in some cases, thinning of tree cover. In some cases, special protection measures were taken to protect existing infrastructure, commercial forest drainage and/or private lands from the effects of rising water levels. An additional aim of the project was to monitor the living conditions of indicator species such as Western capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), Moor frog (*Rana arvalis*), or some species of dragonflies (gen. *Leucorrhinia*), and in the environmental education realm, to acquaint the local communities and the public with the values of mires and the necessity of restoration activities.

The study of cultural heritage and place-lore related to the areas involved in the project was integrated into various project activities. Already at the planning stage of the restoration works, folkloristic and linguistic archival materials, old maps, and literary fiction were studied to obtain input for restoration plans. In some cases, cultural heritage sites mentioned in folklore were considered when planning the location of dams. Restoration plans were also coordinated with the National Heritage Board of Estonia, a governmental agency responsible for implementing the state’s cultural heritage policy, to ensure the preservation of heritage at the restoration sites.



**Figure 1.** Map of LIFE Mires Estonia project sites.

Cultural heritage related to mires (including place-lore) was integrated into educational programs and informational materials, such as texts on information boards, a children’s book and short educational films, which helped to communicate the value of mires and the necessity of the restoration works. The material studied and collected during the project has been made available in the cultural-historical database of Estonian mires (Pungas-Kohv, n.d.) and project outcomes are reflected in the resulting handbook (Salm et al., 2021).

### **3.1. Applying place-lore fieldwork in the LIFE mires Estonia project**

In general, the project applied the fieldwork methods developed by place-lore research group at the Estonian Folklore Archive described in Section 1.3 and the EFA researchers consulted the fieldwork plan. Fieldwork combined in-depth semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and collecting different kinds of data sources (photos, recordings, notes etc.), and was conducted by using various modes of interaction (e.g. field trips with informants, face-to-face interviews or interviews by phone). The lead interviewer was Piret Pungas-Kohv from the EFN with other members of the restoration team occasionally participating.

The first part of the interview questionnaire prepared by Piret Pungas-Kohv focused on the locals’ everyday practices and their subjective attitudes to mires. Previous study of historical data, maps, and knowledge about specific environmental conditions made it possible to add a second set of questions about specific restoration areas, that related to characteristics of the landscape, toponyms, previous folk narratives, etc. (for an example of the questionnaire, see Salm et al., 2021, p. 27).

The main target groups for interviews were local people, but some respondents were also experts or people with practical or personal relations with the specific mires. The snowball method was used to find respondents using contacts shared in public meetings or by locals involved in restoration

activities. As in-depth interviews are time-consuming, it was impossible to talk with all the people living near the project areas; thus, people's motivation and interest in participating in discussions was one of the main factors in the choice of informants. The spatial representation of the interviewees depended on the general population density around the six restoration areas. As expected, there were fewer respondents from the sparsely populated Feodorisoo and Soosaare project areas. Interviews were recorded, except on one occasion, when the respondent refused to be recorded. Interviewees remain anonymous whenever data is presented.

The course of the interviews was directed by the prepared interview guide; however, people were encouraged to add their own topics. The course, length, and thoroughness of each interview was also influenced by the respondent's motivation to speak, interests and agendas and by the specific communication situation. Expression of various topics in interviews is therefore inconsistent, which is characteristic of semi-structured in-depth interviews in general. As most of the respondents were elderly, walking interviews were used less often; instead, shared map viewing enabled interviewees to mark locations of activities and events they talked about.

#### **4. Results: the role of place-lore fieldwork in mire-restoration**

During the LIFE Mires Estonian project, 24 interviews were conducted with 31 people (15 men and 16 women). The interviews lasted from half an hour to several hours, with a total of 45 h recorded. In some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted, and some of the interviews were group interviews (e.g. with neighbors or relatives). The age of the people interviewed was between 30-85.

In presenting the experience gained from the LIFE Estonian Mires project, we aim to provide an overview of how semiotic relations with the environment emerge through applying the study of place-lore, rather than focusing on the specific textual content gathered. While interview content itself can offer additional insights into contemporary values and narratives concerning mires, our analysis centers on fieldwork as a communication process where discussions occur. To identify instances where relationships with mires and reactions to restoration emerge, we created descriptions with interview metadata and summaries at the segment level (a traditional method of organizing material, see guideline Estonian Folklore Archive, 2017) and reviewed fieldwork notes. We then performed open coding on interview summaries to identify: (1) topics related to mires (e.g. "berry picking," "toponymic explanations"); (2) instances where the topic of restoration emerged, categorizing these expressions as positive, negative, or neutral/not interested; and (3) occasions when new information relevant to the restoration process was provided.

Both of us independently coded the data and largely agreed on (1) topics and (2) opinions regarding restoration, with agreement rates of 92% and 83%, respectively. However, we had differences in identifying (3) new information relevant to the restoration process, with an agreement percentage of 46.1%. The first author identified nearly half of the instances, while the second author – who worked on the restoration project – marked all those instances and identified more than twice as many additional ones. We decided to retain all identified instances as valid examples, given that what qualifies as new information for restoration purposes is highly dependent on the specific context and nuances of the project.

##### **4.1. How did place-lore appear in interviews?**

The initial aim of conducting the place-lore fieldwork in the LIFE Mires Estonia project was to collect data about the cultural heritage of restoration areas. However, in the course of the fieldwork, the complex relationship between the locals and the mires became apparent. When analyzing interview materials, we searched both narratives about practices and about mires or its characteristics. We noticed how these two were closely related because characteristics of the mires (e.g. difficult terrain) or earlier narratives (e.g. toponymic explanations) were also mostly recalled by interviewees through specific events and activities. Commonly described practices included berry picking,

peat cutting, and working in the peat industry. Frequent narratives about the characteristics of certain mires involved losing one's way, animals or machinery sinking in bog pools, toponymic explanations, encounters with wild animals, and noticing changes in the landscape. Less frequently, respondents mentioned hunting, herding, or recreational activities such as hiking, swimming, and birdwatching. Supernatural narratives were also rare. Some individuals virtually never visited the nearby mire due to health reasons or fear of wild animals but recounted narratives they had heard from others.

Historical and contemporary narratives were often intertwined in the interviews. Introductory questions about biographical data motivated respondents to frame answers within their life stories, frequently leading them to share personal connections and with specific mires. For example, a woman born in 1933 shared, "I've been going to the bog since I was little, but I've also gotten lost in these bog pools. I was six years old, and my brother was eight. In the spring, cranberries emerge from under the snow, and we went to look for them. We ate our fill of cranberries; they were so wonderful and juicy! But then we couldn't find our way back! We couldn't find where we had entered! But in the old days, they used to cut peat and dry it in sheds. My brother recognized one of those sheds, and that's how we found our way back!" Knowledge of historical uses and events related to mires – such as their use as refuges during wars, winter roads, drainage works, peat cutting, and pine resin collection – came from family histories and local stories. For example, a woman born in the 1930s talked about soldiers drowning in the bog, "The military unit came through here and went into the bog, intending to go straight through the Parika bog. Several tanks were stuck at the front here and sank in along with the men." These narratives revealed an environmental historical perspective while also highlighting the semiotic dynamics of the environment, including the agency of various species and environmental changes. Some interviewees directly described changes in mire areas, e.g. there being fewer berries (e.g. cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus* or cranberries *Oxycoccus palustris*) at the edges of the mires so that one needs to walk deeper into the mire to find them.

Although the questionnaire briefly addressed earlier folk traditions, including supernatural stories, interviewees were generally modest about such beliefs. There was a reference to an ancient settlement that was deemed to be haunted and some interviewees could recall scary stories they heard in their childhood about mystical creatures living in bog pools. These narratives had the didactic aim to keep children away from bog pools (Hiimäe, 1988). Today, public discourse and tourism make use of these earlier stories and often portray mires as mystical and aesthetic landscapes (Pungas-Kohv et al., 2015). Their descriptions of mires were based on practical, indexical, and perceivable semiotic relationships with the environment, rather than on symbolic representations in culture and folklore. Even when interviewees expressed fear, it was a practical acknowledgment of the challenging conditions in the bog and was sometimes expressed as wisdom. For example, a man born in 1949 said, "It is said that when you go into a bog, always look back so you can see the shape of the forest. This way, you'll be able to find your way out by recognizing that same shape later." This pragmatic approach may be due to the snowball sampling method, which led to locals with rather strong practical or emotional relationships with the mire.

#### **4.2. In what context did mire restoration appear in interviews?**

Most of the respondents had a positive attitude towards the place-lore fieldwork and were open to discussions; at the same time, their attitudes indicated a degree of uncertainty and various fears about the mire restoration plans. The interviewees did not directly ask restoration-related questions; however, the topic arose in various contexts. It primarily emerged through narratives expressing changes in the landscape, which were often linked to personal memories of mires described in the previous subsection (3.1). Most frequently, these memories described drainage, peat cutting, or the peat industry.

Primarily, people brought up practical questions related to restoration plans they had heard about. Worries included most frequently those about the *expected flooding* of people's homes or roads close to the home, as expressed by a woman born in 1933, "We live already here as if in a bowl, and the ditches are all overgrown with moss; if they start overflowing, we'll drown!" In addition, worries about *landscape change, loss of its familiar visual appeal* and concern for the *cutting down* or *eventual death of trees* were expressed. The latter has been magnified by the debates concerning forest management that have been in the limelight in Estonian public space (Rommel & Jonuks, 2021). Criticism against extensive clear-cutting that has been at the core of the "forest war" was already brought up in participatory meetings and appeared frequently in interviews. Also, *restoration works seemed damaging or ugly* to some respondents. At the same time, the local people *feared that the machinery used for restoration works would damage private roads*.

Besides practical concerns, many of the interviewees were skeptical about mire restoration in general. For example, some people felt that money should be used more efficiently than on mire restoration or that there are more pressing environmental issues to address. As a man born in 1949 expressed, "I don't think the bog should be turned into a cultural landscape; it's simply not possible. But closing the ditches ... that's a waste of money. In my opinion, the ditches should be reasonably deepened and repaired, not so that we start funneling EU money into this [restoration]." Skepticism may stem from the fact that restoration contradicts the previous discourse of mires as marginal, useless landscapes that needed draining (Pungas-Kohv et al., 2015). Moreover, several interviewees had worked in drainage or peat industries during the 1950s-1980s, a period of extensive drainage projects in Estonia. A woman born in 1933 described her work in peat industry, "I have loaded peat piles! I was offered a job in the bog. You could work at night or whenever you wanted. There were ditches in the bog, and the ditches had piles of peat. I would go out to the bog, but when there was no work to be done, I would go into the shade of the birch trees and knit socks."

Experiences and values expressed in place-lore sometimes challenged the restoration team's knowledge, the ideology of restoration, and earlier folklore. For example, a local woman born in 1933 disputed the notion that a dry bog pool had dried up, stating, "Actually, I don't understand that these bog pools would have somehow dried up; they haven't." She also expressed concern that restoration could harm the trees around the bog pool. Such discussions were valuable for diverse and open communication and often highlighted instances of environmental dissent – environmental dynamics or characteristics that challenge the existing representations or data such as maps, and earlier archive materials. Our analysis revealed several instances where this kind of "dissent", i.e. new, relevant knowledge emerged. This included details about when specific species began to disappear after the bog was drained, or how changes in the water regime affected levels across different seasons. Additionally, interviews uncovered information about previously uncharted cultural heritage sites (such as peat barns and shelters), and locals provided information about the origins of landmarks or objects that the restoration team had observed during fieldwork.

The interview situation provided the restoration team with an opportunity to give explanations about the behind-the-scenes of mire restoration and consider specific problems or worries related to the restoration project, for instance, forwarding the concerning issues to the planners of the restoration works so that they could check the possible problems such as adjusting dam numbers or adding observation points. The interviews also increased local engagement in the restoration process. For example, in response to a community member's request, ENF created an additional information board near their home to help explain the restoration to tourists.

## 5. Discussion

The core of place-lore narratives are semiotic relations between humans and environment (Päll, 2022), therefore, focusing on place-related narratives in fieldwork enables bringing the people's relationship with the environment into focus in the context of restoration. Empowering and

focusing on relationships with the environment is especially important when the environment being restored, such as mires, is not part of people's everyday surroundings. Also, the discussion of restoration became topical in local communities and between different stakeholders; even after the interviews, these topics continued to be discussed by neighbors, relatives, in local gatherings, locations were re-visited etc. Here a possible ethical benefit that various researchers have stressed emerges – people can be more motivated to accept or support restoration efforts when they learn about and experience the environment (e.g. Rosa & Collado, 2019) and when they consider a specific environment as part of their territorial identity (e.g. Reyes, 2011; Robertson et al., 2000).

By studying previous archived material, conducting interviews, contextualizing and analyzing data, place-lore-centered fieldwork methodology enabled experts to collect various kinds of environmental and cultural heritage data and gather knowledge that would have gone unnoticed or overlooked in other scientific data collection. We provided several examples of new and significant information that emerged from the interviews in the results section (3.2). Narratives that represent nature are localized and contextual, they entail information about the characteristics and dynamics of the landscape and species inhabiting it (Päll, 2022; Wheeler, 2008), while storytelling itself activates memory and helps recall and articulate experiences. Thus, the place-lore fieldwork made it possible to consider unique kinds of local ecological knowledge in the project activities. The need to combine local knowledge with expert knowledge is often dismissed in restoration and conservation projects (Higgs, 2005; Koban, 2020).

On a more fundamental level, studying place lore brings the semiotic potential of the environment or “environmental dissent” into restoration discussion. The environment asserts its dissent through multiple relations and forms of knowledge (Low, 2008, p. 48). Since place-lore is open to environmental meanings and environmental signs – such as pre-symbolic, indexical, and iconic signs – these stories express a wide range of meanings. In the result section, we provided examples of how new and contradictory information was expressed because locals were willing to contemplate, negotiate and de-contextualize their relationships with mires. Low (2008) stresses that environmental communication must be a process of inquiry, i.e. studying environmental issues together with parties concerned. Studying different, even conflicting, information and observations about the environment made the communication authentic, enabling restoration experts to consider environmental dynamics and reactions and manage or change the restoration plan if needed.

Place-lore fieldwork encourages dissent at the social level as these narratives express diverse agendas and viewpoints. Enabling different, even conflicting perspectives in communication is crucial to prevent closed, hermetic, or dogmatizing communication (Low, 2008, pp. 48–50), and may help address potential controversies, conflicts, and miscommunications in restoration projects (Koban, 2020; Vining et al., 2000). Place-lore has been a part of environmental communication not only ontologically, but also in a discursive sense, reflecting historical, ideological, and even political positions related to certain environments and practices related to these. Folklore related to mires serves as a good example: these stories reflect the transformation of values and meanings associated with Estonian mires over the last 50 years, and as our experience from fieldwork expressed, these values and meanings continue to coexist within the narratives. Earlier folklore and ideas influence people's attitudes to wetland restoration, which began to be practiced more widely as late as in the end of the twentieth century in Estonia.

An important precondition for voicing various concerns and viewpoints related to restoration is testing and allowing different kinds of participation methods (Koban, 2020). We showed in the results section, how immediate in-depth interviews with a collaborative study of mires made it possible to create a safe space to discuss. Place-lore fieldwork can thus be considered as an additional participation method that includes target groups or individuals who may find it challenging to engage in public meetings or other traditional participation formats due to health issues, limited transportation, introverted personality, or other factors. Also focusing on people's relationships with mires enhances more personal and engaging communication which might not be achieved

through public meetings or brief surveys. Creating a space for open dialogue is essential for allowing “dissent” to emerge. In the LIFE project, interviewees were also able to contextualize new information and conflicting narratives within both ecological and social contexts, integrating these insights into the restoration process.

Fieldwork that focuses on exploring local stories offers the possibility to turn around the hierarchical roles (i.e. who speaks and who listens) between locals and restoration experts that restoration discussions tend to set up (e.g. Koban, 2020). More and more attention is being paid in research and practice to the fact that top-down power relationships trigger conflicts between stakeholders and these need to be replaced with methodologies that combine various kinds of voices (e.g. Collier & Scott, 2008; Gross, 2006). While in a variety of participatory practices, the experts are those engaged in sharing information or leading the discussions, place-lore fieldwork allows local people to become the experts in the context of restoration as well. Local environmental-related narratives are the kind of expertise that can't be replaced or negotiated by outsiders (Robertson et al., 2000). Restoration discussions need to be open to methodologies that focus on small-scale contextual interpretations and expertise. In the case of the LIFE Mires Estonia project, the restoration team undertook the place-lore study, however, other interest groups may also lead such studies or bring local narratives into discussion.

We have demonstrated how collecting place-lore can help identify potential conflicts. However, it is important to recognize that the multi-voiced nature of place-lore also has the potential to trigger or escalate existing tensions. Knowledge and experiences manifested in folklore can conflict with each other or with existing discourses of ecological restoration, as illustrated by discussions around closing ditches or cutting trees presented in the results section. Strong reactions to tree cutting – a necessary activity in some cases to restore open bogs (Salm et al., 2021, pp. 40–44) – serve as a particularly valuable lesson. Not only does forest management considerably change people's familiar landscape, but it is also directly related to the ongoing “forest war” in Estonian society that arose in 2016 in the context of developing a new management plan for Estonian forestry (see Jonuks et al., 2022). Pre-existing tensions around this topic made it challenging to create dialogue, experts were often seen as representing the opposing side in the forest debate. Thus, pre-existing conflicts or significant power imbalances related to specific restoration sites or communities can be important limitations to consider when applying place-lore-centered methodology. To avoid escalating earlier conflicts, it is essential to critically analyze existing social hierarchies and relevant issues, and to communicate with key informants when preparing for fieldwork (see Salm et al., 2021).

The LIFE Mires Estonia project revealed some challenges in integrating place-lore collection into restoration activities. We presented an open-ended methodology that requires motivation for dialogue from the restoration team (and volunteers) as well as readiness to adjust and change the restoration plan and activities during the process. Place-lore fieldwork must not be taken as an instrumental participation tool or a top-down medium to communicate conservation or restoration aims or manipulate existing values and narratives, but the goal must be motivating equal knowledge exchange. In addition, there are possible practical limitations of integrating place-lore fieldwork. One-on-one conversations are time-consuming and require specific methodological expertise; interviewees must be well-versed in the ecological conditions of specific areas as well as in previous and current local narratives. Moreover, it is not always easy to apply these fieldwork methods within the timeframe and costs of an overall restoration plan; nor is the effectiveness of the fieldwork always quantitatively measurable. Because of that, the place-lore based approach is probably more easily applicable within smaller communities or rather sparsely populated areas and in rather long-term restoration projects.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, we proposed studying place-lore as an innovative methodology for enhancing participation and communication in ecological restoration. We connected ecosemiotics and

environmental communication theories to show how place-lore has the potential to make communication and participation more authentic, grounded and inclusive, through bringing various environmental interpretations and agencies (including non-human species) in the center of restoration discussion, and in the end, reach better restoration outcomes. With the experiences gained during the LIFE Mires Estonia project, we illustrated how integrating place-lore centered fieldwork methodology into restoration activities can raise awareness among the parties involved, enable empowering people's environmental relations, facilitate gathering various data about environmental conditions and cultural heritage, and acknowledge local knowledge in restoration context, as well as diagnosing possible miscommunications and conflicts. Analysis of the project outcomes enabled mapping out various practical challenges and limitations of applying the methodology in restoration contexts. We offer practical insights and encouragement for adopting place-lore in restoration and broader environmental management. Integrating place-lore with other methods can enrich transdisciplinary knowledge, bridging natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities in restoration and conservation efforts.

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## Sõjakas kaitse – konfliktid loodus- ja kultuuripärandi hoiu kujundamisel

Tõnno Jonuks, Lona Päll, Atko Remmel, Ulla Kadakas

**Teesid:** Artiklis uurime Eesti looduse ja kultuuri kaitset tekkinud teravaid vastasseise, mida osalejad on mõnikord nimetanud sõdadeks. Näitejuhtumid ulatuvad pühapaikade kaitset metsa ja linnalooduse kaitсени. Vaatleme artiklis, kuidas vastasseisud on arenenud, milliseid argumente kasutatakse ning millised konflikti osapooled neis eristuvad. Meie eesmärk ei ole otsida konfliktidele lahendusi või neid ennetada – selle asemel soovime mõista, miks mõnikord muutub looduse ja kultuuri kaitse sõjakat retoorikat kasutavaks konfliktiks.

**Võtmesõnad:** konflikt, looduslikud pühapaigad, metsasõda, keskkonnakommunikatsioon, konfliktoloogია

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Eesti ajaloos on olnud mitmeid konflikte, mille keskmes on mõni loodus- või kultuuriobjekt. Teravaid vastasseise leiab juba sajandite tagant – konfliktse kaitse vanim teadaolev näide on pastor Gutsloffi kirjeldus, kuidas talupojad üle kogu Lõuna-Eesti 1640. aastatel protesteerisid Võhandu jõe ehitatava vesiveski vastu (Gutsloff 1648). 21. sajandi loodus- või kultuuriobjektide kaitset (edaspidi LKK) toetavad protestid on meie jaoks mõistagi aktuaalsemad, saanud elavat vastukaja ning neid on käsitletud paljudes uurimustes (vt nt Brüggemann ja Kasekamp 2008; Annist 2020). Viimase mõnekümne aasta konfliktidel on mitmeid ajastule omaseid tunnuseid, kus põimuvad ühtaegu rahvuslikud, majanduslikud, keskkonnakaitselised ja võimuküsimused ning mõnevõrra üllatavalt on neis esindatud ka spirituaalne aspekt. Lisaks sellele iseloomustab nii globaalset keskkonnadiskursust kui ka Eesti viimase aja LKK konfliktide meediastumine ehk konfliktide kujunemist, kajastamist ja haldamist suunab meedia loogika (vt Hutchins ja Lester 2015). Näiteks mõjutab keskkonnateemade nähtavust ühiskonnas nende uudisväärtus, uudistsükli loogika või kajastuse afektiivsus jne (Cox ja Pezullo 2017, 115–127). Avalikud diskussioonid leiavad aset hübriidses keskkonnas, sh põimunult nii traditsioonilises uudismeedias kui ka sotsiaalmeedias (Krotz ja Hepp 2013) ning protestiliikumisi iseloomustab lisaks õigussüsteemi ja

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Artikli kirjutamist on toetanud ETFi grant „Eesti Keskkonnaliikumine 20. sajandil: ideoloogia, diskursid, praktikad“ (PRG908); Baltikumi ja Ida-Euroopa Uuringute Fondi grant „The Relocation of Transcendence: The Sacred of the Seculars around the Baltic Sea“; Euroopa Liidu Regionaalarengu Fondi Eesti-uuringute Tippkeskus (TK145) ja Tartu Ülikooli ASTRA projekt PER ASPERA; samuti EMP finantsmehhanismi Balti teaduskoostöö programm EMP340 „Kaasavad paigad ja teekonnad: jagatud lood ja tähendusloome“ ning riikliku programmi „Eesti keel ja kultuur digiajastul“ projekt EKKD72 „Tekstiainese kasutusvõimalused digihumanitaaria juhtumiuuringutes Eesti ajalehekollektsioonide (1850–2020) näitel“.

ametlike meetmete kasutusele suurem (sotsiaal)meedia kompetents (Cox ja Pezullo 2017, 251–269). Keskkonna ja kultuuripärandi teemad saavad avalikus ruumis sageli nähtavaks just konfliktide kaudu – kui keskkonda või pärandit tajutakse ohustatuna, muutub see diskussioonides oluliseks ja seda tunnetatakse teravamalt identiteedi osana (Hafstein 2012, 500–501). Konfliktikeskne kajastus tähendab aga, et kompleksed keskkonna ja pärandi teemad on kajastatud sündmuspõhiselt, lühiajaliselt ja fragmenteeritult (Hansen 2019, 87–88).

21. sajandi LKK konfliktidega seotud märksõnad on lisaks meediakajastuse olulisele rollile ka kaasamine ja ennetamine. Kui osapooled oskavad potentsiaalset vastasseisu ette näha ja tahavad teha koostööd kõigile sobiva (kompromiss)lahenduse leidmiseks, siis sellist olukorda on tavaliselt nähtud parima viisina asju korraldada. Võimaliku konfliktiennetusena ongi kaasamine ja mitmesuguste (sh sotsiaalsete) mõjude analüüs saanud arendus- ja haldusprotsesside loomulikuks osaks (vt Clarke ja Peterson 2015, 91–103; Daniels ja Gregg 2001). Näiteks on Eestis Riigimetsa Majandamise Keskus (RMK) juurutanud kohalike elanike kaasamist uute raiete kavandamisel (vt lähemalt Kuusik 2021) ning Muinsuskaitseamet loonud looduslike pühapaikade eksperdinõukogu, kaasates teadlaste kõrval Maavalla Kojas esindajaid. Mõlemal juhul on eesmärk eelnevate arutelude abil eri arvamusi tekitavate tegevuste osas jõuda konsensusele või vähemalt kompromissile, mis paljudel puhkudel ka õnnestub. Paraku tekivad konfliktid neist ennetusmeetmetest hoolimata, mis sunnib küsima, kas me saame ikka konfliktide tekkepõhjustest ja mehhanismidest aru. Ja ehk ei peakski alati konflikte kartma ja vältima, vaid nägema nende konstruktiivset potentsiaali keskkonnakommunikatsioonis (vt nt Low 2008) või käsitlema neid ennustamatuse ja loovuse allikatena kultuuris laiemalt (nt Lotman 2009, 123–132)?

Artiklis vaatame mitmeid näiteid viimastest kümnenditest, kus LKK on arenenud meedias rohkelt kajastatud vastasseisudeks, toome välja nii laiapindsemad ühiskondlikud konfliktid (nn metsasõjad ja hiitesõjad) kui ka kõnekad üksikjuhtumid (Haabersti remmelga juhtum ja Treimani-Metsapöörde kogukonnametsa kaitsmine). Analüüsime, kuidas konfliktid on kujundanud ja struktureerinud viimase paarikümne aasta Eesti loodus- ja kultuuripärandi kaitse diskursust. Artiklis me ei otsi lahendusi, kuidas konflikte vältida või hallata – selle asemel püüame neid analüüsida ja vaadata, mis on konfliktide „taga“: kes nendest osa võtavad, mismoodi oma seisukohti argumenteeritakse ja milline on ühiskonna eri rühmade mentaliteet, mis üldse viib LKK konfliktideni. Püüame artiklis käsitleda LKK konflikte senisest mitmekülgsemalt, s.t kui tähenduslikke ja potentsiaalselt konstruktiivseid olukordi, kus on võimalik esile tuua ja uurida eri narratiive ja toimetehhanisme.

Raamistame ülevaate keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringute teooriaga, mida toetame viidetega konfliktoloogiale. Näitejuhtumite spetsiifikast tulenevalt kaasame

ka mõned kultuuripärandit ja pühapaiku puudutavad uurimused. Keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringute meetodid annavad võimaluse analüüsida konflikte pragmaatilisest aspektist ehk vaadelda konkreetseid avalikke diskussioone ja representatsioone ning suunata neid konstruktiivsemaks. Teisest küljest võimaldavad need läheneda keskkonnakommunikatsioonile konstitutiivselt ehk mõtestada laiemalt keskkonnaprobleemide- ja konfliktide tekkimise põhjusi (Cox ja Pezullo 2017, 34). Keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uuringud pakuvad raamistust mõlema, nii looduskaitsealiste kui ka kultuuripärandi konfliktide uurimiseks. Artiklis käsitleme konflikte hübriidsetena: vastuolud puudutavad ökoloogilist reaalsust, ent keskenduvad sageli kultuurilistele tõlgendustele ja praktikatele (vt nt Douglas, Verissimo 2013; Päll 2021b). Siinsesse artiklisse valitud näitejuhtumeid on meedias laialdaselt kajastatud ja neid võib seetõttu vaadata kui mudelkonflikte. Uuringus käsitleme konflikte ümbritsevaid avalikke diskussioone, lisaks toetub artikkel autorite poolt tehtud välitöödele (nt Treimani-Metsapöole juhtum) ja kvantitatiivsele meediaanalüüsile (nt Haabersti remmelga ja metsasõdade puhul).

Elise Boulding (1962, 7) on oma klassikalises definitsioonis mõistnud konflikti kui tajutavat sobimatust või osapoolte arusaama, et neil on vastandlikud vaated või võistlevad soovid. Võistlusliku olemuse tõttu on konfliktid keerulised suhtlusolukorrad, kus põimuvad paljude osapoolte huvid ja taotlused. Sellises situatsioonis on suhtlus intensiivne, osapoolte seisukohti väljendatakse reljeefsel ja otsekoheisel, ühtlasi avaldub nende mõtteevis, maailmapilt ja mentaliteet. Konflikte, kus osapooled (siinses artiklis kokkuleppeliselt kaitsjad ja arendajad)<sup>1</sup> mõtlevad läbi ja sõnastavad oma tegevuse eesmärged selgemalt ning seeläbi jõuavad sisuliste probleemide lahendamiseni, saab pidada konstruktiivseteks (Lehtsaar 2015, 33). Probleemsed on hoopis võitluskesksed konfliktid, kus „ei võidelda mitte ainult oma asja eest, vaid ka teisele äratagemise nimel“ (16). Kuna konflikti tüüp ilmneb alles vastasseisu käigus ja võib, olenedes osapoolte käitumisest, aja jooksul muutuda, on konfliktid oma olemuselt unikaalsed, mis teeb alati toimivate lahenduste väljatöötamise keeruliseks.

### **LKK konfliktide lähiajaloo**

Eesti lähiajalugu tunneb mitut looduskaitsealistest muredest lähtunud, paljusid inimesi ühendanud ja kõrghetkedel rohkearvulist liikumist, mida osalejad ise on nimetanud ka „sõdadeks“. 1960.–1970. aastatel, mil Nõukogude Liidu keskvõim eral-

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1 Arendajatena käsitleme siinses artiklis neid isikuid või organisatsioone, kes planeerivad või viivad läbi tegevusi – raiuvad metsi, rajavad hooneid, karjääre vmt – paikades, mis on mõne teise inimese või grupi jaoks ökoloogiliselt või kultuuriliselt väärtuslikud. Kaitsjate all aga peame silmas nii üksikisikuid, kogukondi kui ka organisatsioone, kes aktiveeruvad arendajate plaanide või tegevuste tulemusel, vastustavad arendustöid ning taotlevad olemasoleva olukorra säilitamist ning sisulisemat kaasamist otsustusprotsessidesse.

das ebaproportsionaalselt suuri summasid maaparanduse teostamiseks, peeti maha soode sõda – ajakirja Eesti Loodus veergudel seisid teadlased ja looduskaitse korraldajad vastu soode kuivendamisele ning avaldasid sellega ametkondadele tuntavat survet (Kukk 2010). Kõige tuntum LKK konflikt on kahtlemata 1987. aastal alguse saanud fosforiidisõda NSV Liidu keskvõimu plaani vastu avada ulatuslikud fosforiidikaevandused Virumaal (vt Liivik 2022). Selles kombineerisid nii keskkonnakaitselised, rahvuslikud kui ka kultuurilised küsimused, mis tõi kaasa keskkonnakaitsjate, intelligentsi ja üliõpilaste laiapõhjalise vastutegevuse. Tulemuseks oli kaevandusplaanide külmutamine, kuid lisaks sellele oli ühiskondlik aktiveerumine fosforiidisõjas abiks 1991. aastal Eesti riigi taasiseseisvumisele (Dawson 2000). Sõja kujundit on kasutatud korduvalt ja nii on Eestis toimunud „kullisõda“ ja „lendoravasõda“; käesoleva artikli kirjutamise ajal 2022. aasta suvel toimuvat arutelu Nõukogude võimu püstitatud ausammaste mahavõtmise ümber on juba hakatud nimetama monumendisõjaks.

Seoses 1990. aastatel välisturismile suunatud Eesti kui roheline Eedeni motiivi väljakujunemisega ning puutumata looduse muutumisega rahvusliku identiteedi oluliseks nurgakiviks on Eesti näiline „roheline“ pidevate konfliktide ja debattide keskmeks (Jonuks ja Remmel 2020; Annus 2022). Kuigi esineb debatte ka põlevkivikaevandamise ja tuulegeneraatorite, jõgedel olevate paisutuste likvideerimise ja kultuuriväärtuslike rajatiste (veskid, hüdroelektrijaamad) säilitamise üle ning taustal podiseb Balti riike Euroopaga ühendava raudtee temaatika ja selle mõju kohalikule looduskeskkonnale, on konfliktide keskmeks enim puud ja metsad. Viimaseid võibki pidada Eesti looduse koondsümboliks. Hiljuti on samalaadsesse ikoonilisse staatusesse tõusnud sood, mis samuti tähistavad puhast ja puutumatut, suurema inim mõjuta Eesti looduskeskkonda, olles samas külastaja jaoks esteetilised ja nauditavad (nt Pungas jt 2015). Rahvuslik lähenemine ongi Eesti LKK näidetes olnud valitsev. Vaatamata sellele, et viimase aastakümne jooksul on lisandunud retoorikasse ja argumentidesse üleilmset mõõdet, on konfliktide keskmeks rõhutatult Eesti loodus ja looduskultuur ning selle kaudu Eesti rahvuse kaitsmine (Kaljundi 2019). Seetõttu on ka globaalsete organisatsioonide ja liikumiste mõju Eestis väike. Näiteks mujal tuhandeid inimesi mobiliseerinud ja agressiivset retoorikat kasutavad kliimaaktivistide liikumised nagu Fridays for Future või Extinction Rebellion on Eestis piirdunud kõige enam mõnesaja aktiivse osalejaga (vt Rennit 2022) ja ei ole Eesti avalikus ruumis kuigi nähtavad.

## **Hiiesõjad**

21. sajandi alguse esimene suurem LKK konflikt oli seotud religiooniga ning sellele viitavaid argumente on ka kõikides järgnevates näidetes. Konflikti vedajaks oli Maavalla Koda, 1980. aastate lõpul laiema avalikkuse ette ilmunud Eesti nüüdisaegse paganluse peamine organisatsioon (Västrik 2015). 2001. aastal sai teatavaks, et Maa-

valla Koja jaoks olulisima, Samma Tammealuse hiie maa Lääne-Virumaal tagastatakse õigusjärgsele pärijale. Ehkki uuel omanikul ei olnud esialgu maaga mingeid plaane (Eesti Päevaleht 2001), esitas Maavalla Koda taotluse hiie maa munitsipaliseerimiseks, rõhutades, et tegemist on sakraalse maaga, mis pärimuse järgi kuuluvat ühisomandisse (Virumaa Teataja 2001a). Viru-Nigula vallavalitsusele saadeti arvukaid märgukirju, muuhulgas ka siseministeeriumi usuasjade talitusest, korraldati allkirjade kogumine jne. Hoolimata maavanema vastuseisust otsustas Viru-Nigula vald maa 2001. aasta novembris munitsipaliseerida, sest ei tahetud näida „kultuurivaenulik“ (Virumaa Teataja 2001b). Maavalla Koja poolt „Tammealuse sõjaks“ ristitud aktsioon (Maavalla Koda 2002) toimus suhteliselt väikeses mastaabis ega kerkinud üleriigilises meedias tugevalt esile, aga on oluline järgneva mõistmiseks – just siin testiti esimest korda pühapaikade kaitsmise taktikaid, mida kasutati järgneva tosinkonna aasta jooksul. Samma juhtum näitas, millist tähelepanu on võimalik saavutada konfliktiolukorra oskusliku haldamisega, aga ka seda, kuidas avalik tähelepanu aitab saavutada usuühenduse eesmärke.

Juba Tammealuse sõja ajal kerkis esile „Paluküla sõda“ Raplamaal. Aastakümneid mitmesugusteks sporditegevuseks kasutatud hiiemäel ja selle ümbruses alustas Kehtna vallavalitsus 2004. aastal vahetult peale detailplaneeringu kehtestamist arendustöid suusakeskuse rajamiseks. Hiiekaitsjad korraldasid protestiaktsiooni ja takistasid suusalifti süvendit rajama tulnud buldooseri tööd. Järgnevalt organiseeriti Paluküla hiiemäe kaitseks ja suusakeskuse ärahoidmiseks pöördumisi, avalikke esinemisi, toetuskontserte jne (Päll 2021b). Selle tulemusel kujundati avalikkuses kuvand hiiemäest kui maausulistele olulisest puutumatust pühapaigast. Kohalikul tasandil tekkis aga kaks vastandlikku kogukonda, kes suhtusid teineteise seisukohtadesse äärmiselt kriitiliselt (samas). Paluküla suusakeskusest on saanud külmutatud arendusprojekt, sest kõikide aastate jooksul pole kavandatut realiseerima hakatud. Iga uus aktiivsem samm põrkub taas hiiekaitsjate vastuseisule, kuid igapäevaste spordiradade hoolduses on jõutud mitmete kaasamiskoosolekute abil kokkuleppele.

Juba 2005. aastal lahvatas järgmine konflikt, kui avalikustati plaan rajada Kunda hiiemäele kaks tuulegeneraatorit. Nüüdki avaldati arvukalt artikleid kohalikus ja üleriiklikus meedias hiie kui esivanemate püha paiga kaitseks. Kunda hiiemäe tuulegeneraatorite projekt läbis kõik kolm kohtuastet ning 2007. aastal peatas Riigikohus projekti lõplikult. Peatamise põhiline argument oli usuvabadus – hiiemäele püstitatud tuulegeneraatorite ja nende ümber oleva teenindusala tõttu ei oleks maausulistel enam usurituaalide läbiviimine võimalik.

Hiiekaitsmise üksikjuhtumitest tingituna korraldas Maavalla Koda rea laiemale publikule mõeldud üritusi, et tõmmata inimeste tähelepanu looduslike pühapaikade kaitsele. Koguti allkirju (Maavalla Koda 2014), kohalikes ja üleriikliku levikuga ajaleh-



Joonis 1. Kaader videost „Koduhiite kaitse!“ (Metsatõll 2020). Militaarse ja agressiivse sümbolikeelega video on haruldane nii keskkonna kui ka kultuurivaldkonna kaitstes, mis traditsiooniliselt on rõhunud just „pehmetele“ väärtustele. Selline sümbolism rõhutab hiiesõdade erakordsust Eesti kultuuriruumis ning osutab võimalikele agressiivsematele hoiakutele oma väärtuste ja maailmavaate kaitseks.

tedes avaldati arvukalt populaarses vormis ja lihtsustatud sõnumiga lugusid. Alates 2009. aastast on mitmel pool Eestis eksponeeritud rändnäitust looduslikest pühapaikadest (Maavalla Koda 2009), on toimunud mitu kontserdisarja, kus pühapaikade kaitseks esinesid tuntud muusikud ja ansamblid (Metsatõll, Kukerpillid, Johansonid, Tõnis Mägi jt). Sellise laiaulatusliku avaliku kampaania tulemusel jäid teised samaaegsed potentsiaalsed konfliktijuhtumid, näiteks Purtse hiiemäele planeeritud hoonestus 2006. aastal, lühikeseks, sest arendajad loobusid projektist kiiresti. Vaid Saaremaal Panga pangal ehitas omanik 2007. aastal parkla nii kiiresti ja jõuliselt valmis, et sealse hiie kaitseks ei jõutud mobiliseeruda.

Viimane avalik hiiesõdade lahing peeti 2011.–2012. aastal Maardu hiiemetsa ümber, ehkki siin sõja-retoorikat ei kasutatud. Maareformi käigus riigilt maa ostnud metsandusfirma raius maha osa metsast, mis oleks pidanud olema osa kaitsealusest ohvrihiiest, kuid ei olnud kitsenduste kaardile sellisena märgitud. Maavalla Koda taotles raie peatamist, raieluba vaidlustati ning tühistati, edasisi raieid ei ole toimunud. Selles juhtumis mängis olulist rolli kohalik kogukond ja Maavalla Koda tegutses pigem oskusliku taustajõuna, kes valdas konflikti haldamist ja oskas nõustada.

Kõikides eelnevalt kirjeldatud konfliktides on jälgitav ühesugune argumentatsioon – kaitsjate, s.t Maavalla Koja ning osa kohalike kogukondade liikmete või muul viisil end seotuna tundvate inimeste jaoks on vaidlusalused kohad pühad iseenesest, s.t

pühadus tuleneb loodusest, mitte ei ole inimeste kultuurilise tegevusega paigale omistatud. Seetõttu ei ole looduskeskkonda mõjutav inimtegevus pühapaigas ka lubatav. Selline positsioon ei ole avatud kompromisside otsimisele ja viib suletud, vastandliku ja võitlusliku kommunikatsioonini. Avalikkusele eksponeeriti konflikti osapooltena omakasu silmas pidavaid emotsioonituid rahaahneid ärimehi ja kohalikke põliseid kogukondi, keda toetas Maavalla Koda, pakkudes muuhulgas juriidilist nõu. Vastasseisud seoti ka rahvusliku identiteedi diskursusega: pühaduse kõrval oli Maavalla Koja narratiivis alati esiplaanil ka rahvuslus – maausku propageeriti kui eestlaste põlist ja ainsat omausku. Selline rekonstruktivistlik paradigma ja autentsuse konstrueerimine on iseloomulik teistelegi tänapäeva paganlikele liikumistele, ennekõike Ida-Euroopas (vt Peers 2015; Szilágyi 2015). Nii sai pühapaikade kaitsest ühtaegu rahvuse ja rahvuskultuuri kaitse, kuna pühapaikades „on peidus meie rahva elujõu allikad“ (Maavalla Koda 2001). Sõltuvalt situatsioonist võidi pühapaikade kaitsega liita muidki sobivaid fenomene, näiteks riigikaitset, ehkki enamik argumentidest puudutas pigem loodust, kultuuri ja rahvusidentiteeti. Vastaspoolel, arendajate hulgas aga sellist ühtset narratiivi ei tekkinud ning esitatud vastuargumendid olid üksnes kontekstipõhised.

Häälekas tegevus mõjutas avalikkust, isiklike suhete ja lobitööga suunati ka Riigikogu. 2004. aastal tehti ettepanek hiite riikliku programmi käivitamiseks. Vaid neli aastat hiljem leiti sellele rahastus ja algas kava järgi üle-eestiline looduslike pühapaikade inventuur. Riikliku programmi raames toimus see 2008–2012 ja 2015–2020, edaspidi Muinsuskaitseameti ja Keskkonnainvesteeringute Keskuse projektide abil. Muinsuskaitseameti juurde asutati 2010. aastal nõuandva rolliga looduslike pühapaikade eksperdinõukogu, mis koondas nii eri valdkondade teadlasi ja ametnikke kui ka Maavalla Koja esindajaid. 2011. aastal loodud riigikogu pühapaikade toetusrühma tegevuse tulemusel lisandus 2019. aastal Muinsuskaitseadusesse uus mälestise liik – ajalooline looduslik pühapaik, mis eristas need muistised ülejäänud arheoloogiapärandist. Sellega on pühapaikade kaitse temaatika justkui normaliseeritud ning potentsiaalsed konfliktid omanike, arendajate ja kaitsjate vahel püütakse lahendada ametlike haldustoimingutega. Tegelikult lõppesid hiiesõjad Eestis juba pärast Maardu hiiemetsa juhtumit ja mitmed hilisemad arendustööd pühapaikades (vt Kaasik 2018) ei käivitanud enam sõjakat meediakajastust. Osalt oli see ilmselt seotud senise aktiivse, konfliktihaldamises kogenud ja karismaatilise liidri Ahto Kaasiku taandumisega Maavalla Kojast 2014. aastal. Teisalt mängis oma osa kindlasti ka see, et hiiesõjad olid selleks ajaks juba enam kui kümme aastat kestnud ning sellest teemast oli avalikus ruumis tekkinud mõningane väsimus. Seda illustreerib kujukalt pöördumine looduslike pühapaikade kaitseks, millele kogutud 6131 toetusallkirjast vaid kuus on lisandunud pärast 2014. aastat (Maavalla Koda 2014). Ent kümne aastaga oli loodusli-



Joonis 2. Üle 4500 osalejaga demonstratsioon tselluloositehase vastu Tartus 2018. aastal (Kangur 2018). Rahvusliku sümbolika kasutamine keskkonnaga seonduval protestil viitab konflikti mõtestamisele rahvuslikus raamistuses. Foto: Aili Vahtra (ERR).

kest pühapaikadest saanud avalikkuse jaoks piisavalt kinnistunud kontseptsioon ning vahend mitmesuguste arenduste peatamiseks.

### **Metsasõda**

1999. aastal avaldas harrastusornitoloog Aarne Ots lugejakirja, kus ta tõdeb, et tagastatud või erastatud maadel hävitatakse vanu metsi lausa nädalatega, mistõttu kaovad lindude elupaigad, ning kutsus üles alustama metsasõda (Ots 1999). Nullindatel saatis kohati vägagi terav metsadebatt ja -poleemika nii metsaseaduse muutmise kui ka metsanduse arengukava (2011–2020) koostamist. Muuhulgas esitas Riigikontroll mitu mureliku sisuga auditit RMK metsanduspoliitika suhtes (nt Mattson 2010), mis pälvisid avalikkuse tähelepanu.

Tõeline metsasõda algas aga 2016. aasta lõpul seoses metsaseaduse muudatusega kuusikute raievanuse langetamiseks. Sellel „sõjal“ on olnud passiivsemaid ja ägedamaid perioode, üldisemaid ja lokaalsemaid konflikte ning esile on kerkinud aktiivseid looduskaitseorganisatsioone, kelle hulgast on kõige enam tuntud Eesti Metsa Abiks (EMA) ja Päästame Eesti Metsad (PEM). Üks metsasõja kõige silmatorkavam ja edukam juhtum oli kahtlemata protest planeeritava tselluloositehase eriplaneeringu vastu 2018. aastal (vt Annast jt 2022a). Selle taga olid kodanikuaktivistidest moodustunud Tartu apell (mis lõpetas oma tegevuse pärast kavandatud eriplaneeringu lõpetamist) ja EMA. Vastumeelsust planeeritud tehasele väljendasid mitmed

teadlased, kultuuritegelased ja kohalikud poliitikud eesotsas Tartu linnapea Urmas Klaasiga. Et nii metsasõjast kui ka tselluloositehase vastuseisust on juba põhjalik ülevaade antud (Lõhmus 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; Kõiv 2020), siis pöörame siinkohal tähelepanu hoopis selle sõja käigus esile kerkinud EMAlle, mis pärast hiiesõdade lõppu on võtnud üle looduskaitseliste konfliktide haldaja rolli.

EMA loeb oma alguseks 2016. aastal toimunud metsaseaduse muudatuste vastast piketti Keskkonnaministeeriumi ees. Kui mitte päris algusest saadik, siis vähemalt 2017. aasta lõpust tegi EMA juhtrühm koostööd hiiesõja veteranidega. Looduslike pühapaikadega seotud konfliktid ongi mõjutanud Eesti keskkonnadiskursuse retoorikat ja keskkonnateemade raamistamist avalikus ruumis. Idee looduslike kohtade pühadusest ja rahvuslikust olulisusest kantakse sageli üle ka teistele loodusobjektidele ja paikadele; samuti käivituvad mõnikord varasemad pühapaikade konfliktid uutes vastasseisudes (vt nt Päll 2021b, 205). EMA retoorikasse ilmus üsna kohe metsa ökoloogilise tähtsuse rõhutamise kõrvale looduslike pühapaikadega, vähem muude pärandkultuuri objektidega seonduv kultuuriline ja spirituaalne komponent (EMA 2018). Samuti on metsade rahvuskultuuriline olulisus esil EMAGA seotud Metsalaulupidudel, mille spirituaalne pool on jällegi tugevalt mõjutatud maasu traditsioonidest ja ideestikust.

EMA kuvand on mitmetahuline ning eristub selgelt traditsioonilistest looduskaitseorganisatsioonidest – tegemist on nüüdisaegseid vahendeid (professionaalselt korraldatud kampaaniad, hästi kujundatud infomaterjalid, lai palett kaasatud eksperte, kultuuritegelasi, arvamusiidreid) oskuslikult käsitseva kogukonnaga. Riiklike organisatsioonidega koostöö tegemise asemel keskenduti selgelt avaliku arvamuse suunamisele. EMA on osanud oma sõnumeid hästi sobitada afektiivse ja sündmusekeskse meediakajastuse konteksti, olles reaktsiooniline, kasutades emotsionaalseid argumente ning kaasates kiiresti inimesi sündmuste vahetu kajastusega sotsiaalmeedias (vrd ka Papacharissi 2015; Papacharissi ja de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Reaktsiooniline ja konfliktikeskne kommunikatsioon keskendubki vastandlikele hoiakutele ja sümbolitele, mis keskkonnaga seostuvad, ent jätab vähe ruumi kompromisside otsinguks. EMA emotsionaalsed sõnumid on kõnetanud ka gruppe ja inimesi, kes on ametlikus loodus- ja kultuuripärandi kaitse praktikas pettunud. See hoiak on aga viimastel aastatel muutunud ning EMA on hakanud üha enam kujunema oskusteabekeskuseks, mis valdab LKK konfliktide haldamist ning juriidikat, mille juures tehakse koostööd juba 2007. aastal asutatud SA Keskkonnaõiguse Keskusega (Vaarmari jt 2011; Larin 2018). EMAs on välja kasvanud ühendusi, mis järgivad pigem radikaalset joont (näiteks PEM), ehkki EMA kuvand on niivõrd tugev, et ka kõiki uusi looduskaitseliikumisi peetakse EMAs.

EMA on kaasatud metsanduse arengukava 2030 koostamisse ning teeb koostööd ülemaailmse säästva metsanduse standardi FSC sertifikaati andva organisatsiooniga. Aktiivse tegutsemise, strateegilise meediatöö ja kaasamise tulemusena on keskkonnateemadest huvitatud ning puudutatud inimeste ja organisatsioonide hulk oluliselt kasvanud. Metsanduse arengukava arutelud, RMK tegevus majandusmetsades ja kevadise raierahu diskussioon on kokku andmas metsakäsitlusele uut dimensiooni – näiteks on ilmunud mitmeid mõtteavaldusi, et mets on subjekt ning väärib analoogselt loomadega juriidilist staatust ja õigusi (Tiido 2021; Ratassepp 2021). EMA aktiivsus ja oskus kehtestada avalikus debatis teatud raamistusi (vt Scheufele ja Tewksbury 2007) ning tuues esile rahvuslikud ja spirituaalsed tähendused, on loonud olukorra, kus kõige väiksemgi lokaalse iseloomuga LKK pälviv kiiresti üle-eestilist tähelepanu ning käivitub emotsionaalne, intensiivne, vastanduv ja avalikus ruumis peetav diskussioon.

Metsandusdiskussiooni teine pool – arendajad ja erametsaomanikud – on emotsionaalsema aruteluruumi omaks võtnud. Ilmekaks näiteks on 2019. aastal Eesti Metsaseltsi korraldatud metsanduse visioonikonverentsil kõlanud erametsaliidu esindaja Ants Eriku ettekanne looduskaitsest ja majandusest. Ettekandja nimetas riiklikku looduskaitset totalitaarse ühiskonnakorralduse jäänukiks ning ühtlasi süüdistas looduskaitseaktiviste Eesti riikluse alustalade õõnestamises ja riigireetmises, sest metsamajandamise ja -tööstuse piiramine on kasulik ainult Eesti idanaabrile ja selle ekspansioonidele nõudmistele (Erik 2019; Kartau 2020). Seejärel on mitmel korral kasutatud sellist, osa argumente üle võimendades ja teisi eirates loodud konstruktsiooni, kus looduskaitse taga otsitakse Venemaa Gazpromi rahastust, et demonstreerida looduskaitse kahjulikkust Eesti riigi ja rahva tuleviku jaoks (nt Nigul 2020). Säärased kunstlikud seosed ja ründav retoorika on konflikti eskaleerinud ja toonud kaasa ka vastaspoolelt sama emotsionaalseid väljütlemisi, näiteks: „Eesti Metsa- ja Puidutööstuse Liit on valinud enda juhiks valetava ja laimava tölli nimega Jaak Nigul“ (Laane 2020). Selle tulemusel on üks osa metsakaitse ja metsamajanduse diskussioonist sumbunud ebaproduktiivsesse vastandumisse, kus „ärapanevast“ sildistamisest on mõlemal osapoolel raske välja astuda.

### **Lokaalsed (linna)looduse kaitsmise juhtumid**

Ilmselt tänu looduskaitse ja kliimadebati üha suurenevale aktuaalsusele on viimastel aastatel esile kerkinud lokaalsed (linna)looduse kaitse juhtumid, nt 2017. aastal Haabersti hõberemmelga langetamise ümber toimunud konflikt (Annist 2020) või 2021. aastal Haapsalus ja Viljandis toimunud protestid alleede maharaiumise vastu. Need assotsieeruvad tihedasti metsandusdebatiga, mis muidu jääb linnaelanikele kaugeks, kuid sarnase probleemi tulekul linna või kohalikku eluruumi tekib isiklik ja

teravam seos. Kõigi nende näidete puhul on reaktsioonina mõne ametkonna, asutuse või arendaja tegevusele aktiveerunud rohujuuresandi kogukonnaliikumine. Erinevalt hiiesõdadest on nende aktsioonide ühine tunnus pigem kaitsjate allajäämine kui edu saavutamine. Kohaliku tasandi konfliktidesse kanaliseeritakse sageli üldisemate või ajalisel varasemate vastasseisudega seotud hirmud ja pettumused (Douglas ja Verissimo 2013). Näiteks järgnes Haabersti hõberemmelga vastuolu just sumbunud Rail Balticu protestidele.

Lokaalsetest juhtumitest üks eristuvamaid on hiljutine Treimani-Metsapoole rannamännikute kaitsmise juhtum Pärnumaal, eelkõige organiseerituse ja ettevõtmise tulemuslikkuse tõttu. 2020. aasta augustis ilmusid Treimani ja Metsapoole külade piirkonda RMK teavitused peatselt algavate raiete kohta. Kohalikud jäid esialgu passiivseks, ent mobiliseerusid, kui sai selgeks planeeritud tööde ulatus. Korraldati mitmeid koosolekuid, kus olid esindatud nii RMK kui ka Häädemeeste vallavanem, kes aga toetas RMK tegevust. Selle tagajärjel toimus polariseerumine, kus ühelt poolt väljendati emotsionaalses vormis muret kohaliku elukeskkonna pärast, teiselt poolt aga ignoreeriti seda täielikult.

30. novembril 2020 registreeriti MTÜ Rannamänniku kaitseks, et püüda plaanitud raiet peatada kohtu kaudu. Loodud MTÜ eesmärk oli esindada kohalikke inimesi kohtumenetluses ning toimida kogukonna rahade koondajana eelseisva kohtulahingu tarbeks. Peagi loodi sündmuste arengust infot andev veebileht ([www.rannamannikud.ee](http://www.rannamannikud.ee)) ning algas juhtumi aktiivne kajastamine nii kohalikus kui ka riiklikus meedias (nt „Aktuaalses kaameras“). Abi ja nõu saamiseks pöörduti mitmete organisatsioonide ja inimeste poole eri tasanditel, kaasa arvatud EMA ja PEM. Pärast kohtule kaebuse esitamist rakendus esmane õiguskaitse ja raie peatati. Kui keskkonnainspektiooni hinnangul oli raie metsamajandamise eeskirjadega kooskõlas (Mutso 2020), siis kohtumenetlus tuvastas, et keskkonnaameti väljastatud raieload olid vastuolus valla üldplaneeringuga, mistõttu RMK tegevus oli ebaseaduslik. Samuti tuvastas EMA analüüs RMK Treimani-Metsapoole küla ümbruse ja Ikla–Oandu matkaraja metsamajandamiskavas „ridamisi puudujääke FSC reeglite täitmisel“ (Rallmann 2020). Juhtumi finaalina tunnistas 15. jaanuaril 2021 Keskkonnaamet kehtetuks kõik 28 teatist, mis puudutasid Häädemeeste ja Ikla vahele jäävat metsa (Mutso 2021). Sellele järgnenud kohtumisel lepitati RMK ettepanekul kokku, et „RMK ei teosta järgmise viie aasta jooksul viidatud alal omal initsiatiivil ühtegi raiet“ (RMK 2021).

Metsapoole näitest hoopis erinev oli Haabersti hõberemmelga juhtum 2017. aastal. Tallinna linna jaoks olulise liikluskoridori, Paldiski maantee rekonstrueerimise käigus tuli projekti järgi maha võtta ligi 800 puud, millest ühe silmapaistvama kaitseks korraldasid aktivistid suurema aktsiooni (Annist 2020; Päll 2021a). Puu raiumise vastu kogunes protestima väga erineva taustaga inimesi spontaansetest kaitsjatest

poliitikuteni, protsessi sekkusid mitmed institutsioonid, muuhulgas ka EMA, mis kutsus inimesi puu kaitsele. Nädalaid kestnud vastasseis tipnes viimaks politsei sekkumisega, kes protestijad minema toimetas, misjärel puu 27. juunil 2017 langetati. Hõberemmelga konflikt on tänapäeva Eesti keskkonnadiskursuses märgiline, sest kohalik ja marginaalne vastuolu pälvis plahvatusliku meediakajastuse (Annast jt 2022a). Puu mahavõtmise kajastus oli näiteks Postimehes 2017. aasta loetumate artiklite edetabelis 13. kohal (Postimees 2017). Hõberemmelga konfliktil on kõik uudisväärtuse tunnused: side päevasündmustega ja/või tuntud isikutega, värskus ja dramaatilisus (vt Cox ja Pezullo 2017, 120), samuti on tegemist ajaliselt ja ruumiliselt väga konkreetse vastuoluga, tõenäoliselt seetõttu oli seda ka suhteliselt lihtne ja atraktiivne kajastada (vt rohkem Annast jt 2022a).

Meedias „remmelgakaitseteks“ nimetatud protestijad kasutasid väga erineva sisuga sõnumeid, põimides teaduslikud argumendid (näiteks kõrghaljastuse olulisus müratõkkena) spirituaalsete ja emotsionaalsete sõnumitega (näiteks remmelga 300-aastane vanus või see, et puu on omandanud loodusliku pühapaiga tunnused). Väited pälvisid üksjagu kriitikat erialastelt autoriteetidelt ja näiteks Eesti Dendroloogia Selts pigem soovitas puu raiumist (Jaakson ja Kaasik 2019). Sõnumite vastuolulisus ja mitmekesisus tulenes sellest, et „remmelgakaitsetajad“ ei moodustanud ühtset organisatsiooni, neil ei olnud varasemat meediasuhtluse pädevust, läbimõeldud strateegiat ega seda toetavat narratiivi. Lisaks remmelgakaitsetele said meedias sõna dendroloogid ja munitsipaalametnikud, mistõttu oli käibel korraga suur hulk vastandlikku informatsiooni.

Kui võrrelda Treimani-Metsapoolle rannamännikute ja Haabersti remmelga konflikti, torkab silma peamiselt erinevus protestide organiseerituses ja koordineerituses, mis omakorda mõjutas argumentatsiooni koherentsust ja meediakajastust. Metsapoolle juhtumi puhul toimus konflikti lahendamine mõlema osapoolte spetsialistide tasandil – RMKd esindasid eri tasandi metsaülemad kuni RMK direktorini välja, kohalikke aga kogukonnas respekteeritud spetsialistid, kellel oli: a) teave õiguslike protsesside toimimisest tänu enda ja toetavate organisatsioonide ekspertiisile; b) lobitöö oskus ja kompetents meediaga suhtlemiseks; c) valmidus harida ennast ja teisi; d) piisav organiseerimisvõime MTÜ loomiseks ja kogukonna kaasamiseks. Olulist rolli RMK valmiduses kokkuleppeid sõlmida mängis konflikti kajastamine meedias ning kohalike valmidus ajakirjandusega suhelda ja televisioonis esineda. Seevastu remmelga ümber protestijad ei moodustanud kesket ja juhtivat jõudu. Kohalikud Haabersti elanikud ei toetanud protestijaid, vaid pigem soovisid protestide lõpetamist. Diskussiooni sekkusid aga pidevalt uued isikud ja organisatsioonid, kes üritasid konfliktikommunikatsioonis pildile pääseda ja oma sõnumeid edastada.

Rimmelga ja Treimani-Metsapoolle konflikt võimaldab näha organiseerumise rolli konflikti haldamisel ja lahendamisel. MTÜ tegeleb pärast lokaalse probleemi (ajutist) külmutamist teemaga edasi. Sisuliselt on see juhtum andnud tõuke hulgale inimestele tegeleda keskkonnateemadega laiemalt ning on teatud määral toimunud kogukonda ühendavana, mida näitlikustab ka 2020. aasta augustis MTÜ korraldatud kahepäevane festival Metsapoolle. Seoses KOV valimistega 2021. aasta oktoobris korraldas MTÜ kohalike kandidaatidele seas arutelu looduskaitsega seonduvatest küsimustest. Lisaks on MTÜ eesmärk seadusandjate mõjutamine teadlaste ja ametkondade kokkuviiamise kaudu. Näiteks toimus Kablis 2021. aasta veebruaris seminar, kus kohtusid teadlased, riigikogu keskkonnakomisjon, keskkonnaminister ja RMK esindajad.

### **Arutelu**

Looduse või kultuuriobjektide kaitsmise aktsioone on viimase paarikümne aasta jooksul toimunud tegelikult märksa rohkem kui siinkirjeldatud konfliktid. Enamik neist ei jõua avalikku meediasse ning peetakse kaitsjate-arendajate vahel (nt Koppelmaa 2020). Siinse artikli näited tõusevad esile oma avalikkuse ja terava konfliktisuse tõttu, mis ühtlasi võimaldavad paremini jälgida osapoolte positsioone ja kasutatavaid argumente. Analüüsis joonistusid kesksena välja kaks omavahel tihedalt põimunud teemat – konfliktide osapooled ja konfliktis kasutatav retoorika, mis omakorda juhivad konfliktikommunikatsiooni – kuidas vastuolusid lahendatakse. Viimase paarikümne aasta konfliktid näitavad, et viisid, kuidas konflikti osapooled oma sõnumeid kehtestavad ja edastavad, on oluliselt muutunud. Konfliktid on andnud nendeks muutusteks peamise tõuke, suunates osapooli otsima sobivamaid ja efektiivsemaid kommunikatsioonikanaleid, katsetama mitmesuguseid protestimise ja kaasamise vorme, jne. Siinkohal saab eeskätt välja tuua kaks olulist muutust: muutunud protestikultuur ja (sotsiaal-)meedia pädevuse arendamine. Emotsionaalsem, vastandumisele keskendunud ja samas julgelt sotsiaalmeediat kasutav aktivism jõudis Eesti looduskaitse EMA loomisega, aga on nüüdseks muutunud tavapärasemaks. Kui 2000. aastate hiiesõdade ajal oli peamiseks avalikkuse mobiliseerimise vahendiks kohalik või riiklik meedia ja huvigruppide omavaheline suhtlus põhines e-kirjadel ja telefonil, siis viimaste aastate konfliktide puhul on sotsiaalmeedia roll isegi suurem kui traditsioonilisel meedial, järgides rahvusvahelisi trende (vt nt Lester ja Hutchins, 2012, 848). Avalik sfäär ise, milles konfliktid aset leiavad, on muutunud hübriidseks, killustatuks ja dünaamiliseks, võimaldades ühtlasi ka suuremat kaasatust (Bruns 2018, 309–317).

### **Konfliktide osapooled**

Kui hiiesõdade ajal olid kaitsjad veel valdavalt üksikisikud, kelle selja taga seisis Maavalla Koda, siis hilisemate metsasõdade ajal on loodud mitmeid uusi organisat-

sioone. Lisaks Maavalla Kojaga seotud Hiite Majale on tekkinud laiemad nõuandvad organisatsioonid Keskkonnaõiguse Keskus, EMA, PEM ning mõne konfliktse kaasuse puhul on loodud eraldi ühendusi. Nagu Metsapoolle näide demonstreeris, annab MTÜ (või muu organisatsiooni vorm) kaitsjatele tõsiseltvõetavust ja võimaldab olla konkreetsem dialoogipartner vastaspoolele. Nagu arendajate hulgas, on ka kaitsjate seas eri taustaga osapooli ja huviseid – kaitsjad võivad olla nii kohaliku kogukonna liikmed, aga ka inimesed, kes on diskussiooniga kaudsemalt seotud, näiteks maailmavaate kaudu (Cox ja Pezzullo 2017, 224–225). Treimani-Metsapoolle diskussiooni ajal loodud MTÜ Rannamänniku kaitseks ning Haabersti remmelga all protestijad esindavad siinkohal kahte põhimõtteliselt erinevat organiseerumise viisi. MTÜ Rannamänniku kaitseks oli sisemiselt tugev ja koherentne. Remmelga juhtumi puhul vormus protestijate grupp juhuslikel alustel, enamasti (sotsiaal)meediasuhtluse kaudu ning oli heterogeenne. Ka kohalik kogukond ei liitunud „remmelgakaitsetega“. Esimesel juhul oli koondumise alus kogukondlikkus (*collectivity*), teisel juhul võrgustikupõhisus (*connectivity*) (vt Bennett ja Segerberg 2013). Ent huvigruppidega võivad ühineda ka ideoloogid – ennekõike suure sotsiaalse kapitaliga loovisikud, kes kujundavad loodus- ja rahvuskaitselist õhkkonda, kuigi ei võta otseselt või prominentselt vahetult kaitsmisest osa.

Kõik siinkäsitletud konfliktid on eskaleeritud kaitsjate poolt. See on tingitud sellest, et nemad on sunnitud planeeritud muutustele reageerima ja arvestatava partneri positsiooni saavutamiseks end jõuliselt kuuldavaks tegema. Üks põhjusi, mis soodustab konfliktide teket, on kogukondade või kaitsjate tunne, et protsess ei vasta nende tegelikele ootustele ja nende nõudmistega ei arvestata. Arendajad samal ajal kõnelevad seaduse positsioonilt, mistõttu nende argumendid mõjuvad tugevamalt (Kuusik 2020, 60). See tekitab soodsa pinnase kaitsjate suhtumisele, et „meid ei kuulata ja meiega ei arvestata“. Konflikti eskaleerimine intensiivse kampaania abil on kõige kiirem ja efektiivsem viis saavutada positsioon kaasatavana, sest praktika on näidanud, et kohe alguses konstruktiivsete kompromisslahenduste pakkumine jääb enamasti otsustaja tähelepanuta – nende taga ei nähta või ei usuta olevat laiemat kogukonda. Ka Susanna Kuusik (2020, 20) toob välja, et huvirühmade esindajad tunnevad, et neil on „väga palju kaalul ja väga vähe kaotada, mistõttu ollakse valmis jõudma kokkuleppele läbi konflikti“. See aga tähendab, et hoolimata kaitsjate justkui nõrgemast positsioonist on konflikti haldamine läbi emotsionaalse meediakajastuse enamasti olnud nende käes. Sellise kajastuse olulisteks tunnusteks on ühelt poolt aktiivne ja avalik teavitustegevus, kasutades nii traditsioonilist ajakirjandust kui ka sotsiaalmeediat, teisalt aga tuginemine emotsionaalsetele ja spirituaalsetele argumentidele, mida põimitakse teaduslike argumentidega. Retoorikas on tihti läbivateks märksõnadeks pühadus, rahvuslus, mets, ajalugu ja põlisus. Arendajad on sellisesse situatsiooni sattudes olnud sunnitud omakorda reageerima, teadmata täpselt, kui-

das. Vastusena kaitsjate survele on organisatsioonid, näiteks RMK, kohandanud oma strateegiaid, loodud on kaasamise spetsialistide ametikohad, mis tegelevadki spetsiaalselt konfliktide ennetamise ja lahenduste pakkumisega (Kuusik 2020).

Konflikti haldamisel ja juhtimisel on oluline roll inimestel, kes on konflikti kaasaanud, eriti karismaatilistel, energilistel ja pühendunud liidritel. Ametkondi või ettevõteteid esindavatel osapooltel karismaatiline liider üldjuhul puudub, sest nende autoriteetsuse aluseks on juba institutsioon ise. Seetõttu on nad pigem püüdnud ehitada oma legitiimsuse õiguslike ja teaduslike diskursuste kasutamise kaudu. Kaitsjate poolel on karismaatilise liidri roll ja vajadus selle järele seevastu suurem, sest liidri abil luuakse autoriteet ja legitiimsus. Hiiesõdades oli eestkõnelejaks toonane Maavalla Koja juht Ahto Kaasik, metsakaitse aktsioonides on kõneisikuteks olnud Linda-Mari Väli ja Indrek Vainu EMAst. Karismaatiliste liidrite taandumise järel (Ahto Kaasik taandus 2014, Indrek Vainu 2020) on ka konfliktid teisenenud, tuues ühtlasi kaasa ühenduste vähenenud nähtavuse. See ei tähenda, et organisatsioonid ei tegutseks – vastupidi, pärast konfliktifaasi läbimist on nii Maavalla Koja tegevus Muinsuskaitseameti pühapaikade nõukogus kui ka EMA tegevus koostöös RMKga olnud konfliktide ennetusel ja situatsioonide lahendusel varasemast efektiivsemgi, kuid avalikuse ette jõuavad need tegevused märgatavalt vähem.

Konflikti arenemise käigus toimub enamasti polariseerumine, mille tulemusena sünnivad vastaspoole kohta loodud lihtsustatud, kuid efektsed stereotüübid. Ehkki iga konflikt on erinev, osutavad nii siin artiklis valitud näited kui ka keskkonnakommunikatsiooni uurijate analüüsid, et nii konflikti osapooled ise kui ka ajakirjandus kasutavad üsna fikseeritud ja üldlevinud raame konfliktides osalejate kirjeldamiseks, mis mõjutab otseselt osapoolte legitiimsust ja nähtavust diskussioonides (nt Cox ja Pezullo 2017, 128–129; Hansen 2019, 38–46). Nii portreeritakse arendajaid tihti ahnete ja emotsioonitute ärimeestena, rahahaidena, keda huvitab vaid kasumi teenimine. Ja tõepoolest, arendajate huvi ongi oma projektide kasumlik elluviimine ning eriti hiiesõdade käigus oli näha, et konflikti sattumine oli arendajate jaoks ootamatu, nad ei olnud seda ette näinud ja ei osanud sellega tegeleda. Ka linnalooduse kaitsel on enamasti jälgitav, kuidas arendajad, näiteks linnavalitsus, ei ole arvestanud eri tähenduste ja funktsioonidega, mida inimesed on linnaloodusele omistanud. Kaitsjaid omakorda kujutatakse stereotüüpsete ullikeste, naivistlike puukallistajate, lapsikute uuspaganaate ja linnavurledest loodusearmastajatena, kes ei tea, „kuidas asjad päriselt käivad“, kuni süüdistusteni idanaabri viiendaks kolonniks olemises. Näiteks on meediaanalüüsist selgunud, kuidas Haabersti remmelga juhtumile viidatakse Eesti avalikus ruumis tänini sageli kui naiivse, mõttetu protesti analoogile (Annast jt 2022a).

## **Retoorika ja argumendid**

Osapooltest olulisemadki on retoorika ja argumendid, mida konfliktis kasutatakse. Kui kommunikatsioonihäired kõrvale jätta, siis vähemalt retoorikas on mõlema osapoole eesmärk justkui sama – mõlemad soovivad konflikti vältida, soovivad säilitada loodust ja kultuuripärandit, ühtlasi tagada, et elu Eestis säiliks ja edeneks. Selle saavutamise meetodid on aga kardinaalselt erinevad. Nii RMK esindajad kui ka metsakaitsjad on nõus väitega, et kõik soovivad Eesti metsadele tagada paremat tulevikku ja säilitada kaunis looduskeskkond, kuid arvamused lähevad diametraalselt lahku selles, mida parem tulevik tähendab ning kuidas seda saavutada (vt ka Kuusik 2020, 8). Siinsete näidete puhul torkab selgelt silma esmalt konfliktile, isegi vägivaldale viitav keelekasutus – eeskätt kaitsjate poolt, kes tajuvad arendusi ohuna oma identiteedile. Ka LKK konfliktide nimetamine sõdadeks viitab algusest peale vastasseisule ja see annab tooni ka kogu järgnevas diskussioonis. See mõistagi ei tähenda, justkui oleks vaid kaitsjate pool vastutav konfliktide tekkimise eest – konfliktialdist käitumist ja polariseerivat retoorikat esineb mõlemal poolel.

Analüüsides kasutatud retoorikat, on konflikte jagatud mitmeti. Näiteks Robin Pinkley (1990) on eristanud konflikti dimensioonid: inimsuhted vs. ametiülesanded; intellektuaalne vs. emotsionaalne argumentatsioon; võidule vs. kompromissile orienteeritud lahendused. Hiiesõjad said laheneda juba probleemipüstituse tõttu – pühadus on loodusest antud ja inimene ei tohi seda häirida – justkui vaid ühe poole võiduga ja kompromissideks kohta ei olnud. Metsa- ja hiiesõdades põrkusid teaduslikud, empiirilistele faktidele ja ratsionaalsele arutelule suunatud argumendid emotsionaalsete, spirituaalsete ja isegi esoteerikasse kalduvate argumentidega; nende kahe taustalt ei puudunud ka rahvuslike ja riiklike huvide rõhutamine. See muidugi ei tähenda, et esindatud oleks alati vaid üks polariseeritud teema (Jehn 2014, 15) või diskursus. Näiteks metsasõdades, kus nii kaitsjad kui ka arendajad toetuvad oma argumentatsioonis peamiselt loodusteaduslikele andmetele, kaitstakse samade argumentidega hoopis vastandlike seisukohti, põimides neisse emotsionaalseid ja spirituaalseid aspekte.

LKK konflikte ja nende spetsiifikat arvestades näivad kõige selgema vastandpaari moodustavat majanduslikud vs. looduskaitse/kuultuurilised/rahvuslikud (LKR) argumendid. Selline vastandus tuleb eesmärkidest, millega pooled konflikti sisenevad, ja kirjeldab, mida nad saavutada tahavad. Ühtlasi tähistab selline vastandpaar ka kõige selgemalt erisuguseid maailmavaateid, mis osutab, miks osapooled oma argumentatsioonis tihti üksteisest mööda räägivad või ei suuda vastaspoole argumente vastu või tõsiselt võtta. LKR argumendid on mõistetavalt levinud kaitsjate pool. Lisaks looduskaitse/ökoloogia ja muinsuskaitse diskursustele on selles retoorikas tihti olulisteks emotsionaalsed ja spirituaalsed aspektid – pühadus, mee-

lerahu, kogukonnatunne, põlisuse rõhutamine ja esivanemate tarkus, mis toetab säästlikku ja loodust hoidvat eluviisi. Neid, tihti arhiivmaterjalidele või suulisele pärimusele viitavaid argumente esitatakse kui traditsioonist või pärimusest tulenevat tõde. Täiendatuna sugulusrahvaste ja Ameerika indiaanlaste pärimusega on kujundatud kooslus, kuhu põimitakse kokku akadeemiline haridus ja teadmised ning spirituaalsed diskursused (vt nt Kangur jt 2020). Nii luuakse sümbioos minevikust, olevikust ja tulevikust ning näidatakse oma argumente autoriteetsetena.

Üheks keerulisemaks küsimuseks konfliktides on spirituaalsusega seotud argumentid. Selle näiteks on Maavalla Koja propageeritav seisukoht, et paiga pühadus tuleb loodusest, see ei ole inimeste antud kultuuriline pühadus ning nii ei ole ka inimesel õigus pühapaigas midagi muuta või teha. Ainsad lubatud tegevused tulenevad pärimusest – hiies on lubatud käia ja olla või seal ohverdada; keelatud on igasugune paiga muutmine, millegi kaasavõtmine jne (vt nt Kütt 2007). Hiiesõdades jäi vastaspoole sõnum varju – majanduslikust maailmavaatest lähtudes ongi pühaduse ja spirituaalsusega keeruline arvestada, eriti kui see toob kaasa tegevuspiiranguid. Pealegi oli rahvuslikele tunnetele ja kultuuripärandi kaitsmisele rõhudes pühapaiga kaitsjate sõnum alati tugevam – konflikti haldamise mõttes isegi proaktiivne, esitatud oskuslikult, rõhudes emotsionaalsetele, spirituaalsetele ja rahvuslikele argumentidele, millega on keeruline, kui mitte võimatu vaielda. Pärast hiiesõdade lõppu võeti pühadusele viitavad argumentid kohati kasutusele ka EMA poolt, mida soodustas selleks ajaks juba kujunenud ja laialt aktsepteeritav arusaam maausust kui eestlastele oma- ja põlisest maailmavaatest, mille järgi kogu loodus on hingestatud ja osa paiku on eriliselt pühad. Looduse pühadust kui olulist ideed Eesti keskkonnadiskursuses näitlikustas ka Haabersti remmelga juhtum, ehkki siin spirituaalsed argumentid ei töötanud. Kuigi puu ei olnud pärandobjekt, proovisid protestijad seda pühadusega seostada, nimetasid remmelgat Emapuuks ning kasutasid oma tegevuses nii rahvuslikku kui ka spirituaalset sümboolikat ja sõnavara (vt Annast jt 2022b). Argumentid puu pühaduse ja traditsioonilisuse kohta olid küll remmelga meediakajastuses selgelt esil (samas), ent said palju kriitilist vastukaja. Ka Metsapöle konflikt algas emotsionaalsete argumentidega, ent kohe pärast organiseerumist valis MTÜ teadlikult vaoshoitud argumentatsiooni tee, distantseerides end emotsionaalsetest diskursusest ning selle rõhutamiseks pöördus teadlaskonna poole, et need aitaksid sõnumeid kirjutada ning esitada. See avas tee kokkulepeteks RMKga – rõhuasetus intellektuaalsetele argumentidele aitas saavutada kompromisslahenduse, kuna mõlemad pooled rääkisid lõpuks „ühes keeles“.

Kaitsjate pühadusega seotud argumentidele vastukaaluks on arendajate pool tuginenud majanduslikele argumentidele. Nende, enamasti arvuliselt mõõdetavate, lihtsate ja selgetena esitatud argumentide põhjendus on justkui kõigile mõistetav –

majandus on ühiskonna toimimise alus, kui sellel ei lubata tegutseda ja teenida kasumit, jäävad inimesed tööta, langeb ühiskonna jõukus ning lõpuks jäävad finantseerimata ka kaitsjad ise, kes tihtipeale saavadki palka riigieelarvelistest vahenditest. Lisaks rõhutab arendajate pool makromajanduslikke argumente – metsamajandus on Eestis oluline majandusharu ja iseseisva riigisüsteemi üks alustala. Kuna neid esitatakse emotsionaalsete argumentide vastu, siis tajutakse neid tihtipeale aga ametnike või ärimeeste ülbusena. Kindlasti on ülbe ja ülemäära enesekindel suhtlemine paljudel kordadel päriselt probleem, eriti kui emotsionaalsed argumentid on juba jõuliselt välja toodud ja nende abil on kaitsjad ennast nähtavaks muutnud ja vastaspoolt diskussioonile sundinud. Susanna Kuusik (2020, 27) on kirjeldanud „ülbe“ suhtumise tagamaid metsanduses – metsaekspertid on hästi kursis oma valdkonnas, kasutavad erialast terminoloogiat, neil on omavahel väljakujunenud hierarhia ja autoriteedid, samuti arvestatakse aja jooksul kujunenud traditsioonidega. Vastaspool kasutab aga termineid ebatäpselt või hoopis valesti, neil pole vajaminevat kompetentsi jne, mistõttu nad tajuvadki teist poolt enda üle domineerivana.

Oma positsioonide tugevdamiseks ja argumentide tõsiseltvõetavuseks on nii kaitsjad kui ka arendajad kasutanud autoriteete väljastpoolt, ennekõike akadeemilisest teadusest. Otsestest osapooltest sõltumatule autoriteedile tuginemine on levinud võte, mille abil tõde konstrueerida (vt ka Oring 2008). Keskkonnaalastes diskussioonides on peamiseks autoriteediks olnud teadusandmed ja alles hiljuti on keskkonnakommunikatsioonis hakatud kõnelema kohaliku teadmise või erilaadiliste kogemuste arvessevõtmisest (Nisbet ja Scheufele 2009), millest Eestis on kõige iseloomulikum arhiveeritud folkloori kasutamine (vt lähemalt Päll 2021b). Juba alates esimesest hiiesõjast Samma Tammealusel püüti pühapaikade kaitseks kaasa tõmmata mitmeid autoriteete – poliitikuid, eri huvirühmade eestkõnelejaid, aga ka teadlasi. Rahvuslikuse ja kultuuripärandiga argumenteerimine tõi hiiesõjale kaasa suure toetuse ennekõike Isamaa kui toonase kõige rahvuslikuma erakonna poolt. Pärimuslike pühapaikade kaitseks on olnud tegev palju poliitikuid ja kohalikke otsustajaid, kelle motiivid liikumisega ühinemisel on aga väga erinevad. Akadeemiliste teadlaste toetus oleks andnud enam kaalu pühapaikade kaitseks kasutatud väidetele, paraku teadlaste poolelt oodatud ühtsust ei tekkinud. Kompromissiks võib pidada asjaolu, et nüüdseks on looduslikke pühapaiku tunnustatud ka juriidiliselt nii ainelise kui ka vaimse kultuuripärandi elementidena. Riigikogu otsusega on kinnitatud, et looduses on kohti, mida on ajalooliselt pühaks peetud ning nende säilimiseks tuleb leida kompromiss omanike õiguste ja tegevustega, ent hoides inimõhu neis paigus minimaalsena.

Autoriteete väljastpoolt on kasutanud ka arendajate pool, ehkki taas tehes selge valiku sellistele valdkondadele või teadlastele, mis/kes toetavad nende seisukohti. Nii valitakse autoriteete pigem majanduse või tehnoloogiaga seotud valdkondadest.

Mõlema poole autoriteetide kasutamisel võib näha, et autoriteetidelt küsitakse konkreetseid teadmisi või fakte, „suure narratiivi“ panevad aga kokku ja esitavad ikkagi konflikti eestvedajad. Sel moel võivad autoriteetidid sattuda konfliktis ühe või teise osapoole hulka nende enda tahtest sõltumata. Hea näide selle kohta on eri arusamad, kuidas mõista metsa ja kuidas arvutada metsa kogust Eestis, millised on metsa langetamise mõjud süsinikuringele või mida võib pühapaigas teha ja mida mitte.

### **Kokkuvõtteks**

Demokraatlikus ühiskonnas on normaalne jõuda enamuse toetatud otsuseni vaidluste ja arutelude kaudu, seetõttu on lõplike otsuste kujunemistee tihtipeale aeganõudev. Paljude vaidluste käivitamine toimub konfliktisel toonil ja vastuoluliste sõnumitega, millest aja jooksul konfliktiga tegelemise käigus kasvavad välja konstruktiivsed lahendused. Konfliktiolukordi võib vaadata indikaatoritena, mis toovad esile vastuolud, küsimused ja teemad, mida on tarvis arutada, ümber mõtestada või taas defineerida. Seetõttu on oluline mõista LKK konfliktide põhjuseid ning näha kasutatavate argumentide ja retoorika taga konflikte käivitavaid mehhanisme ja tekkepõhjuseid. Alles siis on võimalik konfliktiga tegeleda nii, et seda on võimalik päriselt lahendada. Siinkirjeldatud ja suuresti maailmavaatelist erimeelsustega arendajate–kaitsjate konfliktide lahendamine on mõistagi keeruline ja eeldab pikki ja laiapõhjalisi arutelusid ning konstruktiivsetele lahendustele orienteeritud osavõtjaid. Maailmavaatelist erimeelsused näivad olevat enamiku nüüdisaegsete LKK konfliktide peapõhjus, kuid motiivid, mis ajendavad osapooli konfliktidesse sisenema, võivad olla väga erinevad. Lisaks konfliktide haldajatele ja neile, kes kaitsevad oma isiklike veendumusi ja maailmavaadet, on kindlasti ka neid, kes püüavad saavutada suuremat sotsiaalset kapitali, vältida muutusi vahetus elukeskkonnas (nn NIMBY- ehk „mitte minu tagahoovis“-efekt); samuti võib selle taga olla majandusliku kasu saamine või näiteks RMK puhul asutuse põhikirjast tulenev majandustegevus.

Viimase aja LKK näidete puhul on kahtlemata märgilised hiiesõjad – nende käigus kujunes välja konfliktilahenduse mudel, mida sealtpeale on nii Maavalla Koda kui ka teised kaitsjad rakendanud nii pühapaikade kui ka loodusobjektide kaitseks. Mudeli üks tunnuseid on selle kompromissitus – kaitsjad lähtuvad isiklikest, emotsionaalsetest või spirituaalsetest argumentidest, millega vastaspool vaielda ei saa, tuleb nõustuda või vastanduda. Ka EMA kampaaniad alustasid emotsionaalsete maausu retoorikaga segatud argumentidega, kuid praeguseks on sellest arenenud oskusteabe keskus, mis on loonud toimiva koostöövõrgustiku teiste liikumiste ja ühingu- tega ning kus osatakse konflikte juhtida. Küll aga ei tohiks neid vastasseise vaadata üksnes negatiivsete situatsioonidena. Tänu Maavalla Koja suunatud hiiesõdadele ja nendega kaasnenud valmisolekule loodi hiite riiklik programm ning 2019. aastaks

jõudis muinsuskaitseseadusesse uue mälestiseliigina „ajalooline looduslik püha-paik“. Niisamuti on metsakaitseorganisatsioonidel olnud tugev mõju sellele, kui olulisel kohal on tavainimese jaoks looduse kaitse, mille all enamasti peetakse silmas metsa. Siinjuures ei ole muidugi tegemist mingi suvalise, vaid spetsiifiliselt Eesti metsaga ning tänu neile konfliktidele ja nendega kaasnevale retoorikale, kuid ka kohalike ideoloogide, kirjanike, loovisikute ja maausu esindajate panusele on Eestis nüüdseks välja kujunenud teatud normatiivne hoiak loodusesse (Remmel ja Jonuks, ilmumas), mis ajaloolisest ja laiemast perspektiivist on mõjutatud romantismist (Thurfjell 2020), tänapäevasest ja kohalikumast aspektist aga peamiselt rahvustunnetusest (Jonuks ja Remmel 2020; Kaljundi 2019). Sellise hoiaku puudumist tajutakse negatiivsena – sisuliselt on tekkinud sotsiaalne surve armastada loodust kindlal viisil, mis lähtub eelkõige loodusest distantseerunud linnainimese romantiseeritud ja põgusast looduskogemusest.

Ehkki ametkondlikul tasandil on LKK konfliktide ennetamiseks ja haldamiseks loodud mitmesuguseid mehhanisme, näiteks nagu kaasamisprotseduurid ja planeeringute avalikustamine, puhkevad need ikkagi. Ilmselt ei olegi võimalik konflikte täielikult ennetada ning see ei peaks olema ka eesmärk. Eriarvamusi ja -meelsust on nähtud keskkonnakommunikatsiooni olulise alusena (Low 2008; Päll 2021b) – nende kaudu ilmnevad maailmaga suhestumise viisid ning nende lubamine ja teadvustamine kommunikatsioonis võimaldab vältida sumbunud ja hermeetilist diskussiooni.

Konfliktidel on oluline roll kultuuris uute tähenduste ja mehhanismide esiletõomiseks ja katsetamiseks. Parafraseerides Juri Lotmani, ei tee dialoogi viljakaks või edasiviivaks ühisosa, mida vestluspartnerid jagavad, vaid see, kus nad on eri meelt (vt Lotman 1990, 143). Konflikte on võimalik võrrelda ka kultuurilise plahvatuses hetkedega, mil on kõige suurem potentsiaal uute tähenduste ja tõlgenduste tekkeks ja mis on seega kultuuri püsimiseks samavõrd vajalikud kui järjekindlad, säilitavad protsessid (vt Lotman 2009, 10). Eelkirjeldatud LKK konfliktid pakkusid mitmeid selliseid näiteid: unustatud pärimuse taastõlgendamine hiiesõdades, kohalooma (*place-making*) kohaliku tasandi konfliktides või uute kaasamisvõimaluste juurutamine metsakonfliktitulemusena. Seega on LKK konfliktide mõistmine esmaseks eelduseks, et neid nügida konstruktiivsema ja sisulisema dialoogi poole.

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## **Warlike Protection – Conflicts in Shaping the Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage**

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**Keywords:** conflict, sacred natural sites, “forest war”, environment communication, conflictology

This paper studies examples of the protection of natural or cultural objects in Estonia developing into sharp conflicts during the past couple of decades. Various mechanisms have been developed to avoid, prevent and solve conflicts, yet sharp oppositions still occur. Our aim is not to provide yet another methodology of conflict solving, but rather to look behind it: who participates in such conflicts, what their reasons and arguments are, what kind of rhetoric they use. Such an approach proceeds from Juri Lotman’s suggestion that it is not agreements, but contradictions that make a dialogue fruitful.

The case studies discussed in the paper range from folkloric sacred sites to the protection of forest and natural objects in urban environments. In all examples, we could observe the presence of two parties that we call the ‘developers’ and the ‘protectors’. In all cases, the developers found themselves in the middle of a conflict they had not foreseen and could not handle, as their only purpose was to develop the initial project, be it a building, forest clearing or the like. In terms of conflict management, ‘developers’ have always been followers of the conflict, reacting to it, but not leading it. The other side, ‘protectors’, consists of an amorphous group of people, some of whom are local inhabitants, while others participate in the protection because of their world view, moral or ideological reasons. In all cases observed it is the ‘protectors’ who lead it to a conflict – mostly as they are un-institutionalised, and thus less visible, so in order to become an equal partner and force developers into a discussion, they use conflict rhetoric and methods. Conflicts are usually expanded in public and on social media in the form of short and easy-to-read messages. Mediatization is the main characteristic of contemporary conflicts and is adopted by both sides.

Our cases demonstrate that a clear and uniform narrative is important in order to control a conflict and make the other side accept it. Protection of folkloric sacred sites has been guided by Maavalla Koda, a representative body of a leading contemporary pagan organisation in Estonia. Likewise, protecting forests from clearcutting has been directed by grass-root organisations. In the case of the folkloric sacred sites, the protectors have been successful and the developments have been stopped in almost all cases. Avoiding forest clearcutting has not been so unambiguously successful, but the aggressive rhetoric and active public campaigns have certainly influenced the public opinion in Estonia. Other cases, in which there have been no organisations in the background and that have lacked a common narrative, e.g. protecting a white willow in Tallinn’s suburb of Haabersti, have not been successful. Due to the missing common narrative and lack of a leader, several persons or groups were trying to act as leaders and distribute their message, which ended with a mixture of dissimilar statements, which eventually led to the protectors losing their credibility.

The core of such conflicts lies in a collision of different worldviews, characterised by opposing rhetoric, in which one party is using economical reasoning, while the arguments of the other are based on nature conservation, protecting of cultural and national values, and mixed with spiritual claims. Such different standpoints lead any discussion into a situation of opposition in which a compromise and solutions are difficult or even impossible to find. However, in Metsapool the local dwellers, who

acted against the State Forest Management Centre, deliberately excluded any spiritual arguments. Choosing rational rhetoric let them speak the same “language” as the Forest Management authorities and the conflict ended with a reappraisal of the plans of the State Forest Management Centre.

There certainly are multiple reasons why conflicts arise in protecting natural and cultural objects. In addition to differences in world views, the effects of NIMBY attitudes or personal disagreements are obvious. Still, often the cases follow a similar pattern in which the conflict is brought to the public and is guided by social media and media rules. In this process, emotional arguments become more important than rational ones, which deepens the gap between the two sides involved in the conflict.

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**Research topics** Ecosemiotics, environmental communication, conflict communication, local folklore, Estonian place-lore, representations of nature in folklore

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2019–...	Rahvusvaheline Keskkonnakommunikatsiooni Ühing (IECA), liige

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### **Tunnustused**

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