

### Kansainvälisenä tutkijana jäätä murtamassa

Pohdin kirjoituksessa kokemustani kansainvälisenä ympäristöetiikan tutkijana Suomessa ja mukaantuloani Yhteiskuntatieteellisen ympäristötutkimuksen seuraan (YHYS). Aloitan paikantamalla ympäristöetiikkaa akateemisena tutkimusalana kansainvälisessä ja suomalaisessa kontekstissa. Tarina jatkuu kuvauksella ensikohtaamisestani YHYS:n kanssa ja liittymisestäni seuran johtokuntaan ensimmäisenä ei-suomalaisena ja ei-suomenkielisenä jäsenenä. Lopulta pohdin oman kokemukseni kautta mitä yhteiskuntatieteellinen ympäristötutkimus on, ja miten ympäristöetiikka siihen sisältyy.

CORINNA CASI

## Icebreakers open the way

INTEGRATING INTO THE FINNISH  
ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL SCIENCE SCENE  
AS AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOLAR  
OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In this chapter, I describe my experiences as an Italian scholar in environmental ethics, based in Finland, entering the Finnish Society for Environmental Social Science (YHYS) and becoming a member of its board. After introducing and positioning myself within the academic world, I contextualize environmental ethics, my area of expertise, as an academic field of research within philosophy both at the international level as well as within the Finnish context. Subsequently, I advance the question of whether environmental ethics can be included in the bigger field of environmental social science. I continue by sharing the story of my first encounter with YHYS, leading to me becoming part of the YHYS board as the first non-Finnish and non-Finnish speaking member. The chapter concludes with answers, via my own experience in YHYS, to the questions concerning what type of field environmental social science is and how environmental ethics is included in it.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: FROM INTERNATIONAL TO FINNISH CONTEXT

I am an Italian university researcher in philosophy based in Finland. In May 2024, I defended my Doctoral thesis at the University of Helsinki. My thesis is an interdisciplinary work on environmental values and value assessments, specifically on the non-economic values of nature such as moral, aesthetic, and ecological values. It intersects with Indigenous studies, by introducing the concept of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous – mainly Sami – perspectives on nature, and finally offers a framework to decolonize environmental discourses (Casi 2024)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Environmental discourses are understood as academic debates and conversations about the natural environment.

My doctoral studies were a long and not-always-easy journey before I finally reached graduation. I moved to Helsinki in 2006 to start an internship at the Italian Cultural Institute, which is part of the Italian Embassy in Finland. After the internship, I continued working at the Institute for a few years helping with the promotion and representation of Italian culture within Finnish society. While working there, my application for the philosophy doctoral program was accepted, and thus I became a philosophy doctoral student at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. My Doctoral studies focused primarily on philosophy and environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics is a type of applied ethics that focuses on the relationships and moral responsibilities between human beings and the natural environment. It originated as a philosophical academic research area in the 1970s, almost simultaneously in different parts of the world<sup>2</sup> – namely the USA, Australia, and Norway, in Europe – as a response to increasing ecological crises. Environmental ethics questioned the primarily anthropocentric, or human-centered, perspective through which philosophers and other scholars in the European tradition have been dealing with the natural environment for centuries. The history of environmental ethics could be also viewed as the history of moral considerability extended to a growing number of beings and elements in nature, starting from animals to other species and ecosystems, including non-living parts of nature.

Concerning the reception of environmental ethics in the Nordic countries, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is probably the most famous scholar, known for his Deep Ecology (Naess 1973). According to this theory, and the movement it inspired, the natural environment with all its elements should be considered for its intrinsic values, rather than for its usefulness to human beings. Additionally, the Deep Ecology movement highly supports a deep engagement with nature and with environmental issues, in opposition to a

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shallow and less-engaged type of ecology.

In the Finnish context, prominent Finnish philosophers such as Georg Henrik von Wright and Juhani Pietarinen started to get interested in environmental philosophy from the 1970s onwards. Nevertheless, it was only in the 1990s that materials, textbooks, and publications, mainly in Finnish, started to appear<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the Finnish academic Leena Vilkkä contributed to bringing research and teaching on philosophical discussions about the values of nature to Finland. She wrote the first Finnish textbook in the field titled precisely *Ympäristöetiikka*, 'Environmental Ethics' (Vilkkä 1993). Furthermore, in 1997 a comprehensive collection of environmental philosophy was published in the Finnish language, focussing mainly on the early mainstream environmental philosophy (Oksanen & Rauhala-Hayes 1997). Since then a growing number of scholars have been publishing in national as well as well-known international journals – such as *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental Values*, *Agriculture and Human Values*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, etc. – on topics that vary from animal ethics to environmental justice, from food ethics to veganism, from environmental values to climate justice and much more.

Other academic fields closely related to environmental ethics have also been flourishing

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, Andrew and Norva Y. S. Lo, "Environmental Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=ethics-environmental>.

<sup>3</sup> This and some of the information in this paragraph are from the ISEE (International Society for Environmental Ethics) official website <https://iseethics.wordpress.com/finland/>, accessed on 29.02.2024.

in Finland – as well as internationally – such as environmental aesthetics and aesthetics of the everyday, the philosophy of the city, and the philosophy of sustainability.

A project worthy of attention is the newly established (2024) COHAB research group at the University of Jyväskylä, led by assistant professor Teea Kortetmäki, who received funding from the prestigious European Research Council (ERC). This research group aims at establishing a new subdiscipline of environmental ethics called ‘Environmental landscape ethics’, built upon a new theoretical framework focusing on the concept of multispecies ‘cohabitability’<sup>4</sup>. The outcomes of this project have the potential to contribute to the advancement of environmental ethics not only in Finland but also in European and international academic contexts.

After this brief – and surely not exhaustive overview – concerning environmental ethics, several questions suggest themselves. Can we talk of Finnish environmental ethics? Why has there not been a discussion about this in English yet? Might the COHAB project be the starting point for this philosophical conversation?

Perhaps the absence of a public discussion in English on a possible ‘Finnish environmental ethics’ is explained by the fact that Finland, a small country in terms of population, has a relatively insignificant circle of scholars examining environmental issues philosophically. Or do the answers lie in the way that, despite the prolific academic work of several independent scholars, there has been little cohesion among scholars in Finland and thus little momentum towards a unitary philosophical discourse on issues related to environmental ethics? Or is it perhaps the case that there have been discussions in Finnish and/or Swedish – the two official languages in Finland – but no material in English?

These are just the speculations of an international scholar working in Finland but they could offer food for thought for the philosophers and scholars based in Finland who are working on environmental ethics issues and who could be better

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equipped, together, to reflect on these challenging questions, which are relevant to the development of the scholarship also in environmental social science.

#### **‘BREAKING THE ICE’ ON THE YHYS BOARD AS AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOLAR**

When I started my Doctoral studies at the University of Helsinki there were very few courses in English closely related to environmental ethics. Hence, I have often found myself looking for groups of scholars to discuss the interdisciplinary topics of my doctoral thesis. The Finnish Society for Environmental Social Science (YHYS) has been an exception in this regard.

My first experience with the YHYS network and my inclusion as a scholar goes back to the year 2018. In fact, the first time I heard about YHYS was when in 2018 I decided to send an abstract to the YHYS Fall Colloquium organized in Rovaniemi at the University of Lapland. Two prominent scholars on environmental ethics, Teea Kortetmäki and Markku Oksanen – who later became my supervisor together with Simo Kyllönen – shared the call for abstracts for a session titled ‘Environmental and ecological justice’. I decided to send my abstract about the non-economic values of nature, and it was accepted. Besides presenting as part of the scientific program, I participated in the YHYS Colloquium dinner. There I met scholars with many different types of expertise but with a common interest in the environment at large. I enjoyed the dinner as well as the whole conference. Yet after the whole event was over, several question marks remained.

Is the ‘environmental social sciences’ a field of study on its own? Or is it rather an umbrella term

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4 Information about COHAB research group on the University of Jyväskylä official website, accessed on 29.02.2024 <https://www.jyu.fi/en/projects/cohab-environmental-landscape-ethics-a-theory-of-cohabitability#toc--project-team->



Corinna Casi defended her doctoral dissertation in philosophy in May 2024. In the photo she is listening to the *karonkka* speeches between her supervisors Markku Oksanen and Simo Kyllönen.

that includes several disciplines? And if this is the case, what is included and what is not? And most importantly, is environmental ethics included in this ‘bigger concept’?<sup>5</sup>

All these questions, besides them being simply curiosity, were genuinely nourished by the willingness to know if I would have found a bigger – even if more general – group of interested scholars with whom I could share ideas, network and, why not, create the bases for future collaborations.

### The annual YHYS meetings, which take place during the YHYS Fall Colloquium, are open to every YHYS member.

In November 2020, I presented a paper in one of the sessions of the YHYS Fall Colloquium which, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, was held online. As we realized then, online conferences and meetings were excellent solutions for COVID-19 times as well as for sustainability reasons. Nonetheless, in online seminars, one cannot network and have conversations the same way as one can at live events and in-person situations. In fact, after

the YHYS Fall Colloquium 2020, I realized that even more disciplines were included within the ‘environmental social sciences concept’. However, many of my questions were left unanswered.

It was only in November 2021 when, during the YHYS Fall Colloquium that year, organized at Aalto University in Espoo, Finland, that I got to know the Finnish Society for Environmental Social Sciences more deeply. As a matter of fact, during a chat over a coffee break with the environmental policy scholar Minna Santaoja, I inquired her whether the meetings are usually in Finnish or in English, and eventually about the possibility of participating in the YHYS board meetings as a regular member of the society. Minna Santaoja was very kind and welcoming to me, to the point that she asked the whole YHYS board if that meeting could be held in English. With great surprise, the proposal was accepted. I was astonished and thrilled at the same time by the great opportunity and openness of the whole board. It was the first time in the history of YHYS that English was used for a meeting, and it was simply to give me the possibility to participate.

The annual YHYS meetings, which take place during the YHYS fall colloquium, are open to every YHYS member. It was precisely on such an occasion, in November 2021, that I was offered the opportunity to become a YHYS board member. I accepted gladly and became part of the board as the first non-Finnish and non-Finnish-speaking member in its history. As a result of that decision, from that moment onward, YHYS’ board meetings have been held in English, in the spirit of welcoming also non-Finnish-speaking members to participate and be active in YHYS’ work. The ‘ice was then broken’<sup>6</sup> and that change introduced flexibility to YHYS language practices to the point that others followed. In fact, in January 2024 – when we celebrated YHYS’s 30th year – the YHYS board welcomed a prominent international scholar, Associate Professor Anna Krzywoszynska, from the University of Oulu.

At the time of writing, in the summer of 2024, I continue to be an active and engaged YHYS board member. On the board, I am responsible for the YHYS’s social media communication and visibility.

5 I believe this book might answer the first three general questions in a more academic and precise manner; what follows are simply my personal considerations.

6 By the way, it is well known that, up until today, Finland has some of the best icebreakers in the world.

In practice this means being active on X – formerly Twitter – and LinkedIn and carrying out other small organizational tasks. During this two-year experience on the YHYS board, I have been learning a great deal and especially widening the network of scholars interested in the natural environment from various perspectives.

As concluding remarks, I can say that I found, via my experience with the scholars within YHYS, some answers to my initial questions. For now, I understand environmental social science as a broad transdisciplinary field, inclusive and open to different types of social sciences dealing with the human-environment relation at large. Undoubtedly, environmental ethics is not only included but also very welcome to contribute to the debates, at least within the Finnish environmental social science.

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