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Open Forest

Data, Stories, and Walking-With

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ABSTRACT

Open Forest is a collective, experimental inquiry into different forests and more-than-human dataflows. The project explores how forests and forest data can be produced, thought of and engaged with *otherwise*, in co-creative ways that consider perspectives of diverse forest creatures and reach beyond geo-engineering, techno-solutionist perspectives. In this Situated Action, we build on our previous Open Forest activities organized in different parts of the world and take an experimental, hybrid walk in a local forest area in Newcastle followed by a co-creation of forest stories. Through these engagements, we hope to entangle the existing, mostly quantitative forests datasets with more messy and abstract data to question the currently available understandings about the forest as a resource to be used. Our aim is to support collective imagination and care-full sustainability actions towards flourishing more-than-human futures.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centred computing**; • **Interaction design**; **Interaction design process and methods**; **Participatory design**;

KEYWORDS

Forest, Forest data, Walking, Eco-social transformation, More-than-human

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1 INTRODUCTION: OPEN FOREST

There is a growing interest in forests globally. As complex ecosystems, forests provide an environment for living and dying for many

species: they are places of refuge, myths, folktales, and sensorial pleasures but also sites for control and industrial extraction of natural materials. The modern, western traditions of forest management and environmental policies tend to see forests as a *resource* to be used to improve human lives – for example, through timber yields and stocks or carbon sink cultivation [2, 4]. Increasingly, and particularly in urban environments, forests are leveraged to protect – not all but a small number of select – humans from perils of ecological disasters such as high temperature, ozone, and other health-related consequences [6]. Forests are also on the move, shifting shapes in response to consequences of climate change, including rapidly increasing temperatures and collapsing biodiversity [3]. In these challenging times, there is an urgent need to better understand, care for and imagine better forest futures.

The Open Forest (OF) project [9] aims to provide a space for co-creative engagements with such imaginaries, by bringing together diverse forest dwellers and inviting them to walk *in, through, and with* various forests. These experimental forest walks are performative and open-ended, centered around the elements of spontaneity, surprise and curiosity. In the Open Forest Collective, we embrace walking as a way of becoming more responsive to place, a relational activity stimulating thinking, feeling, and participation that can trigger co-creative knowledge production [5, 10]. We walk both physically and remotely, together and apart, sometimes in actual forests and sometimes through data-based representations of them, guided by various human and other-than-human navigators with good knowledge or sense of local landscapes.

Since autumn 2020, we have walked with multiple forests in various parts of the world. In Finland, the walks were situated mostly in a highly instrumentalized forest in the Hyytiälä forestry field station in Juupajoki and also in the Sipoonkorpi National Park located near Helsinki. In Australia, we walked with the Melbourne urban forest – a complex ecosystem of more than 70,000 trees each with unique digital IDs. In the Czech Republic, our walks happened in the protected landscape area Křivoklátsko – a unique ecosystem of species-rich habitats located in Central Bohemia, and in Colombia, we explored forest gardens, or chagras, in Tabanoc, the ancestral territory of Kamentsá people. In each location, we experimented with different walking formats and approaches that supported co-creation of diverse forest-stories shared both by researchers and participants. Some walks happened in person; others had a hybrid cyber-physical format and were broadcasted from the local forests

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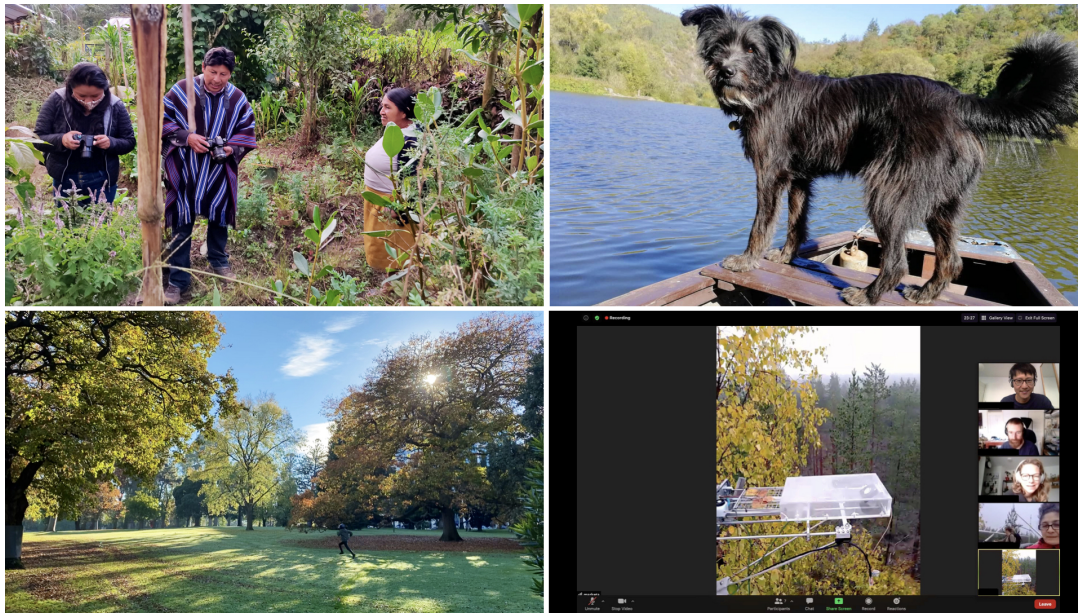


Figure 1: Open Forest walks in Tabanoc (COL), Central Bohemia (CZ), Melbourne (AUS) and Hyytiälä forestry field station (FI): the walks have various formats (on-site and remote) and are guided by diverse human and other-than-human creatures.

to participants located elsewhere, who could join via a video conferencing platform. The Hyytiälä walks were guided by local forest researchers, and in Sipoo we walked, guided by local forest healers. In Melbourne, walking was encouraged as a way to encounter familiar terrains in unfamiliar ways – a more-than-human *dérive* (or ‘drift’) through the urban forest mapped via our digital portal [7]. Bohemian walks were led by a dog and in Tabanoc, we walked under the guidance of Kamëntša women (figure 1).

While walking, we try to listen carefully to our surroundings. Sometimes, we record moments in text and audiovisual notes, and talk with fellow walkers about eco-social issues in forest ecosystems and beyond. These conversations, experiences and notes become forest stories, which are shared via the Feral Map [8], an online public interface connecting more-than-human stories and data. These forest stories come in diverse formats and shapes: some are personal accounts of human-forest relationships expressed in words and pictures, others are numeric datasets capturing, for instance, an exchange of volatile organic compounds between a forest and the atmosphere. Some are told by local forest dwellers and foragers, and others by trees, sensors, forestry scientists, and data managers (figure 2). All of them contribute to an evolving more-than-human account of a forest as a creature on the move [3] whose different voices and parts might help us make better sense of large-scale eco-social phenomena such as climate change and the place that environmental data has in world making, among others.

Through these co-creative activities, we offer alternative perspectives on what might constitute a forest dataset, shifting the focus from quantitative measures towards earthly and lived insights shared by various forest creatures. We are interested in how forest data and stories can be made and told otherwise [1] by extending

the story-telling participation to diverse humans and other-than-humans, including forest healers, scientists, artists, designers, data managers and Indigenous forest guardians as well as dogs and trees. By engaging with worldmaking as a playful, more-than-human practice, we aim to open a space in which stories about forests can be told, and care about them enacted. Our main goal is to utilize our creative practice to extend existing discussions on forest futures and eco-social transformation.

2 OPEN FOREST WALK IN NEWCASTLE

For the conference in Newcastle, we propose a performative Situated Action in the form of a 1-hour long hybrid (both on- and off-line) walk in, through, and with a local forest followed by an hour long reflection session. Tentatively, we consider organising the walk in the Woolsington Park conservation area but we welcome any recommendations from the local conference team. The walk will be led and broadcasted from Newcastle by the authors to enable both on-site and remote participation of any PDC audiences interested in collecting and co-creatively engaging with their local forest data, places, and other creatures. Similar to our previous hybrid walks (figure 3), we will use our laptops and phones to ‘carry’ the online participants along with us in the Newcastle forest via a video conference screen (e.g., Zoom). The event will be conducted in English.

Those joining remotely will be encouraged to simultaneously walk in their local forests, urban parks, gardens, or any other kind of greenery accessible in their neighbourhood, but they may also choose to be anywhere they feel comfortable. The hybrid walk will thus connect diverse forests and forest-walkers around the world, enabling them to share their distinct situated observations and sensorial impressions. Following the walk, we will engage in

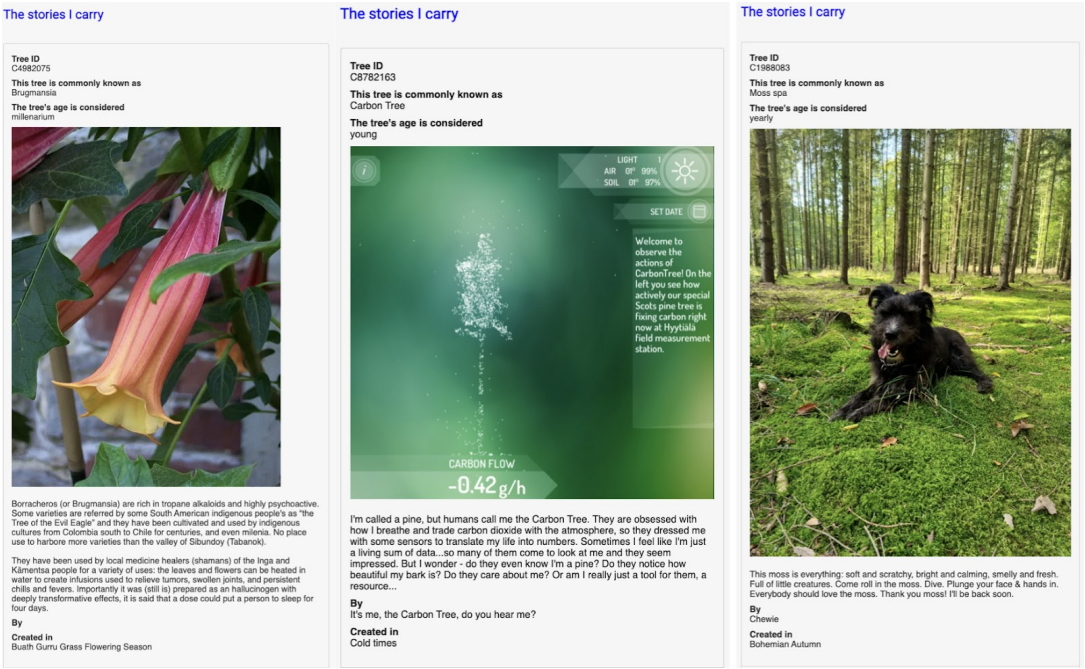


Figure 2: Examples of forest stories co-created during the Open Forest walks (available in the Feral Map [8]).

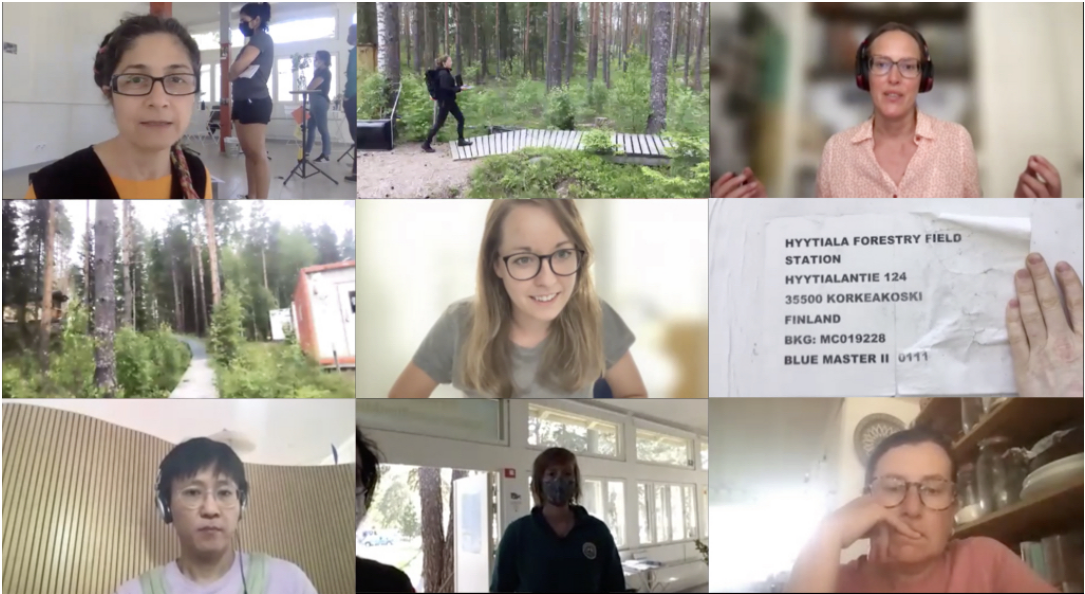


Figure 3: A hybrid forest walk broadcasted from the Hyttiälä station in June 2021, attended by participants in various countries using the Zoom video conferencing system.

a co-creative reflection to share our experiences in the form of forest-stories via the Feral Map and/or on paper, as texts, sketches, drawings and similar. Interested people can also contribute their stories asynchronously via the Map that stays open as an online, public portal. For the on-site walk in Newcastle, up to 20 participants can

participate; there is no limit for the number of participants joining remotely.

Depending on the final Situated Actions track schedule, we will time the event to accommodate participation across time zones. We have also been in discussion with the organisers of the Nordic PDC Place who themselves intend to organise experimental walks, with

an aim to co-organise a follow-up Open Forest walk session during the Nordic Place program late September, 2022. The outcomes of the performative action include co-created, reflective forest stories offering diverse perspectives on forest ecosystems and forest data. The stories will contribute to the WiP Open Forest Catalogue – an online public repository that we have been building since the beginning of 2022. We will also promote and share outcomes of the event via social media with appropriate hashtags to broaden engagement.

3 CONCLUSION

The experimental forest walks and co-created forest-stories shared via the Feral Map are intended to encourage a co-creative questioning of existing forest data, and how it is produced and interpreted and by whom. Through performative walking across various forests, we hope to collectively imagine and take care-full actions toward more resilient and liveable more-than-human futures. We aim to provide a space for discussion and convivial, engaging time spent together outdoors, and hope to initiate new creative forest collaborations with interested participants in Newcastle. The forest stories co-created through the Situated Action will make a valuable contribution to our ongoing Open Forest explorations and the discussion on positive eco-social transition towards more regenerative futures.

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