TRANSCRIPT
Land Body Ecologies Podcast
Episode 1 – The Free River

Opens with the sound of the wind blowing through the trees and onto the ice, like a high pitch breath moving through the dense pine forest, and the sound of distant crows.

Kaisa: But for me, it seems that…it's my creative language, Finnish, so English is more like: '*ahhh! Help me god, ahhh*!' (laugh).

Kaisa: This picture was taken in our home. Probably around 1965. Outi was not born yet. That's me in the middle. I think I'm about 5 years old, and there are also my 3-year-old little sisters. The photo was taken around 1967, which means that the following year the construction of the hydro-power plant began. So here's the Kemijoki river in the summer, at a time when the river had a very slow current, and in the picture you can see the riverbed and many places that were important to us. Back then every day was a sunny summer day. We were surrounded by the countless playgrounds, by the river and in the forests, in the cowshed, and everywhere around us. You can still see it in this picture, the Kemijoki river in its natural state. That was many decades ago. Should I count how many years it's been since this photo was taken? It must be almost...

Outi: 55 years.

Kaisa: Yes. Almost 60 years.

A story from the past

The sound of a running stream, fast and clear.

Kaisa: The water has shaped us… It's such a diverse area, like a mosaic. There are spawning grounds, and rock outcrops, where the weight of the ice has pressed down the stones, forming a tight outcrop. The environment there is very diverse. There are small ecological niches, which contain rare plants. And the most astonishing creature I ever saw as a child just below the rapids at the mouth of the rivulet, was the freshwater pearl mussel. That big thing made an everlasting impression on me for sure. There they lounged in the sandy riverbed.

Kaisa: My name is Kaisa Kerätär. I come from Vanttauskoski.

Outi: My name is Outi Autti. I'm a sociologist and I work at the university of Oulu. And I'm Kaisa's little sister, actually.

How a dam works and what it looks like

Riku: Well, I think they knew but they just didn't care.

A deep machine-like rumble, the sound of the hydropower station through the concrete of the building, recorded on a geophone.

Riku: My Name is Riku Paavola and I am the station manager at the Oulanka research station, which is a unit of the university of Oulu, located in North East Finland, in Kuusamo. My own research background is in freshwater ecology.

There wasn't enough value placed on those fish stocks and populations. For example, the biggest dam in Finland on Kemijoki. It was constructed very close to the mouth of the river, blocking the entire river straight away, and thus destroying practically the best

Salmon River in Europe. But the emphasis back then, in the 50s, was on paying debts from the Second World War. And so minor things like fish populations didn't really count for much.

Let me get this out straightaway. Hydropower is not green power, by any means. And that's supported by science and the results.

First of all, when you build a dam in a river, it blocks movement of fish and other organisms, especially salmon, eels, but basically, any movement is going to be blocked or hindered by the construction of the dam. So that's the obvious thing that it does. But there's a multitude of other really adverse effects on the ecosystem.

It creates a reservoir upstream, which obviously destroys completely the original stream habitat, it no longer exists. But not only that, it also destroys, basically, anything that gets under the reservoir. So if there's forests or wetlands, they're gone. And this effect is especially bad in areas where topographical variability is not that high, well, basically flat lapse, because then the reservoir will be very large in surface area, which means that a lot of habitats will be destroyed.

Researcher

Outi: I started my research in 2009. Well, first they wanted to help "a young student" as they said, and they wanted to help a girl from their neighbourhood. Some of the older people were very lonely, so they were really happy to talk to anyone and really happy that someone was listening to them. And, um… They were also very happy to share their stories and they felt that they hadn't been heard before. And… yeah, I feel they were really happy that their losses were recognised in the end.

Gentle sounds of rain in the forest.

Victoria: *When did you decide your research around Kemi and what happened, what made you want to do that?*

Outi: Yeah, well... That's a very good question. And actually a really difficult one. Because somehow I feel that I didn't really decide to research it. It was more like a way to deal with it and to get answers to questions that I didn't even know how to verbalise at the time.

On some level it was easier to address this subject as scientific research. Then I was able to better protect my own experience of it. And guard it. That way I didn't have to confront it like… with my heart and soul exposed, but I could rely on the framework provided by the scientific research, and from there try to understand how my family had experienced it.

Fishing

Recorded out on the ice on the banks of the 'free' river Tornjoki which has not been dammed. The dialogue is underpinned by the sound of the rushing river, like a roar or a wind.

***Sheila**:* Yesterday we were at a river that doesn't have salmon anymore. Can you imagine this river without salmon?

Risto: No.

***Sheila**:* And why, why is that?

Risto: I know the history of the other river system, which was the best salmon river in Finland, or I think that in northern Scandinavia, or whole Scandinavia and…. I have been living full time, I've had all those fishes and… because it's a very big, big disappointment, of feelings… if there is no salmon and of course there have been seasons, also, in this river, later, later but there has been very few since the nineties, and also, there was done, in the sea and in the river, actions but now we get back now

we have a very good rate of salmons and we can fish some somehow not not all the time we don't need that we can need some some fishing and some feeling to get the feeling there is still still King Salmon is looking at the river and King of the Sea as well in these areas. But it's, for us, it's more better to get Salmon than to have it. We don't, you don't need to eat. We have enough, enough to eat but, but to get the Salmon is a special, very special feeling.

Jaakko: You know when, when, when it is heavy? Like when you speak like that? And it is, it is there. Seven eight metres from you. And when it comes close to the, to the, this this, this deep look at how it's called meanings and it's calls inside there. It starts to, to jump like that. And when you're keeping the equipment it feels like it, feels like, like you're, you're some kind of ancient human being from, from far away. And I feel it like I feel that it goes to every, every cell in the body somehow like that, it feels.

They are very, very kind of innocent looking. And innocent. When you have some there. It's something which is personality. Very, very mild. Touch and the eyes, eyes, like the eyes of the child. And often, often, I look at the eyes or something very, very touching.

if it's difficult, it's, it's really difficult to imagine. Without, without, without whitefish and without salmon, icon. Yeah, the symbol, that symbol is, is something which is, which it's very important. It's something difficult to describe. Because it's so important. Something which is kind of a symbol of the life, a symbol of the river, a symbol of the society.

The sound of the voice is muffled as if heard from under the water.

"For the salmon"

The sound of the same river, this time recorded under the water using a hydrophone, a brittle high pitch sound of a river as it runs under the ice, it is a clean and cold sound.

Outi: For some people, it was hard to talk about their own personal losses, as it's

simply not what people do back where we come from. We don't complain about things. You just have to endure everything, and you can't even admit if there's something that makes you feel bad. You just need to work hard and move on. So… when they couldn't talk about their losses, then some people could talk about the salmon.

So that they could talk about what was happening from the salmon's perspective. How it must've been awful for the salmon when they could no longer swim up their home river and how they could no longer access natural waters. It was easier to talk about that.

At the time when the river was harnessed, or even after the river was harnessed. Money and economy came first. And getting by. So considering the circumstances and the prevailing rhetorics, it would've been completely out of place to express how bad you felt about how drastically the landscape had changed. Such arguments were laughed at and dismissed as unimportant.

Kaisa: In families it was often the wives who noticed how crestfallen their husbands were. And everyone knew what caused it.

He knew when he was going to leave

Recorded on the bank of the free river with the sounds of the rushing water behind.

Kaisa: Let me tell you a story about the Kemijoki river and how things went in my family back in the day. My great grandfather, Korkia-Heikki, was a salmon fisherman in Vanttaus, as was his son. That’s what my father would have been too, if the salmon had not run out from the Kemijoki river. During wartime, Korkia-Heikki was already a veteran and he no longer participated in any military action but stayed home. As he was an elderly man already and had also become seriously ill, the villagers assumed it wouldn’t be long before Korkia-Heikki passed away. So when they paid him a visit, Korkia-Heikki exclaimed, “What? I’m not going to die just yet! Not until the river floods.” That’s what he said to them. Whenever my father told me this story, he never stopped marvelling at

how things eventually turned out.

In May, when the villagers carried my great grandfather's coffin to the other side of the river for burial, the flood was terribly high. He knew how he would leave. But the story doesn't end there. Ten years ago in Vanttaus it was the last spring that my father was still alive. We would call each other quite often. We used to exchange observations, whether either one of us had spotted any wood grouse, and in which rivers the flood was on the rise and especially what the flood situation would be like in the Kemijoki river. The last time I called him that May, I was on my way up the Tornionjoki river. I told him that the water was rising there. My father knew that, soon, the water would start rising in the Kemijoki river, too. And what do you know, my father, that old rascal, passed away precisely at the time when the flood was at its highest in the Kemijoki river.

Yes, on a day like that. For me, a water biologist, it really struck me. I couldn't believe it, but he had done exactly the same thing. So I checked from the environment institute the water levels. The minute the flood turned and the water started to recede, that was my father's exact time of death.

Sound of an engine receding, followed by the sound of water flowing.

What a dam does when you build it

Riku: The dam also has effects on water chemistry, many kinds, typically, oxygen levels drop, because of the reservoir, water is usually colder coming out of the reservoir. And these may have a lot of impacts downstream. On the biota that tries to live in the river, obviously, the flow regime will be completely different, it's going to be regulated. And that may have a lot of significant impacts on the biota living downstream. And there's also the accumulation of both organic and inorganic kind of particulate matter in the reservoir that may create a lot of problems. And then just the construction of the dam itself. It's basically concrete and steel. So there's the environmental impact that's created by those materials in the construction of the dam, including these GHG gas gas

kind of productions.

Hydrophones were placed in the water in the river near the dam, above the ice was silence but underneath a sound like static. Through this section it increases in volume until it drowns out the sound of Riku's voice.

Riku: Plus the fact that when you kind of flood the area, upstream under the reservoir, what you get is a lot of organic material starting to decay. And these produce CO2 and methane. So there are significant greenhouse gas emissions for a long time coming out of that reservoir. The turbine blades would cut up fish…

…the sound becomes indistinguishable.

The roaring fades and transitions to the sound of Chris Watson's voice explaining the recording that is playing is the sound above the ice, a quiet breeze and some distant traffic.

Kaisa: After the power station came, it was a plain watershed, and the concrete building, and the dam was built of boulders and it was so rough and grey.

Outi: The way I see it, the landscape did, indeed, change enormously. First of all, the damming of a free-flowing river and turning it into static pools. There were so many places that disappeared under water, like islands, shores, and even entire traditional village sites here and there. Below the dam there were dry reaches that could be several kilometres long, with no water at all. These areas soon were filled with brushwood and thickets, looking awful. And obviously, the power station constructions themselves. The dams were gigantic, grey blocks of concrete. And also the actual network of high-voltage transmission lines, they were massive and long structures, which swallowed up beautiful, rural river landscapes. There's never been any effort to rehabilitate the landscape. They still look absolutely awful.

Through this is a low hum, the sound of the power station heard through a metal fence outside.

Victoria: Did a lot of people stay after the river was dammed?

Kaisa: Do you mean that… They stayed living there? I think in our village, there wasn't… Was there? Any buildings, which…

Outi: Not in our village. But for example, in the next village. There were buildings that were torn down.

Kaisa: As far as I know, in our village nobody who lived downstream had to move away because of the dam. That was more common around the artificial lake areas further up north……

Outi: Yes, that did happen in certain areas, like in Valajaskoski and Juotas.

Kaisa: And in Taivalkoski.

Outi: Yes, some areas were washed over. And some people who lived there were forced to build a new home. That's how it went. And some people probably moved to Rovaniemi, and of course when the dam was being constructed it was a time when society was undergoing major structural changes. There were many who went to Sweden. That's how it was, yes. And to cities in Southern Finland. Through the mechanisation of agriculture and forestry, there were not that many jobs available anymore. As unemployment increased, people moved.

Yeah, I have made three interviews. Among the same persons or their children that I interviewed earlier.

Victoria: What was that like?

Outi: It was like coming home, actually.

The sound of running water on a free undammed river as heard through a hole in the ice, it slowly fades through this section, disappearing.

Sound and trauma

Silence.

Outi: …yeah, there were many. But now that you mention I remember especially one. I think… it was the first time ever that he talked about his losses and the change in the environment and how it had affected him. That was really heartbreaking actually. And… he was saying that his heart is aching. It's a bit difficult to translate his words. But even after 70 years he still could remember the free river as it was, and he was still longing for it. And the dammed river that he saw every day, daily, reminded him of his losses. So I think he was deeply traumatised.

Sound of a stream of flowing water.

Outi: He was very much into fishing, but it was not only the fishing. It was the element of running water and the sounds of running water, and the smells of running water. Many interviewees told me that when the river was dammed, they… the soundscape changed very much. There were no sounds of the rapids anymore, it was just silence. And that was really difficult for some of them to get used to. And many people told me that they couldn't get sleep. And one even told me that he felt it was difficult to walk in the garden without that sound as a support. He said that it felt like he had to learn how to walk all over again.

A deep rhythmic sound of the turbines gradually slowing, creating very deep subsonic rumbles, amidst which there is indistinguishable speaking.

Fishing elsewhere

Outi: Some of the interviewees were eager to share other kinds of memories, like working at a logging site or floating logs, or salmon fishing. But when I brought up the changes in the river, they closed up and went quiet. We then tried to go back to the subjects they were more comfortable with. Or, then, they diverted the discussion to something else altogether, as they simply didn't want to talk about it. Because the

change in the river hastened the change in the community and the society. And the change was so rapid, it was difficult for many to adjust.

Outi: But yes, in many cases they had simply gone elsewhere.

Kaisa: That's what happened in our family, too. We turned to places of comfort. Our father found new fishing grounds on lake Simojärvi. For him it was a place to keep himself busy, and he also built our cabin there. So that's how he turned his back to the river and focused on areas where there still were waters in their natural state, and where he could fish.

The sound of an ice hole being bored into the ice, a rough scratching sound that gives way to a wet sloshing as the hole punches through the ice and water sloshes up and over.

Dreams

Kaisa: We are processing these things in our dreams.

Outi: Yeah, that's right.

Kaisa: And together with Outi and other sisters we are... Many times we are talking about what we have experienced in our dreams. And we all tend to go to our home village and to the river in our dreams. And somehow we are still in a connection to the river. It is really important.

Kaisa: I'm very happy to have these memories and the sounds of the river, and all the experiences I managed to gain by the time I was 7 years old. They are like… They are still very vivid memories. And often in my dreams I'm still there, on the shore of the free-flowing Kemijoki river. So, in that sense it still exists within me, even today.

Excavators

Sounds captured from the movement through the power station, from the door through the main hall, down in the depths and through the turbine room, through some long closed corridors and back up and out, with the route being described by Victoria. Throughout, the turbines can be heard, their pitch and tone changing depending on the depth of the room.

Outi: I don't remember the free river at all. The first impression that I have of the river are the…what are they called, the excavators, and umm.. the dumper. So we were following their work. So that's my earliest memory of the river.

Outi: I had never seen the river running free, so I didn't know any better. So I had grown used to it and that's just the way it is. But now that I've learned what it used to be like, and heard so many stories of what the river was like and how it's changed, and how people experienced it… Nowadays when I come to Vanttauskoski and cross the dam bridge, I feel terribly sad. Even anxious. And I try to listen carefully to my body and how it reacts to the river. And how majestic the wide river is as it comes into view from behind the cape Ollosenniemi, you can feel the immense power of the river. I can sense its power. And then it runs into the dam, and somehow it's like… It loses its power, or… It becomes enchained. Yes, enchained. That's the word. And when I see it like that, enchained, it makes me feel terribly sad.

And now that I think of it, now that we're talking about it, it's dawning on me that it's probably the underlying reason for my own overwhelming desire for freedom. Freedom is such a valuable thing for me, and I don't think I've even realised how closely it relates to the river. I can then feel it in my heart and my body.

Deep sounds from the turbines.

Outi: [In a way, you are so attached to that environment that it's a bit like… When nature is being exploited, it feels a bit like you are being exploited too.] It's like exploiting yourself. You're so connected to the nature so… You harm the environment, then I feel that my body is harmed at the same time.

The reason for stories

Outi: I have a story about my father I want to share… I think it was during the last years of his life. He knew about my research. He was already ill and didn't leave home much, and he could no longer visit the woodlands and not much elsewhere either, he said that in his mind he's always walking down the hill from Kivalo down to the river, and in his mind the river is always free.

Two sets of footsteps can be heard walking on the ice, this is recorded from under the ice using a hydrophone, the steps grow closer and walk past.

It's through narratives that people have a chance to tell their story exactly the way they have experienced it. Even though it's often intertwined with a lot of collective ingredients. So when a person tells a story, it's like making amends with one's past. People have an inherent need to impart a story that forms a whole. And usually it's a bit like a survival story. And when you have a chance to reflect upon your past through a story, which may deal with a difficult incident in your life, for instance, it's also a way to make you feel whole again.

The sound transitions from sharp cracks under the ice and the sound of the surface ice shifting to a free running stream, until it fades out.

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