

Traces of Extinction: Species Loss, Solastalgia, and Semiotics of Recovery

Tartu, Estonia 5.-7. June 2024

Call for papers

The sixth mass species extinction is one of the greatest ecological threats of our time. The rate at which species are going extinct appears to be a hundred times higher now than a century ago (Ceballos et al. 2015). A recent study found that of 71,000 species analysed from different taxonomic groups, 49% had declining populations, while only 3% were increasing (Finn et al. 2023). In the context of these scientific estimations, our interest in this conference lies in cultural, subjective and semiotic approaches to extinction. How is modern culture so effective at masking this catastrophic process? How is extinction perceived subjectively, both from the point of view of the dying species and the humans who witness it? What cultural strategies can be used to raise awareness of extinction? What means do individuals and communities have for reducing and avoiding species extinction?

Some genres and narratives seem more present in communicating extinction than others. Ursula Heise (2016) and Nicole Seymour (2018) have pointed out that extinction is often related to tragedy and grief and have argued for more engaging alternatives. The Extinction Studies Working Group has skillfully used ethnography-inspired storytelling as a means of raising awareness about the extinction of specific species. At the same time, artistic research seems to open fresh perspectives in combining cultural creativity with environmental decline.

A subjective approach to extinction may raise the question of how we experience extinction in the shared lifeworld or semiosphere. Several scholars — Vinciane Despret and Dominique Lestel — have linked extinction to the loss of imagination and, thus, to the loss of cultural diversity. The deterioration of familiar ecosystems can lead to anxiety and solastalgia, as exemplified by Andrew Whitehouse's (2013) work on disappearing soundscapes. Ivar Puura's (2013) concept of semiocide further links extinction to a loss of memory — an amnesia on the ecosystem level. All these approaches, from different perspectives, point to the semiotic nature of extinction.

By taking a perspective through naturecultures and cultural-ecological systems, we treat extinction as the degradation of such combined systems. Extinction reduces biocultural diversity and the resilience of ecocultures. Taking naturecultures as unified systems also raises questions about cultural strategies that are effective in adapting to extinction, supporting species in danger, and overcoming trauma. What practical means do we have to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), to create refuges and sanctuaries in natureculture, and to support our shared fragile world?

In this context, we especially welcome contributions to the following topics:

- Specific case studies on extinction and their generalisation
- Cultural strategies for representing extinction
- Extinction, solastalgia, and feelings of loss
- Semiotics of extinction
- Traces of past extinctions in culture and memory
- Artistic practices, imagination and extinction
- Cultural strategies for adapting and overcoming trauma
- Citizens' nature protection and other grass-root initiatives in reducing extinction
- Extinction in the frame of naturecultures and social-ecological systems



Submission

Interested parties are welcome to submit their abstracts of max. 300 words by 1 December 2023 to conference secretary Andrew M. Creighton (andrew.mark.creighton@ut.ee) Notification of acceptance will be given by 31 December 2023. Abstracts should be sent as Word files, with the email subject line "Traces of extinction". Each abstract should contain: the paper's title, the name of the author(s) (surname, given name), affiliation and country of residence, email address, an abstract of max. 300 words, and a short bio note of max. 50 words.

Organisation

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