

Missing the Peacock— Arts, Sciences, Creativity, and Chronic Environmental Conflicts

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Abstract

Debate on conflicts and disputes over environmental issues has intensified due to climate change and other pressing global problems becoming ever more pronounced. Simultaneously, there is little evidence of natural or social sciences helping transform lasting conflicts some of which last decades, gradually

becoming chronic and having severe and pervasive effects on people's lives. On the contrary, natural sciences often become part of the conflicts while social sciences remain distant observers. Conflict management requires creativity: imagining new solutions, relating to, thinking and acting in new ways. Hence, stimulating creative thinking might offer an avenue for coping with conflict situations. We tested various forms of transdisciplinary interaction and opportunities of creative work in managing prolonged conflicts in a series of meetings between natural scientists, social scientists, artists and conflict mediation professionals. This article discusses the experiences emerging from this experimental process. Experimenting with creative working methods provided us with new tools to facilitate interaction in the conflicts we intervene in or study. However, we do not see arts-science collaborations as a panacea to resolving conflict situations but rather they provide opportunities for interaction in the search for transformation. More than interactive skills and tools that would lead to a clear-cut end of conflicts, we emphasize the ability to reflect on our own practices and roles in environmental conflicts. Creative experiments can be valuable in pointing out open questions, such as what is the role that scientists, artists and mediators take and should take in controversial situations.

Keywords: art, creative process, environmental conflict, emotion, experimentation, science, trust

Art can create a space for us to wander around in. To explore alternative realities, to day dream and make new connections, to see new ways forward.

Sera James Irvine

When Facts Are Not Enough

Before you read this article, watch the short, experimental film “Hope is a Thing with Feathers.”¹ This film arose from a series of workshops between natural and social science scholars, artists and conflict mediation professionals to explore persistent environmental conflicts.² When we discussed this film after a first viewing, we realized that what we saw and how we experienced the film varied and, notably, one of us even missed the peacock twice even though it is a central element of the film. This simple observation echoes a core challenge in environmental conflicts—how to deal with contradictory viewpoints and “truths” of the same problem. People see and relate to the world differently and their understanding is based on different forms of knowledge and experience. This might become problematic when a shared understanding of a conflict and how to manage it is sought. In our workshops we wanted to explore whether creative working methods can help bridge these different perspectives in conflict situations.

The idea arose from the experience that scientific knowledge is, in itself, not sufficient to reconcile diverging interests, needs, values and viewpoints in environmental conflicts. Whilst it clearly plays a crucial role in defining environmental problems, making them visible and offering solutions to a process

1. Tanya Stadelmann, “Hope is a Thing with Feathers,” video, 2016, <http://www.tanyastadelmann.com/Videoart>.

2. The 2015-2016 project, “Managing long-term environmental conflicts—a workshop series,” was funded by the Kone Foundation and carried out in collaboration with Institut national de recherche en sciences et technologies pour l’environnement et l’agriculture, France, the Finnish Environment Institute, University of Aberdeen, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, UK, and University of Eastern Finland. Finishing this article has been supported by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland (313013, 313014).

of managing them,³ environmental science often becomes political and *part of* environmental conflicts. Similarly, social science analyses are oriented towards describing and analyzing conflicting views between actors and focus on the emergence, causes and characteristics of the conflicts. Neither approach has provided sufficient answers to the question of why some environmental conflicts reach a stalemate, sometimes lasting decades, and neither, we would argue, have truly helped guide the transformation of these conflicts.

The project sought to address these issues by creating an experimental space and a pop-up laboratory to test new forms of interaction and opportunities and limits of creative work in managing prolonged conflicts. We brought together experienced academics and practitioners from different types of environmental conflicts and utilized creative working and communication methods to facilitate interaction and learning. This article is based on the group members' experiences of these processes, which we have documented by each of us providing answers to a series of questions.⁴ Ultimately, we argue that both creative thinking and trust are required to rethink the role of science, art and conflict mediation in transforming the relationships and discourses between people regarding their environment in conflictual situations.

Creative Minds Need Space to Think and Act Differently

I have found myself increasingly in my bubble on conflicts: interacting with people who think in the same way as I do.

A workshop participant

Academics are used to communicating their research on conflicts and conflicting environmental issues through presentations. Others communicate differently. The project team started in a traditional way with presentations on various

3. Arthur P. J. Mol, "Environmental Governance in the Information Age: The Emergence of Information Governance," *Environment and Planning C* 24 (2006): 497-514.

4. We asked each participant to reflect on the process by responding to the following questions: What were your expectations about the workshop series? Why did you get involved? What did you see as your role? What has been the impact (if any) on your practice / the conflicts you are engaged in? What are your reflections / experience of our art outputs? What worked in regards to your expectations? What didn't work / what issues were not covered? What should be done next?

environmental conflicts based on their experience.⁵ These provided material for future discussions and ideas, but we soon realized that to be able to really get our hands in the mud we had to fundamentally challenge our ways of approaching the conflicts. This led us to experiment with various ways of interacting with each other and explore new ways of working together (Table 1). Such exercises (as the one pictured in Fig 1) and collective work served various purposes.



Fig. 1. Exploring conflict. Photo courtesy of Taru Peltola.

First, rejecting Powerpoint and talking enabled us to connect and find different ways to share experiences of conflicts. Second, the interactive exercises provided a balanced and equal dialogue: no one could play the role of the expert. Third, the exercises were a means to evoke emotions, such as the collective feeling of confusion when forced to step outside our comfort zone, or having to depict a conflict by drawing or performing it. Uncomfortable though this was for some, it helped break down barriers and put everyone on a more level playing field.

The exercises created space to think and act differently. They formed a boundary space between scientific language and creativity and enabled us to develop “new eyes,” as one of the participants put it. In addition, the exercises

5. Maria Åkerman, et al., “Understanding Perpetuated Conflicts Over Animals,” *Trace: Finnish Journal for Human-Animal Studies* 2 (2016): 74-80.

Table 1. Experimental approaches to help communication between natural and social scientists, conflict resolution practitioners and creative practitioners.

Type of exercise	Elements facilitating transdisciplinary communication
Creative communications exercise	Group work results summarized through performances, drawings, etc., encouraged people to think differently and to explore possibilities of using novel means of communication; forced stepping outside of comfort zone and increased trust
Dialogue without topic	An exercise without an outspoken topic or goal caused collective confusion and enabled a collective experience of managing to resolve the situation together; increased trust in our skills as a collective
Conflict clinic	Drawing a time line with a real-world "conflict owner" and working collectively on a single conflict case that was new to most participants allowed people to share perspectives and discuss different angles of the conflict
Group discussions outside meeting rooms: "walking groups," boat trip	Discussions in a different setting allowed exchange in a different, more relaxed mode and increased the sense of working together
Designing a conflict course by writing and playing with cards	Enabled participants to think about complex issues in visual terms and to grasp interlinkages between elements
Reflecting on film and music	Allowed researchers and conflict management practitioners to experience how artists work

helped the team members to position themselves in the group and in the process. This was crucial as many of the team members met for the first time during the project meetings, and had little experience of working in a transdisciplinary fashion.



Fig 2. In the same boat: changing place, changing the mode of interaction.
Photo courtesy of Tanya Stadelmann.

During our last meeting we took a small boat trip in the Southern-Finnish archipelago (Fig 2). Although this was initially meant to be an energizer and excursion to see Baltic seals, a species which causes tensions in the area, it served another purpose as well: discussing in a boat, rather than in a meeting room, gave us a chance to communicate differently—and a place to think in a different mode. It gave us time to be together, thinking but not talking, reflecting on the experiences and conversations of the preceding days. Sitting silently together might be uncomfortable in a conventional meeting situation. The shared experience of the cold and wet conditions of a late-fall boat trip out in the sea also strengthened the sense of working together. Some of us have noticed the value of changing the physical setting of discussion in real-life conflict situations also. Moving from a meeting room to a campfire in the forest seemingly helped change the mode of interaction from formal negotiation to an informal—and confidential—mode in an Eastern-Finnish large carnivore committee.⁶ This

6. Personal communication with Outi Ratamäki.

change allowed a different kind of exchange between the participants—at least temporarily.

The Power of Emotions

The art outputs have helped to evoke my emotions in a natural science world that is dominated by cold hearted facts.

A workshop participant

Art can really absorb more than just the facts and generate emotions.

A workshop participant

Creativity and art enabled us to experiment with different methods of communication to consider emotional responses to conflict. One technique, called the “dialogue without a topic,” tested in our second meeting, was a confusing experience for all the participants. The facilitator sat us in a circle and told us simply to start discussing, with no further guidance. After we managed collaboratively to move from confusion to resolve the situation, and to start a discussion, we could perhaps start to trust our collective abilities a bit more. The exercise notably helped us to exchange ideas in a more honest and frank way. Trust and friendliness require, however, time to develop and we could also observe that trusted relations between people developed at different paces. Furthermore, the feeling of slow progress was frustrating at least to some of the team members. In a situation where there is no common language, shared understanding of key concepts or clear objectives but just a slow and creative process of (being in) interaction, it might feel as if nothing is happening. But change and learning still occur. This too could be analogical to conflict mediation processes. In prolonged conflict situations it might take a long time for stakeholders to achieve any explicit outcomes despite several facilitated mediation attempts. Most likely every event is still a step forward and participants develop cognitive, social, emotional or practical skills needed for conflict resolution.

Expressing and dealing with emotions were identified as some of the real benefits of combining art and science. Our experience was that sharing feelings was a crucial starting point for questioning our conventional disciplinary roles and mental models. Art enabled us to express and discuss conflict feelings that were otherwise difficult to deal with. During the creative communication exercise, one group decided to perform subtle power relations which make conflicts

enduring. The hilarious performance allowed us to identify with situations that many of us had experienced in real conflict situations and to address their role in conflicts with the means of humor. As Lyytimäki has suggested, humor may offer “complementary and potentially fruitful ways to discuss sustainability issues. Irony provides opportunities to identify and criticize unsustainable trends and to challenge and disclose dichotomies that may otherwise remain unnoticed.”⁷

Another example of the power of emotions in conflicting situations is offered by the music composed by Inge Thomson for the video “Hope is a Thing with Feathers.” We listened to the music in a session of our second meeting and wrote short notes about things that came to our mind while listening to it. The idea was to use the ideas in the film but with the help of the music we also shared, made explicit and discussed the collective emotions related to conflicts. The creative working methods we tested helped to capture feelings, atmospheres and energies within conflicts and gave room to them. By allowing new forms of expression and new types and instances for collaboration, they also give a voice to those often not heard, offer useful ways of communicating and help soothe otherwise difficult encounters. They can thus be used in making emotional interventions, such as attempts to build trusting atmospheres.

No Way Forward Without Trust

It took a while to adjust myself. Normally our discipline discusses war and violent conflicts, but now I think I am mentally more open and better equipped to study a broader variety of conflicts on various levels.

A workshop participant

The critical role of trust-building in helping deal with conflicts has been widely recognized.⁸ Yet, trust is not easily achieved. In our meetings, some participants were willing and ready to push our own limits and to test the level of mutual trust within the group. They were critical about the fact that we were not able to quickly determine a meaningful common objective or cause that we could pursue together. Others felt, however, uneasy about pushing forward towards a new level

7. Jari Lyytimäki, “Rare Exports: Irony about Northern Nature and Commercialized Culture,” *Nature and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2015): 178.

8. See, for example, Juliette C. Young, et al., “The Role of Trust in the Resolution of Conservation Conflicts,” *Biological Conservation* 195 (2016): 196-202.

of trust. The emerging feelings among our group are a reminder of the challenges of real-life processes of trust building. There is always a need to take into account when people are ready to move and what kind of steps people are willing to take. Our simulation of trust building efforts led the participants to consider the tensions between our own ways of producing knowledge or art. Many participants felt that these tensions sometimes emerged during our discussions but were not made explicit. It was obvious, for example, that many of us had different perceptions about what conflicts are. We discussed the diverging perceptions but were not able to argue about the definitions, nor reach a common definition of the concept of conflict. Neither did we challenge our approaches to conflicts or question the working methods of the moderators (although some participants would have hoped so). It seems that we preferred nurturing our trusted relations—which after three meetings were still rather fragile—and, therefore, we were not ready for genuinely controversial exchange among the group.

The significance of trust has been addressed, discussed and analyzed at length in social science studies on social capital and conflicts.⁹ Our group, however, adopted a more experimental approach to trust. We experimented with the feelings that help create trust or risk it. It is easy to naturally gravitate towards those with whom we have shared values and see potential for future collaboration. Participating in situations or collaborating with people who make us uncomfortable may, however, provide the greatest opportunities for growth and building trust. It turned out that at least a few of us did not want to risk the emerging feelings of trust. In real-life conflict situations the starting point might be different: trust is lacking and this state prevents collaboration and is often not perceived as a valuable goal either. The parties may not want to trust each other if they find it more important to win in a conflict. In prolonged conflicts, the first step would thus be to have a conversation about the conflict and the value of collaboration for the actors to get out of the difficult situation. Only after that might providing safe spaces for interaction improve the situation.

⁹ Roy J. Lewicki and Edward C. Tomlinson, "Trust and Trust Building," In *Beyond Intractability*, edited by Burgess, Guy and Heidi Burgess (Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2003), <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/trust-building>.

Open Question: Advocacy and Activism?

One of the questions that arose from our meetings concerned the role that scientists, artists and mediators take and should take in controversial situations. The role of the researcher in conflicts is often ambiguous and can create a lot of confusion, uneasiness and misunderstanding. Scientists find it hard to stay objective and keep their personal values separate from their studies and the science itself often cannot avoid becoming political as scientific knowledge is crucial in making environmental problems visible. The role can be particularly ambiguous when the researcher is both studying the conflict or the underlying environmental issues and asked to moderate meetings or act as a facilitator.

Sometimes artists can—but not all artists do—take a position in a conflict, and even side with one worldview quite openly. For example, when making *This Creek*,¹⁰ a documentary about Eighteen Mile Creek, a lower socioeconomic neighborhood suffering from high cancer rates and devalued properties, Tanya Stadelmann worked together with chemistry professors Joseph Gardella and Tammy Milillo to disseminate data from their environmental studies. Her work was successful in raising awareness in the local media and community with public screenings, radio interviews, press and informational talks. In turn, Inge Thomson's musical body of work, *Da Fishing Hands*,¹¹ raised awareness of Fair Isle's bid for marine protected status. Her artworks have been used as fund raising and public engagement material for the campaign.

Making conflicts public, whether by means of science or art, is a political intervention. The challenge of activism, science and art in tackling conflict is obviously a question that needs to be raised and discussed further than we were able to do in our group. If the role of science is ambiguous in conflicts, can the role of art also trigger confusion? Will activism by artists or scientists help stakeholders deal with the problems they face? This may not be the goal of the science or art project in the first place. At worst, activism through art or science can be ill informed, inflammatory and misleading. At least, attention should be paid to whose voices get strengthened in these interventions. The group's previous experience with art/science collaborations suggests that engaging with creative

10. Tanya Stadelmann, *This Creek*, video, 2018, <http://www.tanyastadelmann.com/eco%20films>

11. Inge Thomson, *Da Fishing Hands*, Inge Thomson Records, 2014, <http://www.ingethomson.com>.

work can have an effect on future working practices of both scientists and artists, making them reflect on what they are striving for and how. For example, in the ACES Environmental Conflicts Project, there was a concert, an exhibition and film screenings with contributions from all members of the group. But the most interesting, and potentially fruitful, outcomes were the personal shifts in perceptions and future impact on practice.¹²

Conclusions: Reaching Out to the World

I leave with as many new questions, about conflicts, collaboration, my own work, as I have had answered, but that's not a bad thing.

A workshop participant

Based on our experiences, we argue that creative processes offer underutilized potential in conflict situations. However, we do not see arts-science collaborations as a panacea to resolving conflict situations. Our questioning and exploring the various methods and their effectiveness makes our approach different from many arts-science collaborations. The experimental way of working helped us to create a trusting, friendly atmosphere—a safe space to exchange ideas and thoughts. Creative processes may also provide means for interventions in conflicts by enabling the parties to become involved in new ways or force them out of disciplinary or interest-driven mindsets. Creative processes can build bonds between people, help reassess the situation, and encourage reflection about the roles of actors and ways of thinking and acting in the conflict. Herein lies also the possibility for our collaborative work to reach out to the world. As Inge Thomson reported after the meetings: “I have had informal discussions with my fellow Fair Islanders about the conflicts that other group members have brought to the table. This has encouraged deeper thought.”

Combining arts and sciences is not something new. For example, Bruno Latour's and Peter Weibel's effort to bring together writers, artists, and philosophers to rethink the term “politics,”¹³ and Eben Kirksey and colleagues' experimenting with art and science in researching the relationship between

12. <https://serajamesirvine.com/portfolio/conservation-conflictsart-and-science>

13. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

humans and nature in their multispecies salon¹⁴ demonstrate the power of such collaboration to invent new possibilities to approach public issues or to explore and open up possible futures. However, in conflict studies, and in particular in the field of environmental conflicts, we have not come across examples of such efforts that attempt to deal with the fundamental challenges. One task of our group was to make the value of creative processes more tangible, whether based on different types of artistic work, ecocriticism or conflict mediation practice. This article serves this purpose. Bringing up and reflecting on our experimental approach made visible, in particular, the role of emotional experiences in conflict mediation processes. Our pop-up laboratory explored ways to build trust, allowing the questioning of conventional roles and mental models we had, and thus it simulated the real-life situations in which there is a need to develop mutual understanding and encourage exchange between parties who would not otherwise step out of their bubbles. We were aware that the project, as in successful conflict mediation situations, highlighted the need for the willingness of participants to be open minded and to engage with the aims of the experiments and with each other. The interface between experimental approaches to creativity and trusted relations proved to be the key lesson of the project: transforming conflicts requires both the courage to question and reflect on conventional ways of thinking and acting and the creation of safe spaces for interaction. By entering a conflict, scientists, artists and conflict mediators disrupt it. Therefore, we all should be as open to having our own perceptions changed by the process as the conflicting parties. Previous experiences, including the collaborative work we did, surely help in this.

Experimenting with creative methods made the project team discuss the limits of scientific approaches in conflicts: What is it that we, as sociologists, political scientists and natural scientists, can or cannot do about long-term environmental conflicts? How can we do our job better by collaborating with others, such as artists or conflict mediation professionals, without giving up our own competencies and objectives? In particular, how can we embrace the need for more-than-discursive approaches, mobilize embodied skills and ways of communicating and interacting?¹⁵ One of the open questions relates to the

14. Eben Kirksey, ed. *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also <http://www.multispecies-salon.org>.

15. See Isabelle Mauz and Julien Gravelle, "Wolves In the Valley: On Making a Controversy Public," In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005), 370-375.

publication of research results from an art-science project. The ways a researcher can report and document the artistic elements used in the research are rather limited in a world where most scientifically valued and robust publication avenues do not enable or allow the use of voice or video material for example. In this article we can only attach photographs and a link to a video. They do not really deliver a message very efficiently. The challenge goes two ways. How can an artist make explicit the role of sciences embedded in the artwork or the collaboration between scientists and artists (beyond a mention in the epilogue)?

Naturally, our experimental approach needs further testing in real-life situations. Our hypothesis is that policy makers, civil engineers, and private actors working in fields such as natural resource management, land use planning, protected areas or wildlife management will benefit from perspectives and ways of working provided by arts, humanities, and ecocriticism, combined with social and natural sciences. Conflict transformation requires creativity: thinking and acting in new ways, imagining new solutions and creating new relationships and collaborations. Stimulation of creative thinking might offer avenues for coping with conflicting situations. But we need more hands-on experience with how such approaches would enable us to address chronic conflicts, and where the limits of these approaches lie. For example, would intervening in an extremely violent conflict with the means of art be effective? There are examples of art being used in violent conflict situations but appropriate use of creative processes in such situations requires sensitivity. In turn, efforts to build trust may not help in situations in which the conflicting parties do not accept a collaborative approach as fruitful for them. Distinguishing the various ways that art and creativity could be used in various situations would be a step forward.

Our experimental approach enabled many of us to become better equipped in trying new things, and even provided us with new tools to facilitate interaction in the conflicts we intervene in or study. But more than skills and tools, we would like to emphasize the ability to reflect on our own practices and roles. Hence, the value of our laboratory was in proposing ways in which art can transform science and scientific ways of working, science can transform art or art and science together transform society—and asking questions about these transformational potentials, their conditions and their limits.

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