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MISTRA
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Storytelling Collection

Storytelling as, and for, Sustainability

March 2025

Introduction

By **Sara Holmgren, SLU and Mike Wilson, Loughborough University**

The aim with this collection is to provide inspiration and examples of how we can work and think critically with stories and storytelling in difficult times. The collection has developed as a result of a workshop we convened and hosted at the Nordic Environmental Sciences (NESS) Conference in Turku, Finland on the theme of Storytelling as, and for, Sustainability (transformations). Submissions came in all shapes and sizes: research papers, project reports, recitations, visual presentations, performances, all of which were offered in a spirit of generosity, curiosity and playfulness. Over twenty people registered for the workshop, all responding to the following brief:

In 2006 the sociologist and political scientist Francesca Polletta declared that “In recent years, storytelling has been promoted in surprising places” (1). In this instance she was referring to what has been called by Christian Salmon and others as “the narrative turn” (2010, 39), a widespread cultural shift towards an interest in story as a tool for communication and meaning-making. This is particularly the case for those engaged in, researching, and/or promoting sustainable development across different societal domains.

Over the past two decades those involved in sustainability communication, in particular, and those promoting learning and co-creation about, and engagement with, the unfolding climate emergency, have become increasingly interested in the role that storytelling can play in increasing levels of participation in the public discourse, especially amongst those whose voices are less commonly heard in such discussions. Jana-Axinja Paschen and Ray Ison (2013) identify an increasing number of studies and bodies of work within sustainability science that have attempted to engage more seriously with storytelling as a tool for knowledge-sharing and resilience-building amongst communities. Storytelling is a means of capturing and communicating the experiences of those communities most vulnerable to a changing environment and that experiential knowledge can then be brought into discussion with other forms of knowledge: scientific, technological, bureaucratic, political, economic, legal, and so on. This is storytelling as a way of knowing the world, as a knowledge system that sits alongside other knowledge systems, albeit in a hierarchical system where it regularly sits at the bottom of the pile. Storytelling is, however, more than simply an approach for capturing and communicating knowledge. It is also a tool for creating knowledge. In other words, storytelling is both a knowledge system and a thinking system, moving beyond simple knowledge creation and doing, and into the realm of future problem-solving and resilience-building.

Storytelling is a process that has evolved over centuries to enable us to think about

and understand the world. It allows us to test ideas of our own, interrogate the ideas of others and discriminate between truth and lies. Whilst storytelling is often equated with lies and fantasy, it is, in fact, a truth-seeking tool, one that is much needed in a post-truth world and which allows us to imagine our possible futures. The use and, indeed, abuse of storytelling in recent years is what makes it so urgent, so dangerous and so effective. As the critic and essayist John Berger wrote: "Stories are one way of sharing the belief that justice is imminent" (2016, 96).

In this workshop we invite delegates who have worked with story, wanted to work with story, or tried and failed to work with story, in relation to sustainability, to come together to share their thoughts and experiences. In other words, we invite them to share their stories and in doing so, we will use our stories as a way of thinking about stories, storytelling, and the rich possibilities and frustrating difficulties that such work presents for building sustainable futures.

In this online collection you get a chance to meet some of the contributions of the community that came together in Turku in 2024. Needless to say, this work is ongoing and in early 2025 some of the presentations have developed into published papers, and some have led to further conversations. Some contributions in the collection are shortened versions of academic texts, others are links to work published online in other formats, including audio and video. Each contribution begin with a brief introduction, including a bio and description of how the contributor approach storytelling in relation to sustainability and transformative change. Storytelling is a broad concept, methodology, topic, art and practice. One common feature in the collection is, however, that the contributions go beyond storytelling as the conveying of a substantive message, or selling of a story.

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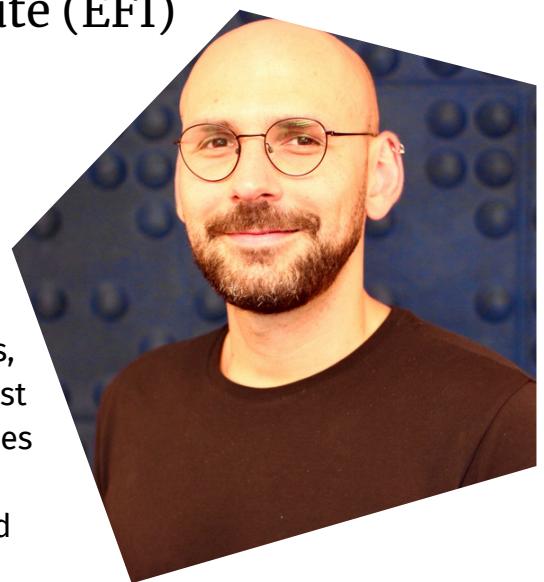
Emilin and the Spirit of the Forest

Alex Giurca, European Forest Institute (EFI)

Format: comic book in paper format flipbook and interactive format.

Biography:

Alex is a principal scientist at the Forest Governance Programme of the European Forest Institute in Bonn, Germany. His recent work broadly focuses on the actors, innovation networks, policies, and politics shaping forest governance arrangements in Europe and beyond. Besides research, he is interested in creative environmental communication. He has illustrated two comic books and numerous illustrations for different research projects, connecting art with science.



Can you tell us about your contribution, what is it about and how did it came to be?

The comic book tells the story of four friends who take a stand to protect their forest. But their actions trigger unexpected consequences. One night, Emilin meets the Spirit of the Forest, who whisk her away on a breathtaking journey through time, revealing the vital role forests play in our lives. As Emilin and her friends confront the tangled complexities of forest management, they must grapple with a critical question: can they repair the present to save the future?

The comic book was commissioned by FOREST EUROPE, and the printed version was supported by FSC.

How do you conceptualise storytelling?

In this first-of-its-kind experiment, we use the digital comic book format as an innovative means of expression through which creators rely on a cross between adventure games and comic books. Readers decide the pace of the story and how to engage with the characters. This format has the potential to appeal to multiple senses, making these productions a powerful tool to harness the power of storytelling whilst allowing space for reflection and critical debate.

The time we currently live in is often referred to as a time of multiple crisis (climate change, wars, democratic backlash, biodiversity loss, uneven economic development etc.) What roles (positive and/or negative) do you think storytelling might have in relation to social and environmental transformations?

This comic book explores the complexities of sustainable forest management, green jobs, and the future of our planet. Rather than offering simple solutions, it embraces multiple perspectives—farmers balancing conservation and livelihood, a disillusioned

younger generation fighting for their future, and forest managers navigating difficult decisions alongside farmers. Through storytelling, it highlights the challenges and trade-offs involved, encouraging readers to step into others' shoes and get the bigger picture. With a mix of wit, pop culture references, and time travel, the story weaves across timelines to show how shifting perceptions can transcend space, time, and generations.

**Find the comic book in paper
format flipbook here**

**Find the comic book in the
interactive format here**

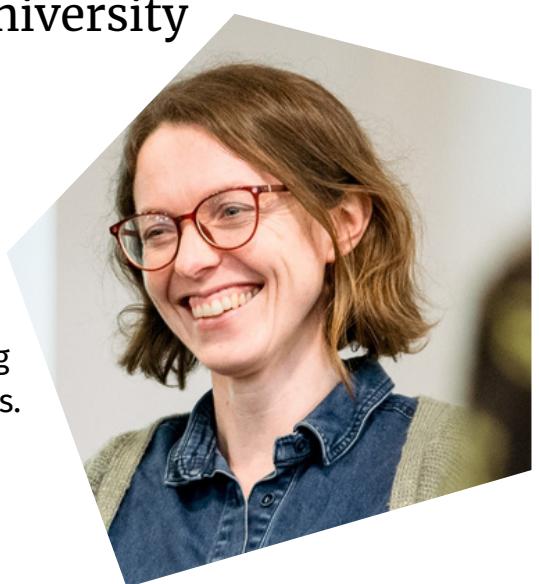
Why are climate stories hard to tell?

Dr Cath Heinemeyer, York St John University

Format: performance commentary

Biography:

Dr Cath Heinemeyer is Senior Lecturer in Performance and Senior Researcher in Ecological Justice at York St John University, where she co-leads the university's Living Lab, a network of staff and students collaborating to investigate and address local ecological justice issues. As part of the duo Adderstone, she creates original music-infused storytelling performances that resonate with an era of climate crisis. She is the author of 'Storytelling in Participatory Arts with Young People' as well as many articles, chapters and creative outputs exploring the role of dialogic storytelling in the current moment.



Can you tell us about your contribution, what is it about and how did it came to be?

This performance commentary explores how my performance duo, Adderstone, approached the notoriously difficult task of telling climate stories - a task made insurmountable if performers seek to share the whole of the 'hyperobject' of climate change with an audience. Using video extracts from our storytelling show *CHANGELINGS*, I discuss how we devised this show from a more humble starting point: our personal and embodied experiences of mothering during the climate crisis. I explore how folkloric and mythic figures can act as ciphers for complex global systems in storytelling performance, and how it can make space for diverse global perspectives.

How do you conceptualise storytelling?

For me, storytelling is a playground for exploration of whatever is important to a community at any given time. In this hermeneutic understanding, people repurpose stories all the time for the sense-making needs of the present. This is not the same as giving up on the idea of truth – we can tell stories in a spirit of honesty, curiosity, wisdom-seeking and responsibility.

The time we currently live in is often referred to as a time of multiple crisis (climate change, wars, democratic backlash, biodiversity loss, uneven economic development etc.) What roles (positive and/or negative) do you think storytelling might have in relation to social and environmental transformations?

Storytelling has so many roles to play in the current moment of crisis. In the East

Africa-based Storying Our Futures project with Adverse Camber, we developed a list of these, including: bearing witness; sharing solutions between cultures and communities; imagining and fleshing out possible positive futures; developing language for shared understanding of new challenges; facilitating intergenerational and cross-community dialogue; creating spaces for ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ forms of knowledge to cross-fertilise.

WHY ARE CLIMATE STORIES HARD TO TELL? Dr Cath Heinemeyer

Oral storytelling has always been deeply infused with an ecological sensibility. Stories as a mode of engaging emotionally with the natural world, animating it in our over-mediated times, exploring our interdependence with it and how to co-exist with it.

This is why I (and many others) came into the practice of oral storytelling. Storytellers (including me) often have ecology degrees! The sheer scope and diversity of ecological storytelling practice in the UK alone is assembled in Nanson (2021); Gersie, Nanson and Schieffelin (2014). Wonderful books. Check them out.

The first story I ever told publicly at a storytelling festival was of an arrogant young man who overstepped the mark with some neighbouring forest spirits and pays the price. He learns from bitter experience. Single protagonist, local human cause, immediate ecological effect, conclusion. Easy.

But when it comes to the climate and ecological emergencies.... These are hyperobjects, says Timothy Morton (2016), ungraspable icebergs. Infinite, global, networked, existential, probing into every corner of life, over multiple timecales. We might dramatize the guardians of a local forest, but how about the global finance system?

Storytellers then become jealous of novelists and filmmakers. Or just give up.

As a storyteller, you can't tell the climate crisis. It's literally untellable. But if it's not there in your stories, you are telling of a fantasy world (Sarena Ulibarri, cited in Ortiz 2019).

Or rather - you can't tell the whole climate crisis. And why should you? As British TV writer Russell T Davies said at a BBC Climate Creatives event in 2022: we don't need stories ‘about’ climate change, but of lives played out amongst it. To help us learn to live well in this zone of unstable weather and unstable societies.

To avoid the polarities of dystopia and utopia, of ‘day-after-tomorrow thinking’; to explore the genuine possibilities for change that will continue to exist on all scales

from the hyperlocal to the global. To find the sense of purpose that lies at the eye of the storm. To become open-eyed, richly human, emotionally literate, skilled operators on the shifting sands of the climate crisis.

So together with my storytelling collaborator in Adderstone, Gemma McDermott, I have been exploring: Where is the climate crisis written on our lives, on our bodies? And we found a starting point in our experiences with a particular kind of young person – in our own households, my university classrooms, our local activist group – that we could call ‘the sensitive children’. Young activists, school refusers, the anxious, the too-observant ones, those who feel deeply.

CHANGELINGS extract 1 - THE GIRL AND HER MOTHER (click to see the video)

So we have the virgin, the mother....but there's one missing from the triad: the crone.

How can a story make space for complexity, phenomena that unfold over long timescales and wide geographies? I have seen many theatre shows that incorporate climate through forms like the ‘performance lecture’, including alarming graphs and statistics in their performance.

But most audiences know this scary stuff already. And hearing it again doesn't bridge the gap between the individual life and the iceberg.

Story is, really, the opposite of information (says Walter Benjamin (1955), and so many others). Its fuels are experience, relationship. We need to start there.

With the crone. The old Celtic winter goddess the Cailleach Beara became, for us, an important figure. She's certainly eco-gothic enough to hold entire systems in her grasp. Her journey into irrelevance, and her impotent grief, are a vessel for what the audience already knows.

CHANGELINGS extract 2 - THE CAILLEACH (click to see the video)

So we have an ancient climate goddess ready to bite back...we're back to the forest spirits, right?

Not quite. There are other voices to attend to. Climate stories are also tricky because they have collective heroes, and they don't usually get a hero's journey with a satisfying conclusion. Rebecca Solnit (2023) points out that we need stories that celebrate the ‘relay race’ of change, with patient collective action, ‘with new protagonists picking up where the last left off’.

Where will the knowledge and wisdom come from, in this case? From real stories on the climate frontlines, from communities who are decades ahead of Northern Europe in their dealings with the hyperobject.

And, undoubtedly, particularly from the sensitive ones in those communities...

CHANGELINGS extract 3 - CRABFISHER AND RAINMAKER (click to see the video)

No story can offer a route out of uncertainty in this case. That's where we all live now, for the long haul. Kirby and Webb (2023) ask us to 'gather around the thing' of climate change, young people and adults together, to pool our knowledge and our uncertainty. There are no magical solutions, but nor are we doomed by deterministic fate. Other worlds and ways are possible; there are spaces with emergent properties; and this is a kind of eco-social magic in itself.

(Among novelists, Ursula Leguin and Barbara Kingsolver are mistresses of conjuring such spaces)

For us, the Cailleach's cave, a never-never meeting space of the sensitive children, became such a collective space of catalysis and potential. Of resolute determination to avoid the poles of self-deception and despair, self-interest and self-abandonment. What could emanate out from such a space? What would it do to the Cailleach, to nature, herself?

Where might the sensitive ones lead us if we show ourselves ready to be guided by them?

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Climate policy - fiction dialogue for societal metamorphosis

Minna Santaoja, Artic Centre, Univeristy of Lapland

Format: [video](#), performance commentary

Biography:

Minna Santaoja is a Finnish environmental social scientist. She holds a PhD in environmental policy and has worked on different sustainability themes in several universities. Her research focuses on different knowledges and environmental agency, including nonhumans. Minna is eager to try different science communication methods, and she has for instance written a children's book on wasp-human cohabitation as an outcome of an interdisciplinary project. Minna is the editor-in-chief of the Finnish peer-reviewed journal *Alue & Ympäristö* (Region & Environment), and has a passion for creative writing.



Intro to the video “Climate policy - fiction dialogue for societal metamorphosis”

I am working on a project titled “Climate responsibility as a normative cornerstone of multilateral collaboration”. In future-oriented interviews, we invited experts and scholars from different fields, working with climate change issues, to mentally time travel to the year 2035, when climate responsibility would have become an international norm. We wanted to know the experts’ thoughts on how we got there and what would have changed. Curiously, three of the interviewees brought up the potential of climate fiction and a particular book – Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry of the Future* – in thinking positive post-climate change futures. I picked up the book to mirror the interviews against it, using the novel as political theory.

In this context, I understand storytelling in several ways. First, there are the interview contents, the future imaginaries of the experts. Second, there is the novel, and climate fiction more broadly, and third, the scholarly literature discussing climate fiction as literature, and its potential influence on politics and science. What I am interested in, finally, is how these different modes of storytelling come to influence societal imaginaries and discourses on post-climate change futures. Based on my current interviews, I cannot, however, address this question, but mirroring fiction and expert views gives plenty of food for thought.

I think we are saturated already with dystopian futures – from popular culture but also

just following the news these days. Several scholars and authors have claimed how the inability to imagine, visualize and implement more positive futures is contributing significantly to the current multicrisis. Alternative, positive future imaginaries are necessary and may be really powerful for moving towards a sustainable future. Climate fiction, like The Ministry for the Future, contributes importantly to this task, but I think us researchers in different fields should increasingly respond to the challenge with the means and knowledges available to us.

[Watch the video here](#)

Knowing Soils – Perspectives beyond growth in carbon farming

Sanna Barrineau, University of the Sunshine Coast & Uppsala University

Format: academic paper

Biography:

Sanna is in the final phases of her PhD journey in the Mistra Environmental Communication research program in Sweden. Her interest is in how human-nature relations play out in the context of agriculture and food system transformations with a focus on care, futures, and time.



Short introduction to the piece

This contribution emerges from eight farm visits around Sweden, where farmers and landowners are engaged in a grassroots initiative piloting regenerative carbon farming methods on their land, and the desire to resist the norms of dominant science communication I see in agri-food contexts. I thus engage with poetic inquiry as a storytelling methodology to explore connections between scientific and non-scientific ways of knowing soils through situated stories and to account for the agency and lived experiences of those working within this sustainability transformation. I turn conversations from the fields and kitchens into poetic vignettes. Poetry brings liminality; a language of creation that goes beyond the strict borders of scientific inquiry which is connected to the rhythms of human and non-human lives. In engaging with storytelling through poetic vignettes, I hope to offer a re-reading of carbon farming that evokes for readers why these participants' experiences matter politically in imagining and enacting alternative agri-food systems. These poetic vignettes draw attention to the diversity of temporalities present in this regenerative carbon farming work. The human-soil relationships that emerge through these stories invite pause – what gets overlooked with the prioritization of urgent climate and agri-food discourses? Where can poetic inquiry lead us?

I see research as a form of storytelling where I hope to communicate stories that do not easily come because they are not neat and tidy, they do not have heros, and they might appear only after listening for things other than heros and happy endings. This relates fundamentally to imagination, and more specifically, the capacity to imagine how things could be otherwise, as well as to attention. My hunch is that there are several essential ingredients to socio-ecological transformations in stories where our attention is cultivated in ways that do not eagerly demand clean-cut solutions, where our senses may connect to myriad other things. Seen in this way, storytelling is a

powerful force that draws attention to different types of (climate) action – as Haraway has put it, the kinds of stories we tell matter!

[Read the academic paper here](#)

A climate change talanoa: exploring creative possibilities for a hopeful future

Simon Hollis, Swedish Defence University

Format: research paper

Biography:

Simon Hollis is associate professor at the Swedish Defence University. His research and teaching foci include international crisis management, climate security and methodology. Research on crisis management focuses on global and local risk governance with a particular emphasis on international and regional organisations as crisis managers. A second trajectory examines the intersection between climate and the environment, crisis management and security. Hollis also has a keen interest in methodological issues that relate to how knowledge is constructed and communicated, especially in the Global South.



Short introduction to the piece

This presentation is based on an article (that promotes the value of Talanoa as a method, as well as a way of thinking, that can help us reimagine the climate crisis. This contribution emerged through a series of talanoa conducted with the Rt Rev Dr Winston Halapua in the period 2023-2024. A Talanoa can be understood as a mode of storytelling that is open ended, deeply relational and creative. It does not follow a typical linear script; instead, it is about a voyage of discovery on the open seas. Perhaps more than ever, the creative space enabled by a talanoa can provide hope in an uncertain and tumultuous time in history when we are confronted with multiple existential crises. It provides a sense of hope through its potential to transform how we perceive reality and its ability to unlock new perspectives.

Read the paper here

Wretched Orlon

Tommi Kauppinen, Kajaani University of Applied Sciences & Haaras

Format: poem

Biography:

D. Sc. (Tech.) Tommi Kauppinen is an expert in applied mathematics. Moreover, his interests include global south, theatre, vocals, and poetry. In 2025, Kauppinen will be teaching hybrid at Kajaani University of Applied Sciences (KAMK) in an engineering program of data and artificial intelligence, physically situated at Keilaniemi, Helsinki metropolitan area. In addition, he is Co-founder of Haaras, a micropublishing aggregate for poetry (www.haaras.art).



Can you tell us about your contribution, what is it about and how did it came to be?

The poem is inspired by the recent events of gradual decline of principles and values that were created after WW2 in the global north. However, in the poem, there is the consolation of time: even the ancient Babylonia was fell by Achaemenid dynasty, so these developments we are witnessing today are not novel, but yet another turn of the Wheel of Time.

How do you conceptualise storytelling?

My instrument is poetry. The more I study and understand it, the less becomes more. With the average concentration span decreasing, a poem can communicate a vast and an effective message to an audience otherwise unconcerned.

The time we currently live in is often referred to as a time of multiple crisis (climate change, wars, democratic backlash, biodiversity loss, uneven economic development etc.) What roles (positive and/or negative) do you think storytelling might have in relation to social and environmental transformations

Stories have their place, of course, to trigger emotions through their communication. However, it should be noted that stories can be used for various purposes. The crisis mentioned stem from physical processes that are well-known and could be acted upon. Awareness without power can reduce the tolerance to entertain certain possibilities for action. Therefore, before substantial power shift, I see no reason to mesmerise people with overflow of stories, which is the case in, e.g., the streaming services available.

Wretched Orlon

Our political system has defaulted,
Regardless of how we vaulted.
I call our weaving Fates
For what they are: faulted.
Hear the cry from the gates!
Trump ad portas.
Oh, the noble
Offspring of The Law of Constantinople!
Summon La Puerta de todas
Las Naciones
To burn this wretched Orlon
Of Babylon



Visual poem by Tommi Kauppinen



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