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EXPERIENCING NATURE FROM PAST TO PRESENT: THE PERSPECTIVE OF NATURE CONSERVATION SPECIALISTS

DABAS PIEREDZĒŠANA NO PAGĀTNES LĪDZ MŪSDIENĀM: DABAS AIZSARDZĪBAS SPECIĀLISTU PERSPEKTĪVA

MASTER'S THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how nature conservation specialists in Latvia experience and conceptualize nature, tracing shifts from the early periods of Gauja National Park to the current work in the Nature Conservation Agency. Drawing on actor-network theory and critical discourse analysis, the study explores the hybrid entanglements of human and nonhuman actors, material intermediaries and institutional discourses that shape how conservation specialists engage with nature. Ethnographic analysis reveal that embodied, affective and place-based ways of knowing coexist with and at times challenge dominant scientific and managerial-bureaucratic discourses. The findings highlight the hybrid positionalities of specialists navigating between institutional demands and personal relationships with nature and how conservation specialists' identities and practices are shaped by shifting institutional structures, broader ideological systems and individual lived experiences. This research contributes to anthropological debates on human-nature relations by illustrating how nature conservation constitutes a dynamic, relational space of co-constructed realities and emphasizes the value of diverse knowledge forms in conservation.

Keywords: Experience and conceptualization of nature, nature conservation, actor-network theory, human-nonhuman entanglements, hybrid positionality, embodied knowledge, institutional discourse

ANOTĀCIJA

Šis pētījums analizē, kā dabas aizsardzības speciālisti Latvijā pieredz un konceptualizē dabu, izsekojot šīm pieredzēm no Gaujas Nacionālā parka darbības sākumposma līdz darbam mūsdienu Dabas aizsardzības pārvaldē. Balstoties uz aktoru tīkla teoriju un kritisko diskursa analīzi, pētījumā aplūkotas cilvēku un necilvēku aģentu savijumi, materiālie starpnieki un institucionālie diskursi, kas ietekmē kā dabas aizsardzības speciālisti veido attiecības ar dabu. Etnogrāfiskā analīze atklāj, ka iemiesotas, afektīvas un vietēji balstītas zināšanas pastāv līdzās dominējošajiem zinātnes un pārvaldības-birokrātijas diskursiem un nereti tos arī izaicina. Pētījuma atklājumi izgaismo dabas aizsardzības speciālistu hibrīdo pozicionēšanos starp institucionālajām prasībām un personiskajām attiecībām ar dabu, kā arī to, kā mainīgas institucionālās struktūras, plašākas ideoloģiskās sistēmas un individuālās dzīves pieredzes ietekmē speciālistu identitātes un rīcības. Šis pētījums sniedz ieguldījumu antropoloģiskajās diskusijās par cilvēka un dabas attiecībām, izgaismojot dabas aizsardzību kā dinamisku, attiecību veidotu telpu, kurā veidojas savstarpēji konstruētas realitātes. Pētījumā tiek uzsvērta arī daudzveidīgu zināšanu formu nozīme dabas aizsardzībā.

Atslēgvārdi: Dabas pieredze un konceptualizācija, dabas aizsardzība, aktoru tīkla teorija, cilvēku–necilvēku mijiedarbība, hibrīdā pozicionalitāte, iemiesotās zināšanas, institucionālais diskurss

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

GNP – Gauja National Park is Latvia's first and oldest national park, founded on 14 September 1973, whose aim is to preserve the distinctive natural features of the Ancient Valley of the River Gauja and its surroundings, while simultaneously supporting both recreation and nature conservation in the area (Nature Conservation Agency, 2022).

Nature conservation specialist – a term employed thorough the thesis as a conceptual designation to categorize individuals engaged in various roles related to nature conservation within the Nature Conservation Agency (NCA). This label serves primarily as an analytical tool for identifying and annotating these professionals in the context of this research. However, it is important to acknowledge that this designation may not correspond to a formally recognized professional identity or be consciously embraced and experienced as such by the individuals themselves.

NCA – The Nature Conservation Agency of the Republic of Latvia is the main governmental institution responsible for implementing a unified nature protection and conservation policy in Latvia. Its main functions include managing all protected areas, overseeing nature protection planning and research, enforcing CITES regulations, issuing and regulating conservation-related licenses, cooperating with local stakeholders, and educating the public on nature conservation (Nature Conservation Agency, 2020a).

INTRODUCTION

A flower may be a flower or it can be a bird's-eye primrose, an endangered species listed in the Red Data Book that must be protected, or a Canadian goldenrod, an invasive species threatening local ecosystems and targeted for eradication. This example highlights how the experience of nature varies and how, particularly within the field of conservation, nature has become layered with scientific classifications, meanings and value judgments.

In Latvia, institutionalized nature conservation began with the establishment of Gauja National Park (GNP) in 1973. Since then, conservation has developed into a formalized practice governed by legal frameworks, scientific language and measurable indicators. This institutionalization may have altered human conceptualizations of nature, distancing them from earlier, more embodied or experiential relationships with the natural world. These shifts may be particularly significant for individuals who have worked in nature conservation across different political and socio-economic systems – from the Socialist period to the post-independence capitalist system of the 1990s.

Moreover, perceptions of nature can differ significantly between those directly involved in conservation and the broader public. These differing conceptualizations influence how individuals interact with and relate to the environment. Understanding these perspectives is essential, as they shape both personal and institutional approaches to conservation and the communication of its practices and logics to the public. Scholars have emphasized that successful conservation must include local communities and the public as active contributors. For example, Orlove and Brush (1996) emphasize the importance of anthropological insights in conservation, describing how local knowledge and practices have historically contributed to biodiversity preservation (p. 329). They call for genuine interdisciplinarity that moves beyond the mere inclusion of local communities as stakeholders and instead recognizes them as co-creators of conservation knowledge and practice (p. 333). Thus, understanding how conservation specialists experience and conceptualize nature and how these experiences have evolved over time may be especially important to developing more inclusive and effective conservation approaches.

Moreover, conservation specialists operate within a highly institutionalized environment where they balance the needs of both nature and society. Their roles often require them to act as advocates for nature, communicators of conservation logic and enforcers of state-delegated authority. Their understanding of nature, rooted in personal experience, professional identity and embodied practices, is central to navigating these complex responsibilities and might be of

particular importance for fostering a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between humans and nature.

Research into the experiences, memory, practices and linguistic patterns of nature conservation specialists can reveal their conceptualizations of nature and their relationships with the natural world. Furthermore, a discourse analysis of the ethnographic data collected with the conservation specialists who have worked both in the early periods of GNP and in the current main nature conservation institution in Latvia – the Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia (NCA) – could reveal how experiences and conceptualizations of nature have shifted over time. Furthermore, a comparative analysis could uncover whether earlier perceptions may have persisted or merged with newer understandings held by younger conservation specialists who entered the field after the 1990s and if these conceptualizations have been affected by broader ideological influences, such as socialism and capitalism. Such analysis could reveal whether the historical legacy of socialism has influenced contemporary conservation practices.

The aim of this research is to explore how professionals in the field of nature conservation experience and conceptualize nature and how these experiences and conceptualizations have evolved over time, from the beginning of institutionalized conservation in the 1970s to the present. To achieve this goal, I have conducted interviews with individuals who worked in nature conservation during the early periods of GNP and continue to work in the field as employees of the NCA, as well as with specialists who entered the field after the 1990s, having little or no direct experience of GNP. This comparative approach enables an examination of how experiences and conceptualizations of nature have transformed and whether broader ideological frameworks have played a role in shaping the understanding of nature among conservation specialists.

Research objectives are set as follows:

- Conduct a literature review to establish a theoretical foundation and insights into: (1) anthropological debates on nature-culture dichotomy; (2) discourse on nature conservation; (3) nature conceptualization in socialism and capitalism; (4) actor-network theory; (5) critical discourse analysis.
- Carry out fieldwork in the NCA.
- Produce and process fieldnotes and interview transcripts.
- Develop coding categories.
- Conduct qualitative coding and analysis.
- Summarize insights and conclusions.

Ethnographic data was gathered during fieldwork conducted at the NCA and from conversations with people that are employed in the NCA during March and April 2025. The data includes semi-structured interviews, group interviews, informal conversations and fieldnotes from participant observation of the NCA employee practical tasks in nature.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

At the start of this research, it is necessary to understand the anthropological debate surrounding the concept of nature. Understanding how nature has been historically and culturally framed is crucial for analysing the ways in which contemporary conservation specialists conceptualize and interact with nature.

1.1. Anthropological debates on nature vs. culture

Anthropological discourse has long interrogated the dichotomy between nature and culture, particularly in the context of how societies conceptualize and interact with the natural world. Foundational theorists have illustrated that the Western separation of "nature" and "culture" is neither universal nor inevitable, but rather a culturally and historically situated construct. Lévi-Strauss (1962), in *The Savage Mind*, laid the structuralist groundwork for questioning this binary by arguing that classificatory systems are a common feature of all human societies, but the categories themselves – such as "nature" and "culture" – are not shared universally. According to Lévi-Strauss, the opposition between nature and culture is "peculiar to Western thought" and rests on the idea that certain phenomena (e.g., kinship, language) are governed by social rules, while others (e.g., reproduction, biology) are seen as natural (1962, pp. 3–4). He argues that the so-called "primitive" thought is not pre-logical or irrational, but rather follows its own logic of analogical reasoning, especially in relation to the natural world. Through his analysis of myth and totemism, Lévi-Strauss demonstrates how indigenous societies classify and organize their environment in ways that challenge the rigid nature–culture divide, instead emphasizing relational and symbolic associations that fuse humans and nonhumans into coherent cosmologies.

Descola (2013) further advances this critique by offering a systematic typology of how different societies construct the relationships between humans and nonhumans. In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, he argues that the Western naturalist ontology – wherein humans are distinguished from nonhumans by the possession of interiority (mind, soul, culture) – is one among several possible ontological frameworks. Descola identifies four ontologies: naturalism, animism, totemism and analogism, each characterized by different configurations of interiority and physicality. Naturalism, he contends, is unique in assigning interiority exclusively to humans and physical continuity to all beings, thus relegating nonhumans to the realm of mute matter to be scientifically classified and politically managed (2013, pp. 173–174). By contrast, animism, prevalent among Amazonian and circumpolar societies, attributes interiority to both

humans and nonhumans, thereby facilitating social relationships across species lines. Descola's framework challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies in environmental governance and conservation, highlighting the need to recognize alternative ontological assumptions about the environment.

Strathern also challenges the universality of Western distinctions between nature and culture. In her essay "No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case" (1980), she illustrates that in certain societies, such as the Hagen of Papua New Guinea, these categories are not separate but are instead intertwined in complex ways that inform social relations and environmental perceptions. Specifically, Strathern dismantles the Western nature-culture binary, arguing that the Hagen people do not conceptualize the world through these categories. Instead, they use terms like "wild" (*rømi* - untamed) and "domestic" (*mbo* - socially managed), which reflect practical relationships with the environment rather than abstract oppositions (pp. 12, 191–192). *Mbo* refers to "all that is human and associated with human activity" with an embedded distinction from *rømi* – the wild. Spirit (*kor*), as a third distinctive category, can be united with both *mbo* and *rømi*, thus encapsulating the distinctive essence of these two categories in relation to spirits: *mbo kor* is associated with human activity, purpose and intention, while *kor rømi* refers to wild spirits that inhabit forests and uninhabited land and tend to wild (inedible) plants and wild (undomesticated) animals (*ibid.*). The *mbo–rømi* dichotomy also encompasses differentiations such as cultivated–wild and social–solitary/non-social (p. 193). The conventions of nurture create bonds predicated upon dependency, in opposition to the autonomous, independent and bondless wild, which also encompasses greed and irresponsibility (pp. 204-205). Notably, the term *mbo* includes the aspect of human control; for example, *mbo* pigs as opposed to wild pigs are subject to control (p. 194). Wild spirits, on the other hand, are not to be subdued but are meant to come to terms with them (*ibid.*). On the other hand, wild spirits are influenced to keep them "out of the way" (p. 204), suggesting a kind of nuanced human capacity to affect the wild, if not to outright control it. In Strathern's (1980) description, *rømi* for the Hagen people represents a source of power that stands in opposition to "ordinary bonds human beings create through nurture", and she notes that the conceptualization of the wild is not simply oppositional but serves to define human characteristics like nurture and sociality by contrast (p. 196). Strathern's analysis thus demonstrates that conceptualizations of nature are historically and culturally contingent, shaped by local practices and social relations.

Taken together, the works of Lévi-Strauss, Descola, and Strathern reveal that the categories of "nature" and "culture" are not ontological absolutes but contextually variable constructs that reflect particular ways of being, knowing and experiencing.

One significant contribution to this discourse is Donna Haraway's reconceptualization of nature as articulated in her works. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway (2003) reconceptualizes nature not as a fixed, external entity but as an evolving, co-constitutive space of "naturecultures" shaped by multispecies relationships. Through her focus on dog-human cohabitation, Haraway advances a posthumanist ontology where the boundaries between nature and culture are porous, emphasizing the concept of "companion species", which highlights the relational and interdependent bonds between humans and nonhumans. She emphasizes that humans and nonhumans "are bonded in significant otherness" (p. 16) and theirs is a "co-constitutive relationship in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all" (p. 12). Her critique of autonomous human agency, alongside her reconceptualization of nature as an evolving, co-constitutive space, advances the idea that nature is not a detached entity but rather a co-produced outcome of intertwined historical, social and biological processes.

The spirit of shared obligation and relationality between humans and other species is also expressed in Haraway's *When Species Meet*, where she writes that "human beings are not uniquely obligated to and gifted with responsibility; animals ... are response-able in the same sense as people are; that is, responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being" (2008, p. 71). This statement reinforces the idea that nature and culture are inseparable, highlighting that humans are always already entangled with other species, rather than existing as detached caretakers of a distant "nature". This perspective challenges the anthropocentric and dualistic framings that have historically dominated Western thought, suggesting instead a relational model based on mutual becoming and shared histories.

The view of human-nature inseparability has profound implications for the field of nature conservation. As the conceptualizations of nature are moving toward more integrated, symbiotic approaches that recognize the entanglement of human and nonhuman actors, conservation practices may similarly evolve to reflect this reconceptualization.

Another important contribution to the anthropological critique of Western epistemologies, particularly the Cartesian dualisms such as nature versus culture, subject versus object, and science versus politics, comes from the works of Bruno Latour. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1993) dismantles the foundational myth of modernity – that nature and

society can be neatly separated into distinct epistemological and ontological realms. He argues that the "modern constitution" is characterized by two simultaneous but contradictory processes – "purification", which seeks to maintain a strict analytical distinction between the domains of nature and society, and "translation" (or "hybridization"), which continually produces entities that blur these boundaries, such as scientific facts, technological artifacts and environmental controversies (1993, pp. 10–12). Furthermore, Latour challenges the notion that modernity has successfully maintained this separation. By mentioning "the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes" Latour highlights the paradox of modernity's attempt to purify and separate, which inadvertently leads to an increase in hybrids (1993, p. 12). He also points out that modernity's insistence on a strict division between nature and society fails to account for the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman actors: "Nature and Society are not two distinct poles, but one and the same production of successive states of societies-natures, of collectives" (1993, p. 139).

In *Politics of Nature* (2004), Latour continues to challenge the divide between nature and society, arguing that political processes must include nonhuman actors as part of collective decision-making. He consistently frames nature not as a separate, given entity, but as the outcome of ongoing negotiations and associations among a diverse array of agents, both human and nonhuman. Latour contends that by recognizing nonhumans as "new entities with uncertain boundaries, entities that hesitate, quake, and induce perplexity", rather than mere objects, they can be considered social actors alongside humans (2004, p. 76). He explains that earlier views excluded nonhumans from this status out of fear that humans would be reduced to things. However, these fears are no longer substantiated if "a perplexed nonhuman [enters] into a relationship with the collective and gradually [is] socialized by the complex equipment of laboratories" (p. 77), that is, nonhumans engage with humans through scientific interaction. Thus, by reframing nonhumans, Latour explains how forming associations between social actors, human and nonhuman alike, is possible (ibid.).

Latour also introduces the concept of spokespersons, who mediate between human and nonhuman actors, speaking on behalf of nonhumans and translating their "articulations" into the collective's discourse (2004, pp. 64, 86). He explains that humans through the act of speech can make the voices of nonhumans become part of discussion, however, he emphasizes the importance of maintaining a critical stance toward the authority of spokesperson and the form of speech, which might "sometimes … transform mute things into "speaking facts," and sometimes … make speaking subjects mute by requiring them to bow down before nondiscussable matters of fact" (2004, pp. 68-69).

In *Politics of Nature* (2004), Latour argues that both humans and nonhumans act as participants in constructing a shared world, thereby reimagining nature as a dynamic and contested collective. His insistence on symmetry between humans and nonhumans challenges anthropocentric governance, thus he proposes that nonhuman actors participate in shaping ecological futures. Consequently, Latour envisions a political ecology grounded in ongoing negotiation and inclusion, rather than fixed hierarchies or rigid distinctions between nature and society.

Also, Ingold (2000), in *The Perception of the Environment*, similarly critiques the division of nature and culture, advancing a phenomenological and relational model of human–environment interaction. Drawing on ethnographic and ecological examples, Ingold argues that humans do not act upon a passive nature but dwell within a "world [that] continually comes into being around the inhabitant" and participate in a dynamic, ongoing process of co-creation as the world's "manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity" (p. 153). Thus, he emphasizes that humans and nonhumans are mutually constitutive, and that knowledge emerges from situated, embodied engagement.

Collectively, the aforementioned authors offer a compelling critique of the dualistic foundations of Western epistemology, proposing instead frameworks that emphasize relationality, co-constitution and the hybrid nature of reality, particularly highlighting the entangled, co-constitutive dynamics between humans and nonhumans.

1.2. Discourse on nature conservation

Contemporary nature conservation discourse increasingly challenges the dominant Western paradigms that have historically shaped global environmental governance. These prevailing models, grounded in anthropocentric, dualistic frameworks, conceptualize nature as separate from humanity and in need of protection from human interference – an approach that has marginalized Indigenous worldviews and perpetuated colonial legacies.

For example, Pyhälä (2024) offers a decolonial analysis of conservation practices through the lens of the Kogui people in Colombia, whose spiritually guided and long-standing relationship with nature exemplifies a more sustainable and integrative form of environmental governance. The Kogui's worldview, which sees no dichotomy between the human and natural worlds, challenges the Western conservation norm that presumes human presence inherently degrades ecosystems. She notes that the frameworks of biodiversity protection, which are based "on mistaken assumptions and dualistic worldviews" have failed to meet global conservation objectives and have also increased detachment from "so-called *nature* [emphasis in the

original]" (p. 490). She points out that the need for conservation itself reflects a broken connection with nature, criticizing exclusionary conservation models and externally imposed conservation initiatives for ignoring "the lives, knowledge, economy, and culture of local and Indigenous peoples", and for promoting "unethical, ineffective, and often neo-colonial approaches" (*ibid.*). Pyhälä stresses that the "predominant conservation model" of protecting nature solely for its own sake is insufficient, as it results in human rights violations linked to the neoliberal conservation model's foundations in colonialism and oppression (*ibid.*). She emphasizes that global conservation goals can only be achieved by recognizing Indigenous "systems of tenure, governance and sustainable ways of life" (p. 491). Pyhälä concludes that the Kogui exemplify how a nature-based worldview, strong cultural identity related to that worldview, and governance rooted in Natural Law are vital for living in "harmony with the natural environment", reminding us that the material and spiritual worlds are inseparably linked and essential for rethinking conservation and restoring humanity's relationship with nature (*ibid.*).

A part of nature conservation discourse through the anthropological lens is the role anthropocentrism plays in shaping the human-environment relations, ethics and nature conservation policy. Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina (2016) proposes a critique of anthropocentric conservation arguing that the prevailing models of biodiversity protection remain constrained by utilitarian and instrumental rationales, failing to account for intrinsic environmental values and nonhuman agency. They advocate for an expanded environmental anthropology that moves beyond traditional wilderness conservation to consider urban, agricultural, and multispecies landscapes, thereby integrating the "social, historical, and ecological patterns of multispecies encounters" into conservation analysis (p. 2). The authors argue for an ecocentric approach recognizing both "cultural values and human rights", as well as "the intrinsic value and rights to life of nonhuman species" (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina, 2015 as cited in Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina, 2016, p. 2). They assert that environmental degradation threatens not only biodiversity but also human material and spiritual wellbeing (p. 3).

In a broader reflection on the field, Brosius (1999) examines the surge in anthropological interest in environmentalism. He notes a discontinuity between the ecological anthropology of the 1960s-70s, focused on localized adaptations, and contemporary environmental anthropology, which is more attuned to "power and inequality, to the contingency of cultural and historical formations, to the significance of regimes of knowledge production, and to the importance of the acceleration of translocal processes" (p. 278). He also cautions that

anthropologists need to remain reflexive on how their work can affect environmental movements (p. 287), as well as notes the potential for anthropology to reveal how environmental discourses are shaped by powerful actors – "national governments, industries, public relations firms, multilateral agencies, and the like" (p. 288).

To summarize, scholars like Pyhälä (2024), Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina (2016) advocate for decolonial, relational, and ecocentric approaches that recognize Indigenous knowledge, nonhuman agency and the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems. Brosius adds that contemporary environmental anthropology must remain attentive to the power dynamics shaping conservation discourse and practice.

1.3. Nature conceptualization in socialism

This subsection explores how nature was conceptualized within Soviet socialist ideology, focusing on the interplay between official discourses of industrial dominance over nature and the lived experiences of individuals inhabiting and working in industrial regions.

Bolotova's (2014) research analyses "the dominant discourse on nature in the USSR and engagements with the natural environment of people working for extractive industries" in the Russian Arctic (p. 3). She describes the Soviet dominant discourse on nature prior 1960s as viewing the natural environment through an economic lens, treating it as a reservoir of resources to be exploited and utilized, and framing nature as an adversary to be subdued for economic and political progress. This view emphasized revolutionary struggle against nature as enemy, human dominance, and the creation of a "new Soviet person" as a separate entity from nature and "able to regulate and bring order to chaotic, passive nature" (p. 73).

According to Bolotova (2014), after the 1960s, the Soviet dominant discourse on nature was normalized and standardized, evolving into a largely homogeneous and formulaic narrative, where Soviet citizens were portrayed as triumphant heroes who had battled and won over a hostile and powerful natural world, showcasing their exceptional strength (*ibid.*). Yurchak has effectively argued that, during the later years of the Soviet Union, ideological representations became more rigid and repetitively reinforced and they "no longer had to be read literally, at least in most contexts, to work perfectly well as elements of hegemonic representations" (2006, as cited in Bolotova, 2014). While official rhetoric continued to emphasize humanity's struggle against nature, with media calling for drastic environmental interventions these representations became increasingly mythologized and grand, transforming into formalized, predictable narratives (p. 17).

Bolotova's (2014) research also reveals that the Arctic settlers' perception of the Northern natural environment gradually transformed from an alien and hostile space into "a familiar, personal and favourite dwelling place", as people developed localized practices and attachments through everyday life (pp. 17, 74). She demonstrates how the experience of nature's hostility and the ideology of dominating the natural world can coexist "with human love for the natural world" (p. 17). Bolotova also identified shifts in perception across different functional zones within Northern towns, distinguishing between industrial "taskscapes" (Ingold, 2000, as cited in Bolotova, 2014, p. 36), where nature was primarily seen as a resource, and recreational spaces that were perceived as "vulnerable to nearby industrial production" (pp. 74-75). Moreover, the analysis highlights how settlers' peasant backgrounds influenced their environmental engagements – while they "engaged with the environment as industrial workers, perceiving the environment as a resource to be processed", they simultaneously revived and adapted their peasant memories and practices such as gardening, foraging and outdoor recreation, effectively developing localised dwelling practices on the basis of their former experience (p. 75). Different recreational activities in natural environments played a key role in shaping people's connection to the area and their sense of belonging (*ibid.*).

Bolotova (2014) concludes that the settlers in the Russian Arctic negotiated the ideological imperatives of industrial expansion with their evolving, everyday interactions with the natural environment. While Soviet ideology framed nature as an adversary to be subdued for economic and political progress, emphasizing revolutionary struggle, human dominance and the construction of a "new Soviet person" separated from nature, migrants' lived experiences revealed more complex and nuanced engagements with the Northern landscapes. Her study shows how the residents simultaneously embodied extractive practices and affective dimensions by cultivating deep engagements with their surroundings.

Bolotova's (2014) analysis of Soviet industrialization highlights the discourse of "conquering nature" as central to the construction of a heroic Soviet identity, wherein the transformation of landscapes functioned as both a material and symbolic expression of socialist progress. This framing positioned the control over nature as inseparable from social reconstruction. However, her analysis also reveals that, despite the dominant Soviet narrative of subduing and controlling nature for socialist progress, individuals sustained complex, embodied relationships with their environment that blended utilitarian perspective and domination with affective engagement and practices of localised dwelling. This underscores that everyday, place-based interactions with the environment constitute not only lived

experiences but also situated forms of knowledge that challenge and coexist with overarching ideological discourses.

1.4. Nature conceptualization in capitalism

The conceptualization of nature within capitalist modernity has been critiqued for fostering a disconnection between humans and their environments, reducing nature to a commodified resource and undermining locally situated, relational ways of inhabiting the world.

Arendt's concept of "world alienation", as articulated in *The Human Condition* (1958), refers to the estrangement or withdrawal of individuals and communities from both their physical environment and the shared, collective realm of mutually constructed reality (as cited in Roessler, 2023). This condition, according to Arendt, is rooted in the emergence of modern science, the capitalist commodification of nature, and the liberal ideal of a global society – all of which contribute to the erosion of locally grounded and meaningful worlds (as cited in Roessler, 2023). Arendt argues that the modern alienation from the world began with globalisation or the discovery of the new world, the reformation, "the expropriation of the peasantry and the origin of capitalism" and science's preoccupation with cosmic exploration (as cited in Roessler, 2023, pp. 12-13). According to this argument it would follow that "fluctuations created by capitalism" undermine the stability of human-made things and structures of human society. Similarly, globalisation erodes traditional forms of belonging and attachment to place, while the rise of Cartesian doubt, with its distrust of sensory perception, contributes to the weakening of shared common sense and the emergence of a spiritual crisis in modern European life (Roessler, 2023, p. 19). Foster (2008) applies Arendt's notion of "world alienation" to argue that the systemic alienation of humans from nature began with the transition from feudalism as the capitalism's development involved the expropriation of peasants and indigenous peoples, severing direct labour relations with the land and commodifying nature. According to Foster (2008), Arendt had described the world as "denatured" as natural objects were increasingly transformed into private property and universal commodities, thereby fuelling relentless wealth accumulation at the expense of ecological sustainability. However, Foster notes that Arendt tied this world alienation primarily to "the development of science, technology, and modernity rather than capitalism as such" (as cited in Foster, 2008).

Jehlička and Jacobsson (2021) offer a complementary perspective to Arendt's and Foster's critiques of world alienation, globalisation and capitalism's effects on the erosion of locally grounded worlds. Their work challenges dominant Western-centric models by

emphasizing the value of locally rooted, ethically driven practices that resist global epistemic hierarchies and propose more diverse approaches to ecological sustainability.

Jehlička and Jacobsson (2021) examine prevailing hierarchies in global environmental knowledge production, emphasizing the need for diversified responses to the environmental crisis and advocating for a geographically nuanced understanding of modernity (p. 8). They argue that, since the 1990s, Central and Eastern European (CEE) environmentalism has been predominantly studied within both Western and CEE academic discourses as an underdeveloped and derivative variant of Western environmentalism (*ibid.*). They note that much of the existing scholarship has focused on "the development of CEE environmentalism in the form of the capacity for environmental advocacy, citizens' environmental values (including post-materialist orientation), and ethically motivated consumerism" (*ibid.*). The authors point out that the uncritical application of Western theories and the treatment of Western environmentalism as the universal benchmark has marginalized the CEE environmentalism (*ibid.*). Drawing on postcolonial theory and interdisciplinary scholarship, Jehlička and Jacobsson (2021) contend that CEE environmentalism should be recognized as a "*distinct variant that offers novel insights* [emphasis in the original]" that "rely on effects of actions and behaviours at a personal level that are motivated by virtue ethics and by caring for others (both human and nonhuman)" *(ibid.)*. These "locally embedded, everyday, low-impact, practice-based" forms of environmentalism, particularly "informal and formal outdoor and nature-based educational initiatives aimed at promoting everyday pro-environmental behaviours that are driven by a desire for authenticity, ethical living, and personal integrity", offer alternative societal vision of "fostering a life in harmony with the natural world" (*ibid.*). According to the authors, such vision challenges dominant Western-centric narratives and has broader relevance for global discussions on environmentalism. Ultimately, they call for a more inclusive and equitable exchange of knowledge that acknowledges the potential of CEE experiences to enrich "knowledge production on environmentalism" *(ibid.)*.

Similarly, Terry et al. (2024) propose that African storytelling traditions offer vital, underexplored knowledge for developing decolonial futuring approaches that recognize multiple pasts and enable the envisioning of more just and sustainable futures. The authors mention "limitations of the imagination to conceive of radically different futures", such desirable futures that are not seeped into catastrophism, as Marasco et al. (2018, as cited in Terry et al., 2024) observe that young people's visions of the future often replicate today's problems. Terry et al. (2024) emphasize that the dominant crisis narratives, rooted in Western culture and the Enlightenment (Moynihan, 2020, as cited in Terry et al., 2024) and shaped by

catastrophism (Yusoff & Gabrys, 2011, *ibid.*), "erase the experiences of countless peoples and nonhumans" who have already survived colonial or capitalistic apocalypses (p. 9). The authors conclude that rather than viewing Africa's future solely through a lens of crisis, it should be reimagined as a space of possibility and resurgence, where historically marginalized forms of knowledge, such as animism, prophecy, and oral storytelling, play a vital role. Through different modes of storytelling and the Entangled Time Tree heuristic, diverse narratives can cultivate "decolonial imaginaries that span timescales and nurture more threads of connection" (*ibid.*). This approach may make it possible to move beyond extractive, violent, profit-driven values toward futures grounded in reciprocity, justice and a renewed "spirited awareness of entangled human-nature relationships across time" *(ibid.)*. This text illustrates that current and future understandings of nature and sustainability are deeply rooted in past ways of knowing, offering pathways to conceptualize futures not as linear projections but as entangled continuations of diverse pasts.

The aforementioned authors have examined how capitalism, globalisation and hegemonic knowledge structures have contributed to the erosion of locally situated, relational ways of interacting with nature and the marginalization of alternative ways of knowing. These perspectives highlight the need to critically reassess dominant frameworks that shape discourses on nature and environmentalism, as well as call for a pluralization of environmental thought that values diverse epistemologies and relational, embodied, place-based practices.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To analyse the human–nature relationship – specifically, the ways in which nature is conceptualized and experienced and how these conceptualizations transform over time – I draw on two theoretical and methodological approaches: actor-network theory (ANT) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). These frameworks offer distinct yet synergistic analytical tools for describing and exploring human–nature relations and for situating these relations within broader institutional, socio-political and cultural contexts. While ANT shows how relationships with nature are materially enacted through heterogeneous networks of human and nonhuman actors, CDA examines how those relationships are discursively constructed, linguistically articulated and institutionally legitimized. Taken together, this dual approach could enable inquiry into whether and how nature conservation specialists' experiences of nature are embedded in socio-material assemblages, while also being shaped by and contributing to the reproduction of discursive regimes and ideological formations.

2.1. Actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT), developed by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich, and John Law, focuses on the constantly shifting relationships and associations that exist between heterogeneous actors – both human and nonhuman. Latour (2005) reconceptualized the social not as a predefined domain or substance but as a process of association, describing it as "*a type of connection* between things that are not themselves social" (p. 5, emphasis in original). He emphasizes the need to trace associations rather than assume society as a stable, underlying structure, asserting that the social becomes "visible only by the *traces* it leaves (under trials) when a *new* association is being produced between elements" (p. 8, emphasis in original). What is referred to as 'classical' ANT highlights the heterogeneity of both human and nonhuman elements within networks, as well as the processes through which these elements become aligned (Michael, 2017). A core principle of this approach is Callon's (1986a, as cited in Michael, 2017) concept of generalized symmetry, which advocates the use of a neutral, abstract vocabulary to objectively describe the functions and interactions of various actors within a network. This principle deliberately avoids any bias, particularly the privileging of human over nonhuman actors. Thus, the 'classical' ANT, as conceptualized by Michael (2017), emphasizes that nonhuman entities, such as species, landscapes, ecosystems and material tools, have symmetrical weight and equal analytical status to their human counterparts, with all actors in a network mutually shaping one another's actions and outcomes.

ANT also details the translational processes through which actors translate, reinterpret and incorporate another actor's interests into their own and subsequently enrol the other actor into their network (Michael, 2017, p. 33). In Callon's terminology, the mechanisms through which interests, information and knowledge are translated and rearticulated can be conceptualized as forms of displacement (as cited in Michael, 2017, p. 39). Such mechanisms may involve a range of practices, including engagement with community groups, the organization of public exhibitions and the cultivation of relationships with key stakeholders (*ibid.*). Collectively, these practices contribute to the enrolment of actors and to the stabilization and maintenance of the networks (*ibid.*). Nature conservation specialists engage in the translational processes through various forms of public engagement, acting as intermediaries between scientific data, ecological discourse, policy frameworks and local concerns. Analysing their translational work from ANT perspective could offer valuable insights into how these specialists negotiate, translate and stabilize networks that encompass nature, public, their own professional identities and broader institutional and socio-political contexts.

Another key concept within ANT is that of intermediaries, which according to Callon are "anything passing between actors which defines the relationship between them" (p. 134, 1991, as cited in Michael, 2017). Intermediaries encompass a wide array of entities, including "scientific articles, computer software, disciplined human bodies, technical artefacts, instruments, contracts and money" (*ibid.*). Within networks, intermediaries function to delineate and allocate roles among both human and nonhuman actors (p. 137, *ibid.*). To distinguish actors from intermediaries, Callon suggests that the division lies in the actor's capacity for "authorship" and that "an actor is an intermediary that puts other intermediaries into circulation" (p. 14, *ibid.*). Latour also points out that human and nonhuman components can merge into hybrids – entities with exchanged and mutually translated properties and shifted capacities – thus shifting analytical focus away from traditional subject-object dichotomies toward these hybrid forms "which can truly be said to act" (1993b, *ibid.*). In the context of nature conservation work, tools and technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), digital data and maps indicating clear boundaries, tablets and standardized protocols might not function as neutral instruments. Rather, they could mediate human action, connect actors, converge with subjects and carry meaning. These tools might potentially participate in shaping how nature is experienced and managed, through hybridized human–nonhuman identities enacted in conservation practices. Thus, framing such tools and technologies as intermediaries within the ANT framework, and recognizing their potential convergence with

human actors into hybrids, could help in analysing how nature and work with nature is experienced by nature conservation specialists who are embedded in the human-nonhuman networks and, potentially, the hybrid human-nonhuman identities.

A single individual can also negotiate several identities and their alignments with particular human or nonhuman actors (Törrönen, 2022). Interviews with research participants might reveal their own articulation of who they are – identity claims, which can be relationally constituted through their connections to a range of actors (*ibid.*). In this view, the individual is not a singular, coherent subject but is constituted from assemblages of roles and relations. Nature conservation specialists may simultaneously assume the role of, identify as or perform the identity of, for example, a scientist, bureaucrat, community member and caretaker. These roles and identities do not exist in isolation but are assembled into hybrid configurations, forming a hybrid actor embedded within overlapping networks of authority, conservation practice and knowledge production. The hybridity and the role assemblages can impact the way nature is experienced as an actor or element within the overlapping networks.

The conceptualization and application of ANT influence its utility in ethnographic and qualitative research. Baiocchi et al. (2013) suggest that the potential of ANT lies not in offering explanatory frameworks, but in fostering a set of 'sensibilities'. These include a critical stance toward taken-for-granted categories and conceptual divisions; an attentiveness to processes of circulation; a focus on the relational dynamics between human and nonhuman entities; and an openness to uncertainty and multiplicity (p. 335). Rather than functioning as a theory that seeks to "'explain' and 'contextualize' ethnographic descriptions and social reality" ANT is thought of as way to engage with the world ethnographically and to trace associations and connections without an a priori set frame of theoretical constructs (*ibid.*, p. 336). Accordingly, ANT is particularly well-suited to this research, as it shifts analytical focus away from fixed entities and toward the relationships and networks between various actors through which meaning and identity are co-constituted.

The lived experience and nature conservation practices for specialists in this field are embedded in dynamically interconnected networks of diverse human and nonhuman actors. The ways in which nature is conceptualized and experienced by these specialists might also be continually shaped through their interactions and negotiations within these networks. Thus, the application of ANT, which underscores the importance of examining networks of actors and their relationships, could offer a valuable framework for understanding human-nature relationships, how nature is conceptualized and experienced by nature conservation specialists,

and how these conceptualizations and experiences evolve over time along with shifts and transformations within the networks in which they are situated.

2.2. Critical discourse analysis

To account for how the background of differing social and historical dimensions influences the research participant experience of nature, I intend to apply the critical discourse analysis (CDA). Fairclough (1993) defines discourse as the "way of signifying experience from a particular perspective" (as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 148). CDA conceptualizes language use as a form of social practice that interacts dynamically with social structures, and it seeks to reveal and raise awareness of this co-constitutive relationship (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 1989; as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 147). The language individuals use to articulate their experiences, memories and emotions plays an active role in constituting and reproducing "identities, relationships and knowledge" (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 149). Language is also viewed as socially determined (*ibid.*). According to Fairclough (1993, as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 149), within a single institution, multiple and contrasting discourses may coexist. Moreover, the relationship between actual language use and the normative structures that underpin it may not be simple and linear (*ibid.*). To account for this complexity, Fairclough introduces the concept of the "order of discourse", which refers to the totality of discourse types or discursive practices and their interrelations within a given social domain or institution (*ibid.*, pp. 148-149). Thee orders of discourse are further categorized into discourses – shaped by distinct fields of experience and knowledge – and genres, which pertain to specific types of activities, such as job or media interviews (*ibid.*).

Fairclough's developed analytical framework of CDA examines discourse through three dimensions: (1) textual analysis which focuses on the content and form of a discursive event, examining lexical choices, syntactic structures and textual organization to uncover how social identities, relations and knowledge are linguistically constructed; (2) discursive practice, which explores the text production and interpretation processes and their intertextual ties to "orders of discourse"; and (3) social practice, which situates discourse within institutional, socio-political and historical contexts, demonstrating how language both reflects and perpetuates social realities (1992b, 1993, 1995a, as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, pp. 150-151). All three dimensions are dynamically interconnected, with linguistic features reflecting discursive practices, which are themselves embedded in and constitutive of broader contextual structures. For instance, institutional power relations and ideologies may become evident in specific language use, lexical patterns or rhetorical choices (textual level), which are then disseminated

and reproduced through internal narratives or public materials such as official press releases (discursive practice level), ultimately reinforcing hegemonic structures and social hierarchies within wider societal contexts (social practice).

The research participants' experiences and conceptualizations of nature might be both shaped by and constitutive of intra-institutional narratives, which serve to reinforce institutional power within broader social and historical frameworks. At the textual level, research participants' relationships with nature might be articulated by and represented through specific linguistic features, rhetorical structures and patterns of language use, revealing underlying meanings and subject positions. At the discursive practice level, their interpretation and production of their accounts reflect the dynamic interplay between individual discursive event and the totality of the institution's discursive practices. Finally, at the social practice level, these discursive practices are embedded within institutional, ideological and historical contexts, with various power relations shaping and being reshaped by the discursive event. Accordingly, the application of CDA enables a comprehensive exploration of the research participants' conversations and interviews by situating these discursive events – imbued with participants' "simultaneously present" identities, relationships, knowledge and experiences (Fairclough, 1995a, as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 149) – within the discursive practices of the NCA, as well as the broader social and historical contexts, thereby situating individual discourse within larger power structures and ideological frameworks. By adopting this analytical lens, CDA may reveal the complex ways in which discourse functions not only as a channel for communication but also as a mechanism through which institutional power is enacted, reproduced and contested. Moreover, it highlights how such power relations are deeply embedded in and continuously shaped by wider social contexts, ideologies and historical frameworks. This approach thus could provide insight into the dialectical relationship between language, identity and power both within specific institutional contexts and wider societal processes.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for this research was based on literature on anthropological research methodology and my own experience and notes from the previous research activities within this study programme.

This section is structured into five subchapters. The first subchapter provides a description of the employed research methodology, including the principles behind its selection, and outlines the process of data collection, organization and storage during fieldwork. The second subchapter describes the process of the fieldwork, presenting an overview of the research participants and detailing the data gathered throughout the fieldwork process. The third subchapter addresses the ethical considerations underlying the research and the final two subchapters offer insights into the researcher's positionality and an analysis of the limitations encountered during the research process.

3.1. Collection and management of data

Due to my pre-existing knowledge of the field, I began to develop the research question prior to the fieldwork from a mix of my understanding and experience in working in the field and hearing from nature conservation specialists that were my colleagues or extended family members. This existing knowledge allowed me to foreshadow problems and issues that could be worthy of exploration. According to Coffey (2018) such pre-existing knowledge and foreshadowing might offer the researcher a practical entry point into a setting, from which ideas for exploring and describing it may emerge. The path that I followed in developing the research question prior to the fieldwork was from narratives in nature conservation communication and reconstruction of nature in nature conservation practices and narratives. These initially defined questions and topics emerged from my pre-existing knowledge of the field and were a starting point for delving deeper into the setting.

To gather qualitative data for this research, I carried out ethnographic research through a combination of individual in-person semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and participant observation. I complemented the semi-structured sit-down interviews with participant observation sessions to address the limitations of the former method, which "keeps informants from engaging in 'natural' activities" by "taking them out of the environments" where participants carry out their daily routines (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 459).

My approach could be described as insider ethnography, as I was doing research in a setting where I might be considered an established insider (O'Reilly, 2009). The advantage of

such a method is its potential for more in-depth research with a possibility to acquire an insider perspective and to collect insider accounts (*ibid.*). The noted drawbacks of insider ethnography are the following: researcher being too close and involved in the setting, leading to a lack of objectivity and neutrality. The insider's familiarity with the field might hinder the researcher's ability to grasp the setting's 'unconscious grammar', that is, to transcend the research participant's verbal statements and to infer these underlying, unarticulated norms from their behaviour (*ibid.*). According to Hastrup (1987, as cited in O'Reilly, 2009) research participants are more likely to treat the researcher based on pre-conceived notions related to class, education, gender, etc., which can influence how they interact with them. Consequently, outsider ethnographers might become privy to information that researcher participants would not typically share with an insider (*ibid.*).

To mitigate the drawbacks of an insider ethnographer I had to adopt the position of a naïve ethnographer, seeking to learn from the research participants without preconceptions. Even though I perceive myself as an insider in respect to my pre-existing knowledge, experience and relationships to some of the research participants, others were colleagues from different departments who saw me primarily as a financial analyst, far removed from the practical aspects of nature specialists' work. When interviewing these colleagues from different departments I found myself positioned as a semi-outsider to some extent in respect to the participant's pre-conceived notions about my educational background and knowledge of the field. However, in other respects, I remained an insider, particularly towards extended family members, and as such, I felt that I was privy to insider accounts that would not have been shared with a stranger.

Nevertheless, I have remained aware that my investment in the field and relationships with the research participants might compromise my objectivity and detachment. For this reason, a great part of my research process is reflexivity about my own immersed position, which is described in detail at a later subchapter.

3.2. Fieldwork setting and research participants

To address the research question within the limited timeframe of the fieldwork, I narrowed the scope of potential participants to senior employees of the Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia (NCA) who had previously worked in the management of Gauja National Park (GNP) before the agency's establishment. GNP, founded in 1973, is the oldest national park in Latvia, making those involved in its management during the 1970s to 1990s among the first individuals in Latvia directly engaged in nature conservation activities. The main office

for GNP management was located at what is now the NCA's headquarters on Baznīcas Street in Sigulda. This historical continuity positions the NCA as a successor to the locality and infrastructure established during GNP's formative years, with many current employees or their families having contributed to its development and maintenance.

The initial exploration of the field included conversations and observations of the NCA employees who were also comparatively younger and who had not worked in the NCA or GNP for extended periods. However, the primary ethnographic data was derived from individuals and their family members who had experienced employment in both the NCA and GNP.

At first, the plan was to focus the fieldwork exclusively on nature conservation specialists working in the NCA, particularly those involved in nature assessments in the field or policy development and improvement. However, this approach evolved to include family members of these specialists, who may not have been employed by the NCA or GNP themselves. This shift was prompted by the first semi-structured interview with Lilija, who mentioned that her memories were intertwined with those of her husband, who had worked in GNP long before she began her own involvement. Due to her extensive integration into her husband's work life during GNP's early periods, Lilija noted a blurring of her own memories with those of her husband. This revelation led to a modification of the initial plan, resulting in the inclusion of family members, specifically the wife, in subsequent interviews with a nature conservation specialist Pauls. In this instance, the conversation was conducted as a semi-structured group interview, where both the specialist and his wife were able to provide complementary responses to the questions, enriching the depth of the collected data.

The semi-structured interviews were supplemented by participant observation field trips together with nature conservation specialists. One field trip, which spanned the entire working day (approximately 9 hours), is referenced in Table 3.2.1. and has informed my research, but any direct quotes from this field trip are excluded from the research due to ethical considerations, which are detailed in a subsequent subchapter. Another field trip, undertaken with the nature conservation specialist Pauls, included visits to three different locations in Vidzeme region that had to be assessed in nature. This field trip took 4 hours, and it was enhanced by detailed explanations and descriptions of the practical tasks performed by a nature conservation specialist, as well as an in-depth overview of the assessment process itself.

Below is a table summarizing six conducted interviews and informal conversations along with the two participant observation sessions. The table details the type, duration and date of each interaction, along with brief descriptions of the participants. To maintain confidentiality, participant names have been anonymized, with abbreviated pseudonyms provided in brackets.

Table 3.2.1.

List of interactions with research participants and their descriptions

No	Participant	Description	Type of interview	Interview length	Date
1	Inese [In]	An employee working in the Vidzeme region; daily duties include practical assessments of nature in the field. Has worked in the NCA for half a year.	Informal conversation	00:45:00	11.02.2025
2	Pauls [Pa]	An employee working in the Vidzeme region; daily duties include practical assessments of nature in the field. Has worked in the NCA since its creation, and, before that, in GNP since 1980s.	Informal conversation	00:09:00	22.02.2025
3	Zane, Vizma and Rasa [ZaViRa]	Employees working in projects, but mainly in the Vidzeme region with diverse specialities – cartography and habitat experts. Have worked in the NCA for several years but have not worked in GNP.	Participant observation	09:00:00	12.03.2025
4	Lilija [Li]	An employee working primarily in the GNP territory. Has worked in the NCA since its creation, and, before that, in GNP since 1990s.	Semi-structured interview, first part	02:09:00	18.03.2025
5	Pauls and Elza [PaEz]	An employee and his wife who has actively taken part in her husband's work-life during the GNP period.	Group interview	00:07:06	19.03.2025

6	Pauls [Pa]	A trip together with an employee to a nature assessment field visit of three different locations in the Vidzeme region.	Participant observation	04:00:00	20.03.2025
7	Reinis [Re]	An employee, whose daily duties include developing and improving nature conservation policy. Has worked in the NCA since 2010s. Unofficially has worked in GNP in 1990s with the construction of infrastructure.	Informal conversation	00:11:00	05.04.2025
8	Lilija [Li]	An employee working primarily in the GNP territory. Has worked in the NCA since its creation, and, before that, in GNP since 1990s.	Semi-structured interview, second part	02:07:00	08.04.2025

3.3. Ethical considerations

In general, I followed the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK Ethical Guidelines (2021), which delineate, among other principles, ongoing ethical reflection, informed consent and participant engagement, confidentiality and data protection, responsibility to participants, and transparency and accountability.

Each research participant was thoroughly introduced to the research and its objectives, as well as the key ethical principles guiding it. These principles included their right not to be recorded, to withdraw from participation at any time, to remain anonymous, and to retract any statements during or after the interview or participant observation session. Participants were also informed of their right to receive the research results. If, after receiving this information, the participant felt comfortable proceeding, we would continue with the conversation or participant observation.

Most of the individuals I approached with the offer to participate in my research agreed to become involved and were even enthusiastic about it. One potential participant initially expressed dissatisfaction at not being included, but upon expanding my research scope, I was able to involve them as well. A group of potential participants agreed to participate in a participant observation session – a work-related field trip to infrastructure objects in nature. However, despite their initial verbal agreement, some members of this group appeared uneasy about being observed during the session. They frequently made light-hearted comments suggesting they were doing something wrong or had failed some sort of test and expressed surprise that I was observing them rather than the natural surroundings. To alleviate their discomfort, I eventually informed them that I would not provide a detailed description of this session in my research. It has informed my research and has been included in Table 3.2.1. but any direct descriptions from this participant observation session are not mentioned in the thesis.

On the other end of the spectrum, a different research participant, with whom I went on a work-related trip, treated me as a colleague in need of training for a job position. They shared that they had trained several colleagues for the same role they held, and during the trip, I felt as though I was being trained as well. They shared and explained even the smallest and most technical work-related details.

During the participant observation sessions – trips in the nature – my note-taking involved audio-recording, which I had informed the participants about, and occasional jotting down of notes on my phone. I avoided more extensive note-taking during the sessions to maintain the natural flow and "business as usual" atmosphere for the participants. Detailed notes were compiled immediately after each session.

Regarding confidentiality, I experienced similar unease even when participants verbally agreed to be mentioned in the research or did not explicitly request anonymity. Given that internal or external pressures might influence a participant's decision regarding confidentiality, I decided it would be more prudent and ethical to maintain anonymity for all participants. Consequently, all research participants in my notes and data analysis are represented by acronyms that do not correspond to their names or initials. However, while these measures may be sufficient to ensure anonymity outside the work environment, they might not be enough to guarantee anonymity within the group of employees, as most participants have worked together for many years and might recognize each other based on their expressions during interviews. To address this concern, I informed each participant of this possibility, offered to share the textual excerpts I planned to include in the research, and chose to include only those excerpts that would reduce the likelihood of the participant being recognized.

Any informal observations or insights gained outside the formal research process, such as those encountered during routine work activities, are not directly quoted in this study unless they were publicly expressed. However, such information may have indirectly informed my overall analytical framework and thought patterns.

To ensure the protection of the gathered and created digital notes, audio recordings and transcripts, these files are stored on a password-protected personal computer and a password-protected external hard drive.

3.4. Researcher's positionality

A substantial part of the initial research phase involved reflecting on my own positionality and taking a step back from my automatic thought patterns and convictions to adopt a more neutral stance. This process allowed me to critically evaluate my assumptions and engage with the research from a more balanced perspective.

My positionality within this research was shaped by multiple influences, including my internal value system, conversations with family members who share similar values, a comprehensive literature review, discussions with fellow course-mates, and the Environment Protection study course that I undertook concurrently with my research. I was mindful of my initial, instinctive notions and stances regarding various theoretical concepts related to nature. At the beginning of this research, I held an automatic conviction that nature is inherently good, beautiful, and essential for human existence, and therefore should be protected and maintained in a pristine state.

Prior to conducting this research and reflecting on my own convictions, I was also convinced that maintaining and improving biodiversity is crucial for nature and that humans have a responsibility to protect and enhance not only biodiversity but also the "quality" of nature – measured by its diversity of species and ecosystems, cleanliness, and quantity in terms of area. As a full-time employee of the Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia, my daily tasks involve working with various nature-related scientific terms and linguistic terminology. This professional context significantly influenced my thought patterns and convictions, which are heavily shaped by contemporary scientific and political terminology related to nature conservation.

The self-reflection process on my positionality significantly altered my understanding of how different people might perceive nature and related conservation concepts. However, my core values remained unchanged regarding the intrinsic goodness of nature and the harmful and undesirable effects of pollution and overexploitation of nature's resources. I also believe that

humans have a responsibility to care for nature and maintain its quality due to their extensive and disruptive interventions in natural processes and states. This responsibility involves respecting and restoring the natural processes that would have occurred without human interference, which conceptualizes nature solely as a resource for exploitation, disregarding long-term sustainability and the mutual benefits of coexistence between humans and nature; an approach that has led to widespread pollution, resource depletion and disruption of nature's self-regenerative cycles.

As part of nature, humans as species have the right to co-exist with nature, but this right should not imply superiority over nature. However, I am aware that, being immersed in the Anthropocene, with my background in economics and resource management, means that my thought patterns may lean towards viewing nature as something to be managed. Therefore, in my mind, the concept of nature having the right to exist in its own right is at times in contention with the perception of nature as a resource. This contention is evident when thinking of, for example, economically managed forests, where the tension between nature as a resource and nature's intrinsic rights is very pronounced, since these forests often involve human intervention in creating and shaping natural environments, thereby blurring the lines between natural and human-made ecosystems, and, consequently, what can be managed by humans and what should be left to evolve under natural processes, allowing such processes to unfold without interference.

I also acknowledge that some of my thought patterns and perceptions regarding nature are not solely based on intrinsic values or beliefs, but rather a blend of my personal values and the scientific explanations widely accepted and circulated in the field as fundamental to nature conservation. This refers to, for example, the emphasis on biodiversity as a key indicator of nature's quality, and the concern about invasive species that spread quickly and harm local ecosystems.

To adopt a more neutral stance regarding several of the concepts mentioned above, I had to approach them from an alternative perspective. For instance, I considered human activities, biodiversity reduction and the aggressive nature of alien species in new environments as ordinary parts of natural processes. However, I found it challenging to apply this approach to the concept of nature's existence itself. I am unable to envision nature as inherently negative or its extinction as desirable. Therefore, I return to the fundamental premise that nature is inherently valuable and should exist. The question that remains is in what way nature, its continued existence and activities ensuring this existence might be conceptualised.

The self-reflection process of my positionality also involved examining the language and words I use when thinking, talking or writing of nature and nature conservation. The awareness of my anthropocentric stance allowed me to notice the use of words and sentence structures that implied an inherent belief in humans as active agents acting upon a passive nature. Examples include phrases like “nature should be protected”, “humans have a duty to care for nature” and “nature conservation envisioned and enacted by humans”. Even the sentence “processes should be allowed to unfold without interference” reveals an underlying perception of humans as active agents who permit or prevent natural processes from occurring. This introspection into my own automatic linguistic constructs shed light on my thought patterns regarding human agency over nature and, importantly, the automaticity of unconscious underlying stances that cannot be easily overridden by consciously applied perspectives. In this context, I had to be cautious when analysing the evolution of nature conceptualization in respect to control or management of nature, as mentioned by research participants, as the language used to describe these activities might reveal an unconscious perspective. However, I also maintained an open mind regarding linguistic patterns that may be influenced by prolonged immersion in the Anthropocene, recognizing that these patterns might not necessarily reflect a more conscious perspective.

Regarding my positionality towards the research participants, it is important to note that I approached them as a colleague or someone who works within the same organization, even if in a different department or field. As such, I was aware that the research participants could view me as someone with inherently similar values in respect to nature and its protection. Additionally, some of the research participants were my extended family members, which facilitated more open and candid conversations. This familial relationship allowed me to incorporate topics into our discussions that I had previously recalled them mentioning, even if they did not bring them up during the formal interview. However, during these conversations with family members, I had to be mindful of maintaining focus on the research objectives and avoiding diversion into unrelated topics due to our familiarity.

Throughout this research, I have made a conscious effort to acknowledge the various dimensions of my positionality and to identify instances where these aspects influenced my thought processes, automatic thought patterns, questioning techniques and overall approach to the research. I have actively cultivated a mindset of openness to perspectives, beliefs and experiences that differ from my own, as well as envisioned a diverse array of possible perspectives and values. By employing the self-reflexive approach, I aimed to reduce the influence of unconscious biases while remaining transparent about their inevitable presence.

3.5. Limitations of the research

One limitation of this research was the relatively small number of individuals who have been employed in nature conservation during both the Soviet era in GNP and currently with the NCA. Although there are several such individuals, they are geographically dispersed, and some no longer work for the NCA. To address this limitation, I focused on those who agreed to participate and conducted more in-depth interviews to gather comprehensive ethnographic data. Additionally, I extended my research to younger individuals who, although not formally employed by GNP, had memories of working there as part of helping their family members who had been official employees of GNP. To analyse the discourse of contemporary nature conservation practices, I also engaged with current NCA employees who had no prior experience with GNP.

Another limitation that emerged during the course of the fieldwork was the familial relationships with some of the intended research participants. This familiarity, while potentially beneficial for building rapport and trust, ultimately proved to be an obstacle to maintaining professional time-management practices, particularly with regard to scheduling and adhering to concrete interview dates and times. The informal dynamics inherent in familial relationships to a more relaxed approach that ultimately resulted in several of the planned interviews being either postponed or not taking place in the full scope as originally intended. This limitation highlights the complexities and potential challenges of conducting research within one's own social or familial networks, where personal relationships can inadvertently undermine systematic data collection.

4. FIELDWORK REFLECTIONS

Initially, the field of research was centred on the Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia (NCA) due to its relevance to my research focus on individuals directly involved in nature conservation. Additionally, my current employment with the NCA facilitated access to potential research participants. However, rather than conducting observations during my work hours at the NCA premises, the fieldwork involved scheduled semi-structured interviews and participant observations, often conducted outside these premises. Consequently, the field was not defined by the NCA as a physical location but rather by the collective experiences and knowledge of individuals engaged in various nature-related subfields across diverse localities and regions. These participants were unified by their current or familial connection to the NCA, ensuring a consistent link to nature conservation. As the research progressed, it expanded to include individuals not employed by the NCA but whose family members were connected to the organization and nature conservation, maintaining this connection as the unifying thread among all participants.

While the semi-structured interviews gave extensive textual corpus for analysis, I decided early on that for a more thorough research and analysis it is necessary to include participant observation field trips that I hoped would reveal the participants' physical and sensory connection with nature. One such field trip, conducted with Pauls, involved visiting three different forests in the Vidzeme region. The purpose of this trip was to assess whether the NCA could authorize the logging operations specified in the forest owner's application. The following section provides a detailed account of this field trip, focusing on Pauls' actions within his 'natural' environment as well as the characteristics of the environment itself. Throughout the session, Pauls continuously commented on "what is going on," explaining both his actions and the reasoning behind them. This ongoing commentary greatly facilitated my ability to observe and document his experiences and interpretations using the observational approach. According to Kusenbach (2003, p. 459), such real-time commentary is uncommon during participant observation sessions, which often makes it challenging to access participants' experiences and interpretations. In Pauls' case, however, his commentary was consistent throughout the session – possibly due to his prior experience mentoring younger colleagues in similar settings.

4.1. Field trip to Vidzeme region

We leave around 11:00 from Sigulda in the white NCA's Dacia. While Pauls has been working with the digital data needed for the forest assessment and picks up the car from work, the pre-set time is shifted a few times – first from 10:00 to 10:30, then to 11:00.

Our first stop is just before Priekuļi. We drive along a narrow, paved road with a steep shoulder that drops into a ditch. After a brief moment of uncertainty, we park the car on the side of the road, ensure it is safe for other cars to pass our car and then climb over the ditch. We follow a damp, slightly overgrown power line to the first site – a forest where the owner intends to cut down spruce trees infested with the European spruce bark beetle, which thorough the field trip is referred to as simply the 'insect (*kukainis*)'. The walk is short but challenging, requiring us to navigate around wide puddles and waterlogged areas. Periodically, Pauls shows me our location on his GPS tablet, using an open map to illustrate our position relative to the various shapes and colours of the mapped areas. Upon reaching the corner of the forest, we find a post topped with a weathered wooden plaque, its faded letters barely legible, but the red colour and context suggest it marks "Private Property". Pauls checks with the GPS tablet and confirms that we are at the correct forest, and we venture inside to assess whether the owner's plans are feasible and to identify any unmarked nature treasures not marked in the Nature Data Management System OZOLS, consistently referred to as just 'Ozols' (*Oak*). This system, which accumulates data on protected territories and species, serves as a digital resource for nature conservation specialists in Latvia, providing essential data that supports their daily work. Although Pauls had reviewed the mapped nature treasures and features in Ozols before our trip, there is always a possibility that something might not be recorded in the system.

Figure 4.1.1. **The corner of the first forest of our assessment field trip – with a weathered wooden plaque that marks "Private Property".** Author's archive.

As we approach the forest edge, we notice several trees that have been cut down and left adjacent to the power line. Pauls speculates that they were likely felled by electricians. One fallen tree has fallen on and destroyed a large anthill, prompting us both to pause momentarily. Pauls begins to say, "Well (*nu neko*)... the ants will wake up and...", after a brief pause I complete his thought with "clean up (*sakops*)?" He agrees, "Clean up". Pauls then explains that this is the plot number 12, where the owner had planned a 'sanitary clearing'. As we venture deeper into the forest, I notice its picturesque beauty, with a lush moss cover, small and large spruces, and other trees. We occasionally come across recently felled spruce trees, carefully removed to avoid leaving grooves in the forest floor. Pauls notes that the owner aimed to catch the frost, allowing the trees to be removed without damaging the forest surface. We also observe spruce trees damaged by the 'insect'. Continuing our walk, Pauls stops at a tree stump and says, "I couldn't figure out which rabbit had left these droppings here, but they're not droppings". Upon closer inspection, we find what appear to be rabbit droppings but are actually puffballs or slime molds. Nearby, Pauls points out a larger puffball, demonstrating its characteristic spore cloud by poking it with his toe. As we proceed, Pauls comments aloud, mentioning the most common nature treasures that could complicate the owner's planned tree-cutting – the protected species stiff clubmoss (*gada staipeknis*) and the lesser spotted eagle (*mazais ērglis*): "I don't see a clubmoss, I don't see a nest [of the lesser spotted eagle]... Ah no (*ā nē*), see, there's the clubmoss". Pauls crouches beside the stiff clubmoss he has just discovered and begins working with his tablet and notes, while I take a few photos of it. He advises on the best angle and tells me to focus on the brown cobs of the clubmoss. I also take photos of a nearby fungus. After documenting the clubmoss, we walk for a short distance and I ask him if he is happier to find or not to find a nature treasure during these forest assessment field trips, with a thought in my mind that every such treasure means a bit more work and perhaps even a negative answer to the owner's application. The question makes Pauls think for a moment, but the eventual reply is that it makes him happy to find a treasure as it can be interesting to find something new. I felt the same when he exclaimed "Ah no, see, there's the clubmoss" – with a subdued joy of a successful find. Soon after this question we turn around and return to the "Private Property" post, marking the boundary of forest plot number 12, where we initially entered.

Figure 4.1.2. **The discovered protected species stiff clubmoss (on the left) and some fungus on a decayed tree stump (on the right).** Author's archive.

As we walk along the edge of the power line back to the car, we reflect on the vast area beneath the power lines and how it is underutilized. These spaces have the potential to be more productive, perhaps supporting the growth of blueberries, blackberries, or strawberries, rather than just willows and shoots that are periodically cleared by machinery. We discuss this potential and also the cutting mechanisms of the machinery that does not cut but grind (*samaļ*) the shoots leaving behind finny stems. Not far from the road, Pauls points out an 'invasive species', common dogwood (*asinssarkanais grimonis*), on the other side of the power line. Its vibrant red stems stand out against the muted greens and browns of the surrounding forest. He gestures towards the large bushes of this species that are surrounding a nearby farmhouse on the other side of the road, indicating that this plant is likely a garden escapee from those bushes. Upon closer inspection, I notice bright red shoots not only along the forest's edge but also deeper into the forest.

Figure 4.1.3. **The bright red shoot of the invasive species common dogwood in the forest (on the left) and in the background the large bushes of this species that are the potential source of this garden escapee (on the right).** Author's archive.

The warmth inside the car provides a welcome contrast to the chilly day, with temperatures hovering around 2-3 degrees. We continue along the same road until we reach a bend, where the next forest Pauls needs to evaluate is located. Instead of entering the forest, Pauls stops the car on the side of the road and conducts his assessment from the window. We then drive slowly past the forest in one direction, before turning around and passing it again in the opposite direction, this time at a slightly faster pace. From inside the car, Pauls can easily observe the insect damage, plot boundaries, trees to be preserved and overall forest quality, eliminating the need for a more detailed on-site investigation, as it is clear for him that it is very unlikely that this forest could harbour such common nature treasures as the stiff clubmoss or the lesser spotted eagle.

After this stop, we make a brief detour through the local houses in search of Veismaņi Manor, but unable to locate it, we proceed to our final site – a forest near Jaunrauna. Following a brief study of the map, we successfully find the forest without much difficulty. To avoid disturbing the nearby residents, we park the car a short distance from some farmhouses and the forest of interest. We then walk along the edge of a meadow and a ditch until we reach the forest boundary, where we cross the ditch and push through dense willows to enter the forest. Before reaching our target forest, we pass through a younger forest area, where Pauls advises me on which aspens should be removed and which should be allowed to grow to their full potential. In the forest where logging is planned, we observe significant insect damage, with spruce trees

displaying shaky bark and thin needles. The owner has marked two large, beautiful spruces for preservation, prompting Pauls to comment that the owner must love the forest, despite the high likelihood that these trees may eventually need to be removed anyway due to possible insect infestation. Pauls does not identify any other notable nature treasures in this forest. He notes that many trees in this area have been previously damaged by roe deer or deer, particularly in the younger forest, where he is surprised to find that the roe deer have primarily targeted hazel rather than aspen, which they typically prefer.

After crossing the ditch, we return to the car and take in the picturesque countryside. The landscape features a smooth field with a prominent, gnarled tree at its centre and a winding country lane, where a crooked birch tree marks the bend. In the background, behind the nearest farmhouses, "lush spruce trees (*sulīgas egles*)" stand tall, which Pauls suggests could be the next target for the insect. As we settle into the car, I notice a packet of cigarettes that appears to have fallen from Pauls' pocket onto the ground. He steps out of the car to retrieve it, grateful for me having noticed it. With our field trip concluded, we begin our return journey to Sigulda via the same route, making a brief stop at a building materials shop in Cēsis. We arrive in Sigulda around 15:00.

This participant observation session proved especially valuable for exploring how conservation work is enacted through various technological intermediaries that create hybrid actors – entities that blend human and non-human actors. It also shed light on how digital representations of nature and their physical manifestations, such as signs and markers, actively participate in conservation networks and shape the ways conservation specialists engage with the natural environment. In this particular case, the delineations presented via the tablet interface and recorded in the database Oak, together with the physical "Private Property" sign, directed the conservation specialist to a specific area. Notably, from the perspective of the conservation specialist, the regulatory frameworks governing conservation work transformed the meaning of the private property sign. Within this context, it no longer functioned solely as a marker of exclusion but rather as a cue that defined a space for interaction between the specialist and the natural environment. Furthermore, this interaction was shaped and mediated by scientific categories assigned to species. The presence or absence of species thus ascribed must be carefully assessed according to established protocols, reinforcing the role of scientific discourse in shaping the specialist's engagement with the landscape. Thus, the convergence of digital tools, physical markers, regulatory frameworks and scientific classifications collectively shape the conservation specialist's experience of the forest, illustrating the complex hybrid networks through which conservation is practiced and nature is experienced.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter is structured into eight sub-sections. The first two introduce the process of creating interview transcripts and coding the fieldwork data, while the remaining six describe and analyse the main themes derived from the theoretical framework and those that emerged during fieldwork and data analysis – temporality, public- and employee-centered formal clean-up events, translational practices, nature inscription practices, hybrid actor positionality and nonhuman intermediaries. These themes and their interrelations illustrate the complexity of conservation specialists' experiences of nature and the multiple modes and positionalities shaping human–nature interactions, highlighting their dynamic temporal and material-semiotic variability.

5.1. Interview transcript creation

For the purpose of CDA analysis, an instance of spoken language use, a discursive event, can be transformed into a written text, which should be supplemented with extra-textual semiotic forms and characters (Fairclough, 1995b, as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 148). CDA is conducted at three levels – textual, discursive and social practice – and at the textual level of analysis, the form is recognised as inseparable from the text (Fairclough, 1992b, as cited in Titscher et al., 2000, p. 150). Recognizing that the manner in which words are spoken is as significant as the language itself, I structured the interview transcription process into two distinct stages. The first stage involved uploading the audio recordings to the online transcription tool Hugo.lv, which generated an initial raw text version of the interviews. However, this preliminary transcript required substantial refinement. Therefore, the second stage entailed carefully listening to the audio files while editing the text to correct inaccuracies and enrich the transcript with paralinguistic features-such as intonation, pauses, and emphasis-that convey the texture and rhythm of spoken language.

These vocal elements were systematically represented in the transcript using a variety of textual conventions (Table 5.1.1.), with the most common method being the use of parentheses to indicate intonation or the manner in which words were articulated. Additionally, I attempted to represent the supra-sentential aspects of textual organization. For instance, turn-taking was illustrated by including my own verbal cues – such as "*mhm*", "*yes*" and instances of half-finished sentences-which the participants often picked up mid-utterance and seamlessly incorporated into their responses. Complex speech acts spanning multiple sentences were annotated in parentheses, specifying the relevant segment of speech, while omitted or

incomplete words were completed within brackets immediately following the original utterance, which was transcribed verbatim. Implementing a systematic method for capturing vocal and supra-sentential features of the interviews enabled a precise coding of textual organization and texture, which is essential for conducting analysis at the textual level of CDA.

Table 5.1.1.

List of vocal element representation techniques in the transcripts

Vocal element	Representation in transcript	Example
Emphasis	Underlined word or expression	tree
Words spoken in a questioning expression, unsure of words spoken	Question mark at the end of sentence	tree?
Shorter pause	Shorter ellipsis	..
Longer pause	Ellipsis	...
Very long pause	Longer ellipsis	.... or *(pause)*
An immediate answer, instead of the usual speed of speech	Parentheses	*(instantly)*
Words, part of sentence or whole sentence suddenly told extremely silently	Parentheses	*(silently)*
Chuckle or laughter during speech or words spoken with laughter	Parentheses	*(chuckles), (laughs)*

5.2. Coding the fieldwork data

The total volume of the textual corpus subjected to analysis comprised 33503 words and included interview transcripts, participant observation notes and notes taken after informal conversations. The coding scheme was developed drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of ANT and CDA, particularly ANT's focus on relationality and the dynamically shifting network configurations and CDA's three dimensions of analysis, including the linguistic features, individual discourses and broader institutional orders of discourse. The structure of the coding system was further shaped by the interview questions, the specific research objectives underlying those questions, as well as emergent themes and observations identified during fieldwork, which were subsequently incorporated into the coding scheme. Presented below (Table 5.2.1.) is the comprehensive coding scheme, detailing the main codes employed in the analysis alongside their respective definitions. The codes are organized into five thematic categories – (1) Actor-network theory, (2) Conceptualization of nature, (3) Subject role and identity, (4) Change over time and (5) Institutional and political contexts.

The thematic category "Actor-network theory" encompasses codes derived from ANT's research approaches and sensibilities, particularly its emphasis on human-nonhuman relations, network formation and maintenance, symmetrical agency of human and nonhuman entities, hybrid assemblages and translational practices, which all are aspects that potentially influence the research participants' conceptualization and experience of nature. Specifically, this category includes, for example, such codes that capture how nonhuman entities (e.g., species, plants, landscapes) are treated or spoken of as having agency in conservation processes (Material agency), mentions of how various tools, technologies and documents mediate human-nature interactions (Intermediaries), and mentions of how participants re-interpret or negotiate among scientific, political and community discourses (Translational work). This thematic category also includes mentions of the influence of institutions such as GNP or the NCA on the participant's identity, decisions or actions, marking institutional agency within the network, as well as mentions or articulations of self-reliance, with expressions of autonomy grounded in the participant's own skills and knowledge acting as opposing force to the perception of constant change.

The thematic category "Conceptualization of nature" encompasses codes that capture research participants' perspectives and framings of nature, as expressed through their linguistic choices, rhetorical structures and patterns of language use. These codes facilitate an exploration of how conservation specialists articulate their relationship with nature. Specifically, the codes are designed to identify whether participants express alignment or tension with extractive and utilitarian approaches to the use of nature as resource; employ regulatory or control-oriented language indicative of a view of nature as something to be managed, governed or restored to balance through human intervention; frame nature as integral to cultural or national identity, emphasizing its historical, aesthetic, symbolic or patriotic value (Nature as heritage); conceptualize nature as an autonomous, sentient or agentive force, attributing to it voice, power or intentionality (Nature as agent); or describe nature as embedded within relational, co-constitutive networks involving humans, landscapes, species and ecosystems (Nature as relation).

The thematic category "Subject role and identity" encompasses codes that capture research participants' articulations of their own positionality, the construction, performance and strategies of legitimizing particular roles and identities. These codes are intended to identify how conservation specialists position themselves within their professional and social contexts, and how such positions are mediated through discourse. Specifically, this category includes codes that examine whether participants construct themselves as moral stewards or guardians

of nature, grounding their identity in ethical responsibility, stewardship or expertise, and emphasizing their role in safeguarding the wellbeing of landscapes, species and ecosystems (Caretaker), whether they position themselves as embedded within, connected to or representing local community, constructing an identity based on relational, place-based and affective connections to specific local areas and populations (Community member), whether they construct their role and authority through appeals to scientific knowledge, data-driven decision-making and professional knowledge (Scientific expert), whether they frame their roles within the bureaucratic apparatus of environmental governance, emphasizing adherence to formal procedures, institutional hierarchies and administrative control (Managerial bureaucratic), or if they articulate their identity through affective experiences, emotional bonds and personal, non-institutional connections with nature (Emotional).

The thematic category "Change over time" comprises a set of codes that capture research participants' perceptions and articulations of temporal transformations, thereby enabling an analysis of how they articulate change, continuity and temporality and how their conceptualizations of nature evolve in response to, or in tension with, the perceived shifts. Particularly, this category includes codes that capture references to perceived progress, where participants describe a transition from earlier, simpler or less formalized practices to newer, more technologically advanced, bureaucratically structured or efficient systems, framed as indicative of institutional improvement or innovation (Modernization), mentions of loss with earlier practices, relationships or nature presented as more meaningful or authentic than those of the present days (Loss), expressions of stability, where participants highlight enduring values, practices or commitments in conservation work that persist despite broader structural, institutional or societal changes (Continuity), or references to the movement and transformation of ideas, technologies or identities across different temporal and spatial contexts, emphasizing their circulation, adaptation and reconfiguration over time (Temporality). Together, these codes facilitate exploration of how conservation specialists make sense of change within their field, how their articulations shape and are shaped by broader discourses of progress, nostalgia and resilience, and how the element of constant change reciprocally influence their experience and conceptualization of nature.

The final thematic category "Institutional and Political contexts" comprises a set of codes that attempt to capture how institutional structures, political regimes and governance models shape and are reflected in conservation specialists' articulations, actions and conceptualizations of nature. This category could facilitate an analysis of how broader political and institutional frameworks are internalized, negotiated and contested through individual narratives and

professional practices. Specifically, this category includes codes that capture references to shifts in organizational structure, governance or internal collaboration patterns, and how participants experience institutional transformations and negotiate their roles and identities within shifting institutional structures (Institutional change), how they refer to, critique or align with EU environmental regulations and how EU policies are represented as sources of authority, bureaucracy, financial support, institutional conflict or legitimation in conservation work (EU policy), how the participants reflect on the period following Latvia's independence in 1991, which could be articulated as a period of institutional, ideological and professional reorientation (Post-independence), and how they articulate, construct or reflect on the period before Latvia regained independence in 1991, which could help in tracing how the participants interpret their institutional memory and ideological lineage, for example, with nostalgia or critique, and if the boundary of regaining independence in 1991 has a meaning that influences the participants' articulations of their memories (Pre-independence). Together, these codes would enable an exploration of how conservation specialists articulate their experiences within different and shifting institutional and political contexts and how such articulations influence their conceptualizations and experience of nature.

Table 5.2.1.

List of codes and their descriptions as used in fieldwork data analysis

Thematic category	Code name	Variables and descriptions
ANT = Actor-network theory	**MAg** = Material agency	Mentions of species behaviour, terrain or ecosystem features influencing conservation decisions, species reacting to human presence or change.
	Int = Intermediaries	Tools, technologies, data, devices, documents and other intermediaries mediating human-nature interactions.
	Ins = Nature inscription practices	Instances of how nature inscription practices (naming, cartography, categorization) shapes what "nature" is, the interaction between meaning and materiality.
	Tr = Translational work	Mentions of specialists re-interpreting or negotiating among scientific, political and local community discourses.
	NhSt = Nonhuman stakeholders	Use of language that frames species, habitats or ecosystems as stakeholders or clients, speaking on behalf of a species, advocating for "rights" or needs of nonhumans.
	WPl = Workplace as actor	Mentions of workplace influencing decisions, roles or identities.
	S = Self-reliance	Mentions of relying on self, own knowledge and skills.

CON = Conceptualization of nature	**NRes** = Nature as resource	**CLan** = language framing nature as economic capital, mentions of economic value, revenue or cost-benefit; **Ext** = mentions of extraction, harvesting or taking from nature; **EffN** = framing nature as needing to be efficient.
	NGE = Nature as governed entity	**RLan** = language framing nature in terms of laws and zones; **ULan** = language indicating unconscious agency over nature; **Mon** = nature monitoring, inspection or control mechanisms; **Cor** = mentions of nature going in wrong direction and in need of corrective human intervention.
	NH = Nature as heritage	**InGen** = intergenerational responsibility with nature discussed as a legacy to be protected for future generations; **Sym** = sites or species treated as symbols or national treasures.
	NA = Nature as agent	**NaRes** = nature described as responsive to human behaviour; **NaFor** = nature described as having its own will; **ResCon** = mentions of nature resisting human control.
	NRel = Nature as relation	**EvInt** = everyday interactions with nature via routine practices; **ConLan** = emotional ties described through personal, familial language that mentions connection with nature; **NHKi** = nonhuman kinship with species or places.
SRI = Subject role and identity	**CIn** = Caretaker identity	**PLan** = language that frames nature as needing protection, care; **NIV** = emphasis on non-instrumental value of nature, ascribing intrinsic or spiritual value beyond its usability or function.
	CMIn = Community member identity	**LE** = local embeddedness, references to being from or growing up locally; **EmT** = emotional ties or moral obligations to the locality.
	SEIn = Scientific expert identity	**SLan** = scientific language and terminology to describe nature; **DBjus** = data-based justification with quantitative or empirical data used as the basis for decisions; **Cer** = mentions of certifications, degrees or specialized training.
	MBIn = Managerial bureaucratic identity	**Reg** = rule compliance, following regulations or procedures; **ACon** = administrative control with mentions of documentation, paperwork or reporting and bureaucratic oversight; **Fin** = references to finances, budget management; **TLan** = technocratic language, use of terms like "KPIs".
	EIn = Emotional identity	**ELan** = emotional language that describes nature as beloved, meaningful or personally significant; **PMem** = emotional narration of personal memories and experiences tied to nature or events in the park; **Em** = empathy for nonhuman life, emotional connection to species, places.
	HyAct = Hybrid actor identity	Identification with several roles or identities at once.
	OSEIn = Opposite to SEIn	Articulating the self as opposite to scientific expert identity.
	OMBIn = Opposite to MBIn	Articulating the self as opposite to managerial bureaucratic identity.
	F = Family	Mentions of family.

	C = Community, togetherness	Mentions of community, being or doing work together.
COT = Change over time	**MNar** = Modernization narrative	**Tech** = mentions of new technology, tools or automation; **OrgRe** = organizational restructuring with mentions of changes in structure, hierarchy or leadership.
	LNar = Loss narrative	**LoTe** = loss of community or team spirit with mentions of changes in work culture, shared practices, events or purpose; **LoBio** = loss of landscape or biodiversity with environmental degradation or transformation observed over time; **LoTra** = loss of rituals or traditions with mentions of discontinued events, celebrations or work traditions.
	ConNar = Continuity narrative	**OngTra** = ongoing traditions or work methods; **LtConPl** = long-term connection to a place with mentions of attachment to specific landscapes, sites or workplace; **IntCon** = intergenerational continuity with mentions of passing knowledge, roles or values through generations.
	T = Temporality	Mentions of ideas, technologies or identities circulating across time and space, and how ideas/techniques migrate, evolve or get localized.
IPC = Institutional and Political contexts	**IC** = Institutional change	**ChOrg** = changes in organizational hierarchy or leadership; **ChG** = shifting goals, scope or focus of the institution; **ChC** = change in patterns of collaboration with fellow colleagues.
	EUP = EU policy discourse	**ObEU** = obligations of compliance with EU directives; **FunEU** = EU funding mechanisms, such as LIFE projects; **OthEU** = other changes due to Latvia becoming a member state of EU, or other EU environmental frameworks, such as Nature 2000.
	PID = Post-independence discourse	**ConIn** = confusion or instability, chaotic or uncoordinated environment; **ValSh** = value shift, changing attitudes towards nature.
	SGD = Pre-independence discourse	**CivSoc** = civic society participation in conservation work; **PolCon** = political control, regime, restrictions or ideological limits on conservation.

To analyse the conceptualization of nature, the thematic category "Conceptualization of Nature" was created and applied to segments containing consciously articulated expressions of this concept. The segments coded under this category consisted of deliberate views about nature, which often appeared to be influenced by the professional identities performed during the creation of the analysed textual corpus. However, the theoretical frameworks of ANT and CDA, along with their respective coding schemes, ultimately proved more useful for exploring experiences of nature, particularly through relationality and the dynamically shifting network configurations.

5.3. Temporality

Contrary to my initial assumptions regarding how time and changes over time might be perceived and experienced, the research participants did not explicitly reference major political or historical milestones, such as Latvia's independence or its accession to the European Union. Moreover, broader ideological influences, such as socialism and capitalism, and their shifts ultimately did not expressly manifest in the experiences of the research participants.

Instead, the experienced temporality was articulated in more personal terms, specifically, in relation to periods before and during employment in GNP/NCA. Moreover, the boundary between these periods was not defined by a clear date but rather emerged as a phase of overlapping memories and narratives, blurring the distinction between when employment began and prior experiences. Nevertheless, phrases such as "when I did not yet work in GNP" were used to articulate shifts in perception and understanding of both nature and the structure of GNP, as well as the institution governing it – entities that, at times, were conflated by the participant. The complex and confusing aspects of GNP's institutional structure have since become incorporated into the participant's current professional role. This experience enables the participant to empathize with those outside GNP who similarly struggle to understand whom to contact regarding various nature conservation matters. The participant's recollection of once being an outsider and being confused by the internal structures now informs their role as a translator who aims to draw current outsiders into nature conservation networks. A particularly illustrative example of this was a research participant's memory of engaging with GNP prior and at the very beginning of their employment through the intermediary of a telephone number of one of GNP's forestries. Upon calling, Lilija asked: "Have I reached GNP?" She reflected that even in GNP times there were many institutional divisions – GNP forestries "which were managing forests and certainly doing something else as well" and GNP, which, as per the participant, consisted of self-designated scientists who "studied GNP, who made some kind of plans for landscape, I don't know, things or something like that". This confusion persisted into the early stages of employment, as described in the reflection: "I called and I didn't really understand what territory, what place, what offices, how it all comes together there… where I have got myself involved. Now, when someone calls the participant with a similar opening line: "Have I reached GNP?" there is a sense of empathy and understanding for the caller's confusion and ignorance of the current organizational structure, which, according to the participant, has become even more complicated and difficult for outsiders to comprehend. As such, the translation of what GNP is, where it begins and ends, and who is that person, who embodies it, is deeply intertwined with the organization's structure and the public's perception of it. If the

structure is confusing or leaves an outside actor questioning who embodies GNP or what it is actually constituted of institutionally, the perception and understanding of GNP might remain blurred, despite translational efforts from the part of conservation specialists. This, in turn, may lead conservation specialists to experience a sense of hopelessness when their efforts are undermined by factors beyond their control, such as ongoing institutional change.

Here it should be noted that a significant portion of the participant's reflections focused on organizational, ministry-driven or other structural reforms and the persistent confusion that has accompanied these changes. Structural changes, shifts in institutional forms, leadership transitions and ministry-induced regulations emerged as such recurrent themes that change itself appeared to become an active agentive force in the participant's identity formation process. The initial phase of employment in GNP was marked by frequent changes in institutional form, even as the participant remained employed in the same locality. Over time, these changes evolved into relocation to a different site and institutional reformation, though the work responsibilities and connection to GNP remained largely consistent. During this period, job titles also appear to have changed, possibly as a result of ministry's directives, where all employees, regardless of their primary duties, were designated as environmental inspectors. A significant phase of transformation occurred when GNP and other national parks were merged under the current NCA, an institutional restructuring that resulted in the "entire structure changed, the organization became many times larger" (Lilija). Another substantial shift, articulated also in connection with changing relationships with fellow colleagues, was prompted by Latvia's accession to the EU. The introduction of EU funding mechanisms brought about the emergence of "projects" and "project people" who were often affiliated with specific, temporary projects while occupying the same premises as regional administrations such as Vidzeme or Kurzeme fostering a profound sense of confusion – what kind of structural unit the particular person embodied and to which collective they were part of. The inherently temporary nature of project-based employment, with organization-wide notifications of staff entering and exiting based on project cycles, further amplified the perception of constant change. The participant also reflected on current and anticipated structural changes, which, though still in the planning stages, are already contributing to a sense of uncertainty concerning future roles, responsibilities and organizational structures.

While organizational restructuring was experienced most profoundly, Lilija also reflected on shifts in institutional priorities and practices over time:

"The conditions for a state institution have certainly changed over the years, how firmly something can be done, what a budget institution can or cannot do. And in which position, what can or cannot be done – that has certainly changed."

However, reflections on such changes of what can or cannot be done and in what ways something can be done more frequently appeared in connection with reflections on manager personalities and management styles and personalities of individual directors of the organization. The management styles and leader personalities were felt and experienced in a more tangible way than overarching institution's, namely, ministry's, impact on the organization.

The coded segments concerning organizational changes were closely linked with the variables of organizational restructuring within the broader modernization narrative (Figure 5.3.1.). Nonetheless, these developments were not necessarily perceived as modernization per se; rather, the participant emphasized the experience of change itself as the defining feature.

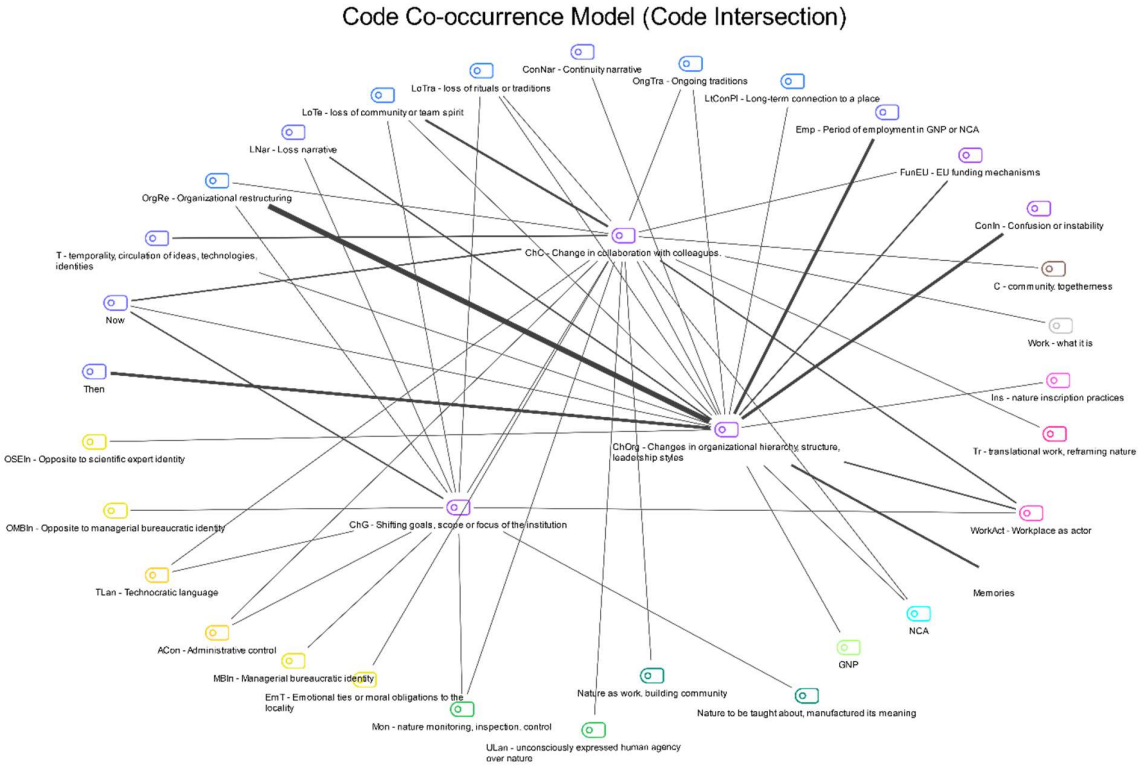

Figure 5.3.1. **Code co-occurrence model generated by MAXQDA presenting Institutional change variable intersections with other codes.** Author's archive.

Organizational changes were also perceived as a contributing factor to the transformation of relationships among colleagues, particularly through the erosion of community and team spirit that had previously been fostered by events celebrated together with employees' families, for example, Christmas or New Year celebrations. These events transformed due to the organization's expansion, ultimately losing their ability to bring together not only employees

but also their families and sometimes, as recalled by the research participant, other people from the area surrounding a particular collective. As Lilija explained, with organizational growth it became impractical to gather all employees and their families, simply because the numbers had grown too large. As she reflected: “I think that with the merger, this kind of family feeling or the charm of small collectives disappeared.” Accordingly, organizational restructuring and the resulting changes were more closely linked to a narrative of loss than one of modernization.

The organization itself, partly through its ongoing structural evolution and partly due to its overarching order of discourse and institutional identity as a scientific and managerial body, emerged as an influential actor in shaping the identities, roles and decisions of its employees. However, it is also possible that the changes, through their constancy and reach across multiple dimensions of work-life, have become an actor, shaping the employee’s individual sense of agency. Lilija emphasized, on several occasions, the importance of self-reliance and of possessing knowledge and skills characterized as universal, practical and applicable in different situations:

“One must have a wide range of knowledge … one must cover a wide field.”

…

“The wider your field of knowledge, the easier it is for you to adapt to any situation, no matter what it may be.”

…

“The broader your field of knowledge, the easier it is for you to adapt.”

These reflections, along with mentions of acquiring new competencies through self-directed learning and relying on personal skills to navigate “the absolutely insane time of crisis [during the period of independence restoration], when there was nothing in the stores at all,” indicate the impactful nature of constant permeating sense of change on the participant’s experience.

Furthermore, the persistent sense of change and its accompanying instability, as manifested in the continuous shifts in job titles, physical locations, structural units and professional collectives, appear to have affected the participant’s perception and construction of their own professional role and identity. This instability may have diminished the relevance of articulating a definite professional role. Lilija expressed this dynamic through a self-description: “Fortunately, I am just an employee,” when contrasting this with the term “official (*amatpersona*),” the use of which she perceived as “very cold, alienated and I have the feeling that the person is no longer there, only the officials”.

Another example of temporality is evolution of conservation methods over time as Lilija has articulated in the following excerpt:

"...for me, when attending the school as a pupil and living outside the national park, never... well, in those days they didn't do such things, probably, but at school they organised a trip to the theatre, but not a trip to the national park."

This reflection highlights the absence, in the past, of translational practices aimed at enrolling pupils into conservation networks – practices that are more common in the present day. The participant's account indicates that such strategies of integration have developed over time, signalling a shift in the methods used to foster public engagement with protected areas.

Overall, the mentions of temporality and change over time where a recurrent theme in the research participant's reflections. However, these references were primarily associated with a personal sense of temporal flow, often framed in relation to periods of youth, family life and employment. The influences of such temporal delineations as restoration of independence, accession to EU or merger of national parks into the NCA were mentioned only when specifically prompted or asked about. The overarching theme of continual change appeared to eclipse all the temporal delineations, without being explicitly attributed to them. The reflections on change were frequently linked with shifting patterns of collaboration among colleagues and a perceived loss of community or shared sense of togetherness, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

5.4. Public and employee-centered formal clean-up events

An integral part of the work-life experience for specialists in the conservation field has been the sense of community and togetherness, primarily fostered through recurrent clean-up events and other forms of collective gatherings. The clean-up events were thoroughly and continuously mentioned in both interviews and informal conservations, and they were often described as combinations of work with some kind of social gathering elements, for example, shared meals or even small parties. At one point Lilija mentioned that clean-up event popularity and the widespread participation in them might be partly attributed to influences from the Soviet period:

"Now [they're] trying to modernise that clean-up process and to find ways to attract people in a more interesting way, but back then... whether it was the Soviet wheel that was spinning, that you have to do a clean-up and that a clean-up is a mandatory thing and a clean-up in nature is a bit more interesting than in a potato field, but in the Gauja National Park there were a lot of clean-ups. And people were kind of happy to go, to do something, of course, then they had a picnic, a party – whatever it was called back then – but yes, I think it was that people were more ready to go to Gauja National Park and do something to make it exist, to make it develop, or create something or build something there. Without even thinking very deeply about, for example, whether it would be beneficial for themselves or for somebody else, they just did it."

This excerpt illustrates the evolving nature of translational practices, exemplifying the contemporary clean-up events as part of integrational process, which are applied to enrol actors into the conservation networks. However, the reflections on past motivations and memories of the public's involvement without such curated translational practices and methods of finding more 'interesting' ways to engage people in conservation suggest a sense of shift in the broader ideologies that have pushed actors outside the conservation networks, who now have to be pulled back through the modernised, 'more interesting' ways of engagement through translational practices. Such articulations indicate that earlier public involvement in clean-up events occurred organically, possibly emerging from collective cultural habits, however, now translational practices are required to induce and foster such engagement. This shift has been vaguely attributed to the Soviet times; however, the participant remains unsure and undecided of what is the definitive cause. Rather, the main reflection is on the change itself, not reasons behind the change. Moreover, it is emphasized that the change has meant lower public integration in conservation networks, which simultaneously indicate that 'back then', probably meant the period prior Latvia's independence coinciding with the early decades of GNP, the public was more engaged in conservation-related activities. However, such participation was not necessarily motivated by conservation ethics per se, but rather by the social and communal aspects of the events as Lilija has expressed in the following excerpt:

"…when people *were* in the clean-up, or when they came from who knows where, there was this feeling that they liked it, that they... well, they were very enthusiastic about it. Whether they had it ingrained in them so much in the Soviet years or whether it was natural, it's hard for me to say at this moment."

Another sentiment expressed in relation to the evolution of public clean-up events into their contemporary forms was the perceived competition for the public's attention and time in an information-saturated environment. The abundance of information and a person's ability to choose from numerous options provided by this information were framed as more of an obstacle than the actual number or diversity of events on offer, which was perceived to be similar as before: "well, what we don't know we just don't do, or… then it doesn't even come to our minds that we have to go there, somewhere" (Lilija). This necessity to make an individual choice from an oversaturated informational field was contrasted with the directive nature of participation in the past, where "employer said that it is compulsory to be [there]" (Lilija). This juxtaposition positions the employer-employee relationships during the Soviet era, characterized by obligatory participation, in contrast to the present-day condition of voluntary engagement, with an individual ability or disability to choose. As a result, events related to nature conservation are perceived to be competing with various other forms of public

entertainment, such as “opera festivals, cultural festivals or fairs” (Lilija). Consequently, contemporary translational practices aimed at enrolling participants into conservation networks through “more interesting” methods must first contend with this competition for attention, which effectively places conservation-related translational activities on par with entertainment, recreational or cultural offerings in the public sphere. Thus, the modernization of these translational activities, through the incorporation of interactive elements and novel engagement methods, is framed as “a way to involve people... to pull [them] into nature” (Lilija) within a fast-paced, information-saturated contemporary environment. Additionally, when reflecting on the past and present conditions influencing the situatedness of translational activities within the public domain, the participant articulated contrasting perceptions of temporality. The past, specifically, the early period of employment, was described as significantly slower, whereas the present was characterised as accelerated and overwhelming: “it’s just cosmos how the wheel is turning now” (Lilija).

Research participant accounts differentiated between clean-ups involving the public and those organized internally by GNP employees for themselves and their colleagues, and the latter were recalled more frequently and in greater detail. Those events where the participant was involved within their role as an employee or as a spouse for an employee constituted an integral role in creating and fostering ties with fellow colleagues or spouse’s colleagues, shaping the workplace into a space of community, which extended outside their employment periods in GNP. The sense of community as fostered through the clean-up events, their related social activities and other social gatherings, such as Christmas events for all employees and their families, especially children, formed an important part of the participant recollections of their period of employment in GNP and were vital components of the participant’s lived experiences within GNP.

Although the research participant acknowledged the continuity and evolution of clean-up events involving public participation in their contemporary forms, the recollections of employee-centered clean-up events were framed within a broader loss narrative, which was situated in the context of institutional change, particularly in relation to changing forms of collaboration with the colleagues. It was further accompanied by a similar perception of temporal transformation from a slower-paced working environment in the past to a present characterized by informational overload and accelerated rhythms: “there are so many other tasks, there is so much other information, *everything* is so much” (Lilija). Contemporary employee clean-ups, when combined with meetings, official addresses, everyday work duties and various other obligations or tasks that had to be done on the way, were perceived as

contributing to a generalized sense of overwhelm stemming from numerous different tasks being stacked on top of each other. In this context, the clean-up was sensed as losing its function in generating a sense of community. Its meaning appeared diminished, reduced to something less than regular work, as evidenced by such recollected expressions as "I need to work, not go to a clean-up" or "Who is going to work [if I go to a clean-up]?" (Lilija). If in the past clean-ups were perceived more as communal work constitutive of conservation specialist work-life experience, their significance and perceived impact appear to have shifted as illustrated in the following Lilija's expressions:

"[In the past] we are all just doing the same work, together, maybe in the same place, but it is work. Nowadays, I often hear that there is work to do, not just go to a clean-up, because what work is there is the clean-up? Stacking branches? That is not work."

…

"... because preparing the documents and all the mm... controls in nature, whether or not you can do this or that, that's work, but the clean-up – that is secondary work."

These excerpts exemplify not only a shift in the perceived value of clean-ups but also a broader transformation in how "work" itself is defined within the field of nature conservation. Whereas hands-on, collective engagement with nature, such as formal clean-up events, was previously regarded as a core element of conservation practice and an integral part of a GNP/NCA employee's responsibilities, contemporary understandings prioritize managerial and bureaucratic activities, such as document preparation and regulatory controls in nature, have taken precedence as being more constitutive of conservation work. It remains unclear whether this shift results from the transformation of public clean-up events, now equalized with and more closely associated with entertainment activities, spilling over into the perception of employee-centered formal clean-ups, or from broader institutional changes that have redefined what constitutes important, meaningful or valuable conservation work. Regardless of the origin, the perception persists that formal, collective employee-centered clean-up events no longer hold the same value or meaning. However, it is important to note that hands-on fieldwork remains meaningful when conducted in smaller groups and tied to specific scientific or management objectives, for example, site visits involving one, two or three colleagues testing specific equipment or evaluating nature management methods for broader application. These activities continue to be perceived as important and meaningful work duties of a nature conservation specialist. Rather the social and communal dimension of formal clean-up events is perhaps the element, which through evolution of translational practices, institutional changes or broader cultural changes has rendered the role of such events in fostering a sense of community as less

meaningful in the perception of conservation specialists, reflecting a de-prioritization of community-building within the professional identity of conservation work.

To summarise, reflections on clean-up events when situated in the transforming temporality encapsulate a dual movement – the modernization of translational practices meant to enrol participants in conservation-related networks in more entertaining ways and the erosion of workplace-based community networks.

5.5. Translational practices

The contemporary public clean-up event functions as a medium and nature translation practice aimed at enrolling new participants from the public into conservation networks. These events have evolved to resemble educational initiatives more than instances of actual physical labour, with conservation specialists engaging in active on-site translational work by explaining the specific location's ecological value, such as protected species, habitat types and notable natural treasures in or around the site, in order to convey why the location is considered significant and why the conservation work there is meaningful. However, the participants of this kind of events, when they are work-collectives from various companies, are perceived as not being overly interested in the specific reasons of the site's importance: "they don't want to find those seven [great] oaks, all of them, *exactly those*, ok? They don't want to see a [bog] arum in the deepest..." (Lilija). Rather the public clean-up event as perceived by the research participant from the company's point of view serves primarily as a place and occasion for the company's employees to be together, outside routine working environment, in a setting that feels more like a social event than conservation effort. Nevertheless, the research participant also reflected on a more recent evolution of these practices in the context of corporate social responsibility. Some companies now engage in such events to meet their sustainability goals by doing something good for something other than their business, for example, as Lilija mentioned: "walking dogs from shelters or... coming to a national park and doing big things. Big." These companies show a greater interest in long-term engagement, taking responsibility for a specific site by organizing recurring clean-up events at the same location. Lilija explained the idea as something similar to a "godparent campaign", suggesting that repeated involvement in the same particular place could be more meaningful and effective:

"Yes, they will know a bit more about the place, maybe. They came once, they will come again. There is this clean-up place where we go every year. ... Not like, once we were there – ok, I remember that we were there, the child already forgot where we were, and like – [they] were, and [they] weren't (*bija un izbija*)."

…

"I think it could be... maybe from the perspective of informing, educating the public, that people feel more responsible for nature treasures. That could be better than a one-time clean-up event."

In these reflections, Lilija articulated the value of long-term commitment to a specific place, suggesting that repeated and tangible engagement could enhance the possibility of successful nature translation. When clean-up event participants observe and contribute to visible outcomes of their work, it could become easier to communicate the importance of nature and nature conservation efforts. In contrast, one-time clean-up events, which lack both continuity and observable impact, are seen as less effective in supporting translational work aimed at integrating the public into conservation networks.

5.6. Nature inscription practices

Nature inscription practices in conservation work are closely linked to translational activities and the involvement of nonhuman intermediaries that visualize and enact them. Inscriptions, such as naming conventions, designations, categories and markers could be considered akin to nonhuman intermediaries; however, in this context they are delineated as distinct entities due to their nature as information-conveying elements rather than as tangible tools or technologies. This section outlines some of the nature inscription practices that have been noted in interviews or observed during the participant observation sessions.

The inscription of the GNP area designation, whether through verbal or spatial demarcations, for example, as visually represented in GNP maps, from the perspective of an NCA employee is equated with notions of clarity and a clear vision. For example, Lilija reflects:

"…why a protected area, why Gauja National Park, I think that at some point there was a conviction that we need a clear, clear vision of where the territory is, which is the richest in natural values. But that is my improvisation on this, because I do not know why [it was decided that there should be GNP]. … I myself have that feeling that everything needs clear boundaries. So that you can tell people, here is and here is not. Although nowadays I often want to see more of a difference in those boundaries. I am showing and telling someone – on one side of the Vidzeme highway there is a national park, on the other side there is not – and then they ask, what is the difference? [Trees are] cut down here, [trees are] cut down there, or a meadow is here and a meadow is there. 'It is green on both sides.'"

This excerpt exemplifies an inscription practice within a translational work where the drawing of GNP's boundaries facilitates the conservation practices and values through spatial differentiation, allowing conservation specialists to communicate to the public where nature becomes "protected". However, the translational work is complicated by the lack of visible distinction at the GNP boundaries. Thus, this excerpt exposes the limitations of an inscription practice at sites where the boundary is grounded purely in maps, lacking visual representations

of the basis for the particular area's protection *in situ*. As a result, the translation of conservation values or logic to entities outside the network, such as tourists or students, fails to fully enrol them in the network of the protected area logic, thus revealing the fragility of the boundary and the inscription practices, which are not grounded in visual referents.

The interconnectedness of nature inscription and translational work is further articulated in Lilija's reflection on "such protected area, its creation, definition or introduction into the public consciousness". Within this statement, the participant aligns the weights of significance of both the inscription of a protected area and its integration into the enrolment of the public as actors within the conservation network. Furthermore, the participant reflected on various nature inscriptions, such as *national park*, *nature park*, *landscape area*, mentioning a sentiment that public does not perceive their differences, doubting if they have any role in the public consciousness and stating that, instead, the concept *park* is better understood in the public than *national park*. Regardless of whether the public does or does not notice the differences in the mentioned inscriptions, this sentiment suggests a perceived disconnect between inscription and translation, suggesting a failure of certain inscriptions to effectively mobilize or align the public within the conservation network. The participant might doubt the efficacy of inscription practices as part of broader network-building efforts, as these inscriptions, especially, *Gauja National Park* are perceived more as legal and administrative demarcations, rather than being grounded in visual representations of conservation logic.

Further, the temporal situatedness of inscription meanings is noted in Lilija's admission that "those [nature] reserves, in my young mind, they didn't express anything at all". The process of meaning-making around nature inscriptions, as experienced by an individual transitioning from an outsider to a conservation specialist, specifically, an employee of GNP/NCA, appears to align with the construction or internalization of scientific expert or managerial-bureaucratic identities. The scientific expert identity was also expressed when nature inscriptions were perceived as lacking tangible representation in the visual elements of the landscape. In such instances, the participant expressed data-based justifications or scientific rationales, invoking or performing a scientific expert identity to substantiate the legitimacy of the protected area designation. Thus, the perceived gap in the translational work between observed landscape and inscription label is bridged through articulations of scientific expert authority, which is an example of how the subject's enacted professional identity mediates the legitimacy and communicability of nature inscriptions within broader conservation discourse and practice.

One of the most prominent intersections among the coded segments emerged as a triangular relationship between nature inscription practices, translational work and the use of scientific language as a variable under the code of scientific expert identity (Figure 5.6.1.). The use of scientific language was among the most frequently applied individual codes across the entire textual corpus analysed, second only to translational work and closely followed by inscription practices, with all three codes showing significant overlap.

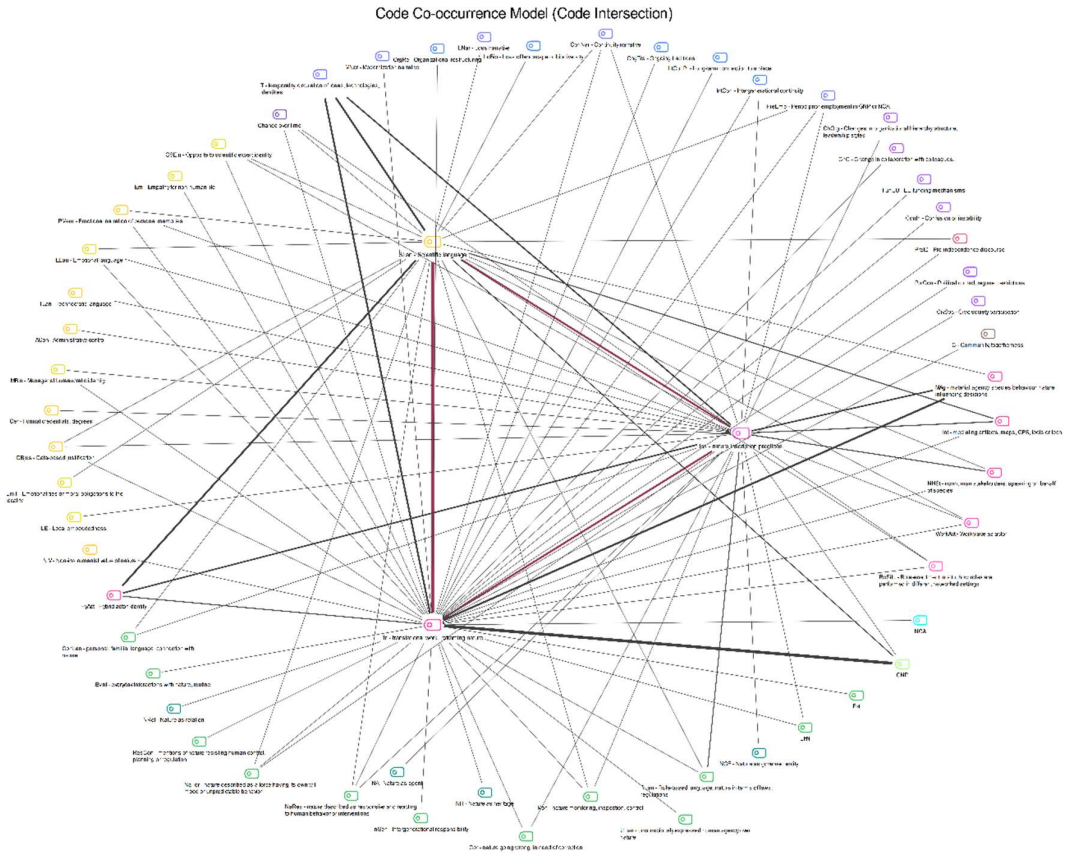

Figure 5.6.1. **Code co-occurrence model generated by MAXQDA presenting a triangle between nature inscription practices, translational work and use of scientific language and their intersections with other codes.** Author's archive.

The strong correlation between scientific language and inscription practices may be partly attributable to the coding strategy employed, wherein both codes were often applied simultaneously to segments that mentioned specific naming conventions of species, ecosystems or habitats, which are derived from scientific assessments and criteria, such as 'invasive species', 'endangered species' or habitat designations like '91E0', and are frequently illustrated through commonly referenced examples, such as hogweed (*Heracleum sosnowskyi*) that embodies invasive species, or bird's-eye primrose (*Primula farinosa*) that symbolises

endangered species. These terms were treated not only as examples of scientific language but also as nature inscription practices, which demonstrate how naming and applying categories to various parts of nature can shape the understanding of what constitutes nature.

Some of these scientifically grounded categories and naming conventions are subsequently processed through various translational practices intended to align conservation specialists' understandings with those of the public. For instance, invasive species are frequently framed as aggressive entities that spread rapidly and displace local species, thus effectively being constructed as unwanted and harmful intruders or the ultimate 'other.' As previously mentioned, such translational practices, when applied to invasive species, are more effective when supported by visual referents capable of eliciting a negative emotional response. For example, it is easier to translate and instil the negative associations of an 'ugly' species like the Spanish slug (*Arion vulgaris*) or expansive fields or scrubs of the same species that illustrate their ability to expand and overwhelm other species.

However, these translational efforts are less effective when the scientific inscription or naming convention does not correspond to what external actors can visually or sensorially perceive. Species such as Canadian goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*), lupines (*Lupinus*) or common dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) are frequently viewed as aesthetically pleasing flowers or ornamental shrubs, commonly found in gardens, despite their repeated occurrence in translational practices that frame them as invasive and harmful species. Lilija noted that "all [my] life [I had] considered lupine to be a decorative flower" and disclosed that a small Canadian goldenrod bush remains in a corner of her garden. Its continued presence was justified by the annual removal of its flowers before they could produce seeds and spread, although the participant also acknowledged their spouse's disapproval due to the plant's status as an invasive species. This reflection highlights how nature inscriptions are not confined to conservation specialists' professional activities aimed at enrolling new actors in conservation networks but also influence their lived experiences outside their professional roles and identities.

Another research participant, Inese, expressed that "people don't understand no matter what they are told" when referring specifically to a published article about controlled burning as a conservation method, which likely included explanations of its benefits and appropriate applications. According to this participant, the comments under the article were very negative, "even though everything was explained in the article. They either don't read or don't understand." This account further illustrates the challenge of translating scientific nature inscriptions and conservation methods when such inscriptions or practices contradict prevailing sentiments, which are rooted in visual, sensory or historically ingrained perceptions.

For example, the prevailing association of fire in forests is with destruction, rather than recognizing it as an important part of ecological cycles, as explained by conservation specialists.

There are also numerous scientific categories and naming conventions that are used in internal communications among conservation specialists during their professional duties, which are not translated for public understanding. An example is the habitat type 91E0, which specialists refer to simply as '91E0' – a designation, which is understood intrinsically, without further explanations, to mean alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior*. This understanding is shared by habitat experts and cartographers who can communicate with such bare inscriptions.

There are other commonly used inscriptions that appear in conservation specialist communication but differ from those used in translational work. For example, 'insect' (Pauls), 'that bug' or 'spruce monster' (Lilija) are references to European spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*), a species responsible for widespread damage to spruce forests in recent years and a focal point in public debates involving the NCA regarding tree removal policies. The most widespread scientifically based nature inscriptions among conservation specialists remain species and their designations, typically used in both Latvian and Latin, as also textually expressed in the last few paragraphs. Since the designation of species is a historically established naming practice, primarily rooted in visually clearly distinguishable features of various entities of nature and is also a part of primary and secondary education, it generally does not require translational effort. However, translational practices are employed when scientific categories and inscriptions are applied beyond the basic level of species classification, particularly when public understanding of such categories, inscriptions and their meanings is necessary for their enrolment and participation in conservation networks. Translational work must be successful in order to engage the public as part of the collective effort to care for nature, following the guidelines set by scientists and applied and translated by nature conservation specialists.

A portion of nature conservation specialists, particularly, as observed, members of the younger generation who joined the NCA without prior employment experience in GNP, have already acquired the use of scientific language before entering the field of nature conservation, often through formal education in conservation-related disciplines such as biology. In contrast, the research participant who had been employed in GNP without such prior academic background acquired the scientific language and broader discourse of nature conservation and

its practices which are rooted in science through workplace exposure. Thus, the workplace is also recognized as an actor influencing the participant's performed professional roles.

While the use of scientific language was more pronounced among younger participants, the individual without formal scientific training also employed a notable degree of such terminology in their reflections. However, the participant's use of scientific language when discussing specific conservation-related issues was less formal, with scientific concepts conveyed through extended strings of sentences and reflections, rather than through concise references to the concepts themselves as exemplified in the following Lilija's expressions:

"I'll have to tell [the participants of a clean-up event] in what ways that Gauja riverside meadow is valuable – which species should be there more or less, or maybe how often it floods or never floods."

…

"Well, there are flowers, there is a theory inside that needs to be understood in general. Because I have talked to my peers, who are plus minus like me, but who are not... in any way connected with nature conservation questions, and it is so, their understanding then – well, what are you on about, branches and leaves, well, they are natural! What are you talking about there? How can they change something in nature? If they are [stacked] in a thick layer, naturally they change it. Nothing grows through there anymore, but... or something else grows through, or... and so on. That's why I think that... that's why I think that people don't... a large part of society... well, they refuse to think [about it]."

These excerpts demonstrate the use of science-based language and scientific logic from the standpoint of an individual who has experienced being an outsider to the conservation networks, someone who understands 'not knowing' from personal experience. In these cases, the scientific language and explanations are applied in a way that appears intended to be accessible and understandable to those outside the conservation networks. Thus, scientific language exists in a partially reciprocal relationship with the translational work of specialists, who rely on that same vocabulary to render science-based nature inscriptions comprehensible to broader audiences. However, it may be inferred that for such translations to be effective, the conservation specialist must adopt multiple professional roles, thereby becoming a hybrid actor who operates across overlapping networks.

5.7. Hybrid actor positionality

The linguistic features, vocabulary, narratives and personal memories expressed by the research participant illustrate several identity formations and acquired roles. As mentioned earlier, a recurrent theme in Lilija's reflections is the transformation in her understanding of nature that coincided with the period of employment:

"…from the moment I started to become aware or participate somewhere, to [think, know] about this, I don't know, when I came [here] to work or when I realized who I was, in my

understanding… well, national, there was still one national park in Latvia. Those [nature] reserves, in my young mind, they didn't mean anything at all."

…

"I was born and raised, I don't know, how I say it myself, on the banks of a winding little river... Mmmm... in the middle of a biologically valuable meadow. At that time, I understood absolutely nothing of it – neither I, nor my family. Because a meadow is a meadow and a river is a river. And at that time, since we didn't talk about national parks, about such natural values that must be protected, differentiated... there was simply the Red Book, and it was completely in content, well, either the very very first or the second, which was there at that time, the Red Book of the USSR."

These reflections indicate that prior to her employment, and the workplace-induced adoption of a scientific expert identity, the participant experienced nature in a different way. The perception of "meadows being meadows" and nature reserves carrying no intrinsic meaning demonstrates a lack of familiarity with scientific nature inscriptions, which, being absent from conscious awareness, did not influence the participant's conceptualization of nature. This earlier, more immediate experience of nature, often tied to personal memories from childhood and family life, continues to constitute a part of the participant's identity, designated here as an emotional identity.

In addition, the participant's reflections reveal an identity rooted in belonging – whether to a collective of colleagues within a department or organization, or to the local community of neighbours and villagers. The embeddedness within networks of human relationships profoundly shapes an individual's perceived identity, which is constructed from shared memories and stories that connect people, places and experiences across time and space. A compelling example comes from Lilija when she expressed uncertainty about where her own identity as a GNP employee begins and ends. Her sense of identity is not only formed by her personal work experiences at GNP but also intertwined with the stories of her spouse, who worked there earlier. These overlapping narratives and temporal positions blend together, creating a complex and continuous identity as a GNP employee that extends beyond the actual period of employment, resulting in an unclear sense of when the actual employment period began:

"That feeling that I'm in it all before I start working. It kind of enriches me, but yes, it's more information and feelings about everything, but sometimes I can't exactly separate where I... have participated or with which moment I started... The year [of beginning] I know, there's no doubt about that, but it's on a feeling level. … Yes, that field of information is stretched, but... sometimes me and sometimes [my spouse]."

This sense of identity is also tied to geographic embeddedness, particularly with affective attachment to the surrounding landscape, such as Gauja National Park. It also affects interactions with local actors, especially when their paths intersect with the participant's

professional role. In such cases, the participant emphasized the need for compromises that align conservation networks and community networks. For example, when a local individual is simultaneously situated outside conservation networks yet embedded in the community, the coexistence of both networks may require concessions or mutual adaptations rather than the dominance of one network over the other. In these situations, the participant, situated in the middle of several differing networks, becomes a mediator between them.

The participant also emphasized, on multiple occasions, a disidentification with certain formal credentials or professional identities grounded in scientific education related to the nature conservation field. For example, Lilija stated, "I'm not a geologist" or "I'm not a biologist". Such disclaimers and abnegations of the scientific viewpoint are treated as expressions illustrating an oppositional stance toward the scientific expert identity, as illustrated in the following Lilija's expression:

> "I'm not a biologist, nor a botanist, and therefore everything for me is through something more like a human prism, something like... am… often learning through doing or through experiencing. Also, that's why also I have that feeling that compromises need to be sought in many places, because it's impossible to exclude humans as such from nature."

This excerpt highlights the participant's hybrid positionality – being situated within a workplace that is in a dynamic co-constitutive relationship with scientific discourse and that simultaneously shapes and is re-shaped by shaping its employees' scientific expert identities, yet self-identifying in opposition to the scientific expert role, instead emphasizing personal and experiential knowledge. This dual stance enables the participant to mediate between the scientific discourse and possibly its perceived detachment from nature and a more personal, embodied engagement with and experience of nature.

Another identity that becomes apparent in the participant's reflections, notably, however, in references to the duties of the NCA's employees in general, rather than own responsibilities, is that of the managerial bureaucratic official. This role is embedded in the organization's identity as a governmental institution tasked with conservation through regulatory and administrative mechanisms. References related to this role emerged throughout the textual corpus gathered during the fieldwork, including interviews, informal conversations and participant observation sessions. These include mentions of documentation that has to be prepared, regulations that have to be followed, controlling practices that are carried out in the field, permissions of what can or cannot "be allowed" to do, as well as, but not limited to, reports on the progress of translational or other events. However, the participant in question, Lilija, who has already been described as enacting emotional, community member, scientific expert and oppositional-to-science identities, expressed sentiments, which can be more aligned

to an oppositional stance toward the managerial bureaucratic role. This is especially evident in her following expression:

> "What I... didn't like then, don't like still and I... that's my problem still – I don't like preparing reports. … I can make a content report without problems, but somehow as the years go by, I have less and less... the feeling that that report has some meaning and value. Although when working in the state administration and in our institution, with some measurable results set by the ministry, that report plays a key role – in the end how many lessons… did you do or... did you also write this, that this and that has been done, how many [press] releases, how many messages? But what is the quality of the process? The ministry doesn't care at all. At least that's how I feel right now. Because there have to be numbers, there have to be reports, [but] how did the whole process develop – qualitatively or with harm, or with some benefit? I feel that this is not being weighed up."

This reflection reveals the tension between a workplace-induced professional role and the participant's personal valuation of what constitutes meaningful work. Although the managerial bureaucratic role may be enacted to meet institutional expectations, it conflicts with the participant's personal identity, grounded in a more embodied engagement with their surroundings.

All of the aforementioned identities may coexist within a single individual who thereby occupies a hybrid positionality across overlapping networks of knowledge, meaning and authority. Importantly, these various identities do not necessarily always align with the individual's conscious self-perception or intentional positioning. While explicit disavowals of assuming the scientific expert role due to a lack of formal credentials and critical reflections on the perceived futility of bureaucratic tasks are consciously expressed, the use of scientific language may occur automatically, reflecting an unconscious absorption of the organization's overarching discourse.

It is also notable that at no point did the research participants, consciously or unconsciously, identify with an identity explicitly termed 'nature conservation specialist'. This supports the point that this designation does not correspond to a formally recognized professional identity and is not consciously embraced and experienced as such by the individuals themselves. The extent to which individuals could perceive themselves as nature conservation specialists as part of their lived professional identity is interwoven with multiple other identities, some personal, others induced by the workplace and its overarching orders of discourse. This reflects the complex and fluid nature of professional self-identification within the nature conservation field, which further impacts the individuals' relationship with nature through their various identities that inhabit overlapping networks.

5.8. Nonhuman intermediaries

Another aspect that contributes to the hybrid identity of people working in the nature conservation field as employees of the NCA is their integration with various technological and material objects that mediate their interactions with nature. Beyond standard office tools such as computers and printers, a key mediating instrument is the Nature Data Management System OZOLS (NDMS Ozols – *Oak*). This system functions as the central database for nature conservation, containing information on specially protected nature territories, micro-reserves, protected species and habitats, tourism infrastructure in protected nature territories, biodiversity monitoring data and other information relevant to nature protection (Nature Conservation Agency, 2020b). As such, the system is used in the daily work of various NCA employees, who either supplement its data or extract information from it, for example, details on territory delineations and designations, habitat types ascribed to specific areas, the area's dominant species, the noted presence of protected or invasive species, or other notable nature treasures. These cumulative designations create complex visual representations that resemble abstract art.

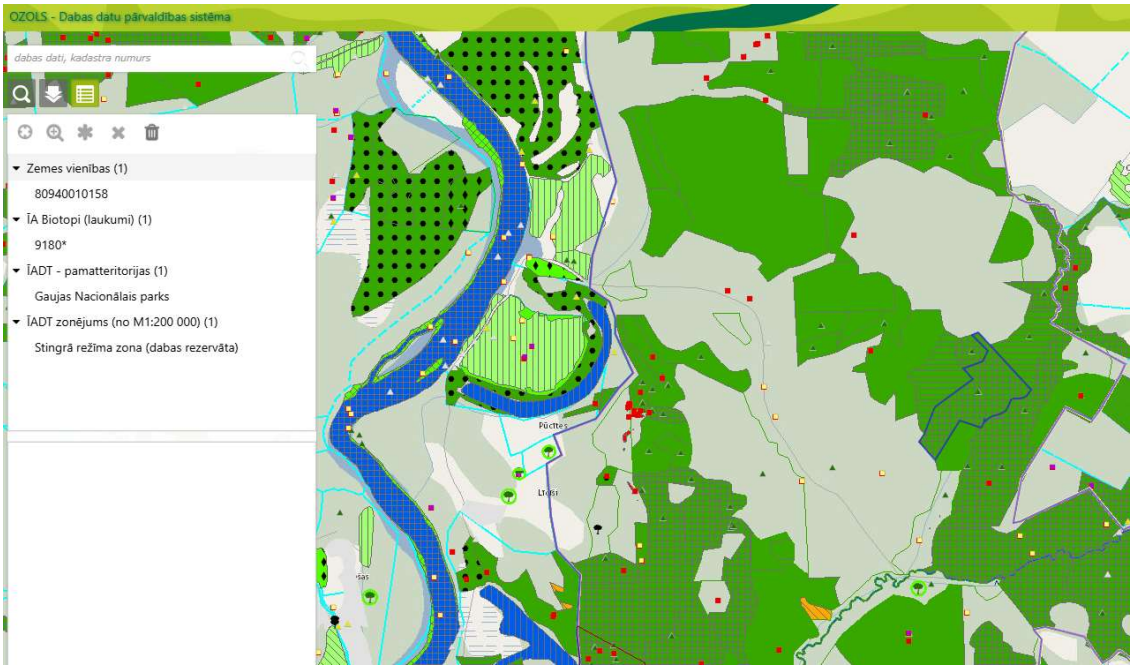

Figure 5.8.1. **Screenshot from the public version of NDMS Ozols illustrating the layers of inscriptions assigned to the plots of lands within Nurmižu Gravu Nature reserve.** *Source: OZOLS – Dabas datu pārvaldības sistēma (2025).*

Figure 5.8.1. exemplifies such an image, generated from overlapping layers of land plot and area designations and species data. It represents part of the Nurmižu Gravu Nature Reserve located between Sigulda and Līgatne in Gauja National Park, which is also marked under the

layer of Specially Protected Nature Territories – base area (*ĪADT – pamatteritorija*). The green areas represent various types of habitats (*ĪA Biotopi*), with the blue-circled area designated as 9180 habitat type (*Tilio-Acerion* forests of slopes, screes and ravines). The red and yellow squares represent noted locations of protected plant and bird species respectively, while the green triangles indicate the noted presence of other species of interest. The various patterns overlaying the green zones represent different types of conservation zoning (*ĪADT zonējums*) ascribed to the specific areas. In this case, the blue-circled area is classified as a strict regime zone (nature reserve).

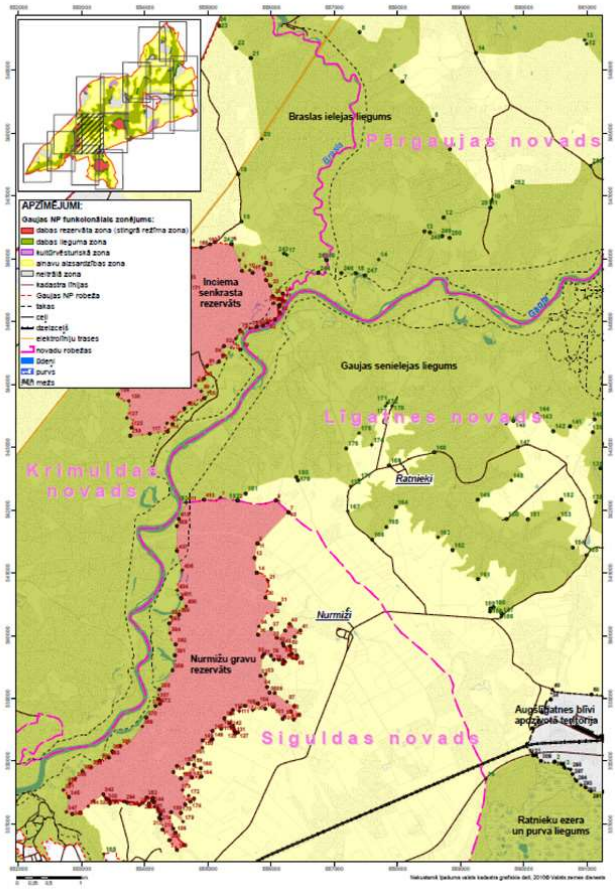

Figure 5.8.2. **The functional zone border scheme of Gauja National Park's Sector 9.** *Source: Nature Conservation Agency (2022).*

Another visual representation of nature inscriptions and delineations is provided in Figure 5.8.2., which illustrates the functional zone designations and their borders within Gauja National Park. This example, designated more for the public display rather than internal use by conservation specialists, illustrates the so-called Sector 9, containing the same Nurmižu Gravu Nature Reserve (marked as a red space in the bottom half) as shown in Figure 5.8.1., albeit at a

different scale. The zoomed-out map of Sector 9 also includes the Inciema Senkrasta Nature Reserve (marked as a red space around the middle of the map). For conservation specialists, however, the NDMS Ozols remains the primary tool for border and area designation related information.

The system, whose official designation is NDMS Ozols, is more commonly referred to simply as 'Ozols' (*Oak*). As observed during participant observation sessions, conservation specialists use the Oak both in preparation for and during fieldwork. In the field, the system is accessed via another technological medium – GPS-enabled tablets. For example, in one session, a participant asked their colleague to verify through the tablet – and by extension, the Oak – whether a specific habitat type had been marked for their current location. Upon learning that no such designation existed in the Oak, the participant remarked that during the next visit they will have to bring a survey with the intention to assign the appropriate habitat type to the specific area within the Oak. Thus, the on-site interactions with nature are mediated through tablet screens that visualize the system's colourful patterns of various spatial and ecological delineations and designations of the area that the specialist is at the moment located in. In this way, the Oak and the tablets act as nonhuman intermediaries that mediate and structure human interactions with nature. Nature is experienced through these tools, and conservation work is enacted through them.

Other tools that serve as intermediaries between conservation specialists and nature include legal documents such as laws, regulations, protocols and permits, which structure specialists' actions according to pre-established legal frameworks. Another essential tool is the car, which is necessary for carrying out fieldwork across the country. The use of cars also entails active communication with colleagues through scheduling logistics, collaboration in driving to the same or close by locations, as well as oversight mechanisms to ensure fair and efficient use. These patterns of sharing, collaboration with colleagues and institutional control are embedded in the daily work-life experience of conservation specialists, for whom access to a car is essential to fulfilling their fieldwork duties.

Another important intermediary is the camera, which plays a significant role in activities related to translational practices. Photographs of both nature and conservation activities are often used alongside descriptions and narratives to translate and explain conservation work to the public via platforms such as Facebook, the NCA website or individual project websites. Given the importance of translational work, creating photographs has become an important side-activity, which is at the front of the awareness, especially for those specialists whose tasks include translational practices.

Additionally, translational practices are carried out through physical signs embedded in the locality of a protected or otherwise valuable nature territories that have been equipped with tourism infrastructure. These signs typically display maps indicating protected territory boundaries and trails, along with information on most important species that inhabit the territory and the most prominent natural formations, for example, caves or cliffs. Booklets serve a similar function, providing information on specific protected territories, species or projects to explain the rationale behind conservation efforts, for example, the value behind framing such territories as protected or allocating a budget for such projects. These informational intermediaries, however, are primarily designed for the public and the conservation specialist involvement with them mostly consist of their production and design of the visual and textual content. Nevertheless, the conservation work is enacted also through these informational tools, which carry the intent and vision of conservation specialists in respect to their aims as intended with specific translational practices.

One of the most significant informational intermediaries produced by scientific experts and conservation specialists is the Red Data Book, which constitutes the most comprehensive list of endangered species in a particular country. This book introduces both the public and conservation specialists to species scientifically designated as 'endangered', along with their assessed level of endangerment. By being included in the Red Data Book, a species is elevated to the status of 'Red Data Book species', marking it as a more special species than those that have not been included. Importantly, inclusion in the book does not necessarily confer legal protection, as legal statuses vary and it might also be that a 'Red Data Book species' is not legally protected at all. Nonetheless, the Red Data Book serves as a significant marker of a species status and influences how both the public and conservation specialists perceive and engage with listed species.

In the case of the upcoming edition of the Latvian Red Data Book, a specific species linkage with the still unpublished book, and consequently, with the status of being endangered and thus more special than non-listed species, is communicated through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and project website that are used for distributing visual materials, with the aim of translating the species into concrete categories and statuses.

The visuals related to the upcoming Red Data Book are created in a way that not only convey a certain species' status as endangered, but also highlight the category of their endangerment, introduce the species by showcasing its pictures along with various data and information, as well as provide the visual representation of its distribution thorough Latvia. All together, these visual tools translate the species to networks outside the conservation field, make

the species more personal by introducing and explaining its various features, and instil upon it the designation of being endangered and vulnerable, in such a way delineating it from other species that have not been marked with such inscriptions, as well as conveying conservation priorities. Moreover, the species status is further reinforced by including a visual representation of its presence in Latvia, which originates from the database *Oak*.

An example of such visuals is presented in Figure 5.8.3., which features a detailed factual data sheet for the Eurasian pygmy owl, supplemented with images of the species to foster a more personal connection with the species. The Eurasian pygmy owl has also been designated as the 'Species of the Month of March' with its visual presentation accompanied by a prominent marker indicating its endangerment category – VU, denoting the category of 'Vulnerable'. Additionally, the images, visual designations and factual information are supplemented with the species distribution map marking all the recorded nesting places of the Eurasian pygmy owl.

Figure 5.8.3. **Left: Factual data sheet for the Eurasian pygmy owl. Top right: Instagram photo highlighting the species' assigned endangerment category – VU (Vulnerable). Bottom right: Map showing the species' distribution.** *Source: Latvijas Sarkanā grāmata (2025a, 2025b).*

Conservation specialists have a mutually co-constructive relationship with the Red Data Book as they contribute to its creation and use it as a tool for translational practices and for enrolling new actors into conservation networks. Moreover, the designation of a species as endangered can influence how specialists perceive and interact with it in practice.

All of the aforementioned technologies, tools, objects and forms of documentation function as nonhuman intermediaries mediating human-nature interactions. Conservation work is materially and discursively enacted through these nonhuman actors, which have become active participants in the conservation network by influencing and transforming relationships among its participants. For instance, the Oak is not merely a passive database as it actively shapes how nature is known, monitored and governed. It determines what counts as relevant data and visualizes nature inscriptions and categories through which the value of nature in terms of conservation is assessed. As such, the Oak mediates the relationship between conservation specialists and the nature they interact with. The system inscribes certain ways of seeing and interacting with nature, aligning the work of diverse conservation specialists, including field, habitat and species experts, cartographers, educational specialists more involved with the translational practices, specialists more involved with policy making and other roles, through shared datasets and their visualizations. As Latour has pointed out, human and nonhuman actors can merge into hybrids that perform an action in a bound union. The described intermediaries illustrate that conservation work is enacted from such human-nonhuman hybrid positionalities, where human action is mediated through technologies, tools, classifications and documents.

Furthermore, these intermediaries are not neutral. Digital databases, their visualizations, maps, signs indicating boundaries, designations, layers of nature inscriptions, species distributions, etc., enact particular realities while obscuring others. For example, they emphasize what is measurable over less tangible values such as aesthetic qualities. Similarly, in the case of species distribution maps, they represent only those locations, which have been recorded by individuals that combine knowledge of the species designation, access and knowledge of digital tools and the willingness to put work into combining this knowledge and access into the action of registering the species. Therefore, these species distribution maps are visualizations of moments when such hybrid actors have simultaneously been located at the same place and time as the specific species, rather than representing a comprehensive or accurate account of species distribution.

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropological scholarship has long critiqued the Western division of Nature and Culture as separate entities, instead arguing for a relational model in which nature is conceived as an evolving, co-constitutive space of human and nonhuman actor entanglements, which is culturally and historically situated (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Descola, 2013; Strathern, 1980; Haraway, 2003, 2008; Latour, 1993, 2004; Ingold, 2000). Within the concept of human-nonhuman relational agency, which manifests through hybrid formations of co-constructed entities, nonhumans are considered as social actors alongside humans (Latour, 2004). Through ongoing relational mutually constitutive dynamics between humans and nonhumans, which continuously exist in a shared, co-constructed world, nature is reimagined from a rigid, separate entity to a dynamic collective (Latour, 2004) or an ongoing process of continually coming into being (Ingold, 2000).

In nature conservation discourse, approaches that emphasize nonhuman agency, the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems and the recognition of knowledge arising from locally situated, embodied practices have emerged as ways of engaging with the reimagined nature (Pyhälä, 2024; Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina, 2016; Ingold, 2000). The discourses on nature and nature conservation are shaped by various dominant narratives and hegemonic knowledge structures that have contributed to the erosion of locally situated, relational ways of interacting with nature and the marginalization of alternative ways of knowing (Arendt, 1958; Roessler, 2023; Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021; Terry et al., 2024). However, scholars have emphasized that embodied, place-based interactions with nature may also give rise to such lived experiences and situated forms of knowledge that coexist with and challenge broader ideological discourses (Bolotova, 2014).

Drawing on these anthropological debates and critical analyses that reimagine nature as a dynamically co-constitutive space emerging in relation to humans, and recognizing that this relational model has direct implications for conservation discourse and practices, this thesis approaches **the research question – how nature conservation specialists experience and conceptualize nature, and how this experience transforms over time** – through the lens of Actor-network theory (ANT), supported by critical discourse analysis. In alignment with ANT's sensibilities, this thesis prioritizes the descriptive exploration of relationships and assemblages of various human and nonhuman entities that shape nature conservation specialists' experiences and conceptualizations of nature, rather than pursuing definitive conclusions or claims. Particular attention is paid to subject roles and positionality, translational

work, nature inscription practices and the role of nonhuman mediators. The conceptualization's transformation through time is examined as a dimension of experience through temporality. Meanwhile, the critical discourse analysis allows the examination of the broader ideological and institutional order of discourse's impact on the conservation specialist experience. The examination of institutional and political contexts that appear within research participants' articulated experiences allows assessment of how these broader orders of discourse influence the experience of nature.

Key insights from the research include:

- The NCA, through its ongoing structural evolution and due to its overarching order of discourse and institutional identity as a scientific and managerial body, is an actor shaping the identities, roles and decisions of its employees. The dominant institutional orders of discourse are scientific and managerial-bureaucratic, with the latter often grounded in science-based regulations, thus the scientific discourse takes precedence.
- "Nature conservation specialist" is a designation of an employee of the NCA that does not correspond to a formally recognized professional identity and is not consciously embraced and experienced as such by the individuals themselves. Instead, the lived professional identity of these individuals is constituted from several dynamically interwoven and at times contested personal and workplace-induced identities that are shaped by situated, embodied practices and broader orders of discourse. This fluid assemblage positions the specialist as a hybrid actor embedded within overlapping networks of authority and knowledge.
- The conservation specialist's positionality as an employee of the NCA, or previously GNP, has been deeply tied to local embeddedness and affective community bonds with fellow colleagues, their families and own families. During the GNP period, family members were highly immersed into the GNP-employee collective, fostering both an affective attachment to workplace and a blended sense of self where the work-related stories and memories of family members overlapped. The sense of community and togetherness was primarily fostered through recurrent clean-up events and other forms of collective gatherings.
- Conservation specialists perform translational work as spokespersons of the scientific discourse that shapes the conservation logic and nature inscriptions. Translational practices, nature inscriptions and scientific discourse co-exist in a

dynamic relationship as the inscriptions are based on scientific logics and translational practices involve these inscriptions to explain the conservation logic in order to enrol outsiders into the conservation networks.

- Material intermediaries such as the database Oak, tablets, maps and documents do not take a secondary place to human activity as they themselves are essential actors in conservation networks, participating in the construction, stabilization and transformation of human-nature relationships. They enable coordination across space and time, align diverse actors under common frameworks and inscribe particular realities of nature into human consciousness and practice. Their interaction with humans creates hybrids that enact the conservation practices through these intermediaries.
- Science-based nature inscriptions, mediated through these human-nonhuman hybrids, construct a particular reality of nature, which is experienced both by conservation specialists and those on the margins of conservation networks.
- Scientific discourse is contested when the science-based nature inscriptions do not align with embodied perceptions, sensory experiences or historically rooted understandings of nature. In such cases, embodied knowledge challenges the hegemony of scientific rationality, which is supported by translational work.
- When the embodied ways of knowing contest the institutional order of discourse based on science, the hybrid positionality of nature conservation specialists facilitates their ability to navigate between institutional and public discourses. Their capacity to perceive from an outsider's perspective enhances the effectiveness of their translational practices, allowing them to reframe scientific discourse in accessible terms.
- Consciously expressed conceptualizations of nature tend to reflect the enacted institutional discourses and the professional identities as performed during the creation of the analysed textual corpus. Meanwhile, nature's material agency emerges more often through unconscious expressions, suggesting that nature shapes conservation specialists' actions and experiences even when its influence is not explicitly acknowledged.
- Temporality and change over time were primarily associated with a personal sense of temporal flow, framed in relation to personal life stages, such as youth, family and employment, rather than in connection with political or broader historical changes. Organizational changes were associated with a loss of the sense of

community, diminished relevance of articulating a definite professional role and increased importance of self-reliance and universal, practical skills that contest the workplace as actor's influence over the employee. The broader sense of continual change appeared to eclipse all the temporal delineations.

- Broader ideological influences, such as socialism and capitalism, and their shifts ultimately did not manifest in the experiences of the research participants. Nevertheless, the growing emphasis on scientific terminology and data, the use of material intermediaries in conservation work, the prevalence of managerial discourse through control mechanisms and identity formulations, such as 'officials', all suggest that the shift toward capitalism has fostered more alienated interactions with nature. These changes have shaped the experiences of nature through new hybrid forms of actor entanglements and identity designations. Furthermore, ongoing organizational changes, as a form of small-scale globalisation, have contributed to this alienation by distancing individuals from localized, affective engagement with nature within work collectives.

In summary, conservation specialists experience nature from hybrid positionalities, situated within complex relational entanglements with material intermediaries that shape their interactions with and experience of nature. Their relationship with nature is dynamically evolving and mutually co-constructive, resulting in a hybrid entanglement in which both human and nonhuman actors are continuously constituted through their interactions. These experiences are further shaped by broader institutional discourses, particularly scientific discourse, which permeate professional identities, nature inscription practices, translational work and linguistic patterns. The influence of science legitimizes management and conservation actions through data-driven rationales, manifesting in science-based nature inscriptions, classifications and delineations. Nature is thus known through naming and a variety of tools that manifest this naming, with nature inscriptions, nonhuman intermediaries and human actors collectively constructing the realities through which nature is experienced. As Haraway has described dogs as "fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience" (2003, p. 5), so too can the experience of nature in the professional lives of conservation specialists be described as a material-semiotic presence embodied in the material artifacts of their work.

Meanwhile, the rise of managerial-bureaucratic institutional identity and ongoing organizational changes have disrupted the affective dimension of work-life within the conservation field. The increasing emphasis on efficiency and administrative controls has

prompted conservation specialists to immerse in their individual duties, resulting in alienation from earlier togetherness, which was mostly experienced and reproduced through joint activities, such as clean-up events or informal gatherings. Consequently, the broader managerial-bureaucratic discourse might have reshaped conservation work from embodied, affective place-based interactions with nature toward more alienated form of interacting through controlling mechanisms and documentation.

This research illustrates that nature indeed is not a discrete, separate entity, but rather a contextually variable construct that comes into being through interconnected entanglements of human and nonhuman actors and intermediaries. The experience of this fluid hybrid space is shaped by positionalities, modes of embodied or detached engagement and prevailing institutional discourses. However, embodied and affective ways of knowing and experiencing nature may coexist with, and even challenge, dominant scientific or managerial-bureaucratic discourses. The hybrid actor positionality, in which situated and dominant ways of knowing and experiencing overlap, enables conservation specialists to resist hegemonic discourses and engage in translational work with individuals outside conservation, and effectively scientific discourse, networks. However, a persistent challenge remains: the entities subject to translation are deeply permeated by scientific discourse, and thus, situated ways of knowing and hybrid actor positionalities may be insufficient to fully account for and translate science-based logics that are not grounded in embodied ways of experiencing.

The insights gained from this research contribute to understanding how conservation specialists experience and conceptualize nature through overlapping networks, positionalities and assemblages of human and nonhuman entities, and how these experiences evolve alongside broader institutional discourses. However, the relatively small number of research participants and the focus on employees that have been employed already since the early periods of GNP suggest that further research could significantly enrich the described perceptions and experiences of nature. Furthermore, while the ANT framework provided valuable tools for exploring human-nonhuman relationships, alternative theoretical approaches, such as multispecies ethnography for affective and interspecies dynamics, practice theory for routine embodied action, or the sociology of scientific knowledge for the social construction of scientific facts, could offer further insights, particularly given the centrality of scientific discourse in nature conservation.

While this thesis has explored the nature conservation specialist experiences and conceptualizations of nature, it remains unanswered how effectively these experiences and conceptualizations through the translational work enrol the public into conservation networks

and foster participation. Future applied research could focus on the narratives disseminated through translational work and their alignment with the experiences and understandings of those outside conservation, and consequently scientific discourse, networks. As highlighted in the introduction, recognizing local communities and the public as co-creators of conservation knowledge and practice, and including them in conservation networks, is essential for more effective conservation outcomes. Achieving alignment among conservation specialists, local communities and the public requires more nuanced research into the experiences and conceptualizations of nature held by these groups. Finally, as the authority of any discourse or knowledge structure can be critically examined, future research might also address what constitutes conservation work and the vision for a sustainable future for human-nonhuman or multispecies entanglements.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Interview guidelines

1. **Nature protection.** *The aim of these questions is to establish rapport with the research participant and to contextualize the creation, purpose, and evolution of Gauja National Park (GNP) within Latvia's environmental, historical and socio-political framework.*
   - Why was Gauja National Park (GNP) created?
   - Why was it created here, in this area?
   - Why is the word "national" in the name of the park?
   - How good or bad was nature here when GNP was created?
   - Was there any place in Latvia where there was a greater need for a protected area of this kind in 1973 (the year GNP was established)?
   - Is there currently a natural area in Latvia that should be protected but is not yet protected?

2. **The first years of the research participant's employment in Gauja National Park (GNP).** *The aim of this set of questions is to uncover the personal, professional and cultural experiences of research participants' early working years at GNP and their historic nature experience, as a way to understand how their conceptualizations of nature and conservation practices were shaped in a historic setting and how they may have evolved over time. The questions aim to surface the narratives, meanings and ideologies embedded in the research participants' reflections.*
   - Why did you start working in GNP?
   - Do you remember your first day at GNP?
   - What was a typical working day at GNP in its early years? What was it that you did in the first years [of your employment] and a little later? What influenced your job responsibilities?
   - What are the most vivid memories or events from the early years of GNP [or your employment in GNP]?
   - Did you have to learn any new job responsibilities?
   - What tools or equipment were used at that time?
   - What did you like most and least about your job then? Did you want to change jobs?
   - What was the group of your fellow employees (*darba kolektīvs*) like then? Where were you located and how did you work together? Were there any common holidays (*svētki*) that you celebrated?
   - Are there any work-related traditions that started in the early years of GNP and are still continued today? Were there any traditions that died out over time?
   - Did you face any difficulties or obstacles in your daily work? Did anything dangerous ever happen?

- Are the job responsibilities now [at the NCA] more or less meaningful compared to GNP times?

3. **The involvement of public in nature conservation.** *This set of questions is designed to explore the social, spatial and participatory dimensions of nature conservation in GNP, focusing on how research participants' relationships with landscape, society's involvement, and conservation practices were experienced and how these experiences have evolved over time. These questions aim to uncover how discourses of nature, community, responsibility and public engagement were articulated historically and are articulated today.*
   - What were people's [park visitors'] favourite places in GNP at that time?
   - Which are people's [park visitors'] favourite places in GNP now?
   - How were the clean-ups in GNP organised? How did people come to the clean-ups? Were there rest breaks during the clean-ups?
   - Where were the clean-ups organised?
   - How did the park get on with the local population at that time?
   - How does the park get on with the local population now?
   - What was the cooperation like with tourists - did they help or hinder the work?
   - Did the job duties involve collecting rubbish from forests or other places? Were there clean-ups organised to collect litter?

4. **Wildlife.** *This set of questions is designed to investigate how animals and plants were perceived, valued and managed in GNP in its early years and over time, revealing deeper insights into the research participant conceptualization of nature as a manageable entity. These questions aim to trace how the research participants personally and through their role as employees of the NCA experience such concepts as species abundance or rarity, human role in shaping nature, symbolic or political dimensions of nature, human-animal relations, and how these concepts reflect broader ideological, ecological and political discourses. These questions aim to reveal how species are constructed discursively as desirable, problematic, charismatic or symbolic, and the relationship of these constructs to conservation ideologies and practice of the time. They also help to illuminate the moral and ecological prisms through which research participants understand and conceptualize.*
   - In the early years/decades of the park, was there any animal that seemed to be too much or too little in the park?
   - Was there an effort to increase/reduce its quantity?
   - In the early years/decades of the park, was there any plant that seemed to be too much or too little in the park?

- Was there an effort to increase/reduce its quantity?
- Was there any animal in the early years/decades of the park that had a special/different approach?
- Was there any plant in the early years/decades of the park that had a special/different approach?
- How was hunting carried out in the park at that time?
- Have you encountered any rare animals during your work?
- Have there been any other memorable encounters with animals?
- Has the behaviour of the animals changed over time?

5. **Forests and landscapes.** *This set of questions aims to examine how individual attachments to nature, daily management practices, and nature conservation ideologies are constructed and reproduced in the discursive event. It aims to uncover how research participants narrate their roles as nature conservation specialists, caretakers, users or co-inhabitants of nature, and how these roles are shaped by both the institutional role and order of discourse and personal values.*
   - What is your favourite place in Latvian nature, where do you like to visit, linger?
   - And in the territory of GNP?
   - Do you manage to go to the forest outside of work duties? For what purpose?
   - In the early years of GNP, was attention paid to the dumping of waste in forests?
   - How were the forests protected against fire? And how were meadows or other places protected?
   - Did you also plant forests as part of your work duties? How was it carried out?
   - What was done with large trees at that time?
   - What was done at that time with felled or fallen trees in forests, near [tourist] trails or in urban areas?

6. **Later years of the research participant's work in GNP, changes in the working environment.** *This set of questions is designed to elicit narratives and articulations about institutional change, professional identity and political context, and they attempt to reveal how research participant experience of nature and their roles is shaped by shifting power relations, policy regimes and discursive formations. By analysing how research participants talk about the experienced change – also, for example, what they emphasize or where they hesitate – these questions aim to reveal how experiences of nature, employment and conservation practice have shifted across different political regimes – Soviet period, independent Latvian state, and EU membership – and how these shifts are reflected in research participants' articulations, identities and perceptions of their roles.*
   - What is a typical working day like now?

- What do you like most about your job at the moment?
- What is missing from the early years of GNP [or the early years of your employment]?
- How are the clean-ups currently organised in GNP and other territories?
- Has GNP changed from what it was and what it is now?
- What has changed most in your work, comparing GNP in its early years [or the early years of your employment] and your current job responsibilities? What have these changes consisted of?
- How have technological developments affected your work?
- Have changes of the park's directors affected your work?
- How were the park's directors chosen before independence? And after?
- What changed in your job responsibilities and daily routine when Latvia became independent?
- Did anything change in your job responsibilities and daily routine after Latvia joined the EU?
- What was the feeling before the referendum - should Latvia have joined the EU?

7. Concluding questions.

- Are there any other vivid memories from the early or later days of GNP, or anything else you would like to share or add?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 2 – Figures A-G presenting summaries of segments coded in MAXQDA

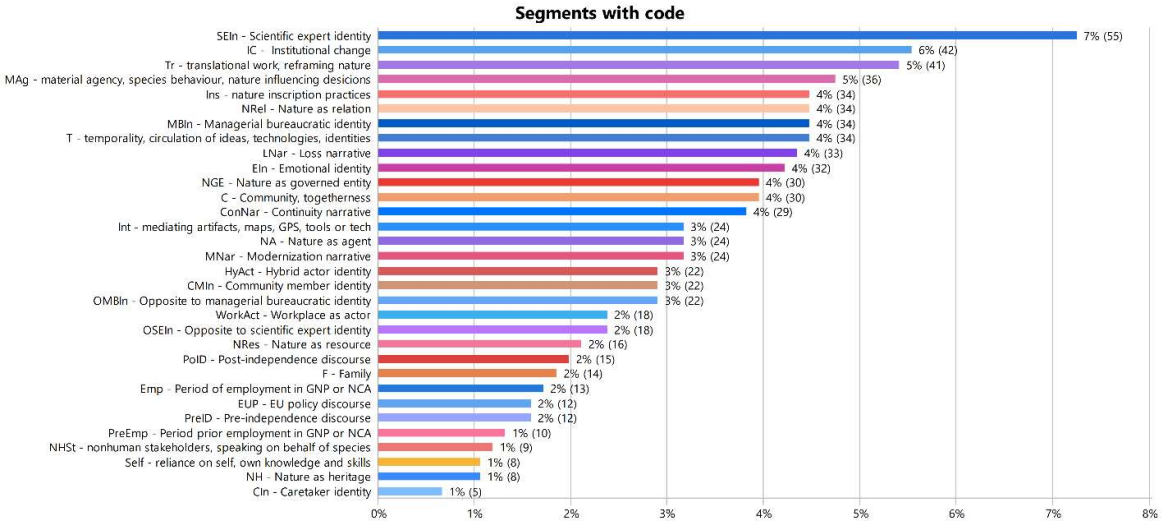

Figure A. **Bar chart generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

Figure B. **Code cloud generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

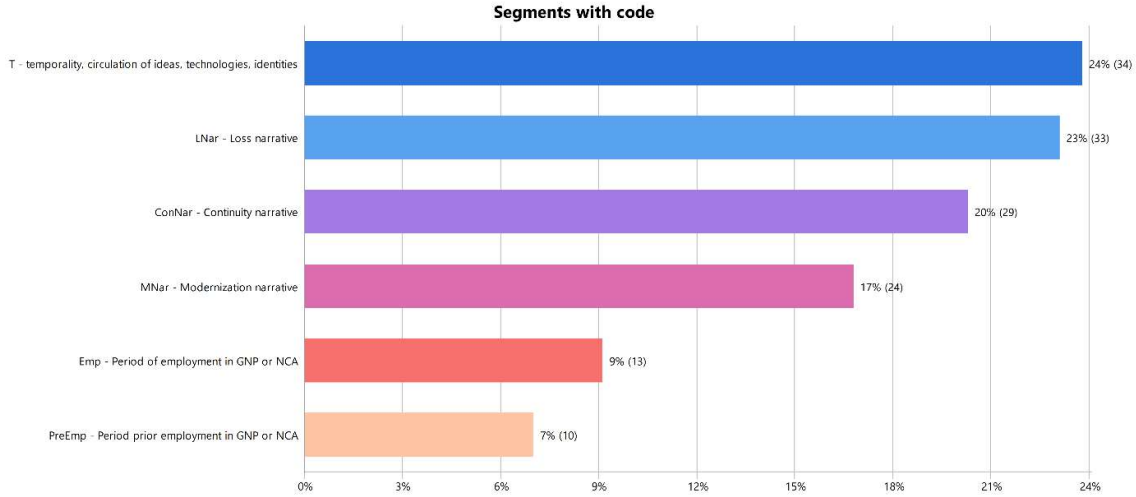

Figure C. **Bar chart generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes within the thematic category "Change over time" identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

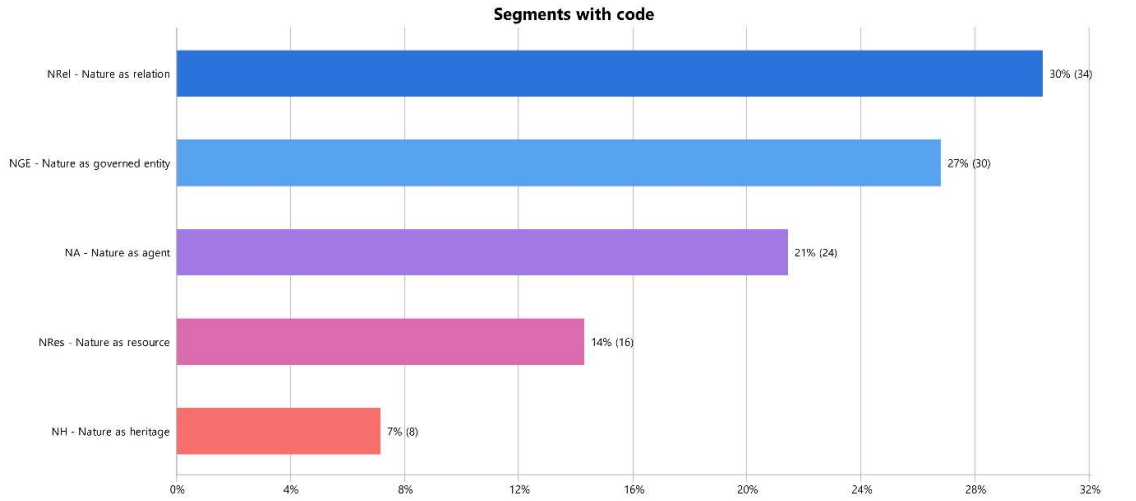

Figure D. **Bar chart generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes within the thematic category "Conceptualization of nature" identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

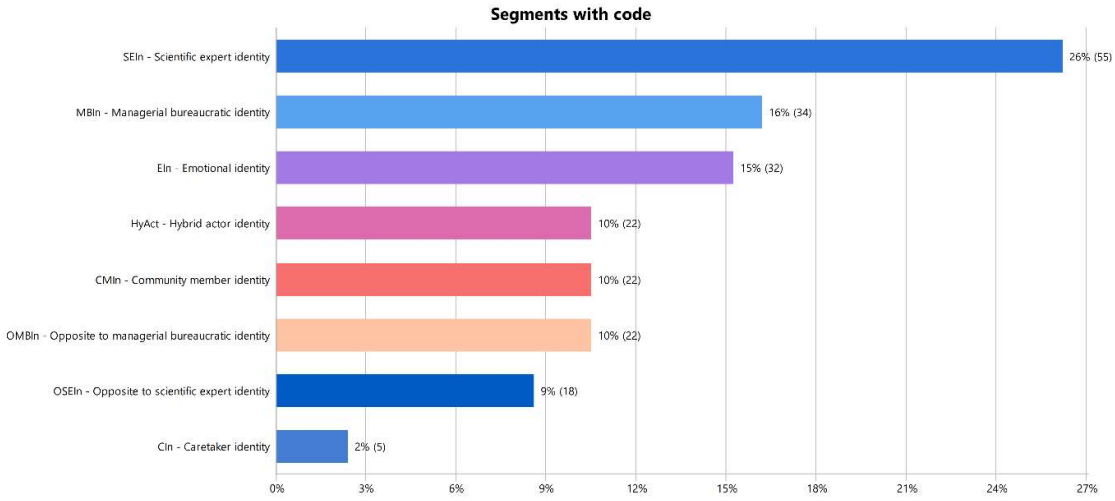

Figure E. **Bar chart generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes within the thematic category "Subject role and identity" identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

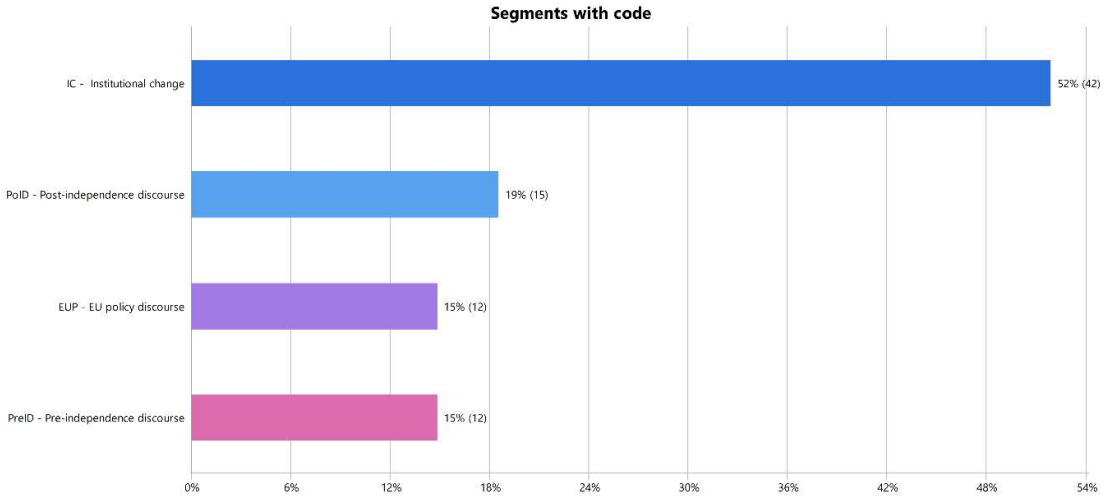

Figure F. **Bar chart generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the comparative frequency of codes within the thematic category "Institutional and Political contexts" identified in the textual corpus.** Author's archive.

Figure G. **Table generated with MAXQDA, illustrating the number of coded segment intersections.** Author's archive.

The master's thesis with the title of „Experiencing Nature From Past to Present: The Perspective of Nature Conservation Specialists" ("Dabas pieredzēšana no pagātnes līdz mūsdienām: dabas aizsardzības speciālistu perspektīva" in Latvian) was produced at the University of Latvia's Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences.

I hereby confirm that the research was conducted independently and only the referenced resources have been used. Further, electronic copy is identical to the submitted printed copy of the thesis.

The length of the thesis (from introduction till conclusions) is 185575 characters, including spaces and excluding footnotes).

Author: _____ Anete Dzērve

(signature)

I hereby confirm that I recommend this thesis for defence:

The supervisor: Assoc. prof. Aivita Putniņa, PhD _____

(signature)

03.06.2025

Reviewer: docent Zane Linde-Ozola, PhD_____

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The thesis was submitted at the Department of Social Sciences 03.06.2025.

Person authorised by the dean: study coordinator Margarita Lutere _____

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The thesis was defended on 10.06.2025.

Defence commission protocol No. _____

Defence commission secretary: lecturer Māra Neikena _____

(signature)