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CULTURAL PLANNING AS A PARTICIPATORY METHOD FOR RESOURCE PERIPHERIES: THE CASE OF PEAT EXTRACTION IN ILOMANTSI, FINLAND

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CULTURAL PLANNING AS A PARTICIPATORY METHOD FOR RESOURCE PERIPHERIES: THE CASE OF PEAT EXTRACTION IN ILOMANTSI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates public participation in spatial planning in Ilomantsi, a peripheral mining region in Finland facing both underground gold mining and peat extraction. While peat extraction has a significant environmental impact and is targeted for phase–out under EU sustainability and Just Transition policies, local opinions are divided: some see resource extraction as an economic lifeline, others prioritise ecological restoration. The research draws on the Bog 2.0 project, which implements comprehensive sustainability by integrating ecological, socio–economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Empirical data were collected through action research and interviews in order to explore perceptions of environmental impact and participatory processes. Findings show that, despite Finland's strong democratic traditions, formal participation is often dominated by a few active voices, leaving many residents uncertain and underrepresented. To address this, the study examines cultural empowerment, an action research approach combining historical mapping, interviews, and participatory cultural activities – such as theatre, a short film, and cultural branding – to broaden dialogue and co–create shared understanding. Early applications suggest that this method enhances residents' sense of belonging, legitimises them as stakeholders, and fosters more inclusive, context–sensitive planning. The chapter highlights both the challenges and potential of integrating innovative participatory approaches into sustainability transitions in peripheral resource–dependent communities.

Keywords: cultural empowerment; public participation; action research; resource extraction; Finland; Ilomantsi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the challenges and promises of public participation in spatial planning in a peripheral mining region in Finland, where, in addition to underground gold mining, there are also plans and debates concerning extensive peat extraction[1]. Peat is considered a non–renewable resource in EU policy, thereby to be scaled down, yet the extraction of peat is being discussed locally and in relation to a state–owned company operating in the case study region. We focus on the municipality of Ilomantsi, where the use of natural resources has sparked conflicts. While formal processes for public participation in spatial planning and resource extraction are considered to be well–developed, participating in public hearings has been regarded as difficult. To overcome such challenges, there are innovative schemes to improve participatory approaches in the planning phase. We focus on the approach of cultural planning, by which we mean empowerment of the local population through the reconstruction of community representation and identity. The research implements the idea of comprehensive sustainability with a cultural materialist approach according to which even the most everyday activity has a cultural dimension (e.g. Thompson, et al., 2016). This means that culture, rather than being a separate pillar, creates a link between different technological, economic and social elements of sustainability. Our research focus is twofold: How do citizens view their possibilities for participation when plans are being made for resource extraction in the Finnish peripheral context, and what does this say about the cultural variety of the community? We proceed by exploring the situation and the challenges of public participation in spatial and resource use planning in Finland, after which we examine the notion of cultural planning, present the case study locality and the research methods, and move to our findings, discussion and conclusions.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SPATIAL PLANNING IN FINLAND AND ITS CRITICISMS

The possibilities of public participation in decision–making generally depend on and are driven by the performance of local government, the degree of democracy and freedom of speech, and the traditions of civic engagement (e.g. Ringov & Zollo, 2007), and they vary across Europe (Kotilainen et al., 2011). Formal participation in spatial planning has emerged over several decades in Finland and has been extended to cover the environmental impact of development projects. It can be said that behind the models for participation lies a Nordic and European idea of democracy with citizens' strong role in decision–making. Citizens should not be seen merely as the targets of public administration, rather the ultimate decision–making power should lie with them. Individual activity and voluntarism are cherished in Nordic societies relatively more than traditional community and family values, something considered

[1] This chapter draws on the results of the research project Bog 2.0, funded by the EU's Just Transition Fund, which aims to phase out local peat production and peat–based energy use so that no one suffers more from the transition than others.

to be more typical in southern Europe (de Broms, 2005). According to the European Value Survey (EVS), there is an established national tradition in Finland regarding citizens' political rights and democratic processes, with a high level of trust in public institutions amongst the citizens (Galland & Lamel, 2017). Nevertheless, the purpose of people's participation in spatial planning has varied according to different theoretical planning models (Arnstein, 1969; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2009).

The guidelines for participation in spatial planning and environmental impact assessments have been formalised in several laws in Finland. Finnish legislation partly follows the directives and decrees set at the level of the European Union, especially concerning environmental impact. In short, when a local or regional administration prepares a plan for the development of urban space, they have to allow the citizens to have their say. This applies to a lesser degree in rural spaces, such as waterfronts, where a physical plan also needs to be prepared. Participation has to be incorporated at certain stages in the preparation of spatial plans. The authority responsible for elaborating the plan needs to inform the local residents of the ideas for the plan, and the same authority has to arrange hearings in the neighbourhood in which the development is to take place. These hearings are open events, and anyone participating is allowed to comment on the plan. Moreover, those concerned are able to make a written complaint regarding the plan. The pertinent law in this regard is the Land Use and Construction Law (1999), which is currently in the governmental and parliamentary process of being transformed into the Law on the Use of Regions with the introduction of the Building Law (2023) that came into force in 2025. Despite these formal guidelines, the role of citizens' participation compared to the role of experts is complex (Bäcklund et al., 2017).

The Law on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure (2017) and the above mentioned legislations on planning are important for the mining of minerals. After a lengthy exploration procedure by a mining company, once it has been estimated that a mineral deposit will most likely be profitable for the company to start mining operations, under current legislation, the municipality needs to start the process of preparing a physical plan. Here come all the phases of participation by the citizens and anyone concerned with the project. The situation is different for peat extraction, however, because even though it is the extraction of a non–renewable resource, it is not formally considered mining. This can be conceived as one of the challenging aspects to citizens' participation in the planning of peat extraction projects.

In Finland, people's generally high level of trust in institutions and authorities creates a foundation for formal participation and consultation methods during spatial and resource use planning. In principle, the participatory system is well–organised, and the processes are smooth. However, relations between citizens may become unnecessarily formalised with a formal system for participation that does not guarantee people are genuinely listened to, with their voices influencing the planning process or the construction of extractive infrastructures (Arnstein, 1969; Pettersson et al., 2017). Furthermore, the role assigned to a region as an administrative unit in relation to a natural resource industry can be very narrow and also limit people's agency, since

regional administrations in regions with natural resources to be exploited, but with fewer opportunities to develop other industries, tend to align with industrial actors and favour resource extraction (Kotilainen, 2021a). Moreover, peripheral regions with natural resource extraction have a tendency to follow longer–term industry life cycles (Halonen et al., 2015), which contributes to the local culture being industry–related. In addition, peripheral industrial companies have a history of practising paternalistic welfare policies and taking care of cultural activities, education, and healthcare for employees and their families (Häyrynen et al., 2012). This has strengthened the industries' social license to operate as well as their position as an opinion leader locally and regionally, which is still seen today in local cultures, even if the height of paternalism may have passed with more neo–liberal policies in place in natural resource industries.

This legacy is part of the historical context in our case study locality, impacting the inhabitants' willingness to express their opinions publicly. Many locals may feel that while there are plenty of formal hearings, there are fewer real possibilities to influence decision–making on the use of natural resources. Therefore, a limited number of active members of the local community may hold sway, causing a power asymmetry. Hence, the European Union's formal Just Transition mechanism for sustainability (European Commission, 2021) is often dominated by one institutionalised idea of nature that also determines whose justice is at stake and which voices are marginalised. From the residents' perspective, the question of the impact of participation in planning is the central problem. The core of the criticism is that residents' opinions do not influence the content of plans – especially in contradictory cases. This is a kind of paradox of inclusion where the participation of the same people repeatedly becomes a problem. The most active and loudest people participate and, as a result, the representativeness of opinions can be questioned (Arola, 2002). The institutionalised division of roles in the public sphere polarises the image of the community, while, in contrast, the community itself is usually much more diverse, with people ready to change their positions on issues related to natural resources. In order to explore how to overcome this challenge in public participation, i.e. the difficulty of having all the voices heard and counted, we next discuss the concepts of cultural planning and cultural empowerment.

3. CULTURAL PLANNING AND CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT

Cultural planning is an action research method that aims to broaden the scope of participatory dialogues and facilitate the co–creation of a common understanding in the context of community transformations within global transformations (O'Connor, 2013; Koskinen–Koivisto & Kumpulainen, 2024). The method has been applied especially to urban environments in Western countries (Stevenson, 2005; Bianchini, 2013) on the one hand, and to the rights and empowerment of indigenous people and ethnic groups (Mercer, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2025), on the other hand. Cultural planning has been adopted in a range of localities with the purpose of empowering the whole community during transformative change (Häyrynen & Hankonen, 2024). It is our aim to explore how the method of cultural planning might be used to improve

the recognition of local people as credible stakeholders in the larger institutional framework, thereby empowering them in the planning process.

According to Bianchini (2013), local cultural resources include the arts, media, leisure, entertainment, religious activities, spiritual sites, local meeting places, landscapes, and value chains of creative production. More dynamically, cultures have been understood as collective cognitive processes, as well as relevance structures that individual members of a group use to assess collective values and be identified by other individuals (Thompson et al., 2016). Cultural resources are regarded as tools for representing individual connections to larger cultures. In the case of transformative changes, culture determines the different reactions of a community to previously unknown phenomena, and how diversified the community gets in such a situation.

Cultural planning begins with cultural mapping in a locality. The core issue is twofold: How is cultural stratification in a locality recognised as a basis for decision–making (cultural stakeholder recognition), and how is stratification taken into account in creating a situational review in the locality (cultural stakeholder consultation)? Empowerment in planning means managing cultural impacts in a balanced way so that everyone in the community feels included in the processes during which decisions are made. Attention should be paid to three aspects in particular: the rigidities of the established cultural perception, the inclusiveness of cultural mapping and barriers to participation, and the continuity of cultural planning and especially its long–term organisation. In cases of a community in transition[2], institutionally established perceptions of culture have proven to be exploitable for various commercial and political interests (Häyrynen, 2017). An institutionally dominant notion of community culture may emphasise a nostalgic and selective view of the past and narrow the community's interpretation of the meaning of nature accordingly. In mining communities, for example, the external image of a local culture is usually dominated by a single, strongly institutionalised interpretation of mining history with strict gender, generational and other functional roles conditioned by mining activities (e.g. Pattison, 1999). Institutional representations of culture tend to reproduce prevailing structures and diminish multicultural dynamics in the community. Thus, a community's cultural image may become unnecessarily unanimous, preventing people from recognising their own personal cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, cultural planning is needed to reconstruct the local cultural image to reflect its true diversity and reveal hidden aspects of the inhabitants' inclusion. Such an approach is based herein on the materialist concept of culture represented by British cultural researchers Raymond Williams (e.g. 1981) and Paul Willis (e.g. 2000), among others. According to the cultural materialist view, everyone has culture, so the concept of culture itself would not be a quality criterion. It provides a cultural perspective that expands beyond the institutional framework and characterises a

[2] By a community in transition, we mean a local community that is going through a process of shifting its economic base, which is impacted by local, national and global economic processes alike, and which further impacts on the social and gradually cultural aspects in the community (Vatanen & Kotilainen, 2016; Kotilainen, 2018; Kotilainen, 2021b).

community as diverse, with different values and relationships with nature overlapping with working life, everyday life, and various relations to the world outside. However, it may become a problem if an analysis that focuses on such an extensive scope of culture leads to an unstable foundation for planning (Stevenson, 2005). Thus, a balance should be found between culture conceived as institutionalised, on the one hand, and as based on the ways of life, on the other hand.

In order to capture the diversity of a community in a transformative phase, cultural planning involves the cultural reconstruction of the community and locality (Stevenson, 2005; Häyrynen & Hankonen, 2024). Mercer (2006) has emphasised that cultural planning should be interdisciplinary and cross–administrative from the outset. The core task of cultural reconstruction is enabling all people to see themselves as full members of the community, and to reach a common understanding of how culture should be negotiated together.

4. THE CASE OF ILOMANTSI WITHIN THE FINNISH INDUSTRIAL AND PARTICIPATORY CONTEXT

The empirical research location for our study is the municipality of Ilomantsi, a community of 4,500 inhabitants located in Finland's North Karelia region, bordering the Russian Federation. For centuries, industries in Ilomantsi have been based on natural resource extraction – originally lake iron ore extraction and forestry, peat extraction from the 1970s onwards, and in recent decades gold mining. While underground gold mining has not caused considerable public discussion thus far, it is largely agreed that peat extraction operated by a state–owned company has severe impacts on local biodiversity and water systems, and adds to global climate change. Regarding the local natural resource industries, extraction of the non–renewable peat has been a target for heated debates and activism locally and on a wider scale. We have therefore chosen to focus on how cultural planning as an approach might help bring the multiplicity of local voices better into discussions on the future of the industry, hence improving the participatory process when planning for future activities in this line of industry.

Despite the controversial nature of mining projects in Europe (Kivinen et al., 2020) and in Finland, not all mines cause conflicts or disputes. Ilomantsi has two relatively new gold mines, both underground and open pit. The underground gold mine has not been a target for public protests on any significant scale, and did not involve much public participation during its establishment and operation; this may change, however, with the expansion of new mining activities. We do not have empirical evidence at this stage to analyse this transformation in local debates. Peat extraction is more significant in terms of protests locally in Ilomantsi and on a wider scale. Today, it is largely agreed that peat extraction concerns the utilisation of a non–renewable resource, and the extraction of peat from bogs (Figure 1) has huge impacts on the landscape, ruling out any other, overlapping, land use. Therefore, peat extraction could be compared to open–pit mining. The impact on the local community from

peat extraction is significant in the form of environmental impacts and impacts on the use of nature for other, competing purposes, and to a lesser extent, on providing employment and income. This traditional economy/ecology distinction has been a source of disagreement on the desirability of peat extraction in Ilomantsi. In public debates, two different "natural environments" are being socially constructed based on different notions of ecological and socio–economic sustainability. In a more material sense, the exploitation of natural resources closes routes and changes soundscapes but on the other hand, industrial activities bring new technologies and wealth to the locality, new roads, water pipes and other public services.



Figure 1. Piitsonsuo, Ilomantsi, 15 April 2025
Source: Nina Tokola, Bog 2.0.

5. METHODS

Cultural reconstruction requires: first, a mapping of cultural margins (in this case, people's individual relation to the peat bogs); second, intervention based on that mapping (collective planning with the cultural producers); and third, an assessment of the impact of that intervention. The study was conducted as an action research project, following cyclical logic (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The process consisted of a single research cycle, which can be summarised in four phases:

- data collection and the development of understanding,
- planning and implementing actions based on that understanding,
- observing the effects of the actions, and
- reflecting to determine guidelines for the next phase.

In order to identify the cultural layers present in the community and to reach hidden voices, we saw all members of the local community as potential respondents, provided they had some connection to peatlands, whether through their livelihood, residence, leisure or any other form of engagement. A total of 19 in–depth semi–structured interviews and 16 short interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2025. Table 1 (in the Appendix) presents the demographic characteristics of the interviewed participants by gender and age group. To ensure anonymity, participant codes were used, and age was reported in age groups. We employed semi–structured interviews to combine a systematic inquiry with openness, and thus examine complex cultural phenomena in which meanings are constructed contextually and dialogically (Galletta & Cross, 2013). The interviews explored respondents' personal relationships with bogs, their views on bog use, and their perspectives on bog–related decision–making and its perceived fairness. The thematically organised framework examined these themes from historical, present–day, and future–oriented perspectives, with a condensed version applied in the short interviews (see the interview guide in the Appendix).

The in–depth interviews were carried out at locations chosen in advance by the interviewees, such as their homes, yards, workplaces, cafés or in a separate room at the municipal library. The aim was to capture the cultural layering of the community by assembling a diverse group of respondents. Interview contacts were formed during the fieldwork, which supported the principles of cultural inclusion. This approach allowed respondents to be selected based on the local context rather than predefined categories. Of the interviewees with long–term residence, returnees, and recent incomers, 12 were men and seven women, with years of birth spanning from 1945 to 1996, and educational backgrounds from secondary education to university degrees. All the respondents had a relationship with the peatlands through their leisure activities. A few owned peatland plots. There were respondents with professional experience in peat extraction and those who otherwise accessed the peatlands as part of their work, such as border guards. The respondents also included volunteers engaged in wetland restoration projects in peatlands. Recordings of the in–depth interviews were transcribed and analysed for qualitative content. In the

first phase, the entire dataset was read as a whole, after which recurring and significant contents, themes, and perspectives were identified. Thematic categorisation was guided both by the interview framework and by data–driven insights. Secondly, the short interviews conducted during a local summer festival also included summer residents; eight respondents were men and eight women. Notes were taken manually. The material from the short interviews was analysed according to the same principles as the in–depth interviews.

For the cultural reconstruction, we practised cultural interference through various kinds of participatory cultural events and productions, including integrated theatre, a short film, and information cards on the diverse local history in order to make the bog–related local cultural history a more visible part of local self–understanding and thus create a more diverse historical image. Information cards are commonly used to convey various types of information, research results, and instructions. The creation of the information cards began by examining how the bog and its cultural history are presented in written local histories and in exhibitions in local museums.

Participatory observations and supplementary short interviews were employed to examine the empowering effects of cultural productions on the research participants' cultural self–image. Participant observation, combined with the short interviews, was conducted during screenings of the short film created during the project, as well as at various cultural events where local cultural heritage was present, such as art exhibitions and local festivals. The interviews focused on participants' impressions of the events and on whether they perceived local culture as authentically represented. Participants were selected through random sampling. Field notes from the participatory observations were coded and analysed using content analysis (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

We combined our own active local participation with observations, enabling an immersive understanding of the studied social and physical environments. Participatory observation is well–suited for the examination of cultural empowerment, as it enables the observation of experiences, social interactions, and nonverbal expressions (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Ethnographic observation was applied to museums and events (Kallinen & Kinnunen, 2021), where all the bog–related content on display in the exhibitions was photographed for later analysis. As action research, the ultimate purpose of the research was to improve the inhabitants' possibilities to participate in the debates and planning phases of local peat extraction projects. Elucidating the diversity of local culture played an important role in this attempt, intending to encourage the residents to express their views more openly. Next, we present the results under three major themes in order to illustrate the importance of cultural planning in providing a platform to enable a better and more empowering participatory process for the people in a locality when planning the utilisation of local natural resources.

6. RESULTS

6.1 CULTURAL MAPPING

The two official histories that have been written about Ilomantsi (Björn, 1991; Björn, 2006) briefly present the local bogs as a source of livelihood through peat extraction, but also as protected areas. However, the multi–dimensionalities and local significance of the history of the bogs are lost in the extensive histories. Based on one author's observations made in local museums in the summer of 2024, the bog is presented above all as a natural environment and hiking destination, without showing much as a cultural environment. The bog is often featured as a backdrop, such as a habitat for bears or a growing place for herbs, but not as an independent cultural environment. Based on a review of the literature and observations, local military history and established mythological cultural history have been commercialised as tourist attractions. This strong emphasis on certain aspects of history has meant that other histories and their interpretations have been marginalised in the local cultural self–understanding.

At the same time, according to the findings from the interviews, people's relationships with bogs are diverse and multidimensional. An individual may have various kinds of relationships with bogs and different cultural identities formed through different contexts, which may also be partly contradictory. Based on the interviews, in a polarised situation, the majority had not formed a clear opinion on the use of peatlands, wishing for more information about different options. Many emphasised the importance of context–specific, long–term, and moderate use, where economic needs would be balanced with environmental and ecological values.

> *Using common sense, one should consider, on a bog-by-bog basis, which bogs should be left undisturbed. Some of them still inevitably need to be used for peat extraction, even though it is being restricted and prohibited — but still. The key is moderation. (R3)*

Some interviewees expressed uncertainty about their roles as participants in the peatland–related discussions, particularly regarding their perceived epistemic competence. This uncertainty became more pronounced in situations where the conversation shifted from personal relationships with bogs to broader perspectives, and was manifested as hesitation to respond to the interview questions. Such hesitation by individual persons illustrates the pervasiveness of the institutionalised view on how the natural environment should be "correctly" dealt with. Women were in the majority among those who expressed uncertainty:

> *Well, maybe I have the wrong view on this, but... I know this might be a wrong answer from me... (R6)*

6.2 CULTURAL INTERVENTION

Everyone is heard, but does it make a difference?

The majority of respondents perceive that, formally, everyone has the opportunity to participate in decision–making and to be heard, but at the same time, the actual possibilities to influence decision–making are limited. Although public hearings are organised, they are often seen as mere formalities without real impact. Decision–making power is perceived to rest with those who hold economic and political influence:

> *Well, yes, surely there is a possibility to be heard, but whether one can actually influence a decision – that's a questionable matter. Information events and hearings are organised, but the voice of the small person doesn't really carry in big issues. They're often just formalities that nowadays have to be held. (R18)*

In practice, many choose not to participate in public discussions or consultation events, and several factors contribute to this non–participation, including a perceived toxic atmosphere, lack of interest, and feelings of insufficient expertise or verbal confidence, along with the experience that participation has no impact on final decisions. Moreover, the debate concerning the peatlands and peat extraction is perceived by the interviewees as highly polarised and conflict–laden. In public forums and consultation events, the interaction often takes place between a narrow group of participants, where the most vocal contributors represent opposing extremes, either strongly supporting peat extraction or firmly opposing it. The interviewees experience the atmosphere of the discussion as harsh and unconstructive, which in turn reduces their willingness to participate and hinders the building of mutual understanding:

> *When you observe the situation from the sidelines, it's almost laughable — both sides are really going at it... It's like each side has only one truth, and they don't listen to each other at all. (R1)*

The perceived hostility of the discussion climate and the straightforward nature of the decision–making processes were seen to undermine the willingness to engage. Many individuals opted for silence due to fear of stigmatisation. Remaining silent was considered an easier and safer option, as expressing one's opinion was thought to have potentially negative consequences, for example, for one's livelihood or economic security:

> *No one should ever be silenced – and yet, people are [laughter]. There is a kind of social pressure to remain silent about certain issues, especially when a loud group defending one particular side dominates the conversation. This group neither sees nor hears other perspectives and is unable to engage in a constructive dialogue... I would really like to be part of that discussion, but as an entrepreneur, I can't. If I were to publicly address these matters, I'd end up burning bridges with everyone. (R1)*

Non–participation is also linked to a lack of interest. Not everyone perceives bogs and peat–related topics as relevant to their own lives. Discussions are left to those considered more active or to individuals perceived to have greater expertise in the subject matter:

> *It's not really everyone's concern... it's just those certain people who are interested in it or who feel they benefit from it. Maybe it's just not interesting, and maybe people don't really have an opinion on it. (R2)*

Limited expertise and lack of verbal confidence were also identified as barriers to participation. Many informants expressed the desire for more information to support the formation of their own opinions. The complexity and multidimensionality of peat–related issues were perceived as making it difficult to form an opinion and engage in the public discussion:

> *Someone who's, let's say, a forest man or woman, or someone living a bit more remotely, doing basic physical work [laughter], we don't really have the skills to make ourselves heard. We lack the ability to produce any kind of written response. (R1)*

Distrust due to a lack of transparency in decision-making

The interviews also revealed a lack of trust in the transparency of decision–making. Informants described situations where no consultation events had been organised at all and decisions were made by influential individuals behind closed doors, without transparency regarding agendas or procedures. These experiences reinforce the perception that participation is neither genuinely possible nor impactful:

> *I've heard that the decision-making culture is such that there are these unnamed gentlemen who push their ideas through. They have their own backup circles that make it all happen. (R12)*

This lack of trust extended to broader concerns about the functioning of democracy. Several informants questioned the significance of participation and voting, expressing doubts about whether an individual citizen can truly influence decision–making. Such experiences weaken the motivation to participate and reinforce a culture of silence:

> *In principle, we have no say in what happens in these municipalities. That's just the unfortunate truth [...] In the end, democracy is just a scam for the poor... They make you think that by voting, you have a voice and can make a difference. But I've seen it over the years — it doesn't matter at all. Still, I vote. (R11)*

At the same time, the interviews also highlighted that sometimes collective civic action can enhance the possibilities to have an influence:

> *The voice of a layperson is heard when there's civic mobilisation... (R7)*

The polarisation between opposing sides is perceived by the interviewees as stark. However, the interview data highlights that the majority of local residents position themselves somewhere between these extremes, considering various options and perspectives. Many are uncertain about their stance or opinion in the current situation. Several informants felt that they lacked sufficient background knowledge to form a clear opinion on the complex and multidimensional issues related to peatlands:

I don't think in black-and-white terms, like that peatlands couldn't be used at all — but it should be done reasonably and in moderation, depending on the purpose. And surely it would be good to have some untouched peatlands as well. (R2)

Tourism and cloudberries

Let us consider two examples from the extensive interview materials on how the respondents saw alternatives to peat extraction: the potentials of tourism and berries as a source of livelihood. Many interviewees felt that bogs should be utilised more effectively for tourism, provided that it was done in an ecologically sustainable manner. Tourism was seen as offering opportunities to strengthen the local economy and increase the region's attractiveness. At the same time, concerns were raised about whether significant growth in the tourism sector could occur in a way that remained ecologically sustainable:

The tourism aspect is, of course, a good thing, but it should be done in a controlled way — not in a way where people would trample the peatland and ruin it, such as if mass tourism were introduced. (R14)

From the perspective of tourism development, the key attractions of peatlands were identified as silence, cleanliness, natural and scenic values, their untouched character, and the maintenance of infrastructure such as boardwalks for hikers. Their exotic nature and the possibilities offered by public access rights – including berry picking – were also seen as strengths:

I think that if we have functioning peatlands where people can go, enjoy themselves, pick berries and all that, it's already an important thing for tourism. Definitely... But if something is done to them [...] — it's such short-sighted thinking. (R19)

However, some interviewees were sceptical about whether peatland tourism could attract enough visitors to become a significant source of municipal revenue. While most saw tourism as a way to strengthen regional vitality, some emphasised that the local economy cannot rely solely on tourism and must be supported by a more diverse economic base:

We need to live here, pay our electricity bills and mortgages, and sometimes even build something new... Roads need to be repaired. But tourism doesn't generate the kind of tax revenue that would allow our infrastructure to be maintained solely through it. (R1)

The cloudberry is a wild berry that grows in bog ecosystems. These berries are considered valuable with both cultural and economic significance. The interviews revealed that cloudberries are picked extensively for personal use, but for some locals, cloudberries are an important source of income:

You can make a lot of money from cloudberries. If they disappeared, I would be in tears. I have relatives who earn several thousand euros every summer just from cloudberries. (R9)

Nearly all the respondents reported picking cloudberries, but it was noted that berry picking has declined, especially among the younger generations. Harvests have also decreased compared to earlier decades due to peatland drying:

> *I have to say, our cloudberry bogs have almost disappeared — you find small ones now. This area used to be famous for its cloudberry bogs in Eastern Finland. Back in the late 1950s, busloads [...] of people came here to pick cloudberries. (R5)*

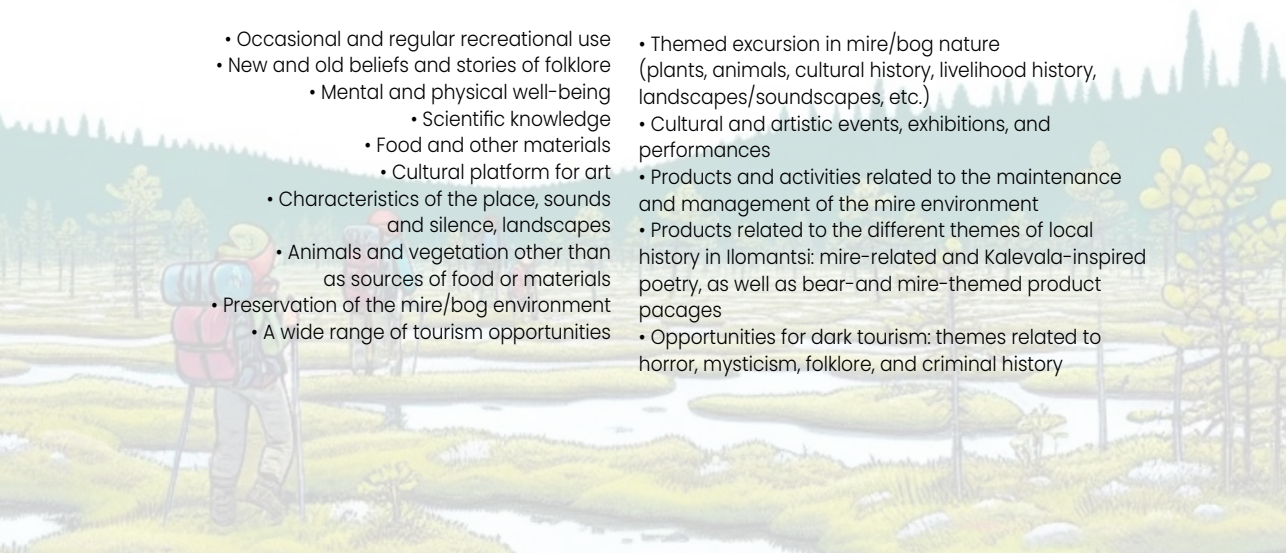

Figure 2. Information card no. 9/11. Translated from Finnish into English by the authors (Source: Jani Karhu, Bog 2.0).

6.3 CULTURAL RECEPTION

Based on participant observations and the short interviews, culture may strengthen cultural identity and serve as a source of empowerment. Cultural products and activities were observed to provide event attendees with both personal and shared joy, a sense of community, reflections on their own culture, and experiences of cultural pride. Culture was also found to serve as a means of conveying information and stimulating discussion. However, the impact appears to be individual and context–dependent. While some attendees displayed clear positive emotional responses and even strong impressions, others seemed less affected.

At the premiere of the bog–themed short film, outwardly visible audience reactions were moderate. However, based on comments heard, the film experience appeared to have been positive. The bog landscape depicted on–screen was experienced as

familiar. Based on observations, for those involved in the film production, the project was significant, empowering, and community–enhancing. They reported that it had been rewarding to create the film with local natural resources for a local audience, and they had learned new skills both in filmmaking and in understanding the bog.

At the art exhibition, clear differences were observed among exhibition visitors in terms of the time and intensity with which they engaged with the exhibition, as well as which works captured their attention. Outwardly visible reactions were generally moderate, although more distinct reactions were observed, for example, in the form of smiles. Verbal expressions of admiration were also observed, with participants commenting, *These are wonderful!*

According to the short interviews conducted at the art exhibition, the nature–related themes of the exhibition were perceived as authentic and integral elements of the local cultural identity. Some respondents emphasised that the bog–themed artworks reflected the local cultural self–image in particular. Some visitors reported feeling empowered and experiencing the exhibition as impactful. As one participant commented, *Impressive images!* Others, however, were unable to articulate their experience afterwards, suggesting that the exhibition did not evoke strong responses in them or that expressing those responses proved difficult. The observations and interviews took place on the opening day of the exhibition. The opening event was multisensory and included elements of local cultural heritage such as folk music and poetry. Many interviewees described the opening event as an impactful overall experience, mentioning feelings of community, Karelian identity, and nostalgia. One participant commented, *A holistic experience!*

Our observations indicate that differences appear to exist between individuals in terms of which cultural products and forms of expression resonate with them, and how actively and intensely they are willing to participate. This observation was repeated across different events. For example, at a local festival, the dance workshop attracted only a small number of participants. The majority of attendees preferred to watch from the side or chose not to stay and observe the dancing. Among both active participants and those observing from the sidelines, smiles, laughter, and shared enjoyment were noted. Similarly, in a school theatre workshop built around the short film, it was observed that theatrical expression was not equally inviting to all, and not everyone wished to participate.

The young people who took part in the participatory bog experiment had not previously been able to connect the bog with, for example, iron production, and the information cards we described above provided many ideas for utilising the bog's cultural history, e.g. from the perspective of tourism entrepreneurship (Figure 2). The strong presence of the bogs in the old poetry collected from the area was new to many. The cards also sparked interesting discussions about people's relationships with the bog and its cultural history, and thus proved to be a handy tool for concretising the theme. The cards were also shared with local entrepreneurs involved in the project to support their opportunities to utilise local history and culture in their operations, but at the same time, it became clear that they had limited capacities to utilise such materials immediately.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discloses the challenges of public participation in a situation that concerns spatial planning and planning the exploitation of natural resources. As we have observed, Finland has institutionalised practices for executing participatory processes, but as the analysis of our research materials reveals, such a highly institutionalised approach to public participation does not necessarily lead to a balanced outcome regarding people's participation. Clearly, many of the residents who should be eligible participants in the administrative participatory procedures either lack the capacity to truly participate by voicing their views on an issue or feel that even if they do so, their opinions are not counted when the decisions are taken by those in power regarding spatial and natural resource use planning.

To overcome such obstacles to public participation, we have tested the method of cultural planning in order to see whether such an approach could bring about a more balanced outcome from public participation. At a minimum, our experiment has revealed that there are plenty of muted voices and hidden views on how to use space and resources. A further challenge, however, that we have not yet been able to solve through our method here, is how to make use of the cultural aspects disclosed through the cultural planning action research method. Further steps need to be taken in order to have an impact on and against vested interests and prevailing power structures. Nevertheless, we see that the method utilised here can be a necessary step towards improving the quality of participatory processes in planning.

We have focused specifically on a locality with the extensive exploitation of natural resources, providing us a glimpse of the hidden views of those who do not find a place in the highly polarised local debates. While democracy in Finland is commonly regarded as well–established, many respondents suggest that democratic participation is, in practice, limited. Paradoxically, some people do not consider themselves experts in their own community's everyday life, and local issues are outsourced to formal experts or representatives of civic organisations, which leads to public debates being placed in rigid frameworks. This emphasis on trust in expertise as part of societal institutions can be seen as an explanation why, despite high levels of trust in institutions, citizens perceive participation largely as a formality. In other words, their trust in institutional expertise overrides their perceptions of themselves as everyday experts in their own living environments. Nevertheless, cultural projects have proven to be good conversation starters, and they reinforce people's sense of belonging and pride in their unique identities. Culture is a powerful tool through which the hopes, expectations, fears and frustrations of the locals regarding new economic activities, for example, come to the fore.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Meaning of the Bog

1. How are you connected to the bog?
   a) I live near a bog
   b) It is important for my livelihood
   c) It is important for my studies
   d) It is important for my leisure time
   e) Other?
2. Do you own any bog areas?
3. What is your relationship with the bog? What does the bog mean to you?
4. Share a memory related to a bog.

Bog Nature

5. Do you think bog nature has changed?
6. If bog nature has changed, has it been for the better or worse?
7. What does the change concern in particular?
8. How could the change be limited?

Bog Natural Resources

9. What do you think is the significance of the bog for the people of Ilomantsi?
10. How do you think bogs should be used?

Bogs: Past, Present, and Future

11. What kind of feelings does the historical use of bogs evoke in you? Why?
12. What kind of feelings does the current use of bogs evoke in you? Why?
13. What kind of feelings does the current public discussion about bogs evoke in you? Why?
14. Do you think bogs are threatened in the future?
15. How do Ilomantsi residents think bogs have changed?
16. Do you think bog–related matters were better or worse in the past? In what sense?

Justice and Decision-Making

17. Do all people have an equal opportunity to be heard in decision–making concerning bogs?
18. Whose perspective should be considered in decision–making about Ilomantsi's bogs?
19. How could participation opportunities be promoted?
20. How could negotiation situations be balanced?
21. What would you hope from local decision–makers?
22. What do you consider unfair or unjust in relation to bogs?

Bog Story

23. If a story were told about the bog, what kind of role would you have in it?

Background Information

- Gender?
- Year of birth?
- Educational and professional background/occupational group?
- Place of residence?
- Physical connection to Ilomantsi?

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewed participants
Source: Authors' contribution.

PARTICIPANT	GENDER	AGE
R1	male	35–44
R2	female	25–34
R3	female	55–64
R4	male	55–64
R5	male	75+
R6	female	55–64
R7	male	75+
R8	male	65–74
R9	male	25–34
R10	female	65–74
R11	male	65–74
R12	male	25–34
R13	male	45–54
R14	male	65–74
R15	female	35–44
R16	female	55–64
R17	female	45–54
R18	male	65–74
R19	male	35–44

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