

## Commentary

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Commentary on “Confronting storms, fires, and pestilence: Meaningful evaluation for a hazardous world” by Juha I. Uitto (2021).

Juha Ilari Uitto, a Finnish scholar living in the United States, brings us a set of proposals for realigning the role of evaluation in contemporary times in his research article “Confronting storms, fires, and pestilence” (Uitto, 2021). By highlighting several drivers, starting from a realisation that the history did not end in 1990 with the closure of the Cold War, and by positioning climate change, environmental hazards, and pandemics along with weak states, rampant consumerism, and problems of overpopulation, Uitto calls for new steps, avenues, and mechanisms of evaluation that would matter to a runaway world.

I will comment on this by using a concept of an Event (Mustonen & Mustonen, 2016) from a small boreal village of Selkie, in North Karelia, Finland, where I live. More precisely, after decades, this summer, associated with the record extreme temperatures around the north (CCAG, 2021) a natural forest fire of over 3 hectares happened

around 17 June. All-in-all 5.8 hectares burned before the fire was put out by the local emergency services.

Now, compared to the fires in British Columbia (associated with the extreme weather of 49.6°C degrees in Lytton but stretching all the way to Northwest Territories which caused 478,000 hectares of burning as of 30 July; CCAG, 2021) or the taiga fires burning in Siberia (1.77 million hectares burning as of 27 July 2021), the 5.8-hectare fire is very small. Yet, as Uitto (2021) says, in the new steps of evaluation, we need to put things into their context. This context for the June fire in Selkie is the following:

1. It is the first natural lightning-struck fire in the village for decades, due to the industrial forest management, road building, and suppression of fires that Finland exercises immediately when the fires happen (avoidance of economic harm to economic forest lots). On the other hand, forest fires are a critical element of natural north boreal forests, where the forest needs to burn occasionally to maintain, for example, fire beetle species, ecosystem renewal, and forest succession in natural forests. It is a natural, and critically important, element of northern forests, made now much worse by climate change and extreme temperatures. The backlog of old fires can be witnessed especially on ancient Scot Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) stumps and trees in those forests that have them in Finland—acting as ecological and traditional markers of mnemonic memories of what happened and when, if a person is immersed in forest reading skills to understand what they see.
2. It was not a tree-top fire, but a ground fire; nevertheless, it burned for 4–5 days and was extremely complex for the fire crews to put out.
3. Prior to the industrial forestry era (<1940s), fire was respected in the Finnish and Karelian villages, as reflected in the long epic poem “Creation of Fire” (<https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

Tulen\_iskentä) that has been dated back 4,000 years. Additional cultural knowledge of fire includes dozens of concepts of fire, the practice of small-scale slash-and-burn lots in the Eastern villages AD 1000–1920, traditional burns in the forest, and magic and folklore associated with the lightning strikes and quartz stones that were seen to be the claws of the Kokko thunder bird left behind after a lightning strike. From here on, I call this the cultural complex of fire for Finnish culture.

4. An Event, as described by Mustonen & Mustonen (2016), is a method of endemic temporal–spatial evaluation in the Indigenous and traditional societies of Eurasia (northern Eurasian continent including tundra and taiga ecosystems) to mark time, significance, and belonging with the cosmos. Events are most often non-linear in character and significant in their cultural contexts. They open up in rather complex and nuanced ways where the Event and its recounting (such as the long epic poem “Creation of Fire” for Finns) is always considered special, unique/meaningful, and first and foremost, from a primary source; that is, natural/cosmic in origin.
5. Within days, the industrial forestry apparatus locally had arrived on site to offer the landowner the purchase price of timber that burned, and the means and methods of clearing the burn site away as fast as possible, to make way for a “renewed” (i.e., ploughed) forest floor where the marks, memory, and sight of the forest fire would be eroded as quickly as possible, to make room for an economic forest lot. This process can be seen to have happened from the evaluation viewpoint of what Uitto calls the market assessment.
6. Lastly, the Landscape Rewilding Programme operating in the village entered into a complex set of talks with the landowner, driven by values built on an Event and traditional knowledge,

to spare and maintain the site by purchasing the fire site into the programme for study, learning, and preservation. These talks are ongoing, including an extremely high price for the lot.

I will comment on Uitto's (2021) article by reading the Fire Event using a selected number of his main arguments—five in total—and trying to reflect whether and how they have merit in evaluation studies and in the reform he calls for. Below I insert a summary statement from Uitto, and then reflect on it from the viewpoint of the Fire Event in Selkie and from my situated location in Selkie. As there is limited space, I have chosen those Uitto statements for my essay that suit and are meaningful for this positioning. These summaries are my own deductions and redactions from Uitto's meaning and may vary in some nuances compared to the primary text.

***Argument A: The role of evaluation as a constructive force is mostly now marginalised, and could cover a broader view of a complex system that includes the natural world.***

What is this fire that came to us in Selkie? It was a primary Event in nature, for the first time in decades. The reason there is a decadal gap is because human systems, built to safeguard the forests-as-wealth, fear the fire. Yet, in the traditional culture, fire is natural, a friend, an ally, and a power always to be mindful of and respected. Uitto in his arguments, looking at the Selkie fire, is right that the kind of evaluation that would “allow” natural Events is marginalised and instead the pathway of assessment–interpretation–action as seen from the economic power position. Thus, the Event was seen as harmful and perhaps threatening/to be feared. Actions were taken to put out the fire as fast as possible (using also the extensive forest road network built since 1990s into the forests). Ultimately, the Event led to the landowner being offered the quick economic compensation of out-of-mind, out-of-sight actions of clearcutting and clearing the land to make the (ecological) memory disappear.

Proliferation of evaluation that would include Argument A could have, in theory, offered a debate on the future of the site. However, unlike Uitto, this debate should have been enforced and propagated on the levels of society that act on these matters, not only in academia and among the theorists of evaluation. A key question is, therefore, how could such debate happen given the power position of the economic evaluation paradigm today?

***Argument B: In a world of hurricanes, wildfires, and other extremes, societies are more vulnerable than ever. Rampant consumerism, of 9.7 billion people by 2050, makes pandemics and other global events linked with ecology given that the natural resources are overharvested due to the economies in place.***

Uitto discusses the question of perception at the beginning of his article, saying that we also need to remember the proliferation of communications technology that today—unlike in the past, especially prior to the 1960s—allows us to see and witness the interconnected and hazardous world. So, vulnerability may include, in Uitto's case, perceptions of risks and then the actual manifestation of risks, like a fire that wipes out Lytton in British Columbia. The Selkie Fire Event points to a more complex reality. Forest fire continues to be a part of a natural boreal forest. Arguments could be made that they should be allowed to burn. A key question is, therefore, how much of what we fear evolves away from, or in the absences of, living-within-natural-systems knowledge?

Nobody denies the vulnerable character of the global system today. The economy as well as people's lives, houses, and living areas are subject to forces that in concrete terms threaten them. Perhaps the dual entity of the Selkie Fire Event shows a compass; understanding a fire overall is a nuanced and important process as was reflected in the cultural complex of fire for Finnish culture that is, for the most part, replaced with the forests-as-economic-resource-knowledge.

This second variant sees the vulnerability (to the primary owner and to the surrounding forest owners) where the fire is a fear, a threat, and, ultimately, an enemy, to be put out.

Yet, the boreal forest species desperately need the fire. Over 40 insect species need the forest fires (Yle, 2020), and from there the food chains stretch all the way to the Eurasian brown bear that utilises and benefits from the natural burned areas. Names of these insects reflect their interdependence on the forest fires:

- kaskikeiju (*Phryganophilus ruficollis*), in Finnish, “Fairy of the Slash-and-Burn”
- kulokauniainen (*Melanophila acuminata*), “Forest Fire Beauty”
- palojahkiainen (*Sphaeriestes stockmanni*), “Burn Waiter”
- sysipimikkä (*Upis ceramboide*), “Pitch Dark”
- tuhkalatikka (*Aradus laeviusculus*), “Lice of the Ash”
- kulokaarnakuoriainen (*Orthotomicus suturalis*), “Beetle of the Forest Burn”
- nahkuri (*Tragosoma depsarium*), “Leather Worker”
- suutari (*Monochamus sutor*), “Shoemaker”
- Mustajäärä (*Asemum striatum*), “Black Beetle”

(From Yle, 2020; draft English translations by the author.)

By investigating the names of these insects, and even if allowing the influences of the modern taxonomy, we can see both the critically endangered role these fire-dependent species have and the rich role they may have played in the cultural complex of fire for Finnish culture. So, by naming, knowing, and respecting the fire and its associated species during the cultural complex of fire for Finnish culture, communities may have been in an aware position and in good relations with the fires. Today, based on evaluation of another kind, that Uitto links correctly with rampant consumerism, the natural fire,

forest, and the species do not have a space or time to cope.

***Argument C: People’s vulnerabilities are not random, but follow the distribution of power, wealth, access, and the global north–south axis.***

Again, the vulnerabilities Utitto talks about are real in the human security world, but they are also metrics that are based on distancing from the codex of evaluations that have been built in co-existence with the natural world.

***Argument D: We need a “meaningful system of assessing” that includes Indigenous knowledge. Assessment needs to understand the root causes of problems. A fundamental problem in assessments is to see a project both as a primary agent of change and an object of evaluation, following standard criteria (tick-the-box).***

Utitto may be right in calling for a new meaning and scope that includes traditional and Indigenous knowledge. In the case of the Selkie Fire Event, what role would this have played? In a fantasy world of uninterrupted cultural complex of fire for Finnish culture, the fire site would be respected, potentially limited if it came too close to critically important village houses for example, but in most cases (it was approximately 5 kilometres from the nearest house in a modern village) it would have been allowed to burn. The Fire would be seen as an Event, especially in the context of the absence of a natural fire for decades in Selkie.

The return of primary and first succession species into the forest site, such as forest strawberries and forest raspberries, would have been harvested by the people. The site would also be serving as an important feeding area for boreal ruminants, such as moose and forest reindeer (rangifer, now extinct from Selkie due to overhunting). Certain religious objects and wooden materials would be collected from the site, given that this was the site of where Kokko, the Finnish thunder bird, manifested its lightning claws. People would be searching for a quartz stone, one of the splintered pieces of Kokko’s claw.

And lastly, people would gather and pass on and sing the “Creation of Fire” rune poem to honour the powers, the weather, and Kokko.

Of course, in today’s Indigenous/endemic literature and community, Finns are not Indigenous peoples. The Sámi are Indigenous by law today in Finland. However, due to a rather unique sociohistorical connection, both Sámi and Finns belong to and connect through the Finno-Ugric peoples and languages. As I (Mustonen, 2014) point out, the surviving and highly critically endangered, sustainable traditional knowledge is all but gone, but is often referred to as “endemic knowledge” of the Forest Finns, as opposed to Indigenous knowledge of the Sámi—despite the fact that both of them could be seen as holding “Indigenous knowledge” when they were alive and well in ways of knowing (see Mustonen, 2017 for what happened).

None of this matters given the power position of the economic evaluation and the culture that permeates every corner of how forests are looked at in the Finnish culture today. The last forest reindeer, a cultural keystone species of Selkie, was killed only in 1928. The switch in Finnish culture away from understanding the forests as the cultural complex of fire/forest has therefore been among the fastest in the world.

Uitto says a project and its evaluation is challenging, as the project is viewed as both the primary agent of change and an object of evaluation. To position and think using the Selkie Fire Event again, we might see in a positive “development”, even by the forestry industrial complex, a project on “traditional knowledge of forest fire: Case Study Selkie”. General appreciation could emerge, people could even join in celebrating the “past cultural heritage” of fire, and some novel, now already forgotten, practices and thoughts could make a speedy splash in media, in society, and in the receptive audiences. As Uitto says, such a project could be celebrated and “valued” by “multiple stakeholders”—tick-the-box.



And then again, in Uitto's (2021) calls for action in evaluation, the weakness remains on how these thoughts, written from the auspices of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) of the UN organisations, or from the position of academia, would ever—in time for the planet—arrive, penetrate, and reform the levels of industrial forestry apparatus in Finland, in Sweden, Russia, Canada, Brazil, or elsewhere, where the similar cultural complex of fire/forest for Finnish culture may have existed as a way of being, knowing, and acting.

SWOT analysis, even in the best of evaluations, will not lead to social change. In the current context, I remain sceptical of the reform Uitto calls for in the existing structures and processes. Perhaps we need first a demarcation (of village, Indigenous, and communal territories) owned by those entities that still uphold or maintain values like the cultural complex of fire/forest for Finnish culture of the past and put them to action, much like monasteries of the Middle Ages in Europe (containing vessels of knowledge as society collapses around them).

Evaluation using Indigenous and cultural ways could emerge only if a time comes where the present power, the present majority, the present dominant populations, demonstrate a restitutive and deeply humbled need of a dialogue. And then such dialogue could only take place if the interests and the safety of traditional, Indigenous, and cultural communities and systems could be guaranteed to the full. And by this time the larger society would have shifted so much, or the crisis and self-discovery would have emerged as massive, that the role of evaluation would have shifted in the process.

***Argument E: Bricolage—merging of qualitative and quantitative ways of evaluating with Indigenous and local knowledge, may improve reforms. Nature cannot be controlled, even by the wealthiest.***

Uitto closes with a Bricolage, a merger of ways of knowing, and determines a truth: nobody controls nature.

## ***Closing comments***

In closing, I have positioned a Selkie Fire Event, an endemic spatial–temporal event in a small boreal village in North Karelia, which has undergone several waves of cultural change, as a mechanism to discuss Uitto’s important article and some of his argumentation as shortcomings. Uitto’s arguments are not wrong per se. Perhaps what we could have wanted to see more of would have been the implementation and how reform looks in a world-on-fire.

I received this commission for a review in mid-May. I was very unsure how to read Uitto and position his important reformative steps into a reflection.

Then, 17 June, the Fire Event happened.

We, as residents and contemporary population of Selkie, are responding to the fire in ways that all fit Uitto’s arguments, depending on who we are. Many of us read the Selkie Fire Event using the glasses of extreme events of a future to come (CCAG 2021), linking similar fires in other parts of the boreal from Canada to Siberia into our small community. But there is more to the story. The future is not set. The Fire Event has reawakened thoughts, some of which have been discussed in this article, of the nuanced, good relations we have had as a culture with the natural fire, for thousands of years, prior to the past century of a collapse of the endemic values of Forest Finns.

The site is being negotiated as I write this, to be included into the Landscape Rewilding Programme; a rewilding process building on the cultural complex of fire/forest for Finnish culture of the past, for today, and in today’s terms. Now readers, at the publication time, please steer yourselves to [www.landscaperewilding.org](http://www.landscaperewilding.org) and from there to the site map. Zoom into Selkie, in Eastern Finland, among the other rewilding sites. Click on Selkie. If you find a site, on the NE corner of the village, and an info card, describing “Forest Fire, 5.8

hectares site, acquired in 2021”, then you will know that the values of the cultural complex of fire/forest for Finnish culture prevailed. If no such note appears, you will know that the “system” on this round prevailed.

But even so, an Event has happened in the village. From a primary source, many have forgotten exists, but for a some of us, reminds, that the next time thunder comes around, it is the Kokko bird, flying high, and if you know where to go, you’ll find a quartz stone piece—a piece of his talon, as a reminder of what was, is, and will be ...

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