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Doing more-than-human culture: Reports from the field, part I

With an editorial introduction by Carsten Herrmann-Pillath

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Abstract

This article presents three Field Dialogues from the Co-creation with the More-than-Human sandbox, a practice-based inquiry hosted by The Repatterning Collective: The three conversations are brought together here for the first time in academic form, accompanied by a theoretical introduction that situates them within ecosemiotics, assemblage theory, and the philosophy of language. The first Field Dialogue, with Joanna Crowson of Casa Gaia and Almenara, explores what it means to work with the land rather than on it — and the particular challenge of listening without projecting. Her work raises questions about what counts as valid knowledge when embodied, relational sensing meets institutional demands for data and measurable outcomes. The second Field Dialogue, with design anthropologist Ariel Sim, introduces more-than-human design as both mindset and method. Drawing on a forthcoming toolkit of 22 design practices, the conversation foregrounds behavioural transformation as an essential companion to new tools: changing what we do requires shifting how we see ourselves in relation to the living world. The third Field Dialogue, with environmental journalist Torsten Schäfer, traces the Talking Salmon research project across Germany, Scandinavia, and the Pacific Northwest. It examines what Indigenous languages carry about human-nonhuman kinship that scientific and journalistic English largely cannot, and what practices like writing from a fish's perspective open up for researchers and students alike. Together, the three dialogues illustrate how cultural transformation is a necessary condition for ecological transformation: without repatterning the background assumptions through which humans relate to the living world, the institutional changes pursued by transdisciplinary projects will remain constrained. They offer concrete evidence of what this repatterning looks like in practice, at the ground level, across design, land stewardship, and storytelling.

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Editorial Introduction

This contribution marks the beginning of a series of reports on conferences, workshops, and field studies that provide information and analysis about ongoing activities aimed at recognizing and practicing more-than-human culture. This ongoing exploration involves three levels.

- The first level focuses on the emerging practices of more-than-human culture on the ground.
- The second level involves activities that report on these practices, typically in the form of reports from activists, NGOs, and increasingly from researchers.
- The third level encompasses theoretical reflection.

In this new series, all three levels will be included in each contribution.

The motivation for this project stems from my experience as a Principal Investigator on the COEVOLVERS project, funded by the European Union's HORIZON program (https://co-evolvers.eu/). This project aims to develop multispecies communities centered on the design and implementation of Nature-based Solutions. My role, alongside my colleague Simo Sarkki, is to create a theoretical framework in continuous exchange with the COEVOLVERS team and distil general conclusions from the ongoing work in the seven Living Labs. This was my first experience engaging in such a project devoted to practical ecosocial transformation, as I have primarily worked as an economist and philosopher. Over the years, I have been intrigued by the fact that many of these European projects involve interaction and collaboration between researchers and community members, such as NGOs, citizen science practitioners, or activists. This is celebrated under the banner of transdisciplinarity. However, I have also noticed a considerable gap between what practitioners do and what theory offers in understanding their activities. Additionally, a similar gap exists between the perspectives of those practitioners and another important group of 'professional practitioners': individuals working in municipal administrations, environmental agencies, or the business community.

I recognized that researchers often play a key role in bridging the perspectives of those two groups of practitioners. In this context, 'science' can be essential to legitimize certain ideas advocated by activists for professionals and officials. However, this mediating role is often restricted, as research projects usually have fixed timelines. As a result, it is often uncertain whether individual projects can lead to transformative change with broader impact beyond their duration. Indeed, from a wider perspective, Europe is certainly the region in the world where transformative agendas are pursued most vigorously. Nevertheless, the overall outcome appears negative, with the environmental crisis becoming increasingly severe and a populist and business backlash against ecosocial transformation gaining ground.

Therefore, I believe that we need a more fundamental transformation of worldviews, values, and habits. In short, we require a cultural transformation. Without practicing a more-than-human culture, ecosocial transformation is bound to fail. This insight derives from the theory of institutions, such as that proposed by John Searle (Searle, 2011). Institutions are embedded in a 'background,' and without changing that background, particular projects of institutional change cannot move far beyond their implicit constraints. Cultural change is a necessary condition for institutional change. This point is also emphasized in the first field dialogue reported below.

In the face of global climate change and biodiversity loss, a key aspect of modern culture is anthropocentrism (Braidotti, 2019). This concept stems from the problematic legacy of the Enlightenment and the disenchantment of the world. It is important to distinguish this from secularization, as many modern religions—particularly Christianity—strongly endorse disenchantment of the immanent world and a belief in human superiority. This creates a unique form of human-centered spirituality and an instrumental attitude toward the non-human world, which

includes other living beings and the material structures associated with them. Elements of modernity include modern science, which often creates a tension, or even a clash, between emerging alternative worldviews and what is considered 'rational' and 'objectively' grounded knowledge. This conflict helps to explain why many activists involved in ecological transformation look to Indigenous knowledge and ways of life to support their values and practices (Kimmerer, 2020).

The series of reports aims to overcome the tensions and contradictions outlined through a three-level procedure. We begin with the fascinating work by Renilde Becqué and her colleagues at the Repatterning Collective (https://www.repatterningcollective.org/). This initiative operates at the second level of reporting, collecting and presenting on-the-ground practices: 'Co-creation with the More-than-Human Sandbox' (https://www.repatterningcollective.org/-co-creation_with_more.than.human). The 'sandbox' is a place where one can play, experiment and try things out, in two formats, a series of 'Learning sessions' and 'Feld dialogues.' These reports were previously published on the Repatterning Collective's website and have only been slightly edited for this journal. The benefit of publishing them lies in the opportunity to view all three field reports together, along with their theoretical interpretations, making them permanently accessible in an Open Access journal.

The approach pursued by this initiative is closely aligned with the model of nature-based assemblages developed by myself and Simo Sarkki in the COEVOLVERS project (https://co-evolvers.eu/from-linear-promises-of-nature-based-solutions-to-relational-practices-of-nature-based-assemblages-1). We are pleased that the COEVOLVERS project was included in the series of learning sessions. The general idea is that transformation coevolves in assemblages; therefore, it is essential to recognize emergent patterns early, reflect upon them, and nurture their growth and diffusion. I argue that this is a cultural process of innovation and diffusion, and we should not approach it solely in terms of standard criteria such as scientific evidence, empirical testing, and theoretical rigour. Essentially, this is a 'humanities' perspective at its core. However, as this series in the journal attempts to demonstrate, there are many ways to generalize the insights gained from the field into a theoretical framework that allows for the transfer of these insights to other contexts.

Let me pin down some of these theoretical references for the three field dialogues that follow.

The **first dialogue** clearly reflects the challenges and difficulties of achieving genuine transdisciplinarity. From a theoretical perspective, I am intrigued by the term 'listening.' The dialogue suggests that we can 'converse' with both other beings and the non-living environment, a cognitive stance that is familiar in Indigenous spirituality. I propose that we anchor this reasoning in (eco)semiotics (Kohn, 2013; Maran, 2020), a topic discussed in the inaugural roundtable of this journal's relaunch (for example, Hünefeldt, 2022).

One of the underlying beliefs in modern culture is the idea that language is the primary or even exclusive medium for discourse and rational deliberation (Meijer, 2019). This belief has inspired vibrant research on animal language, although it is often modeled on the framework of human language (Pepperberg, 2017). Such models emphasize the leading role of the speaker and their intention to convey a message. Consequently, if other beings apparently lack the capacity to use language as speakers, they are often excluded from human circles of deliberation, even when discussions concern ecosocial transformation.

Semiotics offers an entirely different perspective. Language is viewed as just one form of semiotic media, with the interpreter playing a pivotal role in the process of semiosis. The sender or speaker is considered secondary. Charles S. Peirce refers to this interpreter as the 'interpretant' (Atkin, 2023). This shift from the sender to the receiver has been fundamental in expanding semiotics beyond the

human domain, leading to the emergence of disciplines such as biosemiotics (Hoffmeyer, 2009) and, to a lesser extent, geosemiotics (Baker, 1999).

This theoretical framework aligns with the use of the term 'listening' in Field Dialogue 1. Semiotic mediation between humans and other beings depends on human interpretive action and creativity. This approach remains anthropocentric while simultaneously overcoming anthropocentrism by recognizing the signs of other beings as forms of communicative action (Herrmann-Pillath, 2025). There is nothing mysterious about this: meaning emerges from interpretation. However, the semiotic process is only completed if the conversation continues. This means that the interpreter must take action that connects back to the origin of the sign and elicits new responses. In this context, more-than-human culture involves semiosis paired with epistemic justice. The human interpreter acknowledges that non-human signs hold meaning and can be considered a form of 'language.' While humans must put effort into translation, this does not imply that they are projecting their own meanings onto these signs. The true meaning emerges from the ongoing feedback loops between the two parties. There is no analytical necessity to assume human-like intentionality, consciousness, or deliberation on the part of the non-human creator of the sign.

However, if we embrace modern approaches to distributed cognition and agency (Clark, 2011), as well as the rich field of assemblage theory (De Landa, 2016), we can take a significant step forward by recognizing that the contemporary notion of the autonomous human individual is, in fact, a fetish. Human agency extends beyond the limits of our bodies, incorporating various elements of the world around us. This suggests the idea of embodied relationality with other beings, leading to a completely new understanding of who acts as a sender and who functions as a receiver of signs. Consequently, humans can reflexively participate in constructing and co-creating these agential assemblages.

This is the theoretical linchpin of **field dialogue 2**, which raises the topic of more-than-human design (Parker et al., 2022), a theme already addressed in the inaugural roundtable, Roudavski 2022). This relates to the broader idea of constructing affordances for multi-species interaction by designing the environment in which humans and other living beings coexist. Design is a semiotic discipline par excellence; through design, we can shape our identities and behavioral patterns, reflecting an embodied and materially contextualized habitus. For example, Bauhaus design aimed to achieve social justice by combining beauty, functionality, and economic efficiency. However, this approach followed an anthropocentric agenda that overlooked the aesthetics of nature. In contrast, John Ruskin celebrated the Gothic style as embodying a 'natural aesthetics' (Ruskin, 1985; Herrmann-Pillath 2024a). A striking comparison can be made: a Bauhaus high-rise building lacks spaces for rest or nesting for other beings, while a Gothic cathedral is rich in small areas where plants, insects, and birds can thrive.

We often see the importance of integrating natural elements into our cities in our everyday lives and various design practices. A critical aspect of this is epistemic justice, which involves fostering a more-than-human aesthetic (Prum, 2013; Saito, 2007). Many practices already embrace this concept, such as offering 'bee-friendly' plants to customers in market gardens. However, this does not go far enough. As field dialogue 2 argues, however, we cannot realistically pursue grand designs of ecosocial transformation. As we have argued in COEVOLVERS work, this is a process of 'crafting' assemblages, which requires handling the tools of the craft.

Field dialogue 3 further explores the role of language. As I have argued in my book on a new approach to property, language serves as a repository of background knowledge (Herrmann-Pillath, 2024b). Modern languages often lack many terms and grammatical constructs that could define an entirely different way of relating to the world and other beings, as illustrated by the case of salmon in the Sami language discussed in field dialogue 3. Therefore, regardless of whether we project the

capacity for human language onto other beings, our own language can shape a form of relationality that acknowledges their agency and autonomy. This process is informed by a long cultural history of enriching language with meanings that emerge from the continuous interaction between humans and their natural environment. There is nothing mysterious about this: language is a repository of tacit and implicit knowledge, similar to how management sciences recognize corporate routines as such. The scientist's task is to reconstruct this knowledge and make it explicit.

That being said, we also need to acknowledge that the current forms of scientific language may not be the most powerful and appropriate media for constructing and recording this knowledge. Storytelling and other artistic means have long been explored as alternative media, both in sustainability sciences and many other fields of social science, such as feminist studies on discrimination and gender violence. At this point, engaging more deeply with human culture becomes a form of research in its own right, challenging conventional ideas of objectivity and positionality. For example, we can write an account of environmental conditions and crises from the perspective of a tree. The question arises: can we provide scientific evidence to determine whether our story is empirically robust? I believe that this is not the main focus. Writing from the perspective of a tree is a research method that allows for a truly 'objective' turn in research by opening up a wide range of different positions among which a 'reflective equilibrium' can be reached, similar to Smith's notion of the 'impartial observer' (Sen, 2009). From this vantage point, we can generate scientific hypotheses that can then be tested and explored in the narrower domain of empirical research and experimentation.

Field Dialogue #1 — Joanna Crowson (Casa Gaia)

What happens when you stop trying to 'include nature' as an idea—and begin relating to it as a participant?

In this first Field Dialogue, we spoke with Joanna Crowson (Casa Gaia / Almenara), briefly joined by Andrew Zionts (Almenara), about what it actually means to work *with* the more-than-human—not as a concept, but as something that shapes how we design, decide, and relate. This is not a polished methodology. It's a glimpse into work that is still unfolding—alive, searching, and at times unresolved.

The Work — Designing *with* life, not just for it

At the heart of Joanna's work is a quiet but profound shift: moving from working on the land to working *with* it—and increasingly, allowing it to guide decisions. Through Almenara, a land-based regenerative project in southern Spain, this begins very concretely: stewarding land, working with permaculture principles, and creating spaces—like Councils of All Beings—where the more-than-human is actively invited into the conversation. But a next step is emerging. Not just including nature in dialogue, but asking:

What would it mean to include the more-than-human in governance itself?

This question is now being explored through the EMCCINNO project, where Almenara is collaborating with 'Be.Time' as one of several 'transformation sites.' Here, climate change is approached not only as an environmental issue, but as a *cultural* one—requiring shifts in how we think, organize, and make decisions.

Across both contexts, a shared premise becomes visible: human systems cannot transform if they remain disconnected from the living systems they are part of.

The Protocol — Learning to listen (without claiming certainty)

A central challenge in this work is deceptively simple: how do you listen without projecting? What Joanna and Andrew are experimenting with is not one method, but a layered practice of attention.

On one level, listening is tangible. The land responds. After unusually heavy rains—the most in decades—the movement of water across across the water retention landscape they had designed became a form of feedback. It revealed what worked, what didn't, and where assumptions needed to shift. Design becomes a loop: act, observe, adjust. Alongside this, there is a more subtle layer of listening. One that involves the body, perception, and what Joanna describes as a 'symbolic or poetic' register. Practices drawn from constellations, activism, and shamanic traditions are used not to claim 'this is what nature says,' but to notice: What arises when we are in relationship?

The line between perception and projection is never fully resolved. Instead, it is navigated with care—and with a certain lightness. Not everything is taken as a message. But neither is everything dismissed.

The Friction — Where different worlds collide

When this way of working meets institutional contexts, the tensions become very visible. Part of the friction is practical. Human systems run on timelines, deliverables, and measurable outcomes. Living systems operate on entirely different rhythms—seasonal, cyclical, often unpredictable. But the deeper friction sits elsewhere: in what we consider valid knowledge.

Within the EMCCINNO consortium, this becomes tangible. Some partners rely on dense environmental data—sensors, metrics, real-time monitoring. Others, like Almenara, work through embodied observation and relational sensing. Both are forms of listening, yet they don't easily translate into one another. There is also a cultural layer. In the local context, many farmers carry a history of having their knowledge dismissed. As a result, there is both richness and resistance: deep ecological memory, alongside understandable mistrust. The challenge is not just how to include the more-than-human—but what we recognize as knowledge in the first place.

The Insight — Life responds (but not on our terms)

One of the most striking moments Joanna shared was also the most concrete. After decades of drought, a well long considered dry suddenly refilled following intense rainfall, in a place they hadn't planned for. It was both a confirmation and a humbling. Life responds. But not necessarily where or how you expect it to.

Alongside these larger moments, there are quieter shifts. Even simple embodied practices—pausing, taking a few breaths—change the quality of interaction in groups. There is more presence, less friction, more space for listening. And perhaps most tellingly: no group has ever resisted those moments of slowing down. If anything, people seem relieved by them.

The Shift — From expertise to participation

Working in this way doesn't just change outcomes—it changes the practitioner. There is a gradual movement away from being the expert who knows, toward someone who creates conditions for something else to emerge. This requires letting go of certainty, control, and sometimes even professional identity. It also exposes a deeper tension within Western culture: the split between what is considered 'objective' and what is dismissed as subjective, intuitive, or even irrational. Much of this work sits precisely in that gap. Not fully measurable—yet not arbitrary either.

The Unfolding — Small openings, real shifts

Despite the challenges, Joanna notices subtle but important openings. Younger generations, in particular, show a willingness to engage with more-than-human perspectives—not as an abstract idea, but as something experiential. Even among scientifically trained participants, there is often curiosity—and even relief—when given permission to relate differently. At the same time, there is a renewed appreciation for knowledge that has been sidelined. When invited, older generations readily share detailed memories of landscapes, water systems, and cultivation practices—stories that can inform present-day regeneration.

This points to another layer of the work: not just restoring ecosystems, but *re-storying* them. Reconnecting with what has been forgotten, lost, or devalued. The question now is how this work can travel further without losing its essence—how to share practices that are inherently relational, without turning them into fixed tools or formulas.

A closing seed

This conversation does not offer a finished approach. It reveals a field in motion. But one thread runs through it: The more-than-human is not absent. Our systems—and our ways of paying attention—are simply not yet designed to include it. And perhaps the work, for now, is just this: learning how to listen again.

Field Dialogue #2 — A Nourishing Toolkit to the More-Than-Human (Ariel Sim)

In this second Field Dialogue, we sat down with *Ariel Sim* - a design anthropologist working at the edges of human-centred design and ecological thinking. We spoke as part of the Co-Creation with the More-Than-Human sandbox, exploring how designers can meaningfully co-create and listen with the living world in ways that shape decisions and outcomes that echo across the worlds of city planning, community research, digital product/service, and policy-making.

The conversation unfolded around Ariel's upcoming book, *A Nourishing Toolkit to the More-Than-Human: 22 Ways to Design Differently* - a project which invites readers to step sideways, shifting from human-centred design into a more entangled way of designing with the full web of life. Moving through theory, reflection, and practice, the book traces the limits of traditional design approaches, and explores behavioural and multispecies design tactics that gently unsettle the idea that humans are the sole authors of change. Introducing more-than-human design as both mindset and method, the toolkit questions designers' inherited habits and offers a living catalogue of traditional and emerging design methods that shift our ways of noticing toward interdependence.

In our Field Dialogues, we move through questions of practice, perception, and possibility, where this work is already taking root, and where it meets resistance. The following summary does not retrace the conversation step by step. Instead, it draws out the key insights and tensions that surfaced, and considers what begins to take root if our more-than-human kin are more meaningfully asked to 'hold the pen' across pluriversal design worlds.

A living, evolving collection of design tools

'A Nourishing Toolkit to the More-Than-Human' does not read like a resolved framework, but more like a moment of personal consolidation within a longer trajectory of learning. It's positioned as an

open bookmark within a long arc of practice, sharing the author's evolving learnings, methods, and curiosities.

A compilation of reflections and theoretical framings accompany a practical collection of 22 tools for both designers and 'my grandmother' (the general public). The toolkit portion of the book explores how to adapt popular design practices toward meaningful collaboration with the more-than-human world, while gently shifting human behaviours and systems to embrace the multispecies mindset. The underlying invitation is not 'this is how it works,' but rather 'this is what I have been trying, this is what I've witnessed, this is what I've seen made possible so far… and here is what feels unresolved.'

The book embraces that more-than-human design is deeply intertwined across ancient and emerging technologies, cross-cultural communities of practice, Indigenous & Western sciences, socio-ecologies – items almost impossibly stabilised into a clean framework.

There is also a shift in authorship and authority embedded in the more-than-human design approach. From revenue sharing with more-than-human collaborators (termed 'sharing fruits'), to repositioning the designer as apprentice and facilitator–documenting attempts, uncertainties, partial understandings, humblings and limits.

Two questions that are actually one tension

The book is organised around two guiding questions:

- How might we include plants, animals, and ecosystems in our design process?
- How can we shift human systems and mindsets to take this multispecies approach more seriously?

At first glance, one reads as a methodological challenge and the other as a systemic one. On revision, they collapse into a single tension, two arteries at the heart of the same relational turn.

On one plane sits *more-than-human design craft*. Methods, tools, and practices that extend design beyond human participation. Grounding into place, collaborating with proxies throughout the design process, multispecies ethnographies, adaptive multispecies prototyping. Intentional adaptations of widely practiced human-centred design techniques, informed by multispecies design, community-based participatory action research, pluriversalism, Indigenous and Western sciences.

On the other plane sits *behavioural transformation*. The slow work of reshaping our identities, preconceptions, social norms, habits, institutional routines, so we might become more receptive to these new tools. Applying behavioural design to loosen calcified agreements, to reset our social compass away from human-first worldviews and toward the more-than-human.

Designing behaviour, not just systems

One of the more grounded insights in the conversation is that the barrier to more-than-human design is not primarily informational. We already have extensive knowledge about ecological harm and interdependence.

The difficulty is that this knowledge does not reliably translate into different behaviour. We have been presented with decades of evidence and language mapping environmental degradation, proving planetary interdependence. Our collective failure seems more our inability to act on the knowledge in a consistent way. To become different enough – individually and collectively.

More-than-human futures falter from our collective inertia, while thriving in our collective imagination. We can introduce new tools and still find that nothing fundamentally changes. We can

run a multispecies workshop and default back to human priorities when decisions are made. We can agree with a premise and still reproduce the same patterns in practice.

To understand why, it becomes necessary to look at how behaviour is shaped in practice. For example by:

- identity, how people see themselves
- preconceptions & norms, what is expected in a given context
- assessment, how an idea is presented
- feedback loops, how we internalize and reflect on experience

These factors are not abstract. They show up in everyday structures. The toolkit draws on behavioural design to engage with this layer more directly. Rather than focusing only on changing ideas, it considers how patterns of action can be shifted over time.

This reframes the challenge. It is not only about making a compelling argument, but about creating conditions in which different behaviours can take hold and be sustained.

An excerpt from our dialogue:

> '**Ariel:** Behavioural tools are already at play in the world we live in, so can we look at that behavioural science and think about how we can actually use that same information to break out of it, or to repattern towards a more-than-human perspective–an appreciation of the multispecies lens.
>
> I was working at a group called Doblin, which was a human-centred design group, for a number of years and they developed a toolkit called Behavioural Design by Doblin. The second part of the book (A Nourishing Toolkit to the More-Than-Human) really looks at a lot of the ideas in that toolkit. There is a framework that says that all of our behaviours are based on this loop of feedback:
>
> We start with our *identity*–which is 'Who am I? How do I see myself in the world?' Then, what are my *preconceptions*? I see an idea–maybe the 'more-than-human' idea–and based on everything I've experienced in my life, based on everything I've been told, all the community norms that I subscribe to based on either where I work, or who are my friends, or my family, I might have a preconception about what that is and how I feel about it. And then a new idea might be presented to me, and as I move into it, I'm going to *assess it*. Depending on how you present something to someone, you can create more or less connection with it. And after I go through an experience, I'm making a mental log (*reflection*) of everything that felt good, everything that didn't feel good, everything that resonated with me versus not. And I might be really surprised by something.
>
> Every once in a while an experience might actually shift your identity. And I've had those experiences in my own life, where something was just so touching, whether it was a product I used, or a conversation I had with an individual, or a place I visited in the world, and it touches you so profoundly.
>
> **Renilde:** It created an opening. It maybe didn't align with the patterns, because we all have these IDs, programs, patterns, etc., and we're not always necessarily willing to shift out of that, but sometimes certain things create an opening and that opening is like 'Oh, maybe there's a different truth. Maybe there's a different way of looking at this and I think I'm actually willing to change my mind on this.'
>
> **Ariel:** Absolutely. And so, our identities aren't fixed. They are constantly either in tiny tiny tiny ways, or bigger ways (depending on what's happening in your life) being shifted by everything you're experiencing in your life. And so, it may seem kind of obvious, but I don't

know if we always take the time to step back and really think about that – which is, you know – how can we look at behaviour and make this invitation … to try to be better relations? To try to design better and listen better with the more-than-human?

How can we look at this as a human behaviour problem, and throw compassion at the problem?

Renilde: Yes, you said that the book moves through theory, reflection, practice. I guess that's a really important reason why you have that reflection layer, as it can do certain things that the other two cannot.

Ariel: Absolutely. One of the tools in the second part of the book (how do we change ourselves and our systems to appreciate the multispecies framework), one of the first tools is a Mirror Interview, where you sit with yourself and consider your own perspectives. (Do I have a relationship to the more-than-human? And what does that look like?) And I think even someone who might hear the word 'more-than-human' and think 'ah, that's not for me.' If you really investigate your deeper thoughts, I think almost everyone has at least an entrypoint into that connection. It's a great universal truth.

We also have in that part of the book tools about creating maps and processing that just remove the uncertainty out of this difficult thing. I think one of the biggest obstacles we see when we bring this to organizations is just how different it can feel. And so how do we create those maps? In the same way that human-centred design came up in the latter half of the 1900s and people poured effort into building these frameworks, these repeatable frameworks that people could rely on and hold so it felt material. It took the uncertainty out of trying to design with people.

Right, because it used to be a strange idea to design with people. There was this great designer who had wonderful ideas, and they held the pen. And the proposition of human-centred design–that we should design with people. It needed its whole own change management process in the field. And so I think 'more-than-human' is just at that place now. We need to make those tools to make it tangible. So people have something to hold onto.

Renilde: Yeah, it's also often too you see that somebody comes in with a concept that gives a frame and words that people can sort of align their logic around, because they may understand that this is something they want to act on or need to act on, but not have sort of the logical frame, the mental frame, for 'Where do I put this? Where are the hooks?' And someone can come with a frame and suddenly feel 'Ah. Yes, this is it. This is a way that I can actually relate to it.' And now it makes more sense.

Stepping back, stepping sideways, learning to walk together

The book explores complementary calls to action – stepping back and stepping sideways. Stepping back often asks practitioners to withdraw, opening space for nontraditional voices to be heard. Stepping sideways is less about full withdrawal and more about repositioning among a broader web of design contributors, moving in relation, in humility, walking together.

This raises more complex questions. How might we reshape the design room itself, the agenda, and what is recognised as valid input? How might we learn to work alongside other forms of life, rather than organising processes around human priorities from the outset? How might we increasingly centre Indigenous communities as design leaders and decision-makers?

Why 22 tools instead of one framework?

Ariel explains her passion for relentless incrementalism, and her love for the number 22. Breaking down an overarching framework into 22 smaller tools reduces the barrier to entry, and invites more play. It lowers the threshold for engagement and makes it possible to begin without committing to a complete overhaul of existing practices.

Transformation is fragile. Large, coherent systems often trigger resistance, not necessarily because people disagree, but because the shift feels too total and too immediate. It demands new language, new practices, and new ways of evaluating success all at once.

Breaking the work into small tools creates many points of entry. A single tool can be introduced into an existing workflow, tried out, and adapted. Over time, these small shifts can accumulate and begin to affect how decisions are made.

We do not become a more-than-human designer in one move. We begin by changing how we pay attention, and then follow where that change leads.

The most surprising tool: multispecies noticing

Among the different tools, multispecies noticing stands out in how consistently it emotionally affects people who try it. Building on familiar practices such as ethnographic observation or empathy research, extending our field of focus to more-than-human community members who are participating in space alongside humans. The exercise quickly reveals how selective and conditioned perception actually is.

When people attempt to notice the more-than-human world in a structured way, it leads to a series of realisations. For example, that perception is shaped by training and habit. That human language is biased in how we describe what we observe. And that what feels like a neutral perspective is in fact deeply human-centred.

Using tools like the iceberg model or empathy mapping, we have many methods to help to surface our limits and bias when we research with people. Extending that curiosity to explore how our bias impacts how we perceive our more-than-human kin is fascinating.

The result is not a sense of mastery, but a shift in posture. Certainty gives way to attentiveness, and control gives way to a more humble form of engagement.

From there, a different question emerges: If we cannot fully communicate with or understand the full web of life we are engaging with, how do we still act responsibly in relation to it?

An excerpt:

> **'Ariel:** I think just the act of taking some of the social science we know – for any of the social scientists listening to this, maybe the iceberg model or the empathy map ('think/say/feel/do'). You know, we're given all these maps on how to think about our own bias as a researcher, and how to name it, and how to try to limit the impact of our bias when we are working with communities of people.
>
> And when we extend that to the multispecies perspective, and ask people to say, 'Okay, try this tool, but instead of stopping at the human community that we're noticing, or instead of stopping and acknowledging the bias that you have and how it impacts what you see and how you describe what you see, can you extend that to say that, 'I am biased not only based on who I am as a human, but the fact that I am a human biases me.''
>
> In that as I try to notice all of the kin around me – whether that's the trees, or all of the minerals in the buildings that surround me, whether it's the birdsong I hear, or the vibration of soil under my feet, or the insects I'm noticing – you know this cornucopia, just thousands

> of voices that envelop human life – how do I name my human bias and how do I – with love and compassion – say, 'I know that there is so much language and communication happening around me that I don't have the skills yet to reach into. But I want to listen.'
>
> And that, that activity, is deeply unlocking for a lot of the practitioners that I've had the joy of working with over the last decade or so in this work, and really drives the most interesting conversations. If we know that our human language is limited, if we know that our human ears and listening are limited, what interesting and unlimited library of tools can we unlock and add in here to become better listeners? To become better researchers? It really becomes an invitation to become a biologist. I will never be a biologist, I don't have that training, but I can walk through the rest of my career in admiration of wanting to learn as much as I can. And to bringing other people in where I know my limits are.'

Where this approach is landing, and where it isn't

The approach is place-based, so resonates quickly in contexts where the more-than-human is materially present. Fields such as urban design, architecture, and place-based policy already deal with land, water, and ecosystems in tangible ways. This makes it easier to identify who or what is affected, and to consider how those entities might be engaged.

The approach is still finding its way with digital product & service design, which can often feel 'placeless.' We might 'ground into place' through the location of team members, through the lands connected to supply chains and means of production. But it can easily become unanchored, superficial, diffuse. Given the scale and invisibility of impact, this may precisely be where more-than-human tending may be most needed.

A living process, and an unfinished knowing

Describing the book as living reflects the nature of the work rather than a stylistic choice.

Engaging with the more-than-human repeatedly brings one up against the limits of what can be known or fully understood. The boundaries of your own knowledge, and the need to be in continuous learning with teachers.

Writing, in this context, becomes a way of articulating a position within an ongoing process. That it is possible to begin without having resolved, as long as the process remains open and responsive.

What this ultimately asks of us

If the more-than-human is treated as a genuine participant in design, then something has to shift at a fundamental level. Ariel suggests that, in the end, it asks us to consider 'what are we willing to give up?' … And in return, 'what will we receive?'

This shift is not only methodological, but material. And it is not only about loss. It acknowledges that – in surrendering human space, human noise, human agency to others – we receive something truly tremendous in return.

Excerpt:

> **Ariel:** We talked about taking a step back, and we talked about taking a step to the side. I think, at the end of the day, if we are to do this really well, we have to give something up. You know, the human world has to give something up, whether it's convenience, whether it's a hoard of resources that we're sitting on that need to be redistributed, whether it's the permission to speak loudly all the time such that other voices can't be heard, going silent because the human voice has become so loud.

So I think, what are we willing to give up? It's a really personal question, that we can each investigate at our own level. What am I, Ariel, willing to give up – materially, emotionally, to cede space, to listen better, to receive better?

And then collectively, whether it's a small organization or a national government, or an international organization, what are we willing to give up and how do we live?

In Canada, we have a culture of Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation that guides a lot of our community of practice's work in righting the wrongs of a lot of the colonial history of Canada's settlement and giving land back to Indigenous populations. The more-than-human question I think asks a really similar question, which is what active role, active motions can I engage in to reconcile and repair?'

Renilde: I mean, at the same time, even, we may not be very conscious of it, it is a very common thing that, to participate as a citizen in society or to be a neighbour, a friend, etc., in a way we always have to give something up to be able to enable the relationship.

Ariel: And then it gives so much back to you.

Renilde: And then it gives so much back to you.

Ariel: It's not a zero-sum game.

Renilde: We understand that we give something up in order to get something back. To be able to participate in that relationship.

[...]

Ariel: We have to be ready to give something up to get back the thriving of the planet, to get back the joyful, neighbourly communication that we've lost with the more-than-human world.

Closing

Our more-than-human kin are already present, responding, speaking, shaping, co-designing our world. The question is whether humans are willing to become quiet, humble, and curious enough to evolve into better collaborators.

'A Nourishing Toolkit to the More-Than-Human: 22 Ways to Design Differently' is expected to be released later this year (2026), published by Set Margins (Netherlands), with distribution in North America. You can join the release list at arielsim.com.

Field Dialogue #3 - Talking Salmon

The salmon has been connecting oceans, rivers and forests for millennia. Can we learn to tell that story from inside it rather than from a distance? What would it mean for a story to genuinely cross the boundary between human and more-than-human — not as a rhetorical move, but as something that actually shifts how we see and relate? And what does it ask of the person trying to tell it?

In this third Field Dialogue, we spoke with Torsten Schäfer — environmental journalist, nature writer, wilderness pedagogist, and professor of journalism at Darmstadt University of Applied Science. For over twenty years, Torsten has worked at the intersection of environmental storytelling and ecological relationship. His current research project, Talking Salmon, funded by the Okeanos Foundation for the Sea and developed with Oslo Metropolitan University, follows the salmon across field sites in Germany, Scandinavia, and the Pacific Northwest — not just as a subject, but as a lens, a connector, and an invitation to tell stories differently.

The conversation moved through questions of language, method, kinship, and the limits of journalism as it currently exists. What does it mean to write *as* a fish rather than *about* one? What

do Sami languages carry that Western ecological science has no words for? And what actually happens to a journalism student when they try to interview a tree?

The outcome of Talking Salmon will be a massive open online course (MOOC) on ecological storytelling, due in September 2026 — but the questions it is working through feel far larger than any course. Rather than a finished methodology, it provides a glimpse into work that is actively being built — in fieldwork, in classrooms, in the space between a river and the person learning to listen to it.

Why salmon?

The salmon is one of the few beings that makes visible what Western thinking tends to keep apart — ocean and river, sea and forest, ancient and industrial. Born in freshwater, migrating to the open sea, returning to spawn and die in the very streams of their birth, salmon have been fertilizing forests with their bodies for millennia. Their carcasses, spread by predators into the trees, are a literal bridge between water and land. In certain indigenous legal traditions in North America, that link is not metaphorical but constitutional: you cannot separate water from forest in law, because the salmon is the living link between them. To understand the salmon is to understand that these are not separate worlds.

And then there is the other salmon. Alongside the wild salmon as ecological anchor, sits the farmed salmon — one of the world's most industrialized food commodities, implicated in habitat destruction, species loss, and pollution across fjords from Norway to Chile to Iceland. Torsten holds both realities deliberately. The lens of the salmon, he says, can show you the whole world. The wild fish and the farmed fish are not opposite stories. They are the same story, seen from different ends.

This holistic view on the salmon is also expressed in the book 'Being salmon, being human' by natural philosopher and deep ecologist Martin Lee Mueller who is working with Torsten in the project. The salmon family — including brown trout and many other species distributed across the globe — also makes the work geographically coherent across very different field sites: a small trout river near Darmstadt, the Sami fishing cultures of northern Scandinavia, a salmon farm in Norway, and planned fieldwork with indigenous salmon communities in the Pacific Northwest. What connects those places is not geography alone, but a shared question: what stories do salmon and trout make possible that other framings foreclose?

There is a well-known criticism of conservation communication — that it reaches for charismatic species that live far away, lighting up ecosystems elsewhere while leaving people estranged from the places they actually live in. Torsten knows that critique and takes it seriously. The salmon is a deliberate counter-move: not a distant symbol, but something findable in the river at the end of the road.

There is also a climate dimension that rarely gets named clearly enough: the answer to adaptation in an overheating Europe lies substantially in water — rivers, wetlands, swamps, coasts. Coming from climate journalism, Torsten sees water as a largely underplayed answer — and the salmon as a door into exactly that conversation. One that he also explored in 2021 with his nature writing book 'Wasserpfade'.

Talking salmon — four ways of being in conversation

Talking Salmon is not a single gesture. It holds four orientations at once, drawn from IPBES — the global science-policy platform on biodiversity: we can tell stories *about* the salmon; we can tell them *in* the presence of the salmon; we can tell them *with* it; and — as an experiment — *as* it.

These are not stages to graduate through in sequence. They coexist, and a practitioner of ecological storytelling might move between all four in a single piece. What matters is that the third and fourth orientations — *with* and *as* — ask something different: a willingness, at least provisionally, to let the salmon set the agenda.

Giving voice to a fish is contested terrain. Anthropomorphization attracts criticism, and rightly so. But that tension is held consciously here, rather than resolved. The experiment seems worth making, because the alternative — keeping the salmon permanently at the distance of an object — has its own cost. Objectification has consequences. The question is which discomfort to choose.

A species can go extinct twice

The conversation turned to what restoration actually means — and whether it can stop at habitat and species, or whether something else needs to come back too. With it, the notion surfaced that a species can go extinct twice. Once from the land and water. And once from human memory and imagination. Habitat restoration can address the first. Only stories can prevent the second. And when that second disappearance happens, something is lost that habitat restoration alone cannot bring back: the sense of what it meant to be in relationship with that being. The stories that held it in meaning. The felt knowledge of why it mattered.

The conversation brought up Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* here — her description of restoration as re-storying: not just returning the plant or the fish, but returning the human imagination that could hold them as kin. It is also what connects Talking Salmon to Torsten's recently published nature writing book, *Die Wildnis in uns* (The Wilderness in Us). Rewilding, in this framing, is not about returning to a fixed past. It is dynamic, generative, open to what a good life for all beings — human and otherwise — might look like now.

The language the Sami have that we don't

After seven or eight years of building trust in Sami communities in northern Scandinavia — years before the work deepened, before the right doors opened — what Torsten keeps returning to is not a practice or a method. It is language.

Sami languages are languages of the land in a way German or English simply are not. There are twelve or more words for different kinds of valley — each capturing a particular quality of moisture, breadth, orientation. There are distinct names for salmon depending on *when in the year* they enter the fjord: not biological classification, but relational taxonomy, organized around behavior and presence. One entire doctoral thesis was even written at the Sami University of Applied Science just on the richness of Northern Sami expressions specific to salmon net fishing. The world that exists in that language is staggering.

The example that cuts deepest: the Northern Sami word *bivdit* — to go hunting, to go fishing — simultaneously means *to ask for permission*. Harvest and consent are a single word. The relationship is already inside the language, not something you add to it afterward.

One of the people Torsten returns to again and again in his fieldwork is an elderly Sami professor — someone he has interviewed before and will visit again — who has retired to his tiny fjord village, a place that does not appear on Google Maps, and is now spending his days recovering place names from oral tradition and old maps, working to have them included in Norwegian official cartography. His argument is precise: when a place loses its name, it loses its individual existence in the conversation between humans and land. A named place is an interlocutor. An unnamed one is background.

Journalism has no language for this. Science, mostly, has no language for this. Nor for the culture of offering and gratitude — the *seidi*, the offering stones for salmon, still present and still used. Nor for the moments of silence in fieldwork that carry more than the interviews do. Poetry, Torsten reckons, might reach closer. He will be writing poems during his September fieldwork with the coastal Sami — not as a creative indulgence, but as a scientific method. Some things, he says, probably cannot be reached any other way than with 'artistic research': a discipline that Darmstadt's University op Applied Science is currently establishing at its media campus.

The tension of going

The field raises hard questions about positionality. A European academic arriving at an indigenous community with a research agenda to learn how to tell stories differently can raise legitimate concerns. Torsten does not minimize it.

What has made it ethically navigable — slowly, imperfectly — is time and reciprocity. Years before trying to go deeper. Working only through a trusted colleague who acts as gatekeeper and bridge. Going nowhere alone. Being entirely transparent about his role and what he will do with the material. Fishing alongside, cooking, helping with reindeer corrals. Being present in ways that are not extractive.

And crucially: giving something back. Indigenous communities he has encountered — Maori visitors coming to Darmstadt, women from Peru's Río Marañón fighting for the rights of their river — are genuinely curious about what comes from the rivers and woods of Germany, about how Torsten relates to his own landscape, his own river, his own rituals. Reciprocity is not a courtesy. It is what makes the exchange real.

A concrete expression of this: an Austrian fisherman who has dedicated his life to protecting the Danube salmon — itself nearly extinct — handmade a fishing lure and gave it to Torsten as what Torsten himself calls a ritual object: a physical token of one man's dedication to a river. And when he was invited by a Sami salmon elder along the Tana River, he brought it as an offering — passing it from the world of the Danube salmon to the world of the Atlantic salmon, two cousins, two species on the edge of disappearing, held together for a moment by one person acting as bridge.

One of the sharpest insights came from a Sami hunter and fisherman living a modern but land-close life. He did not want to discuss *traditional knowledge*. He wanted to talk about *indigenous values*. The specific knowledge might be outdated — changed by climate, by time, by circumstance. The values — sharing, offering, reciprocity, a different relationship to time — these remain alive, and these are what can genuinely travel across cultures without appropriation.

This distinction matters. Not specific practices rooted in specific ecologies, but orientations that can inspire different ways of moving through one's own landscape. In Germany, this carries its own complexity: homeland and nature rhetoric can shade toward the political right. That risk is named, held consciously, navigated. Caring for one's own river is not nationalism. Making that distinction legible — again and again — is part of the work.

What happens when you write with a tree

The outdoor writing practice is now nearly ten years old. The laboratory of ecological storytelling — its most recent iteration — started this week (April 2026). It begins, as it always has, with repertoires of strong environmental journalism. Then it moves toward something stranger.

Students arrive with well-established reflexes — environmental journalism means crisis reporting, species profiles, policy analysis. Changing those reflexes asks for invitation, not instruction. Not everyone is ready, and that is accepted. But the invitation is extended.

One exercise: write interview questions for a tree — in the journalistic way, as if preparing for a real interview. Then, as a next step, generate only the tree's answers. For many students, just arriving at the questions is already a lot. But it is the start of something — the beginning of taking a kinship perspective, of granting an individual existence to a being that journalism normally treats as backdrop.

What happens is consistent and visible. Students go quiet. Attention sharpens. Senses open — to smell, sound, texture — because the assignment requires it. And something shifts in their sense of responsibility: once a particular existence has been granted to a being, once it has been given an individual life in the imagination, it becomes harder to look away.

The exercises also surface how deeply estranged from water German language already is. There are everyday idioms — *Ausufern*, to leave the shore and dissolve into something uncontrolled, out of normal boundaries in a negative sense — that encode disgust and distance, the need to keep water contained and managed. Language as fossilized estrangement. Noticing it is the beginning of being able to choose differently.

Climate adaptation is not only a technical project. It is a linguistic and narrative one. New relationships with rivers and wetlands require new stories about them. The laboratory is not peripheral to the climate question. It may be working at its root.

A closing seed

Deep ecologist Thomas Berry spoke of the 'great work' of our time as recovering the capacity for conversation among species — a conversation that modernity interrupted. Torsten is drawn to the same idea but comes at it through practice: through the river near his house, through fieldwork in Lapland, through students learning to be quiet in the presence of a tree.

The salmon has been doing this work for millennia — connecting oceans, rivers, and forests, fertilizing what seems separate. The question Talking Salmon keeps circling is whether we can learn, again, to follow its lead. Not metaphorically. Actually.

Torsten Schäfer's most recent book is *Die Wildnis in uns. Von ungezähmter Natur und inneren Landschaften* (2026). An English translation will come out by 2027.

The epilogue of the book has been written from a trout's perspective and has subsequently been translated into English. She, a dark Brown Trout — a trout species native to Germany —, is the 'Black Queen' (refer to main image) and becomes a river narrative herself.

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Starting from the premise that the economy is a nested system within nature rather than separate from it, the sandbox brings together a growing community of practitioners to connect, collaborate, and learn from one another — exploring the possibilities, limitations, and future directions of genuine co-creation with the more-than-human world. Her work sits at the intersection of systems change, ecological governance, and cultural transformation, drawing on backgrounds in sustainability consultancy, circular economy, and regenerative design.