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# Designing for sensitive encounters in nature

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**Abstract**

Nature context is a domain for relaxing, meditating and gaining new experiences. When in nature, we seek authentic experiences and a break from the often urban everyday life environments. On the other hand, nature can be perceived as unfamiliar and provoke feelings related to uncertainty and even fear, especially if the visitor is an inexperienced nature dweller and in an unfamiliar context, as is the case with many tourists. In this workshop paper, we discuss of our on-going research on designing for sensitive encounters in nature.

**Author Keywords**

Nature; tourism; design.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**Introduction**

Being in nature is sought for different motivations, which can often relate to recreation and mental and/or physical wellbeing [2,3,4,10]. Especially, hiking in the wilderness or mountains is a nature activity that disconnects us from our everyday surroundings and buzz of urban context and online lifestyle. Remote

locations which one has to reach without the help of urban vehicles and through narrow tracks, are embraced for their tranquillity and nature peace, and represent the untamed and unspoilt side of our globe. Still, these places are typically not without human intervention. Hiking tracks are marked to the landscape, wind shelters and fire places are built to support the visitors, and challenging paths are eased with stepping stones and stairs.

Hiking context and remote nature locations set a design challenge for physical infrastructure, which on one hand has to be functional in supporting the visitors but on the other hand needs to maintain its unobtrusive character not to ruin but rather enhance the experience with nature. Especially, many tourists attending nature locations and hiking trails may be unexperienced in spending time in remote wilderness, and thus needing more support. Yet, more experienced hikers may emphasize the authenticity and simplicity in their preferences. In this position paper, we describe our ongoing work and research interests in this challenging design area, where we wish to address the sensitive encounters in nature.

## **Encounters in Nature**

### *Designing Nature Tourism Spaces*

We have previously examined – through a dialogue between an architecture researcher and tourism researcher – the encountering of nature in a context of wind shelters, see figure 1 for an example. It became clear to us, that in the context of designing spaces for nature tourism, sensitivity does not only refer to enhancing the elements of nature, but in some cases to the need for diminishing the impact of nature [5]. In addition, when designing nature tourism spaces it

should be taken into account that sensitivity refers also to sensitiveness towards non-human objects and how we enact non-human objects in touristic encounters.



**Figure 1:** Example of a wind shelter design in the nature context.

Furthermore, beyond protection, built elements in wilderness can appear to us as something exciting and even surprising (see e.g. figure 2), but simultaneously the built elements remind us of something familiar and are associated with our everyday built environment [5]. Nowadays, most people live their everyday life in a built environment and many are alienated from nature. To some, even a recreational forest near home can feel insecure and frightening [7]. Therefore, technologies and architectonic-built structures hold possibilities for making approaching nature easier for people who feel uncomfortable, insecure or even frightened of being in the natural environment.



**Figure 2:** Design as part of the landscape experience.

Thus, we suggest that it should be reflected further whether the non-human objects are prioritized as objects to be viewed [9] or enacted through multi-sensual encounters. The reflection can open up new ways of enacting nature and human-nature relationships, instead of constituting non-human objects as objects to be viewed, in which case the encounter merely strengthens the traditional tourist gaze on nature [5,8].

*Unobtrusive Design for Nature Context*

Nature is encountered as an experience. Experience industry related to nature is a growing domain, and its keystone is building the experience on the unspoiled wilderness, where urban lifestyle and technologies that bound us to everyday can be forgotten. Escaping to the nature can be perceived from the viewpoint of physical surroundings, such as changing the busy city streets to quiet nature trails, but also from the non-material angle: a break from the emails, business calls, and the

always online culture. Also, avoiding people and social encounters can be an appealing perspective for many [4].

Aesthetic experience is an important part of the holistic nature experience, and e.g. nature locations are typically advertised for their beauty. The man-made infrastructure embedded to the nature landscape should support the aesthetics and the design align with the visual, and also multimodal, experience with the surrounding nature. Yet, this is often not the case. The requirements for, for instance, noticeability or weather durability may have led to design solutions, where aesthetics has not been emphasized. Challenging design areas include, e.g., signage in nature trails, see figure 3 as an example.



**Figure 3:** Sign on the side of a skiing track in a winter wilderness.

Meditative encounters with nature can be disturbed also with technology use. Especially the omnipresent mobile phone usage can distract not only the user him/herself, but the surrounding people, who can e.g. perceive the

phone use as noise pollution. Also, managing one's unavailability and ability to be without answering the phone can be an important aspect [6], for which hiking offers a good opportunity. On the other hand, mobile technology offers tools for hiking e.g. through numerous map applications or even crowdsourcing information on the locations along the hiking tracks [1].

### Discussion

We believe that there are vast amount of interesting research directions addressing designing for nature context. In this position paper we have described some directions which we have interest in. For instance, the challenge of familiarity vs. unobtrusiveness in designing physical objects and nature spaces is an interesting area, having immediate impact on the outcome of the design process. Also, different design drivers e.g. in material selections (e.g. sustainability, durability) can result greatly varying outcomes. We emphasize that sensitivity should be applied when designing for nature context.

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