

ELAV
International Exchange Visit
'Tourism'

Koli -Finland
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Christine Blanco - Rosehall
David Hannah - Ardgay
Marlyn Price - Lairg



Day 1

Christine Blanco (Rosehall), David Hannah (Ardgay) and Marlyn Price (Lairg) arrived in Joensuu, Finland following a long journey from Sutherland in Scotland. After a restful night in the luxury Sokos Hotel in Joensuu, we were met by Leena Karkkainen, ELAV Finland Project Officer, based at METLA (Finnish Forest Research Institute), and two guides, Tero, a student of Environmental Technology and Aimo, a planner. Aimo drove us the 70 km distance to Koli National Park where we were shown our accommodation at Paimentupa, a holiday centre with a restaurant, sauna, horseback riding and skiing in season. Our home was a small cottage (Majavaranta) situated by a small lake with opportunities for boating. We learned later that a beaver had its home nearby and had built a dam in the stream adjacent to the cottage.

On our arrival, we were greeted by the horse-riding guide, Marko, who explained that the name of the accommodation centre, Paimentupa, meant shepherd's hut, which was the original use of the main building. The present owners have been there for 13 years and the horse-riding centre has been in operation for 6 years, Marko has managed it for four years. We were treated to a welcome lunch of vegetable soup accompanied by a selection typical Finnish rye bread, cold meats and sliced cheese with salad. Leena and two METLA employees Hannu, a researcher, and Lara, a photographer, joined us for lunch.

In the afternoon we were driven to Koli centre, where a coach was waiting to take us on a trip beyond the National Park. We were going for a walk through private forested land along with around 40 local landowners who had formed a group focused on managing their woodlands sustainably. Kirstig, our guide and translator from METLA, was very helpful and informative and told us much about the forests of Koli. He told us that there were many paths through the forests, originally made by cattle farmers. The paths would disappear if they are not managed. Around 50 years ago farmers had maybe one or two cattle and finding them in the forests was not too much of a problem. Slash and burn agriculture was also practised. Now farmers have around 50 cattle which would be too many to manage sustainably in the area. Nowadays if a fire starts there is the risk of it spreading but 1000 years ago small fires managed sustainably were seen as essential to the growth of the forest. In contrast to Britain tourists are allowed to build fires in the forest and there are special "fireplace" areas indicated on local maps. They are also allowed to camp on private land. This may be because there is plenty of forest land. (Finland is the most forested country in EU!) and fewer people than the UK. Finland is twice the size of Scotland but has the same population at 5m. Currently the Finnish Government is providing funding for sustainable forestry and for preservation of streams and rivers. There is an Act of Sustainability so that areas are protected by law. This facilitates protection of the rare capercaillie, and hawk and owl nests. There are flying squirrels in the area and bats, though bats tend to reside near habitations.



Many skiers use the forests in winter and ski walking is free. However restaurants, hotels and ski clothing retailers locally benefit from skiers coming to the area. There were quite a few flowers still in bloom in the woods in mid-September including wood violet, St John's wort and harebell as well as willow herb.

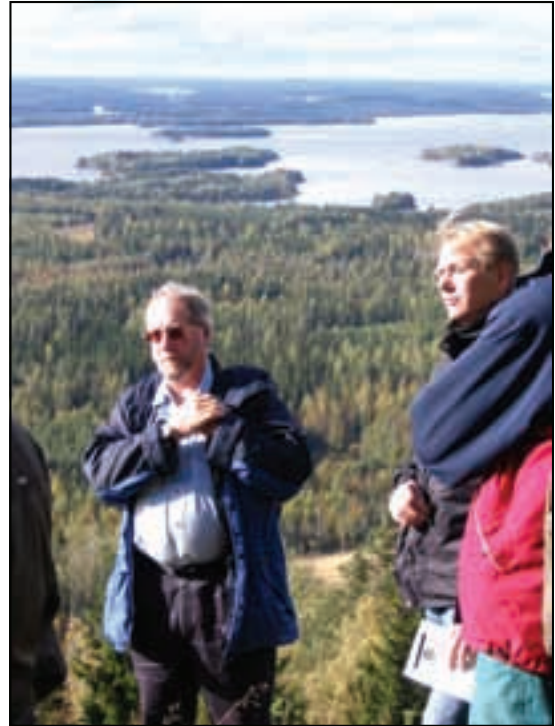
The landowners have been discussing matters such as how to purify spring water, how to overcome the problem of too many elks, which damage the trees, and the best way to use wood fuel for bioenergy. The forest owners themselves carry out the voluntary work and they are trying to get leaders for the various projects.

Our first walk was to a clearing in the woods with a view of Lake Pielinen the largest lake in North Karelia and the fifth largest lake in Finland. Land on the shores is divided between four municipalities Lieksa, Eno, Juuka and Nurmes. Koli is part of Lieksa, a remnant of the past when most travelling was done by waterway. The distance to Lieksa is 30 km across the lake. In winter it becomes an ice road, which can be driven across from Vuonislati to Koli. Our route took us through small open areas, with stone clearance cairns along the line of the path.

We travelled on by coach to an open air theatre in the woods. The meeting and presentations continued at a large picnic area, where we enjoyed hot drinks, cheese with potato scones, freshly cooked on the griddle over an open fire, followed by sweet lingonberry cake. Even our utensils came from the forest - timber slabs for plates, twigs for stirring, wooden butter knives and birch bark baskets. The cups (Kupilka) we later learned were made from recycled wood fibre and mixed with a resin, and were very durable. The cup is derived from the Kuksa, a traditional Lappish drinking vessel made from a pahka, a bulbous growth on the birch tree and used for drinking and as a vessel for baptism, which protects the user from the dangers of hot beverages! The latter are made as gift souvenirs these days and are quite expensive to buy.

The landowners had a lengthy talk sitting round outdoor tables. We were handed a leaflet in English thankfully which explained what how nature conservation works in Finland. Apparently conservation has changed radically away from designation of protected areas by authorities towards voluntary conservation agreements involving landowners based on supply and demand though a successful biodiversity programme (METSO – which translated means capercaillie). Forest owners have been responsive by offering their forests for conservation. The programme comes to an end in 2007 and plans for a successor scheme are underway. This situation differs greatly from the Scottish Highlands where most land is owned by large bodies such as the Forestry Commission or by private landowners. The voluntary approach based on financial compensation for protecting wildlife has led forest owners to become much more favourable towards nature conservation and the owners themselves can take the initiative and negotiate on an equal footing with the authorities. More information about METSO can be found at

<http://wwwb.mmm.fi/metso/international/index.html>



After our refreshments we moved on to investigate the elaborate raised wooden structure with seating, used as an outdoor theatre. Here there was another talk focused on how to use this area for more theatre and musical productions. Tero explained that Finland has a lot of mythology and paganism surviving because Christianity came late to the country and this provides material for theatre and storytelling events. The Koli region was not colonised until the 18th century, because Finns were afraid it was inhabited by devils! Finnish and Karelian folklore were compiled into an epic poem, the *Kalevala*, in the 19th century and is believed to have inspired the national awakening which led to Finland's independence from Russia in 1917.

On our return journey, Hannu explained that there are three main species of tree in Koli forest plantations, pine, spruce and birch. Finland has been lucky in avoiding the high winds which have caused wind blow in Swedish and Scottish forests. Sweden lost half of its economic yield for the year a couple of years ago because of this.

There are houses in the forests, but planning permission is required to erect new buildings. However the National Park is not open to development of any sort. As early as the 1900s it was made into a place for wildlife and officially made a national park in 1991, covering 3000 ha. The main purpose is to conserve the North Karelian forest hill area, the flora and fauna of the central part of the national landscape of Koli, to maintain the landscapes and plant communities created by swidden cultivation (slash and burn), and further to promote environmental research, education and observation. National Parks in Finland are protected areas on public land, managed by the forestry research institute METLA.

In the evening we dined at the café at Alamaja, Koli Harbour on Lake Pielinen. Finns traditionally have an early lunch between 11.30 and 12.30 and then eat their main evening meal about 5pm. The first course consisted of *muikkukukko*, a traditional fish pasty of locally-caught vendace cooked inside a rye bread dough, and accompanied by salad. The next course was a creamy wild mushroom soup and to finish, a dessert made with yogurt, cream and lingonberries. The local landowners along with Leena and Tero continued with an evening meeting for the ELAV group in an upstairs room for another couple of hours and then the three of us were given a lift by Hannu back to our cottage where we were glad to rest after a long day. The cottage had a sauna, but we didn't attempt to use it because it was fired by a wood burning stove and we were not sure how it worked!



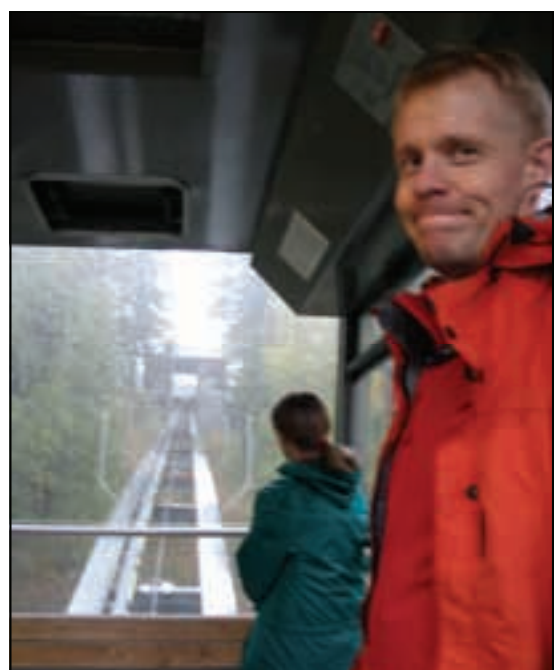
Day 2

After breakfast we were met by Heikki the tourist officer for the Koli area. He explained that the organisational side of tourism for the area was a separate concern from the marketing which was carried out by Karelia Expert. His job is to promote tourism via the website and discussions with interested bodies. The Koli National Park attracts over 100,000 visitors each year. However there is accommodation in the Koli area at present for just over 2000. He hopes this will increase to 5000, not by building more hotels and services but by increasing beds in existing accommodation. Most people stay in small wooden chalets on private land. The philosophy behind this is to keep the area as non-commercial as possible to promote wildlife interest, art culture, skiing and appreciation of the landscape. The type of people who are attracted to Koli are mainly in the over 40s age group. Young people are less interested and will go elsewhere where there is more nightlife. Nevertheless there seemed to be plenty of events going on at the time of our visit. The only hotel in Koli was busy preparing for a large blues music event and expecting several hundred people. The local church was hosting a gospel music event too, which would attract local people and those from surrounding villages.

We were taken to see a holiday homes complex. A holiday homes exhibition was held in 2006 but there are still homes and plots available. Most homes are built traditionally of wood using a modern design although Heikki pointed out one, which was of stone and made to imitate wood! House styles varied. Some were painted a grey colour, others were just treated wood. We were shown inside one of the smallest, made of traditional pinewood. It was extremely warm, electrically heated and had a large kitchen and a sauna. In the past one panel would have been made of one tree trunk, but these days six different pieces go to make up one panel. Heikki estimated that this house would cost 100,000 Euros. Prices are going up so these dwellings are seen as an investment and the structures can last for over 100 years.

We had lunch at the Koli Sokos Hotel, with Leena. There is a cabin lift to the 75-room hotel from a car parking area (although there is also a drop-off point right beside the hotel) and there are steps up too.

After lunch we were directed to a room in the Heritage Centre for a couple of wildlife films at the UKKO Heritage centre which is next to the hotel. The first of these gave a flavour of the local wildlife. Swan, hooded crow, black woodpecker, common woodpecker, eagle, otter, greylag goose, great crested grebe, brown bear, wolf, wolverine, crane, owl, rabbit, Karelian rose (Finland's national emblem), water lily and rowan tree all featured in the film. The next film was taken during one night at the animal watching lodge at Era-Eero which is a nature tour business operating from a cabin about 30 km north of Koli at Kontiokaarra (bear hill). Johanni, our guide for the afternoon explained that a variety of groups of wildlife enthusiasts,



from students to bird-watchers and hunters from outside the region come to stay for one night. The centre can accommodate about 14 people, but less if there are photographers, because of equipment supply.

The centre puts out meat to attract bears, wolves and wolverines. The habitat is characteristically swamp with small ponds and ancient forest and is unique. Wolverines are uncommon in Finland, and rare internationally. There are around 130-140 in total in Finland. They are now tending to migrate to the Russian side of the border. (Johanni joked that they were anti-European Union!) They are not very good hunters because they are clumsy so they scavenge. However in winter they have an advantage with their ability to grip the snow and move faster than any other mammals. The species has been protected in Finland since 1982 but the Lapps see wolverine as competing for their food supply and kill them. Their habit is to hide their food under a stone, where no other creature can get hold of it. This often frustrates ravens who are able to locate food but are unable to dislodge the stone! Wolves may find the wolverines' food but they are cautious. Johanni said that there were no pack wolves in the forest at present— just lone wolves so numbers are not increasing. There are may be up to 1000 brown bears in Finland. (They are shot for food too – we saw tins of bear meat at the airport!). Their habit is to hibernate in winter, take moose when they wake up in spring to give them energy and body fat, then they live off the fruit in the forest over the summer. Wolves and bears are competitors for food, but they tend to respect each other's territory and avoid each other.

After the films Johanni took us to the wildlife watching areas. We met Jaco, who has recently bought back land and dwellings which once belonged to his ancestors. We were taken to a new wildlife watching area, which he is creating as habitat for moose and beaver, by the side of a lake. We were taken to the old farmhouse, over 147 years old, where we were treated to hot tea, coffee, and home made cakes. The ones filled with blueberry were particularly delicious. Another guide, Irya, who also works at the Ukko Heritage Centre was also showing us round, and said her mother made these cakes. We admired the Kupiliska drinking vessels again and sustainably produced weave baskets with tops, which could be used for picnics (beats plastic!). The house had a huge living room space. Jaco had plans to turn it into a museum, together with the outhouses of similar age. We were shown clothing from the past, a device to link logs together for floating them down the river, a special horse drawn carriage for dragging logs from the forest and an old meat-salting churn. We wished Jaco luck and said our goodbyes to him and Johanni, and were whisked away by Irya to see the Devil's Church (Pirunkirkko) which turned out to be a narrow crevasse in the rocks with some steps down to it. It was rather precarious and we didn't have a torch! Irya pointed out the yellow lichen growing on the rock. We read that its part of Koli's unique geological heritage, a 33m long cave shaped like the



letter z, where people believed the devil had a temple at one corner. To end the day's activities we were taken by another guide from the heritage centre, Hannah, to the lakeside for a cruise around the islands. The weather was quite murky so we could not see a lot but it was interesting watching the boatman guide the craft using radar and a depth meter. We learnt that one of the islands is inhabited in summer by a couple of farmers, and even have an electricity cable from the mainland! The boatman told us how his mother, who lived in the middle of the forest when she was a girl, had to walk several miles every day through the forest to school, even in the short dark days of winter.

In the evening we experienced the smoke sauna. We were invited into the nearby home of textile artist, Liisa Tommila and her husband, Jukka, who works in stone. Liisa and Jukka offer their sauna once a week to friends and visiting artists. Leena told us this was not common and for most families the sauna was a private affair. On arrival we were offered a glass of wine, while David joined the men for the first visit to the smoke sauna. There was a larger group of ladies waiting for their turn. We followed a winding and slippery garden path to the sauna, which is a small timber building with a small outer changing room, and the inner sauna room with timber slatted seating platforms, where the sauna is kept at the right temperature by throwing water on the white-hot charcoal embers. Every so often we would venture out into the night along a decked path to the pond for an invigorating dip in the outdoor pool. A smoke sauna is considered to be special and much better than an electric sauna, but there are fewer of these traditional saunas today, because of the fire risk.

After the sauna we had a sumptuous meal cooked by Liisa and the wine and beer flowed freely. The nettle pie and vegetables flavoured lightly with herbs were particularly good. There was also elk on offer for meat eaters. A berry cream dessert rounded things off nicely.

Liisa wears simple tunics which she has designed using her own printed fabrics. These tunics are available in a range of designs at the Koli Heritage Centre, where some of the staff also wear similar garments. Liisa's tunics are reminiscent of the traditional overdresses worn by their female ancestors.



Day 3

The morning sunshine was very welcome after the previous day's dismal rain. We arrived at the Ukko Heritage centre for a walk up Koli hill led by Irya. Irya runs the business *Koli Aktiv* with her colleague, Hannah, to provide guided tours as well as running the centre/cafe at Alamaja and the outdoor equipment and craft shop at Sokos Hotel Koli. <http://www.koliaktiv.fi/> Included in our tour group were a couple of journalists from London writing about Koli. Irya informed us that Ukko means old man. As we ascended the path Irya stopped to pick mushrooms, lingonberries and bilberries (although these were past their best). The hill is 347m above sea level and 200m from lake Pielinen. The word Koli means bald-headed man and refers to the shape of the bare rocks, which can be seen from the lake. The rock is white quartz, 1.7 billion years old and is used in sculpture and in construction.

Next we enjoyed a guided tour of the Heritage Centre with a member of staff. She told us something about the Koli National Park. It is managed by METLA and is expanding as private landowners sell up. The typical quartzite is the remnant from when the land was part of the Sahara. Sand was compressed into bedrock during the ice age. The islands in the lake are also remnants from the ice age. Trees in the forest take on weird shapes due to the weight of snow and ice on them in winter, which stunts their growth. Around 2000 kg weight can lie on a tree. Some trees are over 150 years old. Finland has an extreme climate. Temperatures can reach over 30 degrees centigrade in the height of summer while they plummet to minus 20-30 in January and February. April-September has the milder climate while from October-March it is winter. Ice marks can be seen on the rocks. In 1750 the first settlers came to the Koli region. They were frightened at first because of the scare-stories of demons. They cultivated tiny areas using swidden (slash and burn) agriculture and grew rye and turnips. In 1907 a local landowner started the thinking behind the National Park by prohibiting development in that area. Many artists from all over the world have been attracted to Koli for the scenic beauty. Some of their work is in the heritage centre. We were shown a film of the Koli season by season, all very beautiful, with accompanying sound from the Kantele, a traditional Finnish musical instrument similar to a zither.

The heritage centre itself was designed as part of a national design competition. The very modern interior with large glazed display panels, enable the depiction of dramatic lighting and back projection film effects to bring the story of Koli and Karelia to life.

Following this interesting visit we drove back to the farm for our traditional lunch. We had to gear ourselves up for our next activity – horse-riding through the forest with Marko! We were each allocated our Icelandic horses and had to lead them out of the stable. Christine's had a name in Finnish that meant "little star". After a short lesson we were out down the road. The forest was a little scary as the horses were just about avoiding trees and climbing up and down steep slippery slopes and muddy paths, after



the heavy rain of the day before. They liked to stop and munch vegetation and one also had a penchant for starting into a small gallop while the others were trotting as he was a bit smaller, but we survived! We passed by areas which are outwith the National Park, where the farmers still practice slash and burn. Small farms and outbuildings are dotted throughout the forest, many now converted into holiday accommodation and a few with elderly occupants no longer able to farm their land, as the younger generation have gone away to find work in the towns.

The only thing left for us to do was some shopping for gifts in Koli. <http://www.kareliaexpert.fi> The craft shop in the Karelia Expert building had a wide range of locally crafted gifts including small carved wooden items, brooches, traditional wooden butter knives and cups (Kuksa). There were even postcards made out of birch bark and linen cloths made from Finnish flax. Felted fabrics are made from deer hair and strips of this woven with birch bark make beautiful table mats. Birch bark is also traditionally woven into a wide range of useful baskets. We visited artist/printmaker, Leeva Jarva, who we had met at the sauna. Leena is very inspired by the rocks and forests of Koli and her images are very evocative of this sense of the mystery and mythology of the landscape. To view some of Leena's work check <http://www.davidsongalleries.com/subjects/finnish/finnish.html>.

We found one other gift shop in a local services area before heading back to our cottage.

Leena Karkkainen took us for our last meal to Koli Sokos Hotel where we were joined by Hannah, exchanged small gifts, then retired to drink silver birch wine from Scotland (courtesy of David). Hannah produced a pink-coloured soft drink made of birch sap and rhubarb named Satarvisen Maito (meaning milk of the hundred thorns). It went down very well, laced with some Finnish vodka!

