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Expert evaluation of D.Sc. Taru Peltola for a professorship in natureculture studies

**To the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies, University of Eastern
Finland**

INTRODUCTION

I am honored to have been assigned by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies, University of Eastern Finland, to issue a statement concerning the qualifications and merits of Taru Peltola to the professorship in question. In carrying out this task, I have followed the qualification requirements as laid down in the section 33 of the Universities Act (558/2009) as well as section 31 of the University Regulations of the University of Eastern Finland, claiming that a person to be appointed as a Professor shall be scientifically or artistically qualified, have good teaching skills and, if important for attending to the duties, have practical familiarity with the domain.

Thereby, I am assessing Peltola's merits concerning her academic background, solid scientific and pedagogical competence, ability to lead research projects and acquire research-funding, experience from international research collaboration and leadership skills. I have chosen to describe and assess Taru Peltola's merits according to the three stipulated skills for a professorship: 1) *scientific competence* in view of scholarly publications, obtainment of external research funding and practice of academic leadership, academic expert assignments, and experience in supervision; 2) *pedagogical competence*, including pedagogical education, teaching experience, under-graduate and graduate thesis supervision and examination, the production of teaching material and other pedagogical qualifications; 3) *interactive competence*, including co-operation with other scholars, management skills, as well as administrative experience and societal collaboration. As requested by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies at the University of Eastern Finland, the main emphasis lies in assessing the scientific qualifications and merits of the person to be invited to the post.

To provide my assessment, I have been given access to the following documentation from Taru Peltola:

- CV
- List of publications
- 10 selected publications in full text
- Plan to develop research field
- Teaching portfolio.

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Taru Peltola has a PhD in Administrative Sciences in 2007 (environmental policy) from University of Tampere and the title of Docent in environmental policy at the University of Eastern Finland in 2011. She was appointed as Associate Professor (tenure track), University of Eastern Finland, Dept. of Geographical and Historical Studies (50%) and Finnish Environment Institute Syke, Joensuu office (50%) on 1.1.2020. She is also a Mercator Fellow, Conservation of Forest Biodiversity Research Training Group, University of Freiburg, Germany, since 1.1.2020. Peltola has extensive research visits abroad, including Irstea – National Research Institute of Science and Technology for Environment and Agriculture, France (2013-2016) and Institute for Advanced Studies in Science, Technology and Society, Graz, Austria (2003-2004).

SCIENTIFIC COMPETENCE

In her enclosed plan to develop the research field Taru Peltola describes **her current (and future) research** as contributing to the search for *alternative framings* (to more conventional environmental policy) “*to the study of environmental concerns based on post-humanist and relational ontologies*” where the idea is “*to decenter the human perspective and put emphasis on how human life is embedded in relations between humans, other beings and biophysical elements*”. While this posthumanist and multispecies stream of approaches is evident in her previous work, it also becomes clear when reading her application and publications that she has substantively developed and expanded her research interest over time. Her research has an experimentative orientation based on “*learning and cultivating new possibilities through everyday interventions*”. The empirical contexts of her research are multitude and rich, and progress in terms of state of the art can be tracked.

The assessment of scientific competence includes **the evaluation of the applicant’s merits regarding the quality scientific publications**. In total, Peltola’s list of publications (dated 10.11.2023) comprises 51 peer-review articles, out of which 18 were published in national fora and rest in international publications, including books and journals. The published peer-reviewed articles are in highly reputed journals such as *Ecological Economics*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Conservation Biology* and *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*. Peltola has published

widely in national journals and books, which is an evident merit given her research topic. Peltola has additionally some 25 non-refereed scientific articles and about 20 publications geared towards professionals and the general public. On Google Scholar, she has H-index 18 and G-index 34 which can be regarded high for a social scientist. The high citation index shows that her research has considerable international impact. Her most cited publications so far concern transformative potential of, and innovation in, citizen-science advancements.

The great majority of Peltola's research publications are written jointly with colleagues, which demonstrates collaboration skills and her wide international collaboration networks. There are also a number of single-authored works, particularly in her early research career. The combination of solely authored and collaborative research publications can be seen as an asset, as it demonstrates both the openness to sharing different research perspectives on a particular issue and the capacity to also publish high quality research on her own.

In the following, I first briefly discuss each of the selected 10 publications and then give an overall assessment of their scientific quality and relevance with regard to the professorship in naturecultures studies and Peltola's plan of developing the research field.

The 10 articles Taru Peltola has enclosed in her application include:

1. Santaoja M & Peltola T: Kokemuksia luontoharrastusten teknologisoitumisesta. (Experiences of digitalisation in amateur naturalism). Forthcoming in: *Suomen Museo*.

This most recent publication is in Finnish and discusses experiences of digitalization in amateur naturalism. The article focuses on examining the effects of technologization and digitalization on the "nature lovers" and their relationship with, and knowledge of, nature. The data of the paper consists of texts written by the informants themselves on their usage of novel technologies. The findings of the paper interestingly show that technologies are used in multiple ways and can have diverse – both positive and negative -- effects on the nature lovers living with nature. To me, the specific value of the paper lies in detailed description of the manifold ways in which nature lovers interact with nature through various digital tools.

2. Peltola T & Ratamäki O (2023) Sharing epistemic power: digitally mediated wolf monitoring in Finland. *Science as Culture*: DOI: [10.1080/09505431.2023.2214148](https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2023.2214148)

The second paper provides an interesting comparison to the first one, as in the case described in this paper, digital tools cannot be freely chosen by involved citizens but typically are strict in their scientific criteria and assign participants tasks that make them assistants of professional researchers. Drawing on this setting, the paper focuses on the power relations in research processes involving citizen-science in the case of wolf monitoring in Finland. The data consists of 'wolf data stories' produced

through observations in stakeholder meetings. The findings illustrate how the citizen participation itself has become a power struggle in the case. At the same time, the findings report how Finnish wolf policy stakeholders found a way to envision opportunities to share the epistemic power more equally by comparing the digital tools across the Nordics. Authors conclude that alternative wolf 'data stories' with even subtle changes in their digital design could be used to better meet multiple knowledge needs. This conclusion is in line with the growing academic interest to envision and probe alternative techno-scientific practices in support of more inclusive environmental and nature resource governance.

3. Nygren, NV & Peltola, T (2020) Surprise, surprise: a flying squirrel! Learning to protect the unexpected. *Conservation & Society* 18(4): 378.

This paper focuses on the unpredictability of non-human nature and asks how the unpredictability could be turned into an asset in order to establish more robust conservation strategies. The case study analyzed in the paper is the strictly protected Siberian flying squirrels in Finland, which keeps "surprising surveyors, planners and landowners by their flickering presence". The paper is based on e.g. field interviews analyzing surprises as relational and affective phenomena. The results depict the ways in which surprises can lead to novel knowledge about non-human nature and potentially improved conservation strategies.

4. Peltola, T, Kaljonen, M & Kettunen, M (2020) Embodied public experiments on sustainable eating: demonstrating alternative proteins in Finnish schools. *Sustainability: Science, Policy & Practice* 16(1): 184-196.

The fourth paper discusses sustainable eating in Finnish schools. The empirical focus is quite different from rest of Peltola's publications, but the methodological approach as well as the interest in experiments is in line with her excellence. This paper reports the analysis of 'protein demonstrations' organized for Finnish students aged 10-16 as public experiments, understood as "specific arenas allowing people to experience alternative foods and deliberate on sustainable eating". Through the demonstrations, video-recorded and analyzed, the possibilities of empowering collectives of people to reflect their eating preferences are scrutinized. As a result, tensions between visceral experiences and socially constructed ideas of eating were revealed. The authors conclude that this kind of systematic production of conditions that enable sharing of emotions and feelings regarding dietary transition can indeed promote long-term and internally motivated changes in eating preferences.

5. Peltola, T & Arpin I (2018) Science for everybody? Bridging the socio-economic gap in urban biodiversity monitoring. In: Hecker, S, Hakley, M, Bowser, A, Makuch, Z, Vogel, J & Bonn, A (Eds.). *Citizen Science — Innovation in Open Science, Society and Policy*, 369-380. UCL Press, London.

This book chapter is, as the publication nr. 2, focusing on the capacity of citizen science to foster responsive and inclusive science. The case study is from the city of

Grenoble, France, and analyzes a citizen science project about butterflies “implemented in Grenoble to make urban biodiversity more visible and meaningful for those who manage public urban green spaces”. The motivations and modalities of involvement are investigated with the help of interviews with, and observations of, volunteer gardeners and their trainers. The findings highlight the potential of citizen science in facilitating social learning and thus developing collective capacities among less privileged participants – but only on certain conditions. Key message of the chapter is that successful inclusion techniques broaden the role of participants, address their concerns and support learning.

6. Peltola, T & Heikkilä, J (2018) Outlaws or protected? DNA, hybrids and biopolitics in a Finnish wolf poaching case. *Society & Animals* 26 (2), 197-216.

The sixth article introduces the concept of biopolitics, which could potentially be among the core concepts of a research agenda in naturecultures studies. The concept is, however, not elaborated or included in Peltola’s plan to develop research field. This publication uses a court case on wolf poaching (again in Finland) to discuss how wild animals are categorized and how they gain legal status and value based on their species identification. The article describes how the court evaluated the reliability, accuracy, and relevance of scientific knowledge to distinguish “pure” wolves from hybrids. The reflective discussion on biopolitics is particularly sophisticated in this article.

7. Peltola, T, Åkerman, M, Bamberg, J, Lehtonen, P & Ratamáki, O (2018) Emergent publics and affects in environmental governance. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 20 (2): 157-169.

While the other papers are rather empirical, this seventh publication is conceptual in character and thus no doubt serves its place among the selected publications. The paper focuses on the role of affect theory for understanding public engagement in environmental policy and planning. Based on the discussion of affect theory and case examples, the main insight of the paper highlights the need to understand emotions and affects as main carriers of knowledge about transformation of political subjects and their concerns. This has also methodological implications for both research and practice: the authors conclude that understanding this role of emotions and affects directs analytic gaze beyond public participation procedures, encouraging novel, more inclusive settings for public engagement.

8. Peltola, T & Arpin, I (2017) How we come to value nature? — A pragmatist perspective. *Ecological Economics* 142: 12-20.

This publication is obviously another fruit of Peltola’s research visit in France and takes a critical stance towards valuation studies (and thus, the mainstream of ecosystem service research. This publication is of particular interest to me as a scholar who collaborates a lot with natural scientists who lean heavily on the concept of ecosystem services and thus, conventional valuation studies. Thank you for this valuable read and contribution.) The article introduces a process-based,

pragmatist approach to valuing, claiming that such an approach helps to evaluate the relevance of valuation studies results. To showcase how nature's value to people emerges from various ways of engaging with nature, three empirical cases are examined – one in Finland, one in the French Alps; and one in the city of Grenoble, France.

9. Peltola, T. & Heikkilä, J. (2015) Response-ability in wolf-dog conflicts. *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 61 (5), 711-721.

This ninth paper examines one of the most challenging issues in Finnish wolf policy, the conflict between wolves and dogs, in view of the role of anticipatory knowledge in enabling safe multispecies cohabitation. The data of the paper consists of (impressive) dataset of 201 wolf-dog conflict narratives covering a time period of 26 years (1987–2013); “local newspaper articles, records from local wildlife management authorities, and e-mail correspondence from affected dog owners” (!). The findings highlight the need of ‘response-ability’, defined as “affective attuning to the presence of wolves” which allows for developing anticipatory routines that enable anticipating wolf presence. Yet, the authors argue, this eventually sometimes requires more than what dog-owners are ready and willing to do, even if some of the encounters could be avoided with fairly simple pragmatic solutions.

10. Peltola, T. & Tuomisaari, J. (2015) Making a difference: Forest biodiversity, affective capacities and the micro-politics of expert fieldwork. *Geoforum* 64, 1-11.

The last article scrutinizes Finnish professional foresters and their affective ways of knowing by focusing on expert fieldwork in forestry. The academic discussion on affective capacities as a condition for knowing nature is in this article extended to the politics involved. The analysis reveals that professional foresters' affective ways of knowing nature are controlled by institutionalized strategies and practices determining how nature can and should be known in forestry. This conclusion has implications: the authors argue that governance studies would benefit from understanding how the various technologies of governance interact with emergent and embodied capacities such as affective capacities.

In sum, when reflected upon Peltola's ideas introduced in the plan to develop research field, the selected publications provide a coherent story line. The most recent of the 10 publications in the list, nr. 1 and 2 which are both from 2023, analyze novel connections across digital technologies and nature. Papers nr. 3, 6, 8 and 9 in particular focus on multispecies relations, whereas the papers listed as nr. 5, 7 and 10 scrutinize affective and corporeal relations in environmental governance and knowledge production. Proof of the experimentative orientation of Peltola's research is provided especially by the publications nr. 4 and 5, highlighting also the need of inclusion of other than purely scientific knowledge into just and societally acceptable environmental governance (also paper nr. 2).

While the publications strongly focus on Finland, the inclusion of a case study from Grenoble, France, and the French Alps, expands the geographic scope of Peltola's research in a way that in my view is necessary for a professor in naturecultures studies. The main value of Peltola's scientific production lies particularly in exceptionally rich empirical data used in all the enclosed publications (interviews, stakeholder meeting observations, texts written by the informants, video recordings, narratives, newspaper articles, email correspondence...) and the detailed description of the cases and findings. This is particularly valuable for the effort to envision and probe alternative techno-scientific practices in support of natureculture studies and environmental and natural resource governance, which can be regarded as the core of Peltola's research activity.

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The assessment of scientific competence should also cover the evaluation of the **experience of doctoral education and supervision, national and international academic expert assignments, demonstrated ability to initiate and lead research projects and obtain project funding and other scholarly activities of high standard.**

Peltola's skills are very good in all these respects. She currently supervises eight PhD students (two as main and six as co-supervisor). She has also participated (either as a co-supervisor or as a supervisory committee member) in the supervision of three already graduated PhDs. Moreover, Peltola has been pre-examinator or opponent of four PhD theses and evaluated one application for a Title of Docent.

As for expert assignments and research leadership and funding, the lists she presents are clearly sufficient for a professorship. Examples of her memberships in scientific communities include European Citizen Science Association (2019-), European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (2010-) and Finnish Society for Environmental Social Science (2009-; member of board until 2013), to name but a few. Examples of the memberships in expert, evaluation or steering groups and other expert roles include e.g. Management committee of COST Action OC-2015-2-20105 Citizen Science to promote creativity, scientific literacy, and innovation throughout Europe (2016-2019) and Advisory Committee, ALTER-Net summer school on Biodiversity, ecosystems: science and its impact on policy and society (2017). She has also acted in the editorial board of the Jälki-Trace-Spåret journal since 2014. She has evaluated research funding applications within the Nordic setting and is regularly being assigned as reviewer for different international and national peer-review journals. Moreover, she has given several key note speeches in national and international conferences over the years.

Peltola has led research projects with several team members funded by the Academy of Finland (The Research Council of Finland) and beyond. She has in her CV listed six projects as a principal investigator or sub-project/WP leader since 2010, thus showing her high activity in eliciting external funding often in collaboration with colleagues. The projects are described in further detail in

Peltola's **research plan to develop the research field**. The research plan builds on three key themes and the respective action plans highlighting empirical research and novel approaches, engagement with eco-social reconstruction and interdisciplinary collaboration particularly inside the University of Eastern Finland. Peltola's current projects serve as a solid foundation for the realization and further elaboration of the plan of developing the research field.

In summary, all the above described merits considered, **Taru Peltola's scientific competence clearly and indisputably fulfills the qualification requirements for a professorship.**

PEDAGOGICAL COMPETENCE

Since Taru Peltola is applying for a professorship, the research qualifications are naturally the most important to assess. Yet, as noted in the section 31 of the University Regulations of the University of Eastern Finland, a person to be appointed as a Professor shall also have good teaching skills so I will briefly assess her teaching competence, too.

Taru Peltola has already taught for many years at university level and her experience covers different levels at different universities and many ways of teaching. In her teaching portfolio, she demonstrates substantive experience in planning and implementation of both postgraduate and undergraduate courses on a research-based manner. She has also participated in the development of some teaching materials, including books, over the years. Peltola lists the supervision of 21 MA students at the University of Eastern Finland. Experience of supervising examination is not documented. Peltola has received an award for good teaching skills by geography and environmental policy students at the University of Eastern Finland in 2021. Her teaching merits have been evaluated as part of the application for the title of docent in 2011, and some feedback is claimed to be available from ALTER-Net summer schools (2012-2016), and sustainability transformations course 2021-2023 (yet not included in the portfolio). Beyond this, the pedagogical development is not documented in the attached teaching portfolio (probably because the application is for professorship, not lectureship). Peltola has not documented any university pedagogy or other pedagogical studies. Therefore, continuous development of Peltola's teaching is difficult to assess. The lack of formal pedagogy training would be important to address in future.

In summary, the pedagogical merits of Peltola are good even if she lacks formal pedagogical training.

INTERACTIVE COMPETENCE

As a team worker, Taru Peltola has proved interactive skills with her research colleagues resulting in collective research production. This is best demonstrated in the combination of research projects she has participated in, co-authored publications and in the academic visits abroad. She has built an extensive research network both within Finland and in several other countries, including France and Austria, which also helps in accessing international research funding in the future. The fact that Peltola also works at the Finnish Environment Institute Syke is of great advantage for developing her collaboration networks and interactive competencies beyond the academia.

As for outreach and societal collaboration, much of Peltola's research is pursued together with various types of stakeholders, including representatives of municipalities and regions, NGOs, other organizations and local communities. Not only are these often objects of her research, but she also commonly involves them in the research process to varying extent to co-produce knowledge and facilitate mutual learning. She holds a lot of positions outside the academia: For example, she is a member of the Advisory board of the North Karelia Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (2020-2023), in the Interest Group on Citizen Science of the European Network of the Heads of Environment Protection Agencies (2019-2021), North Karelia Large Carnivore Committee (2016-), Task force of the working group for carbon neutral University of Eastern Finland (2020), and many other duties. She has participated as an expert in the parliamentary hearings and even at the EC DG Environment. The list of publications aimed for general public is impressive and she has regularly been interviewed at the national media.

In summary, Peltola's interactive competencies are excellent.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

D. Sc. Taru Peltola is a solid and diligent researcher, who has an extensive research network as evidenced by her many co-written publications and research projects. The ten selected publications convincingly show that Taru Peltola masters a wide array of theoretical and methodological perspectives and their application within naturecultures studies, and beyond. Over her career Peltola has expanded her empirical studies to comprise different policy problems and solutions, demonstrating the potential for great societal impact particularly in national and local contexts. As for pedagogical and interactive competencies, Peltola's merits are good to excellent. The Faculty Social Sciences and Business Studies has requested to especially assess the scientific qualifications and merits of the person to be invited to the post. Consequently, I consider Taru Peltola *indisputably qualified for the professor status*.

In Turku 19 December 2023



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Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies
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Dear Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies,

I am delighted to provide expert advice on the qualifications, merits and achievements of Dr. Taru Peltola who is applying for the position of Professor of Naturecultures Studies in the Department of Geographical and Historical Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies at the University of Eastern Finland. Below, I assess Dr. Peltola's 'scientific qualifications and merits' in addition to her supervision and teaching.

Overall, it is clear that Dr. Peltola is an expert in the field of 'naturecultures' or what I might call in my own research the cultural politics of nature and the environment. Her work is theoretically broad, sophisticated and inventive as well as methodologically novel and creative. In addition, her research and its outputs are focused on public engagement and practical 'problem' solving in light of the social and environmental problems defined by Dr. Peltola as a 'polycrisis'. Her work and scholarly contributions are, in my opinion, particularly innovative and valuable given her desire to use a theoretically-informed lens on naturecultures and environmental politics to ground her research through practical outputs, public engagement and the desire to consider the development (and critique) of environmental public policy. The latter is clearly demonstrated—and should be particularly celebrated—in her testimony given to the Finnish Parliament, her advisory board positions and efforts at public communication. Her broad engagements across and contributions to the fields of post-humanism, the relational politics of nature, affective theory and environmental humanities position her very well to take up the mantle of Professor of Naturecultures Studies as positioned within and across both environmental policy and human geography. Our current era of polycrises demands 'poly-conceptualisations' and 'poly-responses' and Dr. Peltola is at the forefront of the critical scholarly, practical and public responses to these crises.

Dr. Peltola's unique and valuable position at the forefront of these concerns is clearly demonstrated in her excellent publications and impressive publication record; I particularly enjoyed reading the papers sent to me that I was unfamiliar with. Indeed, I use several of her publications in my class entitled 'Nature and Society' and will continue to seek out her new publications to include in my reading lists. The scholarly impacts of her work are demonstrated not just in the creativity, quality and volume of her publications but in her notable Google Scholar citation numbers and indexes. In my opinion, her work will only gain more resonance and amplification as our environmental and social crises continue to broaden and deepen – and as she continues to work for more sustainable societies through her research and public outreach. Dr. Peltola has suggested some vital and imperative ways forward with her proposed research that looks to expand on and develop new areas of work in relation to her engagements with non-dualistic thinking designed to inform sustainability policy and public engagement. From her profile, it is clear that this future research will be innovative and crucial to the creation of more sustainable societies within Finland and

beyond. Her work has clear resonance outside of Finland and, thus, it is my hope she can further develop research across other parts of the globe and build upon the already impressive international research, collaboration and publication networks she has and will clearly continue to develop.

Dr. Peltola has clearly demonstrated a desire for and aptitude to apply and win research funding. In particular I have sat on several panels for the Academy of Finland and know directly how competitive this funding is; this is a remarkable achievement I would very much expect to continue through her efforts to gain further research funding. There is clear evidence here of managing and delivering on substantial research projects funded through a diversity of sources. Similarly, it is obvious that Dr. Peltola has a keen ability to lead on applications and successfully manage research projects, all of which will continue into her Professorship position and support her in leading future research groups and collaborations.

While I am less able to directly comment on her supervision and teaching, Dr. Peltola's track record of PhD and Masters supervision is remarkable. It is clear she is invested in fostering the next generation of scholars and/or intellectuals in relation to sustainability, environmental policy, geography and environmental humanities; this should be celebrated and the promotion to Professor will only give her further opportunities for supervision. It is also clear her teaching profile, ability and commitments are equally remarkable. The number and content of courses she has developed and taught is exceptional and they are all situated clearly within her theoretical, empirical and methodological expertise on Naturecultures. I would certainly be excited as Programme director for UG teaching at the University of Reading to see this teaching profile in addition to her desire for and commitment to developing public pedagogy and engagement. Dr. Peltola seems like a very 'switched on' lecturer and teacher and I would guess her lectures are not just current and informative but also intellectually engaging, especially given the outputs from her research she is able to call up on in a pedagogical setting.

Given all of the above—and my review of all the materials provided to me in Dr. Peltola's promotion application—in my opinion, she 'indisputably fulfils the qualification requirements' for her promotion to Professor of Naturecultures Studies in the Department of Geographical and Historical Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies at the University of Eastern Finland.

If you have further question please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Professor Michael Goodman
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