

FREE EVENT

NULUNGU TALKING HEADS SEMINAR SERIES

## From the Arctic to Australia: Four Perspectives on Forest Sentience

Wednesday 15 October 2025 12.30-1.30pm

Online: <https://notredame-au.zoom.us/j/88536457258>

Passcode: 439942

Presenters: Dr John Charles Ryan, Dr Francis Joy,

Åsa Andersson Martti and Janne Sirniö

### Abstract:

Can forests sense, communicate and remember? How can we engage with trees as sentient subjects with wisdom to share with humankind in ecologically troubled times? Our collaborative presentation will bring together the expertise of four speakers on the subject of forest sentience. John Ryan (Turtle Island), Francis Joy (Rovaniemi, northern Finland), Åsa Andersson Martti (Swedish Sápmi) and Janne Sirniö (Swedish Sápmi) will share their perspectives on—and experiences of—the sentience of trees, forests and ecological communities with a focus on Sápmi, the homeland of the Sámi people of Northern Europe. After short presentations on forest sentience from scientific, artistic, and Indigenous points of view, the panel will open up dialogue with the Nulungu audience on the implications of sentience for forest appreciation and conservation in Australia.

Forests face myriad pressures globally including in Northern Finland and Sweden, relatively remote regions celebrated as Europe's last wilderness. For instance, throughout Northern Finland, which comprises sparsely populated Finnish Lapland as well as the urban area of Rovaniemi, the widespread clearing of mature trees has degraded boreal habitats. Rupturing longstanding relationships between people and trees, climate change will continue to alter the country's northernmost forests. Parallel to these escalating threats to forests in Finland and elsewhere, however, lies a burgeoning area of research signifying the diverse ways in which trees respond intelligently to environmental perturbations and bolster their resilience.

In this dynamic and rapidly shifting context, the collaborative project Gifts from the Sentient Forest (GSF) (2024–25) develops new modes of interacting with Northern Finland's trees and valuing their biocultural heritage. At the centre of the project is arboreal sentience, a generative concept that sheds light on the capacities of trees to sense, communicate, behave, learn, and remember. In the project, more-than-human sentience serves as a foundation for cultivating tree-human collaborations. At the same time, the work expands the public's awareness of the forest communities of Northern Europe through painting, photography, film, music, poetry, performance, and other creative interventions.

After discussing the project's key methods, John Ryan and Francis Joy will provide examples from a major exhibition of creative work in Rovaniemi, Finland in mid-2025. Åsa Andersson Martti and Janne Sirniö will then elaborate the significance of more-than-human sentience for Sámi people. We conclude with the proposition that arboreal sentience offers a promising basis for transforming environmental values, reframing forests as biocultural systems, and perpetuating knowledge of the region's endangered seasons.

<https://www.notredame.edu.au/research/institutes-and-initiatives/>



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## Biographies

**Dr John Charles Ryan** is an international researcher in literary studies, creative writing, and the environmental humanities. He serves as Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Nulungu Institute, University of Notre Dame, Australia, and Visiting Researcher at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland. Ryan's books include *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (Routledge) and *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (Routledge, co-authored). Funded by the Kone Foundation, his current research with Dr Francis Joy examines possibilities for human-tree collaboration in Northern Finland. He is also Chief Editor of the journal *Plant Perspectives* and Managing Co-Editor of *The Trumpeter*. For further information, visit his archive at [www.johncharlesryan.com](http://www.johncharlesryan.com).

**Dr Francis Joy** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Lapland Arctic Centre, Rovaniemi, Finland, and is currently working as a member of the Arctic Anthropology research team. He has published extensively on the subject matters of Sámi religion and prehistoric rock art and currently engaged as a project leader in the Gifts from the Sentient Forest Project which is currently a two-year research project through which the study of the collaboration between people and trees in northern Finland takes place, and which is funded by the Kone Foundation in Helsinki. Joy's books include a doctoral dissertation *Sámi Shamanism, Cosmology and Art as Systems of Embedded Knowledge* and four books of poetry, volumes 1-4 of the *Wild Wisdom from the Arctic North* collection. He has also published work on how human beings encounter trees in northern landscapes.



**Åsa Andersson Martti** is an Indigenous Sámi and Tornedalian artist, healer, and academic researcher based in Kiruna, Swedish Sápmi. She is founder of the historical and animistic pilgrim trail 'Sámi Trail of Tears' based on her mother's childhood memories.

**Janne Sirniö** is an Indigenous Sámi and Tornedalian researcher based in Kiruna, Swedish Sápmi. He is a member of the Sámi Trail of Tears project.

Satu Kalliokuusi. "Shaman 3"  
(2024). Sumi ink and dragon blood on paper. 17cm x 17cm.