



SHEPHERDING WEEKS

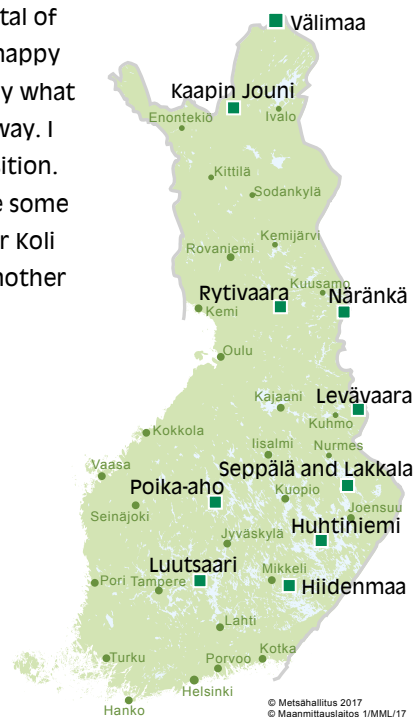
WOOL-SCENTED VOLUNTEER WORK FOR VALUABLE LANDSCAPES

The Finnish Candidate for the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe 2017



AWAY FROM THE EVERYDAY

On a busy day in January, I see a post on my Facebook saying that Metsähallitus, Parks & Wildlife Finland, is searching for volunteer shepherds to look after sheep used for landscape and nature management purposes in national parks and conservation areas. The thought of summer, sheep and lake vistas seems absolutely wonderful. The experience would be totally different from my hectic and often stressful everyday life in the Finnish capital of Helsinki. I look up pictures online of cuddly sheep, happy shepherds and amazing landscapes. Yes, this is exactly what I want, to spend a summer week somewhere far away. I waste no time preparing an application for the position. The sites are scattered throughout Finland, so I have some difficulty picking the location. I end up applying for Koli National Park in Eastern Finland because my grandmother comes from the area.



The sites of shepherding weeks

Shepherding weeks have introduced thousands of new people to landscape management. At the same time, awareness of the value, significance and change of landscapes has increased. Photo: Pirjo Honkasalo.



An aerial photograph showing a large, calm lake surrounded by dense green forests. In the foreground, a small island or peninsula is visible with some buildings and a boat. The water reflects the surrounding greenery and sky.

LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY!

In February, my phone rings. The call is from Heidi Kilpeläinen at Metsähallitus Customer Service, who tells me that luck has been on my side. Close to 500 applicants applied for the positions at Lakkala Farm in Koli National Park. The shepherds were selected by lottery and I was one of the lucky ones. Incredible!

Heidi says that we will spend the week in fairly ascetic conditions. The Lakkala Farm is situated on the shores of Lake Herajärvi, deep in the national park. It has electricity but no running water. The grocery shop is 25 kilometres away and the nearest neighbour is a kilometre distant. We also discuss tending the sheep. No prior experience is required, as all shepherds will be provided with orientation training on shepherding and life on the old farm. Each shepherd will have the farm entirely to him or herself for the full week – no one else will be living there. At the end of the call, Heidi asks me if I'm ready to spend a week as a shepherd. Of course I am, even though I must admit I'm a little excited. Oh right, I also need to remember to tell my husband and son we are going to a national park to take care of sheep. A warm and fuzzy holiday experience in the midst of beautiful scenery awaits!

In a week's time, I get a letter from Metsähallitus, carrying an shepherding contract for me to sign as well as information on Koli National Park and points of interest in the area. I sign the contract and send it to the national park. As the summer draws closer, I also receive an invoice. The week as a shepherd costs a total of 400 euros – the fee goes toward covering farm maintenance costs and nature management expenses.

The volunteer shepherds will spend the week on an old farm in a national park. The Lakkala farm and its pastures are situated in the foreground of the picture. Photo: Timo Halme.





DISCOVERING LOST NATURAL BEAUTY

To venture deep into a national park to work as a shepherd takes some daring and an adventurous mindset. On the winding gravel roads in Koli, we feel like we will never get to where we're going. We've set up a meeting with ranger Taisto Turunen at Lakkala Farm. We find him waiting for us at the end of a small road.

We walk the final 200 metres to Lake Herajärvi together.

The spectacular view leaves us catching our breath for a moment to take it all in. It feels like time has stopped. I have never seen a vista like this other than in old photographs. Beautiful pastures and old fields surround the greying traditional buildings strewn about the yard – a house, cowshed, granary, drying barn and smoke sauna. Lake Herajärvi, glistening brilliantly in the sun, is lined by the majestic hills of the Koli region. And all of this beauty is embraced in the peace and tranquillity of a warm summer's day.

We tour the buildings with Taisto while he shows us the ropes of living on the farm. Then, we finally meet the sheep, which trot eagerly to meet their caretakers. The sheep graze inside traditional wooden fences on the old fields and lakeside and forest pastures. The daily duties of a shepherd consist of ensuring the well-being of the animals, along with providing fresh drinking water and as much affection as you can muster. The sheep on the farm are tame and absolutely love being petted and scratched. The shepherds are also required to herd the animals from one depleted patch of pasture to the next fresh one. In addition to this, it is recommended to count the sheep on a daily basis to identify any runaways. Taisto tells us that the sheep love to eat rowan branches and crispbread. Should the animals escape, they can be easily lured back in the pen with rowan branches.





SHEEP AS CO-WORKERS

According to Taisto, spending a week as a shepherd is a good deed that benefits both landscape management and nature conservation. He sees both the sheep and shepherds as important co-workers. In Koli National Park, the sheep and farms are so far from the park staff's base of operations that it would be impossible to maintain sheep on the farms without the volunteer shepherds. We are doing important volunteer work by taking part in caring for cultural landscapes.

The grazing sheep clear the national park's meadows and forest pastures, which would otherwise quickly become overgrown. Small-scale cattle farming can no longer be found in Finland, which means that as a result of reduced grazing, meadows and their indigenous species have become rare throughout the country. Yet in the well-tended traditional landscapes of Koli National Park, these demanding flowers and butterflies are plentiful.

The landscaping sheep themselves are of a rare native Finnish breed called 'kainuunharmas', which was thought extinct but was successfully restored thanks to determined conservation efforts. By working as shepherds, we are doing our bit to preserve this native breed that has adapted well to the Finnish conditions.

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*The shepherding weeks are an excellent idea
– everybody wins.*

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Crazing is a good way to manage traditional rural landscapes. The grazing animals also enliven the landscape. Photo: Mirja Nylander.





SURPRISE LAMBS

One morning, we are greeted by an adorable sight on the pasture. Lines the ewe has delivered two beautiful lambs during the night. We admire the little ones for a while and eventually start wondering what we should do. We decide to call sheep farmer Jyrki Suikkanen, whose contact information we find in the farm's animal care instructions. He is as surprised as we are by the happy event as he wasn't aware that Lines was expecting. Jyrki lives near the national park and arrives post-haste to meet the newcomers. Fortunately, Lines and the little ones are fine. Still, Jyrki says he needs to take Lines and the lambs to his farm to get them ear tagged. What's more, the traditional fences at Lakkala Farm might allow the lambs to slip through inadvertently and get scared being separated from the herd.

With plenty of sheep on his farm, and Jyrki tells us he is very pleased with the shepherding arrangements organised by Metsähallitus. The sheep are well cared for in the national park, and according to Jyrki, he doesn't have enough pastures for all of them anyway. In addition to this, bringing his sheep to maintain the traditional landscapes in the national park makes him eligible for support through the EU agri-environmental support system. Who would have thought I would become part of a pan-European agricultural policy simply by briefly working as a shepherd?

What a pleasure it was to meet a sheep farmer and even get some praise for a good deed. It goes to show that a city-dwelling family can handle everyday life on a farm, at least with a proper set of instructions.

The sheep will be able to spend their summer grazing natural pastures and are looked after well. The sheep farmer will benefit from more sorely-needed pastures and shepherds.

Photo: Mirja Nylander.





A WEEK WITHOUT HURRY OR SCHEDULES

The most wonderful thing about the week as a shepherd is the opportunity to spend time with my family without having to rush and live by a schedule. Being with the sheep is also an amazing experience. We spend hours on the pastures simply watching them do what they do, providing the occasional affectionate scratch.

It is incredibly relaxing to enjoy a week in the beautiful lakeside landscapes lined by magnificent forested hills. In the mornings, we listen to the wind and watch the mist rising from the lake. I like to begin my day with a leisurely swim in the lake. In the evenings, we heat up the smoke sauna and cool ourselves in the clear waters of Lake Herajärvi. I often sit on the sauna porch and admire the lake, hills, meadows and woods.

During the week, we eat food made from natural ingredients. We pick wild strawberries from the edges of the pastures, and discover delicacies in the nearby forest. My husband lands a few bass and we roast them on an open fire in the evening. We brew our morning tea and coffee from water from the spring nearby.

Many participants have reported that their relationship with the landscape and the environment has improved and their well-being has increased. Photo: Tapani Mikkola.





THE YOUNG SHEPHERD

Alongside the lambs, the highlight of the week is getting to move the sheep to another pasture. Ranger Taisto provided us with instructions on how to handle the transition, and our entire family takes part in the effort. Our son grabs some rowan branches and begins to walk towards the pen that the sheep are supposed to go into. I open the gate of the current pen and my husband watches the gate on the new patch. The sight of the cheerfully bleating sheep following our son to the new pasture is simply too adorable to describe.

In the evening, we heat up the smoke sauna once again. The smoke sauna is part of Finnish cultural history, but for an urban family, heating one is an unfamiliar and even exotic undertaking. This holiday allowed us to teach our son about the cherished tradition.

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Everything went smoothly with the sheep. This has been an unbelievable opportunity and we are all very grateful for it!

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The shepherding weeks are an excellent possibility to take part in caring for valuable traditional rural landscapes and to experience an essential part of the Finnish cultural history, life on an old farm. Photo: Timo Halme.





THE MOST FAMOUS NATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN FINLAND

On a couple of our days on the farm, we decide to do some trekking in the surrounding area. On the second day, we climb Ukko-Koli Hill to admire the most famous national landscape in Finland. We would certainly have the time to explore our surroundings more than we do, but we are so enthralled with the sheep that we only leave the farm for necessary shopping.

A famous hiking trail runs right by the sheep farm, and many hikers stop on a daily basis for a chat and to admire the sheep. Everyone we meet agrees that the sheep have truly livened up the traditional farm landscape.

As shepherds, we also get to take part in other tasks in the national park. For example, we get to see the preparation of a slash-and-burn field. The burning forest is an unbelievable sight. The flames rise as high as the tree tops and you can feel the heat dozens of metres away.





WE WILL SURELY RETURN

At the end of the week, we go to the Nature Centre to return the key to the farm. Saying goodbye to the sheep was as sad as you would expect. The new caretakers will arrive at the farm immediately after our departure, but I'm left with the feeling that we will surely return – maybe even next summer.

The week as a shepherd helped me to grasp the importance of landscape management efforts. The landscapes we take for granted are changing and losing their diversity at a rapid pace. We treat nature harshly, and many rural vistas are broken by motorways and clear-cut areas. I believe that it is important for all of us to be able to go into nature and recharge. I work mostly indoors and the work-induced stress is more mental than physical. The experience of working as a shepherd provided me with the opportunity to do physical work and enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of nature.

“ *We need more locations for
shepherding weeks!* ”

With the shepherding weeks concept, traditional rural landscapes can be managed in valuable locations, where landscape management would not otherwise be possible.

Photo: Kirsti Hassinen.

EVERYONE IS HAPPY – INCLUDING THE LANDSCAPES

Shepherding weeks is a unique concept developed by Metsähallitus, Parks & Wildlife Finland. Concept combines an experience-rich holiday with caring for valuable traditional rural landscapes. Shepherding weeks is cooperation between Metsähallitus, the volunteer shepherds and the sheep farmers that benefits us all.

Working as a shepherd for a week is a chance to do important work to preserve valuable landscapes. At the same time, you get to enjoy amazing vistas, beautiful nature and a leisurely lifestyle while caring for sheep. For a volunteer shepherd, the week is a valuable source of well-being – wool-lined therapy amidst amazing landscapes.

The sheep can happily graze on excellent pastures and receive the proper care. Not all sheep farmers have enough land, which means that many farmers also benefit from the volunteer shepherd arrangement.

Moreover, the farmers get to lighten their work load with at least some of their sheep being cared for by temporary shepherds in nearby conservation areas.

Taking care of traditional landscapes is hard work for the staff in conservation areas. If it wasn't for the shepherds, many farms with their beautiful yards, pastures and meadows would go entirely neglected. For this reason, the help is extremely valuable to the landscapes, nature and Metsähallitus, Parks & Wildlife Finland.

This booklet is produced by Metsähallitus and the Ministry of the Environment. The story in the booklet is based on the real experiences of the volunteer shepherds. The quotations are genuine customer feedbacks. Layout: Erika Várkonyi/SYKE.



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