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Special Track call for papers

Theme: *Combining human and nature as equal actors in the Industrial Network Approach: opportunities and consequences for the future*

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It seems that nature (ecological environment) is still largely treated in society as a resource that can be exploited with minimal regard for the consequences as a mere “factor in production”. In this kind of thinking nature is reduced to an object within a global marketplace distant from our daily lives and indifferent to our actions (Latour, 2018). Our relationship with nature is withdrawn, impersonal and alienated on purpose to preserve our privileges. To use the language of Buber (1937), nature exemplifies an “it” [thing] to us. As such, it is not on par with human actors.

In many EU countries (including Finland), we are regressing in our efforts to preserve the environment. In developing countries environmental commitment may be even less prominent (Ivanova-Gongne *et al.*, 2022), which can further affect the interconnected global business networks and their interactions with nature. Contextual factors, such as culture and history can affect humans’ sensemaking of their interrelation with nature (*ibid.*) and attitudes towards it as an actor or non-actor. Since nature can only have agency indirectly, through human decision-making, we should explore ways to integrate humans and nature as more equal actors within the Industrial Network Approach (Harrison *et al.*, 2023).

So far, our focus has been on minimizing the environmental impact of our businesses (footprint) or assisting our suppliers and customers in reducing their impact through innovative products and services (handprint) (Dessaigne, 2024). This language is centered on impact. However, if we aim to cultivate a more meaningful and balanced relationship with nature, our terminology might need to evolve. For example, in business relationships, we typically strive for fair and reciprocal interactions with our counterparts; we do not speak about the *impact* our business has on our customers but rather on how we can help them prosper and grow alongside us. Could we, similarly, extend this reciprocal approach to our relationship with nature?

The relationship we, as humans and representatives of businesses, have with nature could be deepened by understanding it through concepts such as the Terrestrial (Latour, 2018), the Other (Levinas, 2003), or Thou (Buber, 1937). Each of these concepts, in its own way, offers a perspective that encourages us to see our relationship with nature more profoundly, beyond objectification or mere instrumental use. This deeper connection would help us transcend a self-centered perspective, fostering an ethical and respectful approach to nature. For example, Latour’s concept of the *Terrestrial* (2018) emphasizes Earth as an interconnected system of which we are a part, rather than a resource to dominate or exploit. Companies like Patagonia have long recognized that our relationship with the planet is rooted in mutual interdependence and vulnerability (Chouinard, 2016). Others, such as Stora Enso, have had to learn the hard way about the consequences that negligence towards nature can cause (Gambetta, 2024). While both Patagonia and Stora Enso operate as for-profit businesses, they are fundamentally different in their approaches. Patagonia, led by the inspirational Yvon Chouinard, considers Earth to be its only shareholder. In contrast, the management of Stora Enso sought to shift responsibility for the endangered mussels incident (Gambetta, 2024) to individual forest machine operators. These examples illustrate two very different perspectives on actorhood and its boundaries.

An important question, then, is who constitutes an actor. Within the Industrial Network Approach (INA), and especially in the ARA model, actors typically refer to organizations, firms, or departments

(Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Håkansson and Ingemansson, 2013; Håkansson and Shenota, 1995). We argue, however, that a broader approach to actorhood is needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of networks. If we agree that anything capable of changing the state of things by making a difference can be considered an actor, then both humans and non-human entities should be included. Given the severe consequences of climate change on society and business, nature emerges as a powerful non-human actor.

Granting nature “actor” status within the INA is a powerful yet abstract concept. This shift would mean viewing nature not merely as an object, but as a subject in an equal relationship with humans. Making this leap would also require rethinking the interface between nature, society, and business. Perhaps business networks could serve as that interface. Moreover, increasing attention is being given to social organizations focused on protecting the environment by providing environmental services to society (Liao and Zhang, 2024). Some scholars, such as Gibbs and Lintz (2016), argue that environmental organizations can improve urban environmental governance.

Additionally, what would this new relationship with nature mean in practice for:

1. Researchers
2. Businesses
3. Managers
4. Public entities and governments
5. NGOs and activists

We warmly welcome both empirical and conceptual papers to this Special Track. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- (Re)conceptualizing the meaning of “actor” in business networks in the context of ecological sustainability
- Regenerative actions and interactions in business networks
- Case studies of successful and unsuccessful efforts to recognize or deliberately grant agency to nature in B2B interactions
- Business-policy-research dialogue in defining and promoting the interests of nature
- International controversies around promoting the interests of nature in general or prioritizing “our nature” at the expense of others
- Applying concepts from other fields of research to define and embrace the actor role of nature in the IMP context
- Contextualizing managerial sensemaking of nature as an actor in business networks
- The role of environmental organizations in business networks
- The interplay between local and international relationships in environmental organizations
- The impact of nature as an actor on business model reconfiguration

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